

Pragmatic Function Analysis of the Negative Construction "You Bu Shi" (Again Not)

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Abstract:

In modern Chinese, the collocation of the adverb "you(又)" (again) and the negative phrase "bu shi(不是)" (not) forms the construction "you bu shi(又不是)", which retains the basic meaning of negative structures and develops rich pragmatic expressions in oral communication. It serves as a typical example for studying the interaction between semantics and pragmatics. By reviewing existing research, scholars have mainly focused on the intensifying effect of "you" on negative mood, while lacking a systematic and in depth analysis of special pragmatic functions such as defense and irony of "you bu shi", leaving a research gap. Therefore, this paper investigates and analyzes the pragmatic functions of the negative construction "you bu shi".

Keywords: Construction; Negative structure; Modal adverb; Context identification; Pragmatic function

1. Introduction

In modern Chinese, the combination of the adverb "you" and the negative word "bu shi" forms the structure "you bu shi". While maintaining the basic semantics of negative structures, it has derived abundant pragmatic expressions in oral communication, making it a paradigm for studying the interaction between semantics and pragmatics. A review of existing literature shows that academic circles have focused on analyzing the intensifying effect of "you" on negative mood, yet lack a systematic sorting and in depth exploration of special pragmatic functions like defense and irony of "you bu shi", resulting in a

certain research blank. Hence, this paper conducts an investigation and analysis of the pragmatic functions of the negative construction "you bu shi".

Most existing studies still discuss the adverb you separately from bing and ye, and rarely treat you bushi as an integrated construction to investigate its grammaticalization process, syntactic constraints, and systematic differences from bing bushi and ye bushi. Building on previous analyses, this paper incorporates insights from multidimensional semantics, grammaticalization theory, and speech act theory to further refine its functional system and identification criteria.

2. Semantic Basis and Initial Function of the Negative Construction "You Bu Shi"

2.1 Structural Formation of "You Bu Shi"

The construction "you bu shi" is composed of the adverb "you" and the negative phrase "bu shi". First, the part of speech of "you" has evolved from a temporal adverb to a modal adverb.

In ancient Chinese, "you" mainly functioned as a temporal adverb, indicating repetition or addition of actions:

(1) 请伐郑。子西曰：“楚未节也。不然，吾不忘也。”他日又请，许之。（春秋左氏传·哀公）

(2) 郑文公怨惠王之入不与厉公爵，又怨襄王之与卫滑，故囚伯服。（史记·周本纪）

In the two examples above, the former "you" refers to the repetition of the action "attack Zheng" with the same agent and patient, and the temporal marker "another day" indicates the interval between actions, so "you" expresses repetition. The latter "you" indicates a sequential logical connection, expressing addition.

In modern Chinese, when collocated with negative words, "you" is grammaticalized into a modal adverb, whose function shifts to intensifying negative mood.

(3) 我没有参加这场会议，哪里知道讲了什么。

(4) 我又没有参加这场会议，哪里知道讲了什么。

Comparing Example (4) with Example (3), the negative sentence modified by "you" expresses a significantly stronger negative mood than the one without "you".

As the negative core of the construction, "bu shi" essentially denotes direct negation of judgments, facts or actions, i.e., negating the subsequent statement. In terms of structural development, "you bu shi" has expanded from simple negation to complex expression: in Ming and Qing vernacular Chinese, "you bu shi" was mostly followed by nominal constituents, forming the simple structure "you + bu shi + object":

(5) 婆子便道：“阿呀！娘子，大官人又不是别人，没事相陪吃一盏儿，怕怎的！”（《金瓶梅》）

Here, "you bu shi" only negates the identity "stranger", with a simple structure and single meaning. In modern Chinese, "you bu shi" is mostly followed by clauses, forming the complex structure "you bu shi + subject predicate construction":

(6) 又不是我不努力，是实在没时间。

The structural features of "you bu shi" are unique. "Bu shi", as a basic negative structure, can stand alone as a sentence:

