

On the Independence of Mandarin Aspectual and Contrastive Sentence-Final *ne*

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1. Introduction

While Chao (1968) lists seven meanings for the Mandarin particle *ne*, more recent analyses either aim to reduce these to a single core meaning (Li and Thompson 1981, Lin 1984, Chu 2006, and many others), or else draw a binary distinction between topic-marking uses, as in (1), and sentence-final uses, as in (2) (Li 2006, Wu 2006).¹

- (1) Māma měi-tiān wǎnshàng hěn wǎn cái huí-jīa. (Shao 1989: 174)
mom every-day night very late only.then return-home
Bàba ne, gāncuì jiù bù huí-lái.
dad NE simply just not return-come
'Every day mom doesn't come home until late. *Dad* NE, doesn't even come back at all.'

- (2) A: His family is poor, so you'd do better not to have dealings with him.

B: Tā jiā yǒu sān tiáo niú ne.
his family have three CL cow NE
'His family has three cows NE... (!)' (Isn't that proof that they're not poor?)
(Tsao 2000: 16, modified from Li and Thompson 1981: 301)

This paper provides evidence for a different division. I argue that sentence-final *ne* is ambiguous between the durative aspect marker ne_{ASP} and the contrastive topic (CT) operator ne_{CT} . This account is novel in two ways. First, it rejects the widespread view that *ne* never marks aspect (Li and Thompson 1981, Lin 1984, Wu 2005, Chu 2006, Li 2006), representing a revival of Chan's (1980) classic aspectual analysis. Second, while topic-marking *ne* is known to mark contrastive topic (Lee 2003), I believe my account is the first to associate CT meaning with the sentence-final particle.

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¹Abbreviations used in glosses are as follows: ACC = accusative, CL = classifier, DE = modifier-marking *de*, DISTR = distributive operator (*dōu*), DUR = durative aspect (verbal *-zhe*), EXP = experiential aspect (verbal *-guò*), LE = sentence-final particle *le*, MA = polar question marker *ma*, NE = sentence-final particle *ne*, PFV = perfective aspect (verbal *-le*), POSS = possessive, PROG = progressive, Q = question particle, WA = contrastive topic *wa*

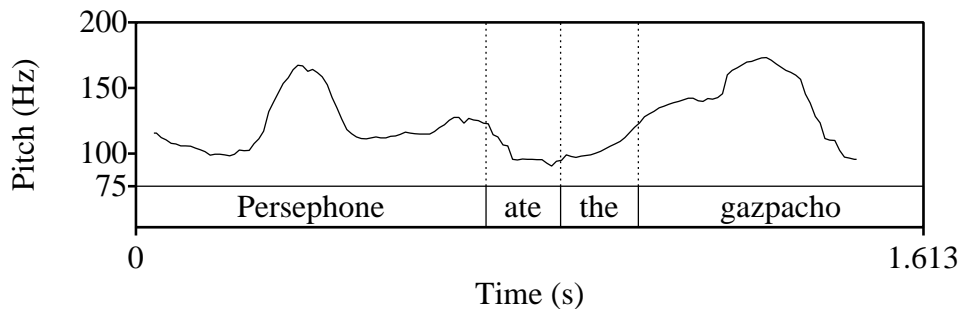
The paper is organized as follows. In section §2, I review the basic properties of contrastive topic, using examples from English. In §3, I present evidence for the view that *both* Mandarin topic-marking and sentence-final *ne* convey CT meaning. Section §4 motivates the need for a second *ne* that marks durative aspect. I show that the examples that cannot be captured under the CT account are precisely those examples that are susceptible to Chan’s (1980) aspectual account. Furthermore, we find that the two particles differ in syntactic distribution. Section §5 addresses the question of why ne_{CT} and ne_{ASP} never co-occur, and presents an account in terms of haplogy. Finally, section §6 concludes.

2. Contrastive Topic

Contrastive topic marking signals an utterance as addressing a particular issue in the discourse, while leaving one or more contrasting issues unaddressed. For example, in (3), speaker B resolves the question of what Persephone ate, but does not address the salient question of what Antonio ate. Intuitively, *Persephone* is the topic of the implicit question that B directly answers, namely “What did Persephone eat?”, and contrasts with the topic of the unanswered question “What did Antonio eat?”.

(3) A: And what about Persephone and Antonio? What did *they* eat?

