Is Chinese a Negative Concord Language?

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This study attempts to account for the apparent negative concord phenomena in Southern Min where two negatives (m and bian) co-occur without canceling each other out. I argue that this is not an instance of NEGATIVE CONCORD.

1. Introduction
Like Standard English, Chinese1 is well known as a DOUBLE NEGATIVE language, yet there are occasions where two negatives co-occur such as in (1). The two negatives in Southern Min, namely m and bian, do not yield a positive reading, however.

(1) tsit.si sit tsi m bian uan.than2 temporarily lose hope M need.not sad
‘You need not feel saddened due to your temporary loss of hope.’

Lien (2008) briefly notes cases like this as an instance of NEGATIVE CONCORD. This is linguistically marked as Southern Min mirrors Mandarin Chinese in terms of its syntactic behaviors. Is the negation in (1) by definition negative concord? A basic inquiry of this study is: Does the Chinese language permit negative concord at all?

This paper is organized as follows. In Section Two, I compare double negation with negative concord before diagnosing Southern Min data in Section Three. Section Four provides further evidence from contemporary corpora, followed by possible accounts in Section Five for the particular phenomenon summarized in 1. Section Six is the conclusion.

2. Double Negation vs. Negative Concord
This section characterizes double negation (DN) vs. negative concord (NC), particularly focusing on the latter type of negation. The discussion is for a later section where I argue that Southern Min does not exhibit negative concord.

2.1 Double Negation

1 Chinese is used here in a more general sense.
2 一時失志毋免怨嘆, a line taken from a Taiwanese Southern Min popular song
DOUBLE NEGATION (DN) is by definition when two negatives cancel each other out (Haegeman 1995: 78). Modern Standard English and Mandarin are typical double negative languages; see examples (2)-(4) and (5)-(7), respectively for each language.

(2) I can’t not invite a colleague of whom I’m not a big fan.
(3) I didn’t eat nothing.
(4) She can’t believe that there is nothing he can do about it.

The English examples illustrate that negative constituents are not necessarily of the same type or form. For instance, the contraction n’t in (2) is often considered a clitic; nothing in (3) is an indefinite pronoun, and the two negatives in 4 are in different clauses.

(5) mei you ren bu ai qian de. Mandarin
   NEG have person NEG love money DE
   ‘We all love money.’
(6) ta bu hui mei(you) dai qian lai. Mandarin
   3sg NEG will NEG carry money come
   ‘He will bring money with him.’
(7) ni bu yinggai bu qu. Mandarin
   2sg NEG should NEG go
   ‘It is obligatory that you go.’
(8) ni fei qu (bu ke). Mandarin
   2sg NEG go NEG allow
   ‘You must go.’

Sentences (5) and (6) exhibit the two commonly used negatives, bu and mei, in one sentence with different word order. bu is used twice in (7); (8) is a strong demand and in some cases, bu ke may be omitted, leaving the double negative sentence with one negative marker fei.

2.2 Negative Concord

NEGATIVE CONCORD (NC), on the other hand, represents cases where only a single negation out of multiple negative constituents gets interpreted (Crystal 2003: 94). As such, negative concord is also known as multiple negation. Languages documented as NC include the so-called “non-standard” English, French, Spanish, Greek, Arabic, Romanian, Polish, and so on.

Two concepts are essential in defining NC: the N-ELEMENTS and N-WORDS (e.g., Hergurger 2001). For example, n- in (9) is the N-element that licenses the N-words following it—rien and personne, the two of which express negation in independent contexts, as shown in the word-by-word transcription.
The so-call N-words³ (Laka 1990) are typically negative indefinite items in NC languages, such as ‘nobody’ and ‘nothing’ in English. However, the equivalent ‘nobody’ in concord constructions cannot be interpreted as ‘nobody’. For example, the second *personne* in (9) can’t read as ‘nobody’. Briefly, the negation in *rien* and *personne* is overridden due to the concordance effect (Déprez 1997: 106).

Nonetheless, English also has negative concord to verbs, aside from indefinites; see (10). Again, an indefinite such as *none* participates in such a sentence.