(7) 不是！我没有说过这些！

It can also be followed by various constituents with flexi-

ble semantic and pragmatic functions:

(8) 不是我干的，你搞清楚好吧。

"You bu" is mostly followed by verbal constituents, negating repeated actions:

(9) 又不吃饭，你想干嘛？

In contrast, "you bu shi" cannot stand alone and requires support from subsequent clauses. Its semantic core is "intensifying negation of facts or actions". This structural difference determines that "you bu shi" is more prone to extend to the pragmatic level. From the perspective of grammaticalization, you here has assumed a metalinguistic function. It is unstressed and subjectivised, serving to highlight a negative proposition rather than to express repetition. Meanwhile, you bushi functions as a constituent at the higher level of speech acts. It can only appear in the main clause of negative declarative sentences and is barred from interrogatives, conditionals and subordinate clauses, which reflects strong subjectivity constraints.

2.2 Initial Semantic Function of "You Bu Shi"

The initial semantic function of "you bu shi" is emphasizing the certainty of negation, which is jointly determined by the modal intensifying function of "you" and the negative function of "bu shi". Shen Jiakuan proposed that "you" is a presupposition trigger, which strengthens negation in negative sentences to eliminate possible cognitive biases or presuppositions of the hearer.

(10) 又不是第一次做这件事了。

In this example, "you bu shi" intensifies negation to explicitly rule out the hearer's presupposition that "the speaker is doing this for the first time", thereby emphasizing the fact that "the speaker has rich experience". Its semantic core is "enhancing the certainty of negation", enabling the hearer to clearly perceive the speaker's firm attitude toward the negated content.

In terms of semantic features, the negation of "you bu shi" has two prominent characteristics: first, non repetitive negation—its negation targets facts, judgments or actions rather than repeated actions; second, clear directionality:

(11) 这件事又不是我错了。

(12) 她又不吃饭。

(13) 又不是他偷的，你别乱冤枉人。

In (11), the negated item is the fact "I am wrong"; in (12), it is the repeated action "eat", showing distinct negation directions. The negation target of "you bu shi" is mostly the core constituent in the subsequent clause. For instance, in (13), the negation target is the fact "he stole it", and the following clause "do not wrong him" supplements the negation to make the direction clearer.

From the perspective of inferential mechanisms, you bushi follows counterfactual consequential reasoning: by

denying the antecedent of a sufficient condition, it derives the negation of the consequent, namely 'if not p, then not q'. Although this inference is invalid in formal logic, it is widely attested in the pragmatics of natural language. Meanwhile, you in this context also carries an implication of imposing common ground: the speaker assumes the negative proposition should be mutually known, thus conveying an implicit attitude of 'you ought to have known this'.

3. Pragmatic Function Differentiation of "You Bu Shi"

With the enrichment of communicative needs, the construction "you bu shi" has gradually derived two pragmatic functions—defense and irony—on the basis of its original semantics. Its core intention has shifted from stating facts to expressing attitudes and emotions.

3.1 Defensive Function: Mitigating Responsibility and Expressing Grievance

The defensive function means the speaker uses the semantic intensification of "you bu shi" to explain the rationality or non subjectivity of his/her behavior. Its core intention is not mere negation of facts, but "reducing one's own responsibility" and "seeking understanding and forgiveness from the hearer". Essentially, it weakens the negativity of one's behavior by intensifying negation, thus achieving harmonious interpersonal communication.

The defensive function mainly occurs in three scenarios: mistakes, refusals, and grievances.

In mistake scenarios, "you bu shi" explains the non subjectivity of mistakes to reduce responsibility and seek forgiveness:

(14) 又不是我故意弄坏的, 是它自己掉地上的。

The speaker intensifies negation of the subjective act "broke it on purpose" and supplements the objective reason "fell off by itself", clarifying no subjective fault, aiming to make the hearer understand the accident and avoid being misunderstood as intentional.

