

Potential Errors in Chinese Negation of Congolese Learners: A Contrastive Analysis of Syntactic, Semantic, and Pragmatic Differences Between 不/没 (*bu/mei*), Lingala ‘té’ and Kituba ‘vé’

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to use a comparative linguistic approach to analyse potential errors in Chinese negation that may arise among Congolese speakers with lower proficiency in Chinese in Congo-Brazzaville. It compared the structural sentences of the Chinese negative markers 不/没 (*bu/mei*) with those of the negative markers of Congolese local languages — Lingala ‘té’ and Kituba ‘vé’ — in terms of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. This comparative analysis sought to elucidate how negation functions across these languages and how negation, particularly in Lingala and Kituba, influences learners’ acquisition of Chinese. To achieve this, a linguistic approach was employed to contrast the negation concepts of these languages analytically by examining potential errors in Chinese negation. The contrastive analysis revealed that these learners may experience cross-linguistic transfer influences, such as the placement of predicate-final negation. Semantically, they may misinterpret the functional meaning of Chinese negation, often overusing the ‘mei’ marker to negate nearly all situations related to past events, thereby overlooking the distinction between static and dynamic meanings in Chinese negation. Pragmatically, these learners might misuse and misinterpret what speakers convey in specific contexts. This research has implications for deepening understanding of second language acquisition—specifically, Chinese learning within local contexts. The study highlights that acquiring Chinese requires a more inclusive approach that considers learners’ linguistic backgrounds, rather than focusing solely on pedagogical fundamentals.

KEYWORDS

Comparative Analysis; Congolese Learners; Chinese Lingala and Kituba; Negative Markers; Potential Errors

INTRODUCTION

With China’s economic growth and its significant global presence, Chinese language education has become increasingly visible in many countries worldwide (Cui & Sung, 2022). In African contexts, particularly in Congo-Brazzaville, the Chinese language is learned within a social and educational environment where multiple languages are spoken. As a multilingual country, Congo-Brazzaville is home to 73 languages, including ethnic and tribal

mother tongues, national languages, and the official language (Tsoumou, 2024; Mabiala, 2025a; Ngamountsika, 2014). Unlike other languages, the national languages—Lingala and Kituba—serve as the Congolese lingua franca, spoken extensively across urban and rural centres. These languages are naturally acquired: Lingala is predominantly used in the north, while Kituba is more common in the south (Tsoumou, 2024). In urban centres, both coexist and are often used interchangeably. This multilingual environment contributes to Congolese learners developing a diverse language repertoire.

Linguistically, both languages have features that differ significantly from those of Chinese, especially in the negation system. While other aspects of multilingualism differ from Chinese, the negation system is particularly noticeable among learners studying Chinese in public institutions and transnational language agencies, such as the Confucius Institute and Confucius Classrooms (Mabiala, 2025b; Wang, 2023). This situation creates additional challenges for Congolese Chinese language learners, who must first overcome the inherent complexity of Chinese and then contend with transfer effects from their mother languages. These influences are increasingly evident at the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic levels, especially when learners with lower proficiency in Chinese interact with peers or undertake basic writing tasks. In earlier literature, most research on negation in Chinese has primarily focused on Indo-European languages, the Koreanic family, the Afro-Asiatic family, or the Japonic family, such as English, Korean, Arabic, or Japanese, which are perceived as dominant languages worldwide (Cui & Sung, 2022; Deng, 2025; Wang & Chan, 2021; Shengxia, 2023). In the African context, particularly in the Congolese context, these studies seem noticeably limited, and the few existing findings mainly focus on the pedagogical relationship between Chinese and French, emphasising grammatical, cross-cultural, or translation aspects (Mabiala, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c; Ngatseke, 2024; Boukete & Shen, 2025).

Although these findings offered some nuanced insights into the relevant issues, these studies overlooked the need to contrast negation features in Chinese with those in other language families, such as the Bantu family, which has distinct linguistic characteristics from other families. In the Congolese context, these findings overlook a linguistic approach to broaden understanding of contrastive studies between Chinese and Congolese languages. Motivated by these gaps, the present study uses a linguistic approach to compare the Chinese negators 不/没 (*bu/mei*) with the Congolese languages—Lingala ‘té’ and Kituba ‘vé’—syntactically, semantically, and pragmatically. By comparing their syntactic structures, the study seeks to identify potential errors that may occur among Congolese learners with *lower proficiency* in Chinese during their learning process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An overview of the linguistic background of Chinese, Lingala and Kituba

China is a multicultural and multilingual country, comprising 56 ethnic groups, with the *Han* as the majority ethnic group. Linguistically, Chinese is derived from the Han ethnic group, which is classified as a member of the Sino-Tibetan language family. This family contains four other main branches, such as Han Chinese, Tibeto-Burman, Tai and Miao-Yao. This allows the family to possess a large number of speakers compared to other Chinese language families, such as Altaic, Austric, or Indo-European (Bloomfield, 1967; Dai, 1994; Ma, 1954). Although the Chinese language, often known as Putonghua or Mandarin, coexists with more than 400 languages of minority ethnic groups, it comprises 1.3 billion native speakers. It represents 92 per cent of the population (Tsung, 2014). Globally, this number, 1.3 billion, reaches 1.39 billion speakers and represents 17 per cent of the global population¹.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_language