B: *Persephone* ate the *gazpacho*.
 L+H* L-H% H* L-L%
 └──────────┬──────────┘
 TOPIC COMMENT



In English, contrastive topic is associated with the intonation contour L+H* L-H% (Büring 2003), consisting of a rising pitch accent (L+H*) on a focalized element, and a subsequent low-rising boundary tone (L-H%). Other languages mark contrastive topic via a discourse particle, as in Japanese CT *wa* (Heycock 2008; Tomioka 2010b):

(4) (Who ate what?) (Tomioka 2010b)

Erika-wa mame-o tabe-ta (kedo...)
 Erika-WA beans-ACC eat-PAST but
 ‘Erika ate beans (but...)’

needed to capture uses of CT in questions, as in the Japanese (8). These three diagnostics for CT are summarized in (9).

- (8) ... Zyaa *Erika-wa* doko-e itta-no? (Tomioka 2010a)
 then Erika-WA where went-Q
 ‘..., well then, where did *Erika* go?’

(9) *DIAGNOSTICS FOR CONTRASTIVE TOPIC*

- a. CT marks non-maximal elements like *most*, but resists maximal elements like *all*.
- b. CT marks partial answers, but resists direct and completely resolving answers.
- c. CT marks contrasting sub-questions of a larger issue, but resists simple out-of-the-blue questions.

3. Mandarin *ne* as Contrastive Topic

There is a wide range of evidence for analyzing Mandarin *ne* as a contrastive topic marker on a par with English L+H* L-H% and Japanese *wa*. I present a subset of that evidence here, and refer the reader to Constant (to appear) for further discussion. First, we find that as with English CT constituents, *ne*-marked elements cannot be maximal:

- (10) a. *Dàbùfen* de shìqing **ne** dōu hěn nán-bàn.
 most DE matter NE DISTR very difficult-manage
 ‘Most of these things are hard to deal with.’
- b. *Suǒyǒu* de shìqing (#**ne**) dōu hěn nán-bàn.
 all DE matter NE DISTR very difficult-manage
 ‘All of these things are hard to deal with.’

Next, the contrast between (11) and (12) shows that *ne* can mark a partial answer, but not a complete answer.

- (11) (Is Zhangsan going to the conference?)
 Tā gēn wǒ *shuō* yào qù **ne**... (dànshì tā hái méi mǎi jī-piào.)
 he with me say will go NE but he still have.not buy plane-ticket
 ‘He *told* me he’s going... (but he still hasn’t bought a plane ticket.)’

- (12) (How did you find out that Zhangsan is going to the conference?)
 Tā gēn wǒ *shuō* yào qù (#**ne**).
 he with me say will go NE
 ‘He *told* me he’s going.’

Finally, the dialogue in (13) shows that *ne* is illicit on an out-of-the-blue question, but licensed on a follow-up question that contrasts with an earlier question in the discourse.³ Given this distribution, it is often natural to translate *ne* questions with an initial *so*, *then*, *and*, or *but*, and in fact many authors offer comparable translations. Li and Thompson (1981: 306) translate *ne* questions with ‘in that case’, and Chu (2006) cites Jin (1996) with the claim that *ne* implies a pre-existing condition or presupposition roughly translatable as *nàme* (*in that case, if so, then*).

(13) Context: A calls B on the phone out of the blue.

A: Nǐ xiǎng-bù-xiǎng jīntiān wǎnshàng chū-qù chī huǒguō (??ne)?
 you want-not-want today night out-go eat hotpot NE
 ‘Do you want to go out for hotpot tonight?’

B: Not really.

A: (Nà) nǐ xiǎng-bù-xiǎng chī shuǐ-zhǔ-yú ne?
 then you want-not-want eat water-boil-fish NE
 ‘Then do you want to have *boiled fish*?’

The analysis of *ne*-marked questions as being contrasting sub-questions within a larger strategy also fits perfectly with what Wu (2006) calls “thematic question” uses of *ne*, marking an isolated topical constituent, as in (14). By comparison, the context in (15) provides no salient contrasting question with a different topic, so *ne* is illicit and the polar question particle *ma* is used instead.

(14) Tā huì lǎ xiǎotíqín. Nǐ ne?
 She can play violin you NE
 ‘She can play violin. What about *you*?’