In refusal scenarios, "you bu shi" states objective reasons for refusal to prevent the hearer from interpreting it as "subjective unwillingness":

(15) 又不是我不帮你, 是我手里的活实在赶不完。

The speaker negates subjective unwillingness to help and states the objective difficulty "cannot finish work", expressing refusal while conveying sincerity of "being willing but unable", complying with the politeness principle in interpersonal communication.

In grievance scenarios, "you bu shi" expresses passivity of behavior, conveys grievance, and seeks empathy:

(16) 又不是我愿意这样, 是实在没办法啊。

The speaker negates "subjective willingness" and emphasizes passivity and helplessness, making the hearer perceive grievance and achieve emotional resonance.

In terms of formal features, the defensive function of "you bu shi" has special collocations and syntactic structures:

Collocations: It is mostly followed by words indicating subjective will and actions such as "on purpose, willing, refuse to help", which directly point to the speaker's subjective intention. Negating subjective acts highlights objectivity and rationality of behavior. It is often collocated with modal particles "ma(嘛)" and "a(啊)" (e.g., " 又不是我错了嘛 ", " 又不是我不努力啊 "), which further soften the negation and make expression more euphemistic.

Syntactic structure: Defensive "you bu shi" sentences mostly follow the pattern "you bu shi + subject + subjective act + reason clause". The reason clause is the core of defense, supporting the negation of "subjective act" with objective causes:

(17) 又不是我不想去, 是路上堵车了。

The reason clause "stuck in traffic" directly supports the negation "I do not want to go", making the defense more convincing.

In terms of mood intensity, compared with "bu shi" sentences without "you", "you bu shi" sentences are euphemistic, gentle, and less negative:

(18) 我不是故意的。

(19) 又不是我故意的。

Example (18) is simple negation with plain tone, leaving the hearer suspicious of the speaker's subjective intention. Example (19) intensifies negation via "you", not only negating "on purpose" but also implying "you should not misunderstand me", with a softer tone that effectively weakens the negativity of "mistake" and facilitates acceptance of the explanation.

From the perspective of its defensive function, the construction essentially negates the felicity conditions of an act: the speaker denies having the subjective conditions for "being blameworthy or obligated to do something", thereby invalidating the other party's demands or accusations. While this function is similar to that of ye bushi, you bushi carries a stronger argumentative tone, whereas ye bushi is more euphemistic and mild.

3.2 Ironic Function: Intensifying Mockery and Expressing Dissatisfaction

The ironic function of "you bu shi" means the speaker emphasizes negation of the reasonable premise of the hearer's behavior, implying a judgment that the hearer's behavior is inconsistent with his/her conditions or com-

mon sense. Its core intention is to convey mockery, dissatisfaction or teasing—negation is only a means, while emotional expression is the real core. The ironic function generally appears in three scenarios: criticism, complaint, and teasing.

In criticism scenarios, "you bu shi" negates the reasonable premise of the hearer's behavior to criticize irrationality and express dissatisfaction:

(20) 又不是家财万贯, 还这么铺张浪费。

The speaker negates the premise "extremely rich", implying the hearer has no right to waste, criticizing extravagance and expressing dissatisfaction.

In complaint scenarios, "you bu shi" mocks the hearer's behavior or attitude, conveying helplessness and teasing:

(21) 又不是天才, 还天天不学习。

The speaker negates the premise "a genius", complaining about laziness and implying common sense that ordinary people should study hard, with a helpless tone.

In teasing scenarios, "you bu shi" mocks the hearer's excessive expectations or unreasonable demands with light irony:

(22) 又不是神仙, 怎么能什么都知道。

The speaker negates the unrealistic premise "a god", teasing the hearer's excessive expectation with a light tone and no strong negative emotion.

In terms of formal features, the ironic function has distinct collocations and syntactic structures:

Collocations: It is mostly followed by words indicating extreme attributes such as "extremely rich, genius, god", which are unrealistic or beyond conventional conditions. Negating such extreme attributes quickly highlights the contradiction between the hearer's behavior and his/her conditions.