Unlike Chinese, Lingala and Kituba are the lingua francas of Congo-Brazzaville. These languages are also largely spoken in diverse geographical parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), including Kinshasa, the capital, and in some parts of Angola (Samarin, 1991; Meeuwis, 2013, 2020; Swift & Zola, 1963). Lingala reaches approximately 25 million speakers, including native speakers, while Kituba comprises approximately 6-8 million speakers (Meeuwis, 2013; Mufwene, 2013).

Lingala is a Bantu language (Guthrie, 1953), while Kituba, also known as Kikongo-Kituba, appears to be unclassified in the Bantu language family. Its status as a ‘non-Bantu’ language continues to raise vehement controversy from a linguistic perspective. Some scholars argue that Kituba comprises all linguistic features of a Bantu language, such as noun classes (n.cl.) and structural verbs. This must lead to Kituba being classified as a Bantu language, regardless of Guthrie’s classification (Hulstaert, 1989, 1974). In contrast, others clarified that this non-classification may be related to various reasons; for instance, its origin remains problematic. They highlighted that Kituba is a creole developed through contact between Kikongo-Kimanyanga and other Bantu languages. Indeed, Kimanyanga is the Kikongo dialect of Manyanga—it was a trade language in the precolonial period in the DRC and Congo-Brazzaville (Mufwene, 1989, 2009; Swift & Zola, 1963). In essence, this appears to challenge the Kituba classification. From these perspectives, further research may be required to offer nuanced insights into its belonging.

Taken together, although these languages differ, their distinct linguistic features offer nuanced insights into each language’s background, providing a solid foundation for deepening the contrastive analysis of negation in these languages.

The structure of negation in Chinese, Lingala and Kituba

Negation structure refers to the position and manner in which a particular negative pattern occurs within sentences to form a negative construction in Chinese, Lingala, and Kituba.

Grammatically, Chinese, Lingala, and Kituba are generally subject-verb-object (SVO) languages. Their sentence structure commonly consists of a subject, followed by a predicate—verb and object. They comprise different negative markers to express negation. These negative markers occur in different grammatical positions in a sentence. As stated earlier, the Chinese language comprises 不/没 (*bu/mei*) as its negative markers, while Lingala and Kituba use ‘*té*’ and ‘*vé*’ to negate their sentences. For instance:

(1) *Chinese*

1.a	我们不是 陌生 人 We not be strange person We are not strangers	1.a.a	我 没 有 钱 I not have money I do not have money
1.b	<i>Lingala</i>		
	<i>Bísó to za ba mópáya té.</i> We us be n.cl. stranger not We are not strangers	1.b.b	<i>Na za na mbóngo té</i> I be with money not I do not have money
1.c	<i>Kituba</i>	1.c.c	
	<i>Béto ké ba nzénza vé</i> We be n.cl. stranger not We are not strangers		<i>Mú(nu) ké na mbóngo vé</i> Me be with money not I do not have money

Building upon this foundation, the negation in Chinese is achieved by two negative markers, ‘*bu*’ (不) and ‘*mei*’ (没), which occur in specific contexts. ‘*bu*’ in the examples (1.a) refers to the verb “be” as an auxiliary verb, while in (1.a.a) the adverb ‘*mei*’ is used to highlight the auxiliary verb of to “have”. In contrast, Lingala and Kituba both comprise only a single negative marker— ‘*té*’ and ‘*vé*’—that are used in both contexts of the auxiliary sentence model for “be” and “have” verbs.

Beyond SVO and these negative markers, these languages may also have other exceptional and complex sentence structures and negative markers that do not always align with the SVO structure or use the standard markers to form a negative construction. Chinese comprises words such as *bie* (别), *fei* (非), *wu* (勿) or *wei* (未), which are often used to negate a sentence in specific contexts. Meanwhile, Lingala and Kituba do not possess multiple words for negation; the most visible word is “*áta*”(even), followed by other elements sometimes used to express negation in specific contexts. For example:

(2)		<i>Lingala</i>		<i>Kituba</i>	
	2.a	<i>Ata mo-to moko té</i>		2.a.a	<i>Ata mu-ntu mosi vé</i>
		Even n.cl. person one not			Even n.cl. person one not
		Noone			Noone

Learner errors in Chinese negation

Many contrastive studies have been conducted on negation between Chinese and other languages. Most aim to examine how learners’ mother tongues (L1) influence their ability to acquire negation in Chinese by revealing the numerous learning gaps between how negation is used in learners’ L1 and how it functions in the target language — Chinese (Wang, 2020; Liu, 2019; Cam, 2016; Hou, 2016).

Earlier literature highlights that language transfer often affects learners’ ability to use the Chinese negative markers ‘*bu*’ and ‘*mei*’ effectively. Consequently, this confusion can hinder their learning. Wang (2020) stated that Thai learners experience this confusion when using Chinese negations, often mixing up *bù* and *méi* or switching them, with ‘*bu*’ tending towards ‘*mei*’ and ‘*mei*’ creeping into the usage of ‘*bu*’. Unlike confusion, other contrastive studies emphasised that an insufficient understanding of how Chinese negation functions in different contexts — compared with L1 negation practices — leads to a poor grasp of the conversion rules between the target language and L1. Cam (2016) noted that Vietnamese learners made negative errors, such as incorrect substitutions or word order, influenced by negative markers of their native language. Furthermore, a lack of understanding of the complexity or distinctions among Chinese negation markers causes learners to mix or substitute ‘*bu*’ for ‘*mei*’ or vice versa.

Building upon this, many scholars emphasised the distinction between ‘*bu*’ and ‘*mei*’ to capture and mitigate potential errors occurring in the learning process. Notably, most findings demonstrate that ‘*bu*’ and ‘*mei*’ particles comprise distinct functions, and their usage conditions vary contextually and linguistically. Descriptively, ‘*bu*’ and ‘*mei*’ can serve to negate actions or activities, and also negate the nature or state of objects, while their semantic and pragmatic function may differ in usage by expressing subjective or objective intentions, including aspectual, modal, temporal, lexical, discourse constraints and other features (Lü, 1980; Liu, 2019; Cui & Sung, 2022; Hou, 2016; Yin, 2004). In terms of temporal constraints, ‘*bu*’ aims to indicate subjective intention, with a focus on past, present, and future events, while ‘*mei*’ emphasises objective intentions, particularly in past and present situations. Based on this, the existing literature highlights that this complexity is often viewed as a source of difficulty that leads learners to produce errors, such as misinclusion, omission, misrepresentation, and incorrect sequencing (Liu, 2019).

In the Congolese context, similar research remained visibly underexamined. Most research conducted on Chinese has widely addressed conventional issues—teachers, materials and methods, or pedagogical issues related to learners’ learning situation, motivation, and setting. Lingala and Kituba, in turn, have been widely examined in the context of sociolinguistics, with an emphasis on language policy (Wang, 2023; Mabila, 2025a, 2025b, 2026; Tsoumou, 2024; Mufwene, 1997, 2013; Meeuwis, 2013, 2020).

Overall, researchers have produced diverse findings on Chinese negation usage, particularly in learning contexts. These findings offer distinct insights into how negation functions in Chinese while also highlighting multiple errors from learners’ perspectives. In contrast, Lingala and Kituba appear underdeveloped, particularly in the context of Congolese learners. To address these gaps, this study poses the following research question:

What potential errors or difficulties in learning Chinese among Congolese lower-proficiency learners can be predicted from the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic differences between Chinese, Lingala, and Kituba?

RESEARCH METHODS

This study focuses mainly on a linguistic approach to shed light on potential errors that may occur in the learning process, especially for Congolese high school fifth-form humanities learners. The data for this study came from observations of Lingala and Kituba native speakers, systematically documented in books analysing Lingala and Kituba features, while sentences used as Chinese examples were extracted directly from learning textbooks.

Participants targeted: Lower-proficiency learners

The notion of lower proficiency refers to Congolese high school fifth-form humanities learners. In the Congolese educational system, Chinese is taught at high school, especially to humanities learners from fifth form to upper six form. In other words, fifth-form learners are beginners; lower-six-form learners are intermediate learners, and upper-six-form learners represent the advanced level. This study focused solely on fifth-form learners due to their limited proficiency in the Chinese language. Unlike fifth-form learners, learners at other levels seem to have developed some awareness of how to avoid transfer-related errors.

Data sources

Before shifting to a contrastive analysis, it is necessary to clarify that the author is a native speaker of both Lingala and Kituba and therefore draws on native-speaker knowledge to formulate and verify the linguistic examples presented in this study. To reduce potential native speakers-related biases, however, the examples used as data were not based solely on observations of linguistic knowledge. Their formulation and interpretation were informed by previous empirical research and linguistic works addressing the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic features of Lingala and Kituba. These sources provided additional reference points for selecting and analysing the examples. Some of these materials are available in the reference section (see Swift & Zola, 1963; Meeuwis, 2020), while others are accessible at the following links:

(a) Kituba <https://apics-online.info/contributions/58> , (b) Lingala [https://apicsonline.info/surveys/60#:~:text=Lingala%20\(or%20%20%20Lingála%20as%20well%20as%20native%20speakers](https://apicsonline.info/surveys/60#:~:text=Lingala%20(or%20%20%20Lingála%20as%20well%20as%20native%20speakers)