(10) None of ‘em can’t fight. (Labov 1972: 786)
   ‘None of them can fight.’

There are two types of NC, namely negative doubling and negative spread (Ionescu 1999: 25). (11a) exemplifies the former and (11b) the latter (Ionescu 1999: 25-26).

(11) a. Ion *(nu)* mai vizitează pe nimeni. Romanian
   ‘John not any more visits PE nobody
   ‘John visits nobody anymore.’

b. Ion *(n)*-a călătorit nicăieri, niciodată. Romanian
   ‘John not -has travelled nowhere never
   ‘John has never travelled anywhere.’

As shown in (11a), negative doubling involves one instance of N-element and N-word each, whereas there is one N-element n- together with two occurrences of N-words in negative spread, as in (11b). Either type expresses one semantic negation only. As seen in 11, two or more negative words do not cancel each other out.

Note that one language may utilize both types of negation, such as English and French; see examples (12) and (13). Therefore, to discuss whether or not Chinese uses negative concord does not dismiss the fact that it has a system of double negation, as demonstrated in sentences (5)-(8).

(12) I didn’t eat nothing. English
   a. ‘I did eat something.’ DN reading
   b. ‘I didn’t eat anything.’ NC reading

³ Other similar terms are negative words or negative concord items, as opposed to negative polarity items (NPIs).
Negative concord is nothing new in English as Chaucer in Middle English had made use of it; see (14).

(14) *Nolde never write in none of his sermons…(Chaucer)
    ‘He wouldn’t ever want to write any of his sermons.’ (Barry 2002: 178)

In fact, scholars such as Herburger (2001) have associated the co-existence of DN and NC in the same language with its historical development, known as the Jespersen Cycle. This shows that a language can change from NC to DN, or vice versa.

The mechanism behind double negation and negative concord is complex, which has caught intensive attention in the literature, particularly for Romance and Slavic languages (e.g., de Swart & Sag 2002 and Tsuska 2010). I leave this for future research.

3. Southern Min as a NC language?
Based on the criteria addressed in the previous section, I then diagnose Southern Min sentences to see if this language is qualified as a NC language.

Scholars such as Lien (2008) have observed apparent negative concord in Southern Min although he does not provide any account for such phenomenon, however. An example is 1, repeated below as (15), where two negatives *m* and bian co-occur.

(15) tsit.si tsi *m-bian* uan.than.
    temporarily lose hope M-need.not sadden
    ‘You need not feel sadden due to your temporary loss of hope.’

Interestingly, the negative morpheme *m* and bian ‘need.not’ are used together without canceling each other out in semantics⁴. This may have led Lien to conclude that Southern Min has NC.

This conclusion, however, cannot be held true. Southern Min does not have equivalent N-words/negative indefinites nor does it utilize the N-element. My first point here is that there is no negative indefinite; see (16), which is ungrammatical⁵.

(16) *li m-bian tso bo.tai.tsi.

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⁴ I do not transcribe *m* as NEG in that it does not contribute to negation in (15). It is underspecified here.

⁵ Southern Min negative *bo* is not a D(eterminer); see Gillon & Yang (2010).
3.1 The N-word diagnostic

A skeptical reader may argue that Chinese does utilize *WH-INDEFINITES*. This still does not provide evidence that Southern Min has negative indefinites. For instance, *siann-mih* ‘anything’ is a typical indefinite in Southern Min. The *wh*-indefinite pronoun *siann-mi* is, however, restricted in its use.

With appropriate contexts, (17) can be read in two ways, depending on how *siann-mih* is interpreted: (17a) shows that it is an indefinite, whereas it is an interrogative pronoun ‘what’ in (17b). As a matter of fact, when the *wh*-word *siann-mih* stays-in-situ, the interrogative reading is preferred over the indefinite one.