Syntactic structure: Ironic "you bu shi" sentences mostly follow the pattern "you bu shi + extreme attribute + hearer's behavior clause". The sharp contrast between extreme attributes and inappropriate behavior is the key to irony:

(23) 又不是富二代, 还天天买奢侈品。

The extreme attribute "second generation rich kid" contrasts sharply with the inappropriate behavior "buys luxury goods every day", meaning one should not act beyond his/her means. The speaker's ironic intention is clearly perceived without direct expression. The most significant difference between the ironic function and the defensive function lies in their orientation: the defensive function is directed toward the speaker himself, whereas irony targets the interlocutor's behavior. The defensive function adheres to the politeness principle, while irony conveys an evaluative stance. Furthermore, the ironic function frequently co-occurs with rhetorical questions, which serve to further intensify the speaker's attitude and emotional tone.

Brown and Levinson's politeness principle holds that people should save each other's face, weaken negative expressions, avoid conflicts, and maintain good social relations in communication. The defensive function of "you bu shi" exactly embodies this principle. The speaker intensifies negation of subjective acts and supplements objective reasons, stating his/her position while softening negation to avoid making the hearer feel accused, complying with Leech's tact maxim and sympathy maxim. Second, the need for emotional expression: language is not only a tool for information transmission but also a carrier of emotions. In communication, people need to express complex emotions such as dissatisfaction, grievance and mockery indirectly to avoid direct conflicts.

The ironic and defensive functions of "you bu shi" provide appropriate linguistic forms for indirect expression of "dissatisfaction, mockery" and "grievance, helplessness", realizing euphemistic emotional expression via intensified negation and implied intentions.

4. Contextual Identification and Boundary Distinction of Pragmatic Functions of "You Bu Shi"

4.1 Contextual Identification Criteria for Two Pragmatic Functions

Although both defensive and ironic functions of "you bu shi" are based on the initial semantics of "emphasizing negation", they differ drastically in core intention and expressive effect. In actual oral communication, they can be accurately identified by three criteria: core intention, mood intensity, and communicative scenario.

Core intention: The essential difference lies in "the purpose of negation".

Defensive function: Core is to seek understanding and forgiveness. The speaker negates subjective fault or explains objectivity of behavior to make the hearer understand his/her situation, resolving misunderstandings and maintaining interpersonal harmony.

Ironic function: Core is to convey emotional attitudes. The speaker negates the reasonable premise of the hearer's behavior to express mockery, dissatisfaction or teasing, evaluating the hearer's behavior.

(24) 寿娥拭泪道: “太太请回去吧, 今天劳动, 孩儿心中实在不安, 我又不是不知好歹的, 只要他不寻着我, 再也不敢教太太生气的。”(《汉代宫廷艳史》)

(25) 只因为大家印象中, 都知道女学生没有辫子, 留下个鹤鹑尾巴, 像个尼姑, 又不完全像。穿的衣服象洋人, 又不是洋人。吃的, 用的……总而言之, 事事不同, 一想起来就觉得怪可笑! (《边城》)

Example (24) aims to make the hearer understand the speaker's plight—she is not ungrateful and will not annoy the hearer, belonging to defensive function. Example (25) mocks female students' incongruous appearance and behavior, belonging to ironic function.

Mood intensity: The two functions have distinct mood features:

(26) 听见她的最后一句话,他就鼓起勇气说:“这跟我有什么关系呢?又不是我使你到这个地步的。”(《家》)
(27) 好,你听着。你的伯父真是把手,真能干!他不专靠着卖古玩,古玩又不是面包,那能天天有买卖。(《二马》)

Defensive function: Euphemistic, gentle, no strong emotional fluctuation, with grievance, helplessness or sincerity (e.g., Example 26, conveying helplessness and innocence).
Ironic function: Sharp, with teasing or dissatisfaction, with mockery, discontent or banter (e.g., Example 27, teasingly comparing antiques to bread, implying mockery of excessive expectation).

Communicative scenario: Function use is highly scenario related.