³Some speakers report *ne* being acceptable on out-of-the-blue wh- questions, as in (i), while others find such uses marginal or affected. Speakers who accept these uses may have *ne* as a wh- “clause-typing” particle, in line with Cheng (1997). However even for these speakers, an account of *ne*_{CT} is needed as well, since Cheng’s analysis cannot extend to uses of *ne* in declaratives and yes-no questions.

(i) Lǐsì dài shénme le (%ne)? (out of the blue)
 Lisi bring what LE NE
 ‘What did Lisi bring?’

If we replace the standard Mandarin *shénme* ‘what’ with the rough-sounding colloquial variant *shá* ‘what’, as in (ii), the possibility of *ne* out-of-the-blue is ruled out. This is evidence that, contra Cheng (1997), *ne* is not uniformly available as a wh- question particle. For more arguments against the view of *ne* as an wh- or interrogative particle, see Lin (1984), Shi (1997), Gasde (2004), Chu (2006) and Li (2006).

(ii) Lǐsì dài shá le (#ne)? (out of the blue)
 Lisi bring what LE NE
 ‘What did Lisi bring?’

(15) Context: Someone knocks on the door. I yell from inside...

Lìsì { **ma** | #**ne** } ? Shì nǐ ma?
Lisi MA NE be you MA
'Lisi? Is that you?'

All of this evidence supports the idea that *ne* conveys CT meaning, like Japanese CT *wa*. However it is worth noting a difference between the two particles in their positioning. While Japanese *wa* marks the contrastive topic element itself, even in cases of “lone CT” (Tomioka 2010a), Mandarin sentence-final *ne* can occur at a distance from the focalized CT constituent. This highlights the need for a theory of where *ne* surfaces, and where CT markers surface more generally. I will not go into this for reasons of space, but one promising approach is to say that *ne*_{CT} is uniformly the realization of a fixed head in the left periphery. On this view, topic-marking *ne* would be derived by raising the topic to the specifier of *ne*, while sentence-final *ne* would be derived by raising the matrix IP to the same position. See Li (2006) for general discussion of this approach to sentence-final particles.

Up to this point, the account I’ve sketched follows in the spirit of Lin (1984) and Chu (2006), who treat *ne* as a marker of contrast. The difference is that I identify this type of meaning as contrastive topic, which displays known behaviors across languages. Connecting *ne* to CT is valuable in that it leads to robust predictions for where *ne* will be used. In the next section, we’ll see that these predictions force us to abandon the idea that *ne* always conveys a unitary meaning.

4. The Return of *ne*_{ASP}

We saw in (12) that CT resists marking direct completely resolving answers. Given this fact, the appearance of *ne* in (16) poses a problem for the analysis of *ne* as always conveying CT meaning. The important point is that B’s response in (16) can be taken as a simple and direct answer to A’s question, without implying any contrasting issue in the discourse.

(16) A: Nǐ zài jiā ma? you at home MA 'Are you home?'	B: Zài jiā ne . at home NE 'Yeah, I am.'
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Similarly, counter to the pattern we saw in (13), the following question with *ne* does not require any contrasting question in the immediate discourse. That is, (17) is an unmarked, neutral way of asking if you have the keys. This discourse neutrality is unexpected if *ne* uniformly marks CT.

(17) Nǐ dài-zhe yàoshi **ne** ma?
you carry-DUR key NE MA
'Are you carrying the keys?'

More generally, examples like (16) and (17) are a challenge for any minimalist analysis that attributes a core meaning to all uses of sentence-final *ne*—whether that meaning is phrased in

terms of contrast (e.g. Lin 1984 and Chu 2006) or “response to expectation” (Li and Thompson 1981). The crucial fact to observe about these examples, and indeed any uses of *ne* that fail diagnostics for CT meaning, is that they involve situations that are viewed as ongoing, and whose end-points are not relevant to the discussion. The occurrence of *ne* in these examples, which cannot be marking contrastive topic, is amenable to an analysis as a marker of durative aspect.

From early on, researchers have separated out “continuing state” uses of sentence-final *ne* (Chao 1968, Chu 1978, Marney 1980, Chan 1980), and I will argue that this is a successful characterization of the non-CT uses of *ne*. In Chan’s (1980) words, *ne* “serves to intercept a situation between (not including) its inception and termination, without focusing on any particular part of the situation’s actualization”. The basic properties of aspectual *ne* are listed in (18).

