Evolution of “Hao (好) + Adjective Phrase” and Affirmative Construction “Hao (好) + Bu (不) + Adjective Phrase” in Modern Chinese

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With the development of language, the range of adjective phrases that can be placed in “hao (好) + AP” and affirmative construction “hao (好) + bu (不) + AP” in modern Chinese is continuously expanding. This paper proves through investigation on network language and spoken language that an increasing number of adjectives can be placed in “hao (好) + AP” and affirmative construction “hao (好) + bu (不) + AP”, and there is a growing acceptance of “hao (好) + AP”. This paper attributes this phenomenon to the following reasons. Firstly, Chinese southern dialects have a growing influence on modern spoken Chinese, leading to an increased acceptance of “hao (好) + AP” and negative construction “hao (好) + bu (不) + AP”. Secondly, whether the “hao (好) + bu (不) + AP” construction is affirmative or negative largely depends on the context. In a fixed context, there is a higher acceptance of AP in the affirmative and negative “hao (好) + bu (不) + AP” constructions. Thirdly, influenced by the Principle of Least Effort in spoken language, the speakers and receivers of spoken dialogues tend to believe “what they hear is what they get”. As a result, the “hao (好) + AP” is used more frequently in expressing affirmative meanings.

Keywords: “hao (好) + AP”, “hao (好) + bu (不) + AP”, redundant negative, context

Introduction

Example (1) a. “这字写得好看!”	hao + negative AP = negative meaning
b. “这字写得好不好看!”	hao + bu + negative AP = negative meaning
c. “这字写得不好看!”	hao + bu + affirmative AP = negative meaning
d. “这字写得漂亮!”	hao + affirmative AP = affirmative meaning
e. “这字写得好不好看!”	hao + bu + affirmative AP = affirmative meaning
f. “这字写得好不赖!”	hao + bu + negative AP = affirmative meaning

In the above six sentences, (1) a, b and c mean that the handwriting is ugly, while (1) d, e and f mean that the handwriting is good. b/f and c/e have the same structure but opposite meanings. Perhaps some people think that we cannot take in only from literally, but should at least analyze their construction. According to the

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Modern Chinese Dictionary (7th Edition), “haobu” is an exclamatory modal verb. Then, the analysis of b and f should be adjusted as follows:

hao + bu + negative AP = negative meaning $\approx$ a

hao + bu + affirmative AP = affirmative meaning $\approx$ d

With the problem of b and e solved, here comes the problem of c and f: why is it impossible to combine “bu” with “hao” in the linguistic sense, but have to believe that “bu” works to modify the AP after it?

Segmentation and Interpretation of “Hao + Bu + AP”

It has long been recognized by scholars that “hao + bu + AP” can be segmented in two ways: (1) “hao + (bu + AP)”, negative meaning; (2) “(hao + bu) + AP”, affirmative meaning.

Redundant Negative Theory

Yuan (1984), after analyzing the language facts in Chinese classics, put forward that the semantic structure of “hao + bu + AP” was first derived from the negative construction “hao + (bu + x)”¹. This negative construction was later used to express irony, in which the negative meaning of “bu” gradually weakened and was attached to “hao”, thus forming the affirmative construction “(hao + bu) + y”. After a period of coexistence, the affirmative construction “(hao + bu) + y” has taken a basically dominant role since entering the modern Chinese era² (Yuan, 184, p. 207). Yuan did not mention “redundancy negative” in his article, but his explanation of the weakening negative meaning of “bu” is based on that theory. Shi (2001) compared whether other adverbs of degree can be put before several APs (X) (including “rongyi” (‘easy’ in Chinese)) with whether these adverbs can be put before their “bu + X” structure. He believed that the “hao” in “haobu nan shou” (‘nan shou’ means ‘sad’ in Chinese), “haobupiaoliang” (‘piaoliang’ means ‘beautiful’ in Chinese), “haobu kai xin” (‘kai xin’ means ‘happy’ in Chinese) and others works as an adverb of degree and expresses exclamation mood (with “haoburongyi” as an exception), and “bu” in these phrases is a form of redundant negative. On the other hand, the “bu” in “haoburongyi” has a practical meaning, but the meaning of “rongyi” and its exclamation mood are not quite consistent, thus leading to “a deviation in the meaning, which turns the true meaning of ‘rongyi’ in the affirmative construction into the negative construction ‘burongyi’” (Shi, 2001, p. 215). Contrary to the redundant negative construction “hao + bu + X”, the negative construction “haorongyi” is a kind of vacancy negation. Yang zi et al put forward from the perspective of construction that the existence of “hao” in the redundant negative construction “hao + bu + AP” makes the “bu” a negative marker of metalanguage. In such case, “hao + bu + AP” conveys an affirmative and emphatic meaning instead of the conventional negative and emphatic meaning. They also proposed in their article that “hao + AP” and “hen + AP” have different semantics, where “hao” is not equivalent to “hen” and other adverbs of degree (Yang & Wang, 2013).

¹ Some scholars use “x” and “y” to refer to adjective phrases. If the original text is quoted in this article, no change will be made.

² Yuan Bin believed that “after entering the era of modern Chinese, the negative construction ‘hao + bu’ has been rarely spoken, with the only exception of the negative construction ‘haobu’ in ‘haoburongyi’”. But this no longer fits today’s linguistic facts. In sentences like “他好不情愿地照办了”, “听他这样说我好不舒服”, “这里好不干净, 让人怎么住” in modern Chinese, “hao + bu + X” is still negative. Shen Jiaxuan (1994) and Jiang Lansheng (2008) also held that this viewpoint is open to question.

Theory of Rhetorical Adverbs

The theory of Rhetorical Adverbs is mainly represented by Jiang Lansheng. Jiang (2008, p. 186) studied “haorongyi” and “haoburongyi”, finding that negative construction “haorongyi” appeared much earlier than the negative construction “haoburongyi”. He pointed out in his article that “the negative ‘haorongyi’ and affirmative ‘haobubeishang’ are fundamentally attributed to the fact that ‘hao’ works as a rhetorical adverb in such case”. This opinion can be summed up as two formulas as below:

Rhetorical adv. (hao) + AP = neg. AP

Rhetorical adv. (hao) + neg. + AP = AP

As rhetorical mood adverbs have an implied negative meaning, it can be understood that two negatives make an affirmative. This viewpoint can explain the semantic asymmetry of “hao + AP” and “hao + bu + AP”. Unfortunately, he did not explain in his article under what circumstances such asymmetry would appear.

The following three examples of early modern Chinese contain “hao + bu + AP with similar meanings”, where “hao” is not a rhetorical adverb. On the contrary, the “hao” in the three examples of modern Chinese can be understood as a rhetorical adverb. What are the reasons behind it?

Example (2)

(Old Mandarin) 那汉看见，抢来劈手夺住，望桶里一倾，便盖了桶盖，将瓢望地下一丢，口里说道：“你这客人好不君子相！戴头识脸的，也这般罗唆！” (Water Margin 16)

(Mandarin) 他好不阳光帅气！一丝不苟的脸上掠过一丝不经意的笑容，那一双浅咖啡色的俊美的眼睛流露出醉人的温柔，高挺的鼻子，樱花瓣嫩白的皮肤，那迷惑众生的笑让人深深陷入其中。(Net literature)

Example (3)

(Old Mandarin) 翠莲见姑娘与婆婆说，就道：“小姑你好不贤良，便去房中唆调娘。若是婆婆打杀我，活捉你去见阎王！……” (Qingