

The Application of Negative and Positive Words and Phrases in Chinese Negation Expressions

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Negation is a ubiquitous phenomenon in all languages. In Chinese, there are a good number of such negative expressions as “fēi (非)”, “bù (不)”, “méi (没)”, “mò (莫)”, “bié (别)”, “wèi (未)”, “wú (无)”, “wù (勿)”, “fiào (甯)”, “béng (甬)”, “fǒu (否)”, and “miǎn (免)” as well as phrases with one of them. This paper is intended to explore the application of negation in Chinese in two ways: (1) People express positive meanings with negative words or phrases; (2) People express negative meanings with positive words or phrases. The linguistic data employed in this paper come from real life, microblogs, variety shows, short videos, and some hàobù expressions from three of China’s four classic novels.

Keywords: negation, negative expressions, linguistic data, study

I. Introduction

Currently, more and more scholars are doing researches on Chinese negative words and phrases, especially “búshì” and “méiyǒu”. However, as far as the Chinese language is concerned, there are quite a number of expressions of negation in it, such as “fēi (非)”, “bù (不)”, “méi (没)”, “mò (莫)”, “bié (别)”, “wèi (未)”, “wú (无)”, “wù (勿)”, “fiào (甯)”, “béng (甬)”, “fǒu (否)”, and “miǎn (免)” as well as phrases like “búshì (不是)”, “méiyǒu (没有)”, “bùkuì (不愧)”, “bùgǎn (不敢)”, “biétí (别提)”, “hàobù (好不)”, and “bùfáng (不妨).” Predecessors have done much research on “búshì” and “méiyǒu”. Most expressions with negative words and phrases imply negation, i.e., “bù (不)” or “méi (没)”. However, there are exceptions. This paper will focus on the phenomenon that people express positive meanings with negative words or phrases, the phenomenon that people express negative meanings with positive words or phrases, and how hàobù (好不) is used in three of China’s Four Great Classic Novels, but it is not found in *A Dream in Red Mansions* (also known as *The Story of the Stone*).

II. Literature Review

Scholars in academic circles have paid much attention to the analysis of “bú (shì)” and “méi (yǒu)”. Lǚ (1999, p. 18) classifies “bú” and “méi (yǒu)” into negative adverbs, discussing negation expressions made up of

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“bú” and “méi (yǒu)” in detail in the book of *Eight Hundred Chinese Modern Characters (Revised and Enlarged Edition)* (1999). Xie (2011) combs the predecessors’ researches and describes the semantic and pragmatic differences between “bú” and “méi” based on the different types of errors in the process of learning “bú” and “méiyǒu” by foreign students in the International Culture Exchange School of Fudan University. Ran (2015) declares that the metapragmatic negation expression of “búshì+ (S) + V + (NP)” helps to reduce or lessen the negative illocutionary forces or unwelcome effects of what follows in interpersonal interaction. Wu and Zhou (2020) assert that the expression of “不是…吗 (búshì...má)?” is not only face-saving for the recipient but also less risky for the speaker and thus supportive of the social solidarity between two interlocutors in their paper “Addressing information discrepancies in conversation: búshì...má?—interrogatives as account solicitations in Mandarin Chinese.” Zhan et al. (2021) argue that the right-periphery pragmatic marker “búshì” originates from the use of the negative adjective “búshì” in a clause-final position as a rhetorical question tag while the left-periphery pragmatic marker “búshì” originates from the negative adjective “búshì” used as a negative response to the previous speaker’s question or statement. In her master’s thesis, *Study on the Acquisition Errors of the Negative Adverbs “Bú” and “Méi” by Thai Foreign Students*, Alissa (2021) claims that negative adverbs “bú” and “méi” are frequently used in written expression and daily communication, but Thai students often make different types of errors in practical use. She points out that “bú” and “méi” are similar in some aspects, but different in semantic and pragmatic aspects. In her paper, “A Study of the Semantic Equivalence of Common Negative Words and Phrases in Korean and Chinese from the Perspective of Korean Learners”, He (2021) maintains that negative meanings in Chinese are mostly expressed with negative words “bú” and “méi” and the differences between them are mainly on the tenses of sentences. In “A Study of the Aspect Restriction and the Derivation of ‘bú’ and ‘Méi’ in Chinese,” Liu and Li (2021) contend that the syntactic generation of “bú” and “méi” is not related to the aspect restriction. They also maintain that the superficial difference in the phonological realization of the negative word is determined by the interpretive mechanism.

III. Main Body

Negative Words and Phrases for Positive Meanings.

Negation expression “búshì + (S) + V + (NP)” does not mean the speaker is committed to not performing the speech act of criticizing and the like, nor is the speaker committed to the truth of what is said (Ran, 2015, p. 192). For example, the sentence that “búshì wǒmen kànbúshàng tā, tā quèshí zuòde bùdìdào” (不是我们看不上他, 他确实做得不地道) means that not that we look down upon him, but that he did do the thing in the wrong way. Here “búshì” doesn’t perform negation. Negative words and phrases don’t always mean negation. There are many such negation expressions which don’t perform negation.