- (18) *PROPERTIES OF ASPECTUAL ne* (adapted from Chan 1980: 61)
- a. can occur with permanent states (PREDICATE ... *ne*)
 - b. can occur with temporary states (VERB-*zhe* ... *ne*)
 - c. can occur with processes (*zài* ... *ne*)
 - d. resists events lacking duration
 - e. resists situations which have terminated
 - f. resists complements denoting the frequency, extent, or duration of an action

Later work by Li and Thompson (1981), Lin (1984), Chu (1998, 2006), Wu (2005), Li (2006) and others⁴ attempts either overtly or covertly to collapse these aspectual uses with other sentence-final uses (or all uses, in Lin’s case). However such a collapse is not tenable for a number of reasons.

First, to the degree that associating *ne* with CT is attractive, examples like (16) and (17) which cannot be marking CT already speak against this collapse. But beyond this, the two particles can be shown to have different syntactic distributions. In tag questions, if *ne* intervenes between the declarative and tag, the particle must be interpreted as aspectual, whereas if *ne* appears post-tag, it always marks contrastive topic. This distribution, illustrated in (19–20) strongly suggests that *ne*_{ASP} is lower in the syntax than *ne*_{CT}.

- (19) Yàoshi dài-*zhe* (ne) méi-yǒu (#ne)?

key carry-DUR NE not-have NE

‘Do you have the keys?’

Literally: ‘Are you carrying the keys (NE) or not?’

- (20) Zhāngsān qù-guò Rìběn. Nǐ qù-guò (#ne) méi-yǒu (ne)?

Zhangsan go-EXP Japan you go-EXP NE not-have NE

‘Zhangsan has been to Japan. Have you?’

Literally: ‘Have you or not (NE)?’

⁴Beyond those mentioned above, Li (2006: 9) cites Hu (1981), Chu (1984, 1985ab), King (1986) and Shao (1989) as all advocating that there is only one *ne*.

As additional support for two *ne*'s, contrary to the common claim⁵, sentence-final *ne* can co-occur with the yes-no question particle *ma*, but only when there is a continuing state or progressive action, and never otherwise. These facts hold irrespective of whether the question fits the discourse conditions for contrastive topic use. Example (21) shows the absence of *ne* + *ma* in a context that we would expect to support CT. On the other hand, (22) demonstrates that this combination is possible when the verb is progressive. This contrast cannot be accounted for without drawing a formal distinction between *ne*_{CT} and *ne*_{ASP}.

(21) Zhāngsān qù-guò Rìběn. Nǐ qù-guò (*ne) ma?
 Zhangsan go-EXP Japan you go-EXP NE MA
 'Zhangsan has been to Japan. Have you?'

(22) Nà háizi hái huó-zhe ne ma? (from sitcom 我爱我家 *I Love My Family* ep. 54)
 that kid still live-DUR NE MA
 'Is that kid still living?'

Acknowledging the existence of two independent *ne*'s lets us avoid a number of problems with approaches that insist on a single core meaning for *ne*. As a case in point, I would like to respond to two objections to the aspectual analysis of *ne* that have been brought up in the literature.

The first type of objection says that whenever *ne* appears to contribute an aspectual meaning, it is in fact other morphemes responsible for this meaning. The prevalence of *ne* with durative markers *zài*, *-zhe*, and *zhèng* has been observed by Wu (2005: 50) and others. Li and Thompson (1981: 302) suggest that when *-zhe* and *ne* co-occur, the aspectual meaning is carried entirely by *-zhe*, since this meaning persists in the absence of *ne*.⁶ This argument, which builds off of the comparison of minimal pairs like (23) vs. (24) has been repeated in subsequent work by Lin (1984) and Li (2006), and is one of the main rationales for not formally distinguishing an aspectual use of *ne*.

(23) Tā ná-zhe huār.
 She hold-DUR flower
 'She is holding a flower.'

(24) Tā ná-zhe huār ne.
 She hold-DUR flower NE
 a. 'She is holding a flower.'
 b. 'She is holding a flower, and this contrasts with our expectations.'

There are several ways we can respond to this standard argument. First, the argument seems to take on a troubling assumption about redundancy in language—the assumption that if one

⁵The possibility for co-occurrence is often overlooked in the literature on *ne*, where Li and Thompson (1981: 306) and Li (2006: 29) claim that *ne* + *ma* is impossible. Lin (1984: 218) notes that *ne* + *ma* was historically possible, but is rare in modern Chinese.