Regarding Chinese examples, the research refers to the current textbook “*Contemporary Chinese*”, used for humanities learners in the Congolese secondary educational system. Specifically, the textbook comprises four volumes aligned with high school levels. For example, volume one is designated for fifth-form, while other volumes are allocated to lower-six-form and upper-six-form learners. As a principal learning support, the textbook “*Contemporary Chinese*” volume one addresses basic Chinese knowledge, in

which Chinese negation emerges as part of the basic grammatical knowledge, especially in lessons one, four, and others. This study draws on volume one, where examples used in the present study have been extracted to illustrate the contrastive linguistic analysis that seeks to shed light on potential learner errors, rather than focusing on learner-produced data. Volume one was selected over other volumes because it aligns with the research target and meets the research requirements and expectations.

Criteria for data selection

These sentences were selected systematically using rigorous criteria. It consists of targeting basic sentences that cover negation knowledge, where syntactic, semantic and pragmatic aspects are visible, and aligns with the study's research methodological framework. After initial selection, these extracted sentences were categorised as "Full-match", "Semi-match", or "Mismatch". Through a rigorous selection procedure, the "Mismatch" sentences—they may contain complex negative features or correspond to a higher proficiency—were removed from the dataset. "Semi-match" sentences—they are sentences that fit grammatically, but do not fit contextually—were therefore refined contextually to align with the research framework and kept in the dataset. "Full-match" sentences—they are sentences that fit grammatically and contextually—were therefore kept in the dataset.

CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS AND RESULTS OF NEGATION: CHINESE, LINGALA AND KITUBA Syntactically

As noted above, negation in Chinese, Lingala, and Kituba remains distinct. This difference can initially lie in their syntactic structure—the arrangement of negative patterns within a sentence. Syntactically, Chinese encompasses subject, verb, and object patterns. Its negation occurs by placing negative adverbs 'bu' and 'mei' before a predicate, such as a verb, an adjective or other elements.

(3)		'bu' 不		'mei' 没
3.a	他们 不 去 学校	they not go school	3.a.a	她 没 学习 汉语, 而 学习 了 英语
	They do not go to school			She has not learned Chinese, but English

Unlike Chinese, negation in Lingala and Kituba is expressed quite similarly. In other words, Lingala negation is rendered by the negative marker 'té', which is positioned at the end of a clause or subclause to which it is attached. The negative marker 'vé' refers to Kituba. It appears at the end of a clause to negate the action or state of the whole predicate. At this level, Lingala and Kituba appear alike (See 4a.; 4b.). Beyond this similarity, the Kituba 'vé' can also occur before a given word to negate only a specific pattern that appears in the predicate, rather than negating the whole clause (See 4.b.b.).

(4)		Lingala 'té'	
4.a	Bangó ba kénda kélasi té	Them n.cl. go school not	4.a.a Alobak-i na ko yékola Chinois té
	They do not go to school		She say p.t. me f.t. learn Chinese not
			She said that I will not learn Chinese
		Kituba 'vé'	
4.b	Baú ke Kwénda na kalasi vé	them p.p. go to school not	4.b.b Tata ya beto me somba vé lupangu yakaka
	They do not go to school		

	Father p ² . us p.t. buy not parcel another Our father has not bought another parcel
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Analytically, the syntactic structure of Chinese shares some similarities and dissimilarities with that of Lingala and Kituba. Syntactically, these languages possess clausal (3.a; 4a; 4.b) and constituent (3.a.a; 4a.a; 4.b.b) negations. This signals that these languages comprise grammatical negative markers used to express negation in clauses. Despite this similarity, it revealed a significant difference in how each language typically expresses clausal and constituent negation. Chinese often focuses on standard negative markers ‘*bu*’ and ‘*mei*’, aligning with temporal, possession and other considerations, while Lingala and Kituba refer to a general negative marker used in almost all contexts. Most notably, Kituba constituent negation appears more dynamic than Chinese and Lingala negation because it may negate constituents differently from other languages by emphasising a specific expression rather than the entire sentence. For instance, the constituent negation in (4.b.b.) stresses the word *lupangu*, which is distinct from that in (3.a.a) and (4.a.a).

Unlike Lingala and Kituba, the Chinese negative markers ‘*bu*’ and ‘*mei*’ can also express a temporal aspect. For example, ‘*bu*’ is often linked with actions denoting present and future events, while ‘*mei*’ is viewed as a marker to negate past events and ongoing habitual activities. In contrast, Lingala and Kituba use their general negative markers to negate past and future events, as noted in (4.a.a) for Lingala future and (4.b.b) for Kituba past events.

‘*Bu*’ and ‘*mei*’ can also be used in the *affirmative-negative* structural pattern to form interrogative sentences. That is, a predicate—verb or adjective that is applicable in the negative markers ‘*bu*’ and ‘*mei*’ can be duplicated to form a question.