Defensive function: Applies to scenarios "needing explanation" (mistakes, refusals, grievances). The speaker is a participant who explains behavior to resolve misunderstandings (e.g., "It is you bu shi I broke it on purpose" after breaking a cup).

Ironic function: Applies to scenarios "needing emotional expression" (criticism, complaint, teasing). The speaker is an observer or evaluator who comments on behavior to convey emotions (e.g., "He is you bu shi without arms or legs, lying at home all day" criticizing a NEET).

4.2 Fuzzy Boundary and Discrimination of Functions

Although the two pragmatic functions have clear identification criteria, their boundaries may blur in special contexts, with the same "you bu shi" sentence interpretable as both defense and irony. Such fuzzy cases can be discriminated by three methods:

1. Speaker's identity and stance: If the speaker is a direct participant with stake in the event, it is mostly defensive; if an observer without direct stake, mostly ironic.

(28) 又不是多大点事,别这么计较。

Participant (the one who made a mistake): Defense—"It is trivial, I am not wrong; please do not mind."

Observer (mediator): Irony—"It is trivial, you are too serious; no need to fuss."

2. Tone and facial expression: In oral communication, tone and expression assist intention expression.

Gentle, grievance tone + sincere expression → mostly defensive.

Teasing, disdainful tone + playful expression → mostly ironic.

3. Contextual context: In written texts, context clarifies intention.

Preceding text mentions the speaker's behavior/plight → mostly defensive.

Preceding text mentions the hearer's behavior/attitude → mostly ironic.

The fuzzy boundary arises because both functions originate from the same semantic basis—"emphasizing negation". They are extensions of the same structure under different communicative needs, reflecting the richness of modern Chinese and the dynamic relationship between linguistic form and expressive intention, enabling "you bu shi" to adapt to diverse scenarios.

From a multidimensional semantic perspective, the fuzziness between defense and irony essentially lies in the overlap of propositional orientation and speech act orientation. Functional overlap arises when a sentence refers simultaneously to the speaker's own act and the interlocutor's attitude. This also indicates that the functions of you bushi are not discretely binary, but form a continuous pragmatic continuum.

5. Conclusion

Taking the modern Chinese negative construction "you bu shi" as the research object, this paper systematically analyzes the evolution and differentiation of its pragmatic functions by integrating semantic grammar, pragmaticalization theory and speech act theory, drawing three main conclusions:

1. Clarified the functional hierarchy

"You bu shi" has evolved from an initial semantic function (emphasizing negation certainty, eliminating presuppositions, neutral contexts) to pragmatic functions, differentiating into defense and irony, with core intention shifting from "stating facts" to "expressing attitudes and emotions".

2. Clarified typical features of two functions:

Defensive function: Core is "seeking understanding and forgiveness"; used in mistakes, refusals, grievances; followed by subjective act words; collocated with "ma"/"a"; structure "you bu shi + subject + subjective act + reason clause"; euphemistic and gentle.

Ironic function: Core is "conveying mockery, dissatisfaction or teasing"; used in criticism, complaints, teasing; followed by extreme attribute words; structure "you bu shi + extreme attribute + hearer's behavior clause"; sharp and emotional.

3. Proposed identification criteria

Two functions can be identified by core intention, mood

intensity and communicative scenario. Fuzzy cases are discriminated by speaker's identity, tone/expression and contextual context.

This study has limitations: First, the corpus scope is narrow, focusing only on standard modern Chinese and modern literary works without dialectal data, which may lead to functional differences across dialects. Second, the diachronic corpus sorting is unsystematic, lacking quantitative statistics of different historical periods, making it impossible to pinpoint the timing and phased features of functional evolution.

Future research can expand in two directions: First, expand the corpus to collect "you bu shi" data in dialects (Wu, Cantonese, Northern Mandarin) and compare pragmatic function differences, exploring dialectal influences. Second, deepen diachronic research by systematically sorting corpus from Ming Qing vernacular to modern Chinese, refining evolution timing, phased features and driving factors via quantitative statistics and case analysis, to enrich pragmaticalization research on Chinese negative constructions.

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