⁶Li and Thompson (1981: 222) separate out a use of *-zhe* + *ne* in construction as an intensifier, restricted to Northern dialects. I will not discuss these uses here.

morpheme carries a certain meaning, other morphemes in the same sentence must be conveying something else. Logically, there is no reason why *-zhe* and *ne*_{ASP} couldn't both have aspectual meanings, and work together redundantly, or even through some kind of agreement.

Returning to (24), it is important to recognize that this example with *ne* has not only the reading in (b) but also a reading that is essentially the same as the version without *ne*. It seems to be a challenge of eliciting judgments of ambiguous sentences that consultants may be tempted to disambiguate toward a preferred reading, especially if an alternative form that unambiguously conveys the other meaning has been made salient. This phenomenon could be seen as a further variation on the challenges Matthewson (2004: 404–408) and Meyer and Sauerland (2009) have already observed with regard to judging cases of ambiguity. In the case of (23) vs. (24), consultants and analysts struggle to identify the subtle difference between the two forms, and naturally focus on extra meaning that (24) *may* have as the locus of the difference between the two. However this can easily lead to the faulty conclusion that *ne* is (always) responsible for contributing the meaning in (b). In fact, this conclusion would be unavoidable if we came to these sentences with the assumption that *ne* had a single meaning. Under the present analysis, on the other hand, (a) is a case of *ne*_{ASP}, while (b) is a case of *ne*_{CT}.

A second objection to the aspectual analysis concerns the co-occurrence of *le* and *ne*. According to Chan (1980: 61), since *ne* marks durative aspect, it should not be able to mark events lacking duration, or situations that have already terminated. From this, Chan (1980: 71) reasons that *ne* is in diametric opposition to the perfective aspect marker *le*, which marks the termination of a situation. Nevertheless, we do find examples of *le* and *ne* together:

- (25) Èr shàoye jìntiān zǎoshang hái wèn-le nǐ de bìng ne.
 two young.master today morning also ask-PFV you POSS illness NE
 ‘Also, the second young master asked LE about your health this morning NE.’
 (Wu 2005: 61 ff. 6, from 雷雨 ‘The Thunderstorm’ by 曹禺 Cao Yu)

- (26) ... zài gǎi tiān qù hǎohǎo xièxiè rénjiā, rénjiā jiù-le nǐ ne.
 then change day go proper thank them they save-PFV you NE
 ‘(You should have taken down their telephone number and) gone back on another day to properly thank them; after all they did save you.’

These examples show clearly that an aspectual analysis is not sufficient to cover all uses of *ne*. However, there is no reason that contrastive topic *ne* should be incompatible with perfective *le*, so their co-occurrence is unproblematic for the dual *ne* account. Showing formally that such examples abide by the discourse conditions on *ne*_{CT} is a complicated matter that will depend on our implementation of CT meaning. But at a first pass, this seems right. For example, the *ne*-marked (26) addresses the issue of whether they saved you, which is being treated as just one sub-issue of a larger strategy aimed at establishing what you should have done.

This type of example also highlights an important point for future investigations on *ne*. If we are interested in discovering the use conditions on *ne*_{CT}, we need to first rule out the possibility that we're looking at *ne*_{ASP}—for example by using perfective *le*. Similarly, anyone investigating the

meaning of *ne*_{ASP} needs to control for *ne*_{CT} by specifying the context—for example by restricting on direct answers to questions.

Finally, while it is not my aim to provide a diachronic account of *ne*, it is worth pointing out that the two *ne*'s discussed here may have distinct historical roots. According to Chao (1968: 802), the uses of *ne* that we have associated with CT all derive from one source, while the “continued state” use, and other potentially related uses, derive from a separate source, which was written as 哩 *li* in old novels. Furthermore, Chao states that some dialects have maintained a distinction between *ni* for the first uses and *li* for the second. With these historical developments in mind, it is less surprising that *ne* in modern Mandarin should have two fundamentally unrelated meanings. For more on the historical facts, see also Ōta (1987), Cao (1995) and Qi (2002).