(5) ‘*bu* 不’

‘*mei* 没’

5.a	您 是 不 是 老师? they go not go school Do they go to school?	5.a.a	(你们学校) 有 没 有 学习 汉语 ⁴ ? have not have learn chinese Does anyone learn Chinese
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Overall, the negation in Chinese— ‘*bu*’ and ‘*mei*’—appears more multifunctional than those in Lingala or Kituba. This difference becomes more evident due to the absence of multiple negative markers and their limited multifunctional role compared to Chinese negative markers.

Semantically

Semantically, the negative markers in these languages serve to change the meaning of clauses due to aspectual, modal, temporal, lexical, discourse and other constraints. As markers, the Chinese ‘*bu*’ and ‘*mei*’ may shift their meaning when involved in the temporal aspect. That is, the negation of meaning aligns with the predicate tense within a clause where it applies. For example, ‘*bu*’ is often associated with actions expressing present and future events, while ‘*mei*’ is viewed as a marker to negate past events and present habitual activities. In contrast, Lingala and Kituba both use their general negative markers to negate past,

² Possession marker. e.g. ya munu (my), ya yange (your), ya yandi (his/her), ya beto (our/us), ya beno (your), ya baú (their)

³ Example from “Contemporary Chinese”, p. 40

⁴ Example from “Contemporary Chinese”, p. 79

present, and future events, as seen in (4.a.a) for Lingala future and (4.b.b) for Kituba past events.

Chinese

(6)		<i>Present with 'bu'</i>	<i>Future with 'bu'</i>
6.a	我不是加拿大人 ⁵ me not be Canada person I am not a Canadian	6.a.a	明天 星期六, 我们 都 不 上 课 ⁶ Tomorrow saturday, we all not up class Tomorrow is Saturday, we all will not go to class
		<i>Present with 'mei'</i>	<i>Past with 'mei'</i>
6.b	他们没有 儿子 they not have son They do not have sons	6.b.b	他们没 吃 你的 饭 They not eat your food They did not eat your food

These sentences illustrate how negation in Chinese occurs semantically within specific tenses, which may alter the original meaning of the negative markers. For instance, the 'bu' in (6.a and 6.a.a) does not merely serve as a simple negation; it also conveys subjective intention in relation to the temporal tenses. Conversely, the 'mei' in (6.b. and 6.b.b) highlights objective intentions by emphasising the existence of something. Unlike 'bu' and 'mei', 'té' and 'vé' remain the only general negative markers, appearing in all contexts without being confined to particular situations.

Beyond these distinctions, negative markers in Chinese, Lingala, and Kituba can be used independently to respond to a question, serving as responses that refer to the entire clause.

(7)		<i>Chinese 'bu'</i>	<i>'mei'</i>
7.a	A: 你 是老师 吗? you be teacher <i>int. m</i> ⁷ Are you a teacher?	7.a.a	A: 附近有没有银行? ⁸ around have not have bank Is there a bank around?
	B: 不! No!		B: 没(有) ! No (have) No!

Lingala

7.b	A: Yo za mólákisi? You be teacher Are you a teacher?	7.b.b	A: Yo za na ordinateur? You be with computer Do you have a computer?
	B: Té! No!		B: Té! No!

⁵ Example from "Contemporary Chinese", p. 37

⁶ Example from "Contemporary Chinese", p. 134

⁷ Interrogative marker for questions.

⁸ Example from "Contemporary Chinese", p. 178

Kituba

7.c A: *Nge ke múlóngísi?*
 You be teacher
 Are you a teacher?

B: *Vé!*
 No!

7.c.c A: *Nge ke na ordinateurur?*
 You be with computer
 Do you have a computer?

B: *Vé!*
 No!

Overall, the Chinese language may employ different markers to indicate such contexts, whereas Lingala and Kituba use a single marker to distinguish between negative subjective and objective intentions.

Pragmatically

This notion aims to examine how negation in Chinese, Lingala, and Kituba functions within specific communicative or interactional contexts where speakers pragmatically convey intentions.

Regarding Chinese, ‘*bu*’ and ‘*mei*’ do not merely serve a grammatical function; rather, they express what speakers intend to communicate in context. Pragmatically, ‘*bu*’ tends to be more static, negating a state, a general stance, a habit, or an attitude of speakers, whereas ‘*mei*’ is more dynamic, negating the completion or occurrence of an action (Lü, 1980; Liu, 2019; Cui & Sung, 2022).

(8)

‘*bu*’

Future with ‘*bu*’

8.a	我不吃米饭 I not eat rice I do not eat rice	8.a.a	我 没 吃 米饭 I not p.t eat rice I did not eat rice
8.b	我不比你高 I not comp. ⁹ you tall I am not taller than you	8.b.b	我没有你高 I not comp. you tall I am not as tall as you

These examples express different meanings that depend on their context. The ‘*bu*’ in (8.a) may indicate that the speaker does not habitually eat rice or simply shows refusal or unwillingness to eat rice. Similarly, the ‘*bu*’ in (8.b) may suggest that the speaker is as tall as their interlocutor or that they are shorter. Unlike ‘*bu*’, the negative marker ‘*mei*’ in (8.a.a) clearly states a fact—something that has not happened—while the (8.b.b) may imply that the interlocutor is taller than the speaker.