(1) “hǎobù (好不)” + adjective.

“hǎobù rènao (好不热闹)” means “hǎo rènao (very hilarious). To some extent, the former is more vivid than the latter and used more often. That “zhè bù diànyǐng hǎobù gǎnrén” (这部电影好不感人) means that the movie is so touching. “hǎobù sāoxìng de yī tiān” (好不扫兴的一天) means “a very disappointing day”.

However, when “hǎobù (好不) + adjective” is used to modify verbs, it usually indicates negation. That “hǎobù róngyì áiguò zhè yī tiān” (好不容易挨过这一天) means it's not easy at all to get through this day. “hǎo” here is used to emphasize “bù róngyì”, so “bù” indicates negation, meaning not.

(2) Something or somebody is “liǎobudé (了不得)”.

“liǎobudé” means excellent or terrific although with “bù” in it. That “zhè míng yùndòngyuán liǎobudé” (这名运动员了不得) means that this sports player is really outstanding.

(3) Adjective/adverb + “bùdéliǎo (不得了)”

“jīntiān rède bùdéliǎo (今天热得不得了)” means that it is such a dog day today.

“bùdéliǎo (不得了)” can also be used alone, similar to “liǎobudé (了不得)”.

(4) Somebody/something + “liǎobuqǐ (了不起)”.

“liǎobuqǐ” means really great. However, if “liǎobuqǐ” collocates with “a (啊)” or “má (吗)” with a rising tone, “liǎobuqǐ a” often annotates the implied meaning that there is nothing great. For instance, “xuéxí hǎo jiù liǎobuqǐ má?” (学习好了就了不起吗?). It actually carries a negative meaning to question the view that if somebody studies very well, he or she is simply great.

(5) “béngti (甬提)” + “duō (多)” + adjective.

gōngzuò le yī zhěng tiān, béngti duō lèi le (工作了一整天甬提多累了). (After a whole day of work, I am really tired out.)

“béngshuō (甬说)” is similar with “béngti”. However, they are used in different situations. “béngshuō” is usually followed by “le (了) and “yě bù (也不)” or “méiyǒu (没有)”. “béngshuō” + something/somebody + le, another sentence with le, somebody “yě bù (也不) + verb”. “béng shuō nǐ le, tiān wáng lǎo zǐ yě bù xíng”. (甬说你了，天王老子也不行). Here, “béngshuō” means that nobody can change the situation, let alone you.

(6) “búshí (不时)” + verb.

“búshí miáo yī yǎn tā (不时瞄一眼她) or “búshí miáo tā yī yǎn (不时瞄她一眼).” “búshí (不时)” means from time to time or occasionally, similar to “shíbúshí (时不时)”. For example, “Xiǎo Wáng búshí miáo tā yī yǎn (不时瞄她一眼)” means that Xiǎo Wáng cast a glance at her from time to time.

7) “hènbùdé (恨不得)” + (somebody/something) + verb

Its literal meaning is that I hate it that I can't, but it actually implies that I am looking forward to doing something with great eagerness.

There are similar expressions such as “bābùdé (巴不得)” and “hènbùnéng (恨不能)”, which perform more or less the same function.

(8) “hébù (何不)” + verb + question tag

“hébù (何不)” + verb + question tag is why not in English.

“hé bù gān cuì fàng xià? (何不干脆放下?)” It means “why not just let it go?” Maybe the speaker wants to point out that only when you really let go of it can you live a happy life.

A similar negative expression is “yǒu hé bù kě (有何不可).” For instance, “yī rén guò yǒu hé bù kě (一人过有何不可?)” is a typical sentence a person who prefers to remain single may use, meaning “Why not just live all by yourself?”

(9) “Nǐ búhuì xiāngxìn (你不会相信)” + clause

When somebody says “Nǐ búhuì xiāngxìn”, it actually means that he/she knows that you will believe something. A girl school student says to her mother, “Nǐ búhuì xiāngxìn, wǒ zhè cì kǎo le yī bǎi fēn (你不会相信, 我这次考了一百分。)” The girl is sure that her mother will believe her and that she just wants to show she is surprised and her mother will also be surprised that her daughter hasn’t got full marks.

(1) “wǒ + shénme + dōu + bùhuì + shuō (我什么都不会说)”

Though it seemingly means the speaker won’t say anything, it implies that the speaker knows something the audience want to know. In a short video, an ingenious girl gets annoyed by her father, and says deliberately when her mother walks by, “wǒ + shénme + dōu + bùhuì + shuō.” Her mother instantly acquires her implied meaning that she knows something about her father that he doesn’t want her mother to know. Then, the girl succeeds in having her father criticized while her father can’t find her fault in this case. But, literally, the structure of “wǒ + shénme + dōu + bùhuì + zuò (我什么都不会做)” only means that “I won’t do anything.”

2) “wǒ + juéding + bùzuò + noun + le. (我决定不做…了)”

A girl announces, “wǒ juéding bùzuò zhānǚ le (我决定不做渣女了).” It indicates that she has made up her mind to stop being a girl who is just leading a debauched life, suggesting that she is a bad girl for the time being. “le” here brings out the crucial point, revealing the present state of the speaker.