5. Haplology

If *ne*_{CT} and *ne*_{ASP} are indeed distinct lexical items, we are faced with the question of why the two particles never co-occur. Here, I pursue an account in terms of haplology, following existing work on the particle *le*. Li and Thompson (1981: §6.1, §7.1) argue that when *le* cliticizes to a verb, it marks perfective aspect, whereas the sentence-final use (sometimes called inchoative *le*) marks a “currently relevant state”. This analysis has been widely accepted, and in fact, given the clear difference in both the syntax and semantics of these uses, a truly minimalist analysis of *le* would be nothing short of radical.⁷ Surprisingly, though, when a verb is sentence final and both the aspectual and the non-aspectual meanings are licensed, only one occurrence of *le* is ever pronounced:

- (27) Huǒ miè-*le* (**le*). (Li and Thompson 1981: 299–300)
 fire go.out-PFV LE
 ‘The fire went out, and that’s what I’m telling you.’

Rather than indicating that the two *le*'s are the same at some abstract level, this fact is widely, and I believe correctly, understood as a surface phenomenon, reflecting a morpho-phonological haplology constraint against adjacent realization of the two distinct and interpretable morphemes *le* (Chan 1980). I propose that a constraint of the same form prevents more than one instance of *ne* from surfacing. Since unlike *le*, both *ne*'s are sentence final, this constraint obscures the line between the two uses, so that we never see them together. It is likely for this reason that theorists of the “minimalist” persuasion have largely attempted to collapse the two.

One point in favor of treating both *le* and *ne* in terms of haplology is that violations of the constraints in question appear parallel in the type of infelicity judgment they give rise to. That is, while (28) and (29) are both clearly unnatural, the sentences are alike in that speakers may perceive them as logically correct, despite the awkwardness. In fact, even while disapproving of the sentence, speakers can reliably identify the first *ne* in (29) as intuitively referring to an ongoing state of affairs, and the second *ne* as drawing a contrast, in line with the ordering facts we saw in section §4.⁸

⁷For a few radical approaches in this vein, and the challenges they face, see Chan (1980: 44–61).

(28) Tā yǐjīng chī-le (??le).
 she already eat-PFV LE
 ‘She has already eaten by now.’

(29) A: If he’s awake, ask him to call me.

B: Nà rúguǒ tā hái zài shuìjiào ne (??ne)?
 then if he still PROG sleep NE NE
 ‘And if he’s still *sleeping*?’

These “soft” judgments suggest that speakers are not only aware of the distinct roles among the two *le*’s and the two *ne*’s, but also perceive a difference between surface phonological infelicity and underlying semantic infelicity. Indeed, when one of the two *ne*’s is ruled out on semantic grounds, a stronger judgment is rendered:

(30) A: Where is he?

B: Zài jiā ne (#ne).
 at home NE NE
 ‘He’s at home.’

6. Conclusions

In this paper, I hope to have established two major facts about the Mandarin particle *ne*. First, sentence-final *ne* cannot be reduced to a single core meaning. I showed that the particles *ne*_{ASP} and *ne*_{CT} differ on a variety of counts, including their discourse function, syntactic position, and interaction with other particles. From the perspective of the “meaning minimalists”, this first conclusion could be seen as a step backward. However we also took a step forward in collapsing two uses of *ne* that are often kept apart. In particular, my second finding is that non-aspectual uses of sentence-final *ne* convey one and the same meaning as topic-marking *ne*, so these two may be unified.

Treating *ne* as contrastive topic is appealing for a number of reasons. For one, it is a first step toward formalizing the meaning of *ne* in a compositional semantic framework, which is a project

⁸If the discussion in section §4 is on the right track, we actually predict that two *ne*’s could surface non-adjacently in a tag-question, as in (i). However, the speakers I have consulted reject such examples. At present, I am not sure how to best account for this infelicity.

(i) A: Is Old Li still alive?

B: Yeah, he’s still alive.

A: *Nà Lǎo-Wáng hái huó-zhe ne méi-yǒu ne?
 then old-Wang still live-DUR NE not-have NE
 ‘Then is *Old Wang* still alive?’

I pursue in more detail in Constant (to appear). This approach also has the virtue of placing *ne* within a larger class of CT markers across languages. Identifying *ne* with this class of elements allows for insightful comparisons that, with luck, will not only lead to a better understanding of *ne* itself, but also inform theories of CT meaning and realization cross-linguistically.

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