(17)  
\[ \text{3sg M -not.need do what-thing} \]
\[ \text{He doesn’t have to do anything.’} \]
\[ \text{What does he not have to do?’} \]

In (18), the indefinite reading assures when the same element *siann-mih* is fronted, and, meanwhile, bounded by the operator *long*. The object raising of *siann-mi* together with the occurrence of the operator *long* such as in (18) prevents the ambiguity. This is how *wh*-indefinites function in Southern Min.

(18)  
\[ \text{2sg what-thing LONG M-not.need do} \]
\[ \text{‘You don’t have to do anything.’} \]

One may argue that the *wh*-indefinite *siann-mih* in (17) appears c-commanded by *m* or *bian*. However, this *wh*-word is by no means a negative indefinite, thus not an N-word. On one hand, *siann-mih* cannot be an answer to a question like (19), which is an resemblance of the French sentence (20).

(19)  
\[ \text{2sg see attach what} \]
\[ \text{What have you seen?’} \]
\[ \text{*Siann-mih/ Bo siann(-mih).} \]
\[ \text{Nothing.’} \]

(20)  
\[ \text{What-is-it that you have seen} \]
\[ \text{‘What have you seen?’} \]
Rien.
‘Nothing.’ (de Swart & Sag 2002: 375)

On the other hand, *bo in the answer in (19) indicates that *siann-mih carries no negation and that it is by definition not equivalent to an N-word like French *rien in 20.

A possible counterexample may be (21), where there appear multiple occurrences of negation and *siann-mih is interpreted as ‘anything’.

(21) i m-si siann-mih long m-bian tso.
3sg M-COP what LONG M-need.not do
‘It’s not the case that he didn’t need to do anything.’

However, *siann-mih can appear in affirmative environments too; see (22).

(22) i m-si siann-mih long tioh(-ai) tso.
3sg M-COP what LONG need do
‘It’s not the case that he needed to do anything.’

In brief, *siann-mih is never a negative indefinite. Examples (21) and (22) show that *siann-mih may be merely a variable. It sometimes gets interpreted as ‘anything’ (INDEFINITE PRONOUN) and other times ‘everything’ (UNIVERSAL PRONOUN).

3.2 The N-element diagnostic
Turning to the second major point: there is no N-element in Southern Min. As previously stated, an additional N-element is required for a language to be characterized as an NC language. One may then suspect that *m is “that N-element” since the (modal) verb *bian denotes ‘need not’.

To be qualified as an N-element, the negative particle *m would have to appear with all negatives in Southern Min. As seen, none of the combinations in (23) is possible, except for the combination of *m and *bian; one such example is (15).

(23) M +-NEG intended reading
*m bo ‘not have’
*m be ‘not able’
*m m ‘not want’
*m bue ‘not yet’
m bian ‘not need’

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6 The Japanese *nani-mo ‘what thing’ is a negative indefinite, however (see Watanabe 2004).
To conclude, with the data in sections 3.1 and 3.2, it is evident that Southern Min does not meet the criteria of NC.

3.3 An exceptional case

Let’s now examine an exceptional case with an occurrence of $m$ together with $tioh$.

Not only is $m$ disqualified for an N-element, but it may not carry any concrete semantics at all. Consider the following sentence.

(24) li (m) tioh tshing khah kau e.
    2sg M need wear more heavy PAR
    ‘You need to dress warm.’

Despite the fact that the negative $m$ can be absent, the presence of $m$ does not give rise to a negative reading in (24). This is relevant to this study on $m$ and $bian$, in that $tioh$ is the affirmative counterpart of $bian$. We may conclude that $m$ is not a negative in (24) and (25).

(25) li (m) bian tshing siunn kau.
    2sg M not need wear too heavy
    ‘You need not dress too much.’

Again, the phenomenon only exists in the affirmative $tioh$; it does not spread to other SM negatives and form a paradigm; see (26).