Regarding Lingala and Kituba, ‘*té*’ and ‘*vé*’ do not need to be used as specific markers in particular contexts to convey either static or dynamic significance. Unlike Chinese ‘*bu*’ and ‘*mei*’, the position of Lingala ‘*té*’ may be more flexible and more precise when interpreting the contextual meaning of a clause. To understand the pragmatic mechanism, the negative marker can sometimes shift position to emphasise specific words. Similarly, Kituba employs almost the same properties to express meaning in specific contexts. The interpretation of these contextual meanings depends on what the speaker intends to communicate by emphasising a particular expression within a clause.

⁹ Comparative particle

(9) *Lingala*

9.a <i>Na koki kolina té mwasi wana</i> I can love not woman that I cannot love that woman	9.a.a <i>Lobi té bino bo ko-balana</i> Tomorrow not you yourself f.t. marry It is not tomorrow that you will marry
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Kituba

9.b <i>Mu-ntu ke vé kuna</i> n.cl. person be not there No one is there	9.b.b <i>Ni Munu vé dia-aka madia ya yandi nionso</i> it me not eat p.t. food pos. ¹⁰ his all It was not me who ate his entire food
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These Lingala and Kituba sentences function differently from those in Chinese. Pragmatically, the ‘té’ in (9.a) may emphasise either ‘*kolina*’ or ‘*mwasi wana*’. In this sense, it may indicate that the speaker lacks emotional capacity towards that woman or that the woman’s behaviour makes the speaker feel unloved. There is more meaning in the expression ‘*mwasi wana*’. This scenario is also seen in (9.a.a).

The Kituba (9.b.b) appears visually similar to (9.a.a), which emphasises the difference between ‘*Lobi*’ and ‘*bino bo*’. This Kituba ‘vé’ highlights that the entire food was not consumed by ‘*Munu*’, indicating that ‘*Munu*’ did not eat any food at all. Alternatively, it may suggest that only part of the food was eaten by ‘*Munu*’, while the rest was consumed by others. Therefore, ‘*Munu*’ should not be held responsible for all of the food.

From syntactic, semantic to pragmatic analysis, Chinese negation—‘*bu*’ and ‘*mei*’ appear more abundant, specific and situational than the Lingala ‘té’ and Kituba ‘vé’. In the learning process, the Chinese negative markers may be hard for learners with Lingala and Kituba backgrounds to master.

CONGOLESE LEARNERS— POTENTIAL ERRORS IN CHINESE NEGATION

As a system of knowledge, grammar explains how speakers interpret their understanding when using or learning a particular language. Throughout the process, certain concepts may seem complex and difficult to grasp, which can potentially lead to errors among learners, especially those with lower proficiency.

In this study, the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic aspects of Chinese negation—‘*bu*’ and ‘*mei*’—appeared more varied and context-dependent than the Lingala ‘té’ and Kituba ‘vé’. During the learning process, these Chinese negative markers may be difficult for learners with Lingala and Kituba backgrounds, especially those with lower proficiency. Through this contrastive analysis, several systematic errors may emerge, particularly syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic errors, as learners attempt to use Chinese.

In the syntactic foundation, learners may produce predicate-final negation errors—errors with the placement of negation at the end of sentences due to cross-linguistic transfer. As previously stated, Chinese negative markers are often situated before the predicate, such as verbs or adjectives, whereas negation in Lingala and Kituba occurs at the end of the predicates. This leads to ungrammatical sentences (See 10.a*). Alongside the predicate-final position, learners may also misplace the ‘*bu*’ and ‘*mei*’ in sentences. This misplacement may occur because Chinese typically follows a strict syntactic order for negation— subject + negative markers + predicate, while Lingala and Kituba negative markers can be more

¹⁰ Possession marker

flexible within sentences, as in (4.b.b). Consequently, learners can produce some ungrammatical sentences (10.a.a*).

(10) *Chinese*

10.a *¹¹我学习 汉语 不/没
 I learn Chinese not/no
 I learn Chinese not/no

10.a.a *他们去没 超市
 they go no supermarket

Regarding semantic contexts, most errors may often emerge from how the significance of negation is understood within sentences. This leads learners to confuse the use of ‘*bu*’ and ‘*mei*’, because Lingala and Kituba do not make a specific distinction between negation expressing a state and that describing a factual stance, even though negation stresses the temporal aspects in specific contexts. Learners can produce certain ungrammatical sentences (See 11.a). Beyond confusion, learners may produce some irrelevant negation to express the completion of an action. Instead, they can refer to ‘*bu*’ to negate sentences where actions are completed, rather than using ‘*mei*’, which indicates completion of actions (See 11.a.a). A misinterpretation of Chinese negation, particularly ‘*mei*’, can appear as another significant error emerging from learners. Since ‘*mei*’ marks the past tense, these learners might overuse this marker to negate all situations related to past events by overlooking the distinction between static and dynamic meanings in Chinese negation (See 11.b).