A similar structure of “wǒ + bù yào + verb phrase + le” manifests what the speaker is doing now. For example, “wǒ + bù yào yǎng huā le. (我不要养花了)” demonstrates that the speaker is growing some flowers at that time.

Positive Words and Phrases for Negative Meanings.

Negative words and phrases do not necessarily perform negation, and positive words and phrases don’t always express affirmation. In certain contexts, positive words and phrases indicate negative meaning.

(1) Verb + le + máoxiàn”, “guǐ”, “chuízi”, “niǎo”, “qiú”, “chanchan”.

2019 was a tough year. Economic crisis came along with coronavirus, so many didn’t make money in that year. They teased about their income in the year, “zhuànle gè máoxiàn (赚了个毛线)”, “zhuànle gè guǐ (赚了个鬼)”, zhuànle gè chuízi (赚了个锤子)”, “zhuànle gè niǎo (赚了个鸟)” and “zhuànle gè qiú (赚了个球)”, which all mean nothing without a single negative word in them here, though “máoxiàn”, “guǐ”, “chuízi”, “guǐ”, “niǎo”, and “qiú” literally mean “wool”, “ghost”, “hammer”, “bird”, and “ball” respectively. In real life, all the above terms indicate practically nothing.

(2) Verb + le + gè + jìmò (寂寞).

“Verb + le + gè + jìmò” has similar meanings to the above-mentioned expressions, like “děng le gè jìmò” (等了个寂寞), “chī le gè jìmò” (吃了个寂寞), and “kàn le gè jìmò” (看了个寂寞). The literary meaning of “jìmò” is lonely. But in this structure, it simply means nothing. However, it is a better way for people to receive disappointments.

(3) “guǐ zhī dào (鬼知道) + clause” means nobody knows + clause.

It is the counterpart of a western saying, “God knows.” In 2016, Fu Yuanhui finished third in 58.95 seconds to qualify for the women’s 100-meter backstroke final. When asked what she thought of the case, she said excitedly, “guǐ zhī dào wǒ jīng lì le shénme”. (鬼知道我经历了什么)

(4) “děng + something + verb + le + zài shuō ba (等…了再说吧)

It means I am not sure that something will happen. When asked what she would do if she played against ITO Mima, the Japanese pingpong player who with Mizutani Jun defeated Xu Xin and Liu Shiwen, Chen Meng brushed it aside, saying, “děng tā jìnle juésài zài shuō ba (等她进了决赛再说吧).” Here, Chen Meng didn’t answer the question directly but said so, suggesting that she didn’t think that it would be easy for ITO Mima to make it into the final.

A boy says to his parents, “If I score 100 in the exam, buy me a toy.” If his parents say yes directly, it indicates that they have confidence in him. But if his parents say, “děng nǐ kǎo dào yī bǎi fēn zài shuō ba”, it indicates that they don’t don’t think that it would be easy for him to get full marks.

(5) “rúguǒ + verb + huì + gèng hǎo.(如果…会更好)”

When somebody says that something will go better if you do it in that way, he/she wants to tell that he/she is not satisfied with the way you do it and he/she wants you to follow his/her opinions. It is a better and wiser way to deny someone’s proposal and achieve the speaker’s goal.

(6) When people say something that they know that everybody knows it is a lie, usually it implies that they try to express negation with positive words or phrases, and vice versa.

This saying spreads on the Internet that what moves me most at the Olympic Games is not those athletes who doesn’t win medals but still keep striving, but those juries who go blind in both eyes but still keep working. Those juries don’t go blind. People say they go blind which is opposite the truth to deliver the message that they don’t believe in those judges who pretend to be blind when the games are not unfair to Chinese players. They let Japanese gymnast HASHIMOTO Daiki win the gold medal even if he jumped out of the bound. They ignored the situation that a Japanese swimmer swam over a Chinese competitor. People express their distrust by saying things that are obviously wrong.

IV. Conclusion

Chinese negation expressions are an important part of Chinese language and culture, and a difficult one for there are so many negative words and phrases, especially when they are used in classic works. Thus, it’s necessary for people to master the application of negation expressions in Chinese. People need to know not only the literary meaning of negation expressions but also the implications. Normally, negative words and phrases perform negation, while positive ones, affirmation. But in certain contexts, they deliver the opposite meanings. To obtain the true meanings of utterance, people must pay attention to the speakers’ tone, the context and particular expressions. This paper concludes 11 structure negative words and phrases expressing affirmation and 6 structures of positive words and phrases expressing negation, based on the conversations in the real life, variety shows, dialogues in short videos and reviews and writings on the Internet. Moreover, some examples about *hǎobù* in three of China’s four classic novels are stated in the paper. Still, they are beyond the full content of negation expressions due to the authors’ limited linguistic data and knowledge. It is expected that this paper might bring up more better researches on Chinese negation expressions which help spread people all over the world understand Chinese culture better.

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