(26) M + AFFIRMATIVE intended reading
    *m-u ‘have’
    *m-e ‘able’
    *m-beh ‘want’
    m-tioh ‘need’

To conclude, the example in (25) is atypical for Chinese, which is well-known to characterize double negation. Scholars have noticed such phenomena but with no further explanation provided. On the other hand, no research has pointed out the incident as in 24. Are these two instances related? The issue at hand is how to account for the non-negative reading of $m$ in the two sentences. The puzzle may be whether there is a paradigm within the necessity $tioh$-$bian$ (modal) verb pair. The following section examines contemporary Southern Min corpus data, attempting to find some patterned syntactic distributions between $tioh$ and $bian$. 
4. The *tioh-bian* paradigm

Data under investigation are from the conversational lines of two Taiwanese Southern Min soap operas and story series. I first show instances of two negatives: *m* and *bian* ‘not.need’ with one negation getting interpreted. I then examine corpus data for the occurrences of *m* ‘not’ and *tioh* ‘need’ that does not yield a negative reading.

4.1 *m* and *bian*

Corpus data show that cases where *m* and *bian* co-occur with a verb are usually for persuasive and deontic purposes; see (27)-(29), respectively. The negative *bian* is a modal verb in such cases.

(27) 你毋免煩惱啦！
Li  m-bian  huan.lo  la.
2sg  M-not.need  worry  PAR
‘You don’t have to worry about it.’

(28) 叫阮阿兄毋免去趁錢囉
Kio  gua  n a.hiann  m-bian  khi  than  tsinn  lo.
ask  my  brother  M-not.need  go  make  money  PAR
‘telling my brother that there is no need to make money.’

(29) 你安怎樣仔煮飯毋免煮菜湯
li  an.tsuann-iunn-a  tsu  png  m-bian  tsu  tshai-thng.
2sg  why  cook  rice  M-not.need  cook  soup
‘Why did you cook rice without having to make soup?’

The other occasion with the co-occurrence of *m* and *bian* in the corpora is when both proceed a nominal phrase; see (30), where *bian* serves as a verb.

(30) 我食麵麼毋免錢啊
gua  tsiah  mi  ma  m-bian  tsinn  a.
1sg  eat  noodle  also  M-not.need  money  PAR
‘I can have noodles without having to pay.’

4.2 *m* and *tioh*

Corpus analysis reveals that the appearance of *m* together and *tioh* shows impatience, as in (31). The English *why-not* transliteration may also provide us with a hint that negative morphemes may not yield negation.

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7 Sentences are modern Southern Min from the corpora (The Collection of Taiwanese Southern Min Stories, edited by Wan-chuan Hu), except when the source is mentioned.

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(31) u siann-mih tai.tsi m tioh kin kong. SM soap opera have what-thing matter M need quicklysay
‘You need to spit it out if you have something in mind.’
‘Why don’t you speak up?’

What is more interesting is that most cases of m-tioh are in CONDITIONALS, as in (32).

(32) na an.ne gua m tioh ai tan paipai if so lsg M need need wait god.worship
   tsiah e-tang kah (...) -in sng.
   then can with (people)-PL play
‘If this is so, I would have to wait until god-worshiping when I can play with them.’ SM soap opera

Examples (31) and (32) demonstrate that the previously negative morpheme m is used to denote IRREALIS rather than negation.

5. Possible Accounts
A skeptical reader may argue for de-nasalization in m, thus leading to bian appearing alone in some cases. Then, this hypothesizes that m and bian occurred before the stage where there was only single negative word bian. This needs further research on how the morpheme m is used in historical texts. If this is the case, the phenomenon where m co-occurs with tioh will be viewed as an independent case. We then need to account for the m-tioh instance described in section 4.2, where m that does not participate in semantics.

Below I provide one of the possible theoretical accounts.

5.1 Negation cycles
This subsection discusses a cyclical change in negation, with a focus on Mandarin and Southern Min. It is to show that a lexical negative can lose its semantic features, thus becoming reanalyzed as a functional head in another position.

The literature has intensively addressed the issue of NEGATION CYCLES across languages (e.g., van Gelderen 2008 & 2011, among others). Two grammaticalization paths are often identified in the negation cycle: one is concerned with an indefinite phrase, such as English, and the other has to do with a verbal head, such as Chinese (van Gelderen 2011: 292, 299). According to van Gelderen, a loss of semantic features as shown in (33) accounts for the reanalysis of a lexical head to a higher head (to another higher head and to disappearance, when a RENEWAL⁹ is observed).