(11) *Chinese*

11.a	*她 没 是 学生 <i>She not be learner</i>	11.a.a	A: 你 吃 过 火锅 吗? you eat p.t hot-pot int. m Did you eat hot-pot?
11.b	*我 没 喜欢 那个 比赛 I not like this match	11.b.b	B: *不, 我 不 吃 过 火锅 No, I not eat p.t hot-pot

On a pragmatic basis, the errors may emerge from a misunderstanding of what the speakers convey in a specific context by using negation. This misunderstanding may lead these learners to misuse and misinterpret the meaning in the context of their interlocutors.

(12) *Chinese*

12.a	A: 我去 电影院, 你 去 不去? Me go cinema, you go not go I go to the cinema; do you go too?	12.a.a	他 不 吃 猪肉 Him no eat pork He does not eat pork.
	B: 我 没 有 时间 Me no have time I do not have time	12.b	我 没 有 办 法 Me no have way, I do not have a way

Literally, these sentences express simple negation from the Congolese learners’ perspective. However, these sentences can convey another contextual meaning that these

¹¹ A marker of ungrammatical sentences.

Congolese learners can simply reduce to a trivial negation (12.a) or can misinterpret it as negation; for example, (12.a) they can translate it into the speaker does not have, or he has unsuitable time. Beyond its literal meaning, the sentence (12.a) can pragmatically be considered as a specific implicit sort of refusal to the speaker's request, rather than expressing it overtly or directly. This indirect refusal can be driven by various motivations; for example, the speaker may dislike going to the cinema, or he may not be interested in today's cinema programme; therefore, to avoid offending the interlocutor, the speaker uses the indirect refusal.

Unlike (12.a), besides its literal meaning, (12.a.a) can convey the speaker's rejection of a pork dish offered. Similarly, it may emphasise an explicit or direct refusal, depending on the context of the interlocutor's request. In addition, (12.b) at first glance, it conveys that the speaker has nothing he can do; directly, he is powerless. In other words, it translates the self-imposed limitations. However, the negation here may indicate a deliberate choice by the speaker to evade or resign from a given problem. Consequently, the speaker uses persuasive strategies to hide personal reluctance to take on responsibilities.

In this regard, these Congolese learners may pragmatically oversimplify Chinese negation by focusing on surface meaning, as their multilingual background expresses negation differently from Chinese, depending on the context of speakers' interaction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Previously, many studies examined negation in Chinese compared with other languages, such as English, Korean, Arabic, and French. These research findings mainly focused on the Indo-European, Japonic, Koreanic, or Afro-Asiatic language families (Cui & Sung, 2022; Deng, 2025; Wang & Chan, 2021; Shengxia, 2023). As a result, they overlooked exploring Chinese in relation to the Bantu language family, especially within the Congolese context, where local learners may encounter multiple challenges in mastering Chinese negation concepts. To fill these gaps, this study has contrasted negation in Chinese 不 and 没 (bu and mei) with Lingala 'té' and Kituba 'vé' to address potential errors that emerged among Congolese learners. To achieve this, a linguistic approach was employed to proceed with a contrastive analysis by comparing the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic functions of Chinese negative markers 'bu' and 'mei' with Lingala 'té' and Kituba 'vé'. This study is important insofar as it highlights that enhancing learning of Chinese in specific local contexts requires an inclusive approach that considers learners' linguistic repertoires, rather than overemphasising the pedagogical foundation alone.

The contrastive analysis found that negation in Chinese differs from that in Lingala and Kituba. This distinction concerns the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic functions of the negative markers. Syntactically, Chinese negation is abundant, and its structural placement emphasises the use of negative markers in specific contexts. Instead, Lingala and Kituba often require clause-final placement and typically employ a single negative marker in most contexts. Semantic aspects are other elements that highlight the distinction between Chinese negation and that of Lingala and Kituba. The contrastive analysis revealed that the semantic functions of Chinese negation are more meaningful than those of Lingala and Kituba. Chinese negation can carry temporal meaning—by using tense aspects to convey different times, such as past, present, and future. These additional aspects are important in describing whether negation is static or dynamic. Because of this, speakers need to refer to specific markers that show subjective and objective negation. Unlike Chinese, Lingala, and Kituba, which do not require a particular negative marker in specific situations, such as those

involving temporal aspects or the static vs dynamic nature of negation. Instead, these languages use a general negative marker and do not require the speaker to distinguish between different types of negation. Pragmatically, these languages highlight differences in how they interpret contextual meaning. The Chinese negation appears more complex to understand because of the different functions of negative markers, such as static, dynamic, subjective, objective, or temporal elements. In contrast, Lingala and Kituba do not require such details to interpret what speakers intend to convey; instead, their negative markers can be shifted to emphasise specific words to which they apply. Beyond Lingala and Kituba, many other Bantu languages feature a single negative marker to negate clauses in most specific contexts, without needing different types of markers (Cyffer et al., 2009; Kahrel & Van der Berg, 1993; Ngonyani, 2002). Meanwhile, some languages use multiple negative markers in only certain contexts (Sulaiman, 2020).