(33) lexical head > (higher) head > (higher head) > zero

⁹ A renewal doubling may not exist in Chinese, however.
The mechanism for the latter path is illustrated in (34).

(34) The negative head cycle (van Gelderen 2011: 298)

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Neg} \\
\text{mei} \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Asp} \\
\text{mei} \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{VP} \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{V} \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

The Chinese case involves a grammaticalization path: $V > T > C$; see van Gelderen (2011) for a discussion of Mandarin data. In other words, a negative derives from a full-fledged verb, gets reanalyzed as in $T$ (as an aspect or modality marker), and/or in $C$ (as an interrogative or discourse marker)\(^{10}\).

Southern Min also demonstrates such a grammaticalization path (Yang 2009). Take \textit{bo} as an example. One observes such a path from the synchronic Southern Min data (35)-(38).

(35) gua \hspace{0.3cm} \textit{bo} \hspace{0.3cm} tsinn. (\textit{bo} as a verb)

1sg not.have money
‘I have no money.’

(36) gua \hspace{0.3cm} \textit{bo} \hspace{0.3cm} khi \hspace{0.3cm} hakhau. (\textit{bo} as negative aspect)

1sg NEG. ASP go school
‘I didn’t go to school.’

(37) gua \hspace{0.3cm} \textit{bo} \hspace{0.3cm} beh \hspace{0.3cm} khi \hspace{0.3cm} hakhau. (\textit{bo} as an negative)

1sg NEG will go school
‘I won’t go to school.’

(38) li \hspace{0.3cm} \textit{u} \hspace{0.3cm} khi \hspace{0.3cm} hakhau \hspace{0.3cm} \textit{bo}? (\textit{bo} as an interrogative)

2sg go school Q
‘Did you go to school?’

5.2 Loss of semantic features
The verbal head grammaticalization discussed in 5.1 also applies to \textit{m}; see (39)-(41)\(^{11}\).

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\(^{10}\) T is where tense, aspect, and modality are accommodated. Some may argue that Chinese is a tenseless language; I used T only for conventions. I adopt Kayne (1994) for the interrogative C where anything below TP moves to the spec of CP. Note that some scholars may use IP for TP.

\(^{11}\) The other negatives (\textit{m}, \textit{be}, \textit{bue}) also follow a similar path (for details see Yang 2009).
Although $m$ is used across categories in synchronic data, $m$ is more productive in its functional than its lexical usage. For instance, in my previous work, I concluded that $m$ as a verb, meaning ‘want’, is rarely in use in modern Taiwanese Southern Min any longer (Yang 2009). Additionally, the same morpheme $m$ is reanalyzed as an interrogative marker sitting in the C despite the fact that $m$ as a question marker is decreasing in its use. According to my recent fieldwork, $m$ has also become the least preferred interrogative marker. It also poses more restrictions on such usage. In most cases, $m$ appears in tag questions; the verbs are limited to some, as shown in (42)-(46). A shift of category in $m$ is undergoing.

(42) li beh khi khuann i, si m? 知毋
You want go see he, be Q
‘You want to see him, don’t you?’
(43) lan mai koh sio.tsenn, ho m? 好毋
We not-want again flight all-right Q
‘Let’s not flight any more, all right?’
(44) li si tiam tsia tua.han e, tioh m? 著毋
You be at here grow-up PRT right Q
‘You grew up here, right?’
(45) li ai lai, tsai m? 知毋
You must come know Q
‘You must come. Do you understand?’
(46) *i beh lai, lai m? *來毋
He want come, come Q
‘He wants to come, doesn’t he?’

With a better understanding of negative cycles in general and Chinese negation in particular, we now proceed to the use of $m$ in non-negative contexts.
5.3 Irrealis marking
I tentatively analyze the morpheme \( m \) as marking irrealis mood. Negation, interrogative and subjunctives are irrealis. Let’s look into three sets of data below.