The contrastive analysis also revealed that these typological distinctions pose potential obstacles for Congolese learners with Lingala and Kituba backgrounds in learning Chinese. Syntactically, these learners may encounter difficulties with the placement of negative markers in Chinese because Lingala and Kituba prioritise clause-final negation. Additionally, learners may likely misplace the use of *'bu'* and *'mei'* due to a lack of awareness of this distinction. Semantically, the obstacles might lie in understanding the significance of negation within sentences. This misunderstanding may result in confusion between *'bu'* and *'mei'*, incorrect negation related to the completion of an action, as well as the overuse of *'mei'* in almost all situations by ignoring its implications for the temporal aspect and other elements. Pragmatically, the main obstacles probably relate to interpreting meaning in context. The findings of this study seem different from those of some previous research, which often focused on identifying similarities and differences between two languages using methods such as descriptive-qualitative analysis or questionnaires. Although their results contribute to the literature, a linguistic approach may be more effective in addressing these differences (Sulaiman, 2020; Cam, 2016). Additionally, the findings of this study seem different from other results that focus on negation in Chinese within pedagogical trajectories, overlooking that relying solely on a pedagogical approach may not fully or necessarily address this problem. By emphasising the pedagogical method, these studies tend to classify the common errors into misinclusion, omission, misrepresentation, and incorrect sequencing (Liu, 2019; Cam, 2016; Wang, 2020; Hou, 2016). Although these research outcomes appear significant, other analytical approaches—such as linguistic ones—may prove more effective, contributing to a comprehensive approach that offers a nuanced perspective on how to better address the challenges associated with acquiring Chinese negation.

The study has both theoretical and pedagogical implications. Theoretically, it contributes to clarifying cross-linguistic findings on negation by examining typological differences in negation notions that influence second language acquisition. It highlights how multiple negative markers and a single negative marker function across different languages in various linguistic contexts. In addition, it has implications for enriching the typological representation of negation mechanisms across language families, particularly between Sino-Tibetan and Bantu families. Pedagogically, the study suggests enhancing Chinese language education by fostering the acquisition of the notion of negation, especially for African learners with Bantu language backgrounds. Firstly, local teachers may need to undergo additional training to acquire linguistic knowledge about Lingala and Kituba. This may not

only be limited to typological differences in negation but also extend to some basic cross-linguistic understanding. Although teachers are native speakers of Lingala and Kituba, this does not guarantee they are well-equipped with knowledge of these languages, as they are not yet taught locally. Through this training, teachers could enhance their knowledge of Bantu languages and gain a comprehensive understanding of how their native languages function. This may assist them in managing how to support learners to avoid facing various difficulties that may arise from cross-linguistic influence. Furthermore, encouraging pre-service and in-service teachers to embrace cross-linguistic learning by exploring how such knowledge is addressed academically could be beneficial. Rather than focusing on standard training formats, developing this approach may help teachers explain clearly and sufficiently how negation in Chinese is constructed syntactically, semantically, and pragmatically, rather than viewing ‘*bu*’ and ‘*mei*’ as simple negative markers. In classroom practices, future teaching books and textbooks should at least include specific contrastive descriptions of essential knowledge that may help identify errors arising from similarities between Chinese and Lingala or Kituba. Taken together, these should help teachers inform learners about potential transfer errors from local languages to Chinese.

This study has certain limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results of this contrastive analysis in this specific context. For example, the lack of learners’ voices in the findings—since learners’ data are not included, only their linguistic backgrounds are—should be noted. Furthermore, the study primarily concentrates on syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic aspects, but other dimensions, such as morphological or typological factors, might be more relevant. The research focuses solely on potential errors; therefore, future studies should incorporate participants’ voices through quantitative, qualitative, or test-based approaches, as these methods could better identify actual errors rather than just potential ones.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, this study examined negation in Chinese and two Congolese languages, Lingala and Kituba. Through a contrastive analysis, the Chinese negation markers *bù* and *méi* were compared with the Lingala negative markers *té* and the Kituba marker *vé* at the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic levels.

Rather than adopting a pedagogical approach, the study took a linguistic perspective to identify potential errors that Congolese beginner learners might encounter when acquiring Chinese negation. The analysis suggests that these learners may experience difficulties when using Chinese negation because of the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic differences between the languages. In light of these findings, the study highlights the importance of developing teachers’ pedagogical skills while also equipping them with relevant linguistic knowledge of the learners’ native languages, particularly Lingala and Kituba.

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