First, like bian ‘need.not’, tioh ‘need’ is compatible with the \( \text{wh}-\text{indefinite siann-mi} \); compare (47) and (48). It is likely that \( m \) is to mark mood onto tioh or bian.

(47) li (m-tioh) siann-mih long ai kong tsut lai.
2sg M-need what-indef LONG need say out come
‘It is mandatory that you say everything/spill the beans.’

(48) li (m-bian) siann-mih long ka i kong.
2sg M-need.not what-indef LONG KA 3sg say
‘It is essential that not tell him everything.’

Next, I show that a clause is apparently an island for mood \( m \); compare (49) and (50).

(49) li (m-)tioh ai\textsuperscript{12} khi.
2sg M-need need go
‘You should go.’

(50) gua kio i (*m-)tioh ai khi.
1sg ask 3sg M-need need go
‘I ask that he should go.’

The last case is when the double modals, \( m \)-tioh and bian, appear in one sentence, as in (51). The speaker utters this sentence with a doubt but possibly assumes, in the embedded clause, someone not having to pay. Again, \( m \) expresses irrealis mood.

(51) li m-tioh (m-)bian lap tsinn (a)?
2sg M-need M-not.need pay money PAR
‘Is it the case that you don’t have to pay?’

When we switch the order of the modal verbs, the sentence (52) becomes ungrammatical. Again, \( m \)-tioh can only be in a matrix clause.

(52) *li (m-)bian m-tioh lap tsinn (a)?
2sg M-not.need M-need pay money PAR
Intended: ‘Isn’t it the case that you need pay?’

\textsuperscript{12} The extra word \textit{ai} is the doubling of tioh; this is not unusual in grammaticalization, as tioh ‘need’ has gradually lost its semantic features.
When *bian* and *tioh* appears independently with *m* as in (53) and (54), the sentences are grammatical; see below.

(53) li (m-)*bian* lap tsinn.
2sg M-not.need pay money
‘You need not pay.’

(54) li (m-)*tioh* ai lap tsinn.
2sg M-not.need need pay money
‘You need to pay.’

6. Conclusion
This study begins with two sentences with *m* where *m* does not participate in semantics; 1 and (24) are repeated as (55) and (56) below.

(55) tsit.si sit tsi m-**bian** uan.than
temporarily lose hope M-need.not sadden
‘You need not feel saddened due to your temporary loss of hope.’

(56) li (m-)*tioh* tshing khah kau e.
2sg M-need wear more heavy PAR
‘You need to dress warm.’

Scholars analyze this construction in Southern Min as negative concord. I however argue that there is only one negative at work in these sentences. Based on the corpus data in this study, my tentative analysis is to treat *m* as marking the speaker’s mood.

The advantage of this analysis is that it accounts for the interpretations of both (57) and (58). In (57), two negatives co-occur with only one semantic negation. In (58), when *m* ‘not’ stands alone, there is however no negative interpretation. Examples (57) and (58) further show that *m* is mood sensitive.

(57) m-**tioh** kin seh to.sia.
M-tioh hurry express thank
‘Why don’t you express your gratitude now?’

(58) a m kin seh to.sia.
or M hurry express thank
‘You should express your gratitude now.’

Along the same lines, the other negatives in Southern Min, such as *bo* ‘not.have’ in (59) and *be* ‘cannot’ in (60), also serves a discourse function. Future research may also include these negative markers.

(59) a bo gua lai khi a.
or BO 1sg come go PAR
‘Otherwise, see you later then.’

(60) be tshin tshiunn huat.sing siann.mih tua tai.tsi le.
BE like like happen what big matter PAR
‘It looks like something big really happened.’

This study is not yet prepared to supply a thorough theoretical account. A better postulation for now is to analyze m as mood. Further research certainly needs to continue.
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ABBREVIATIONS

1sg  first person singular
ASP  aspect marker
COP  copula verb
NC   negative concord
DN   double negation
NEG  negative
PAR  final particle
PL   plural
Q    question marker
SM   Southern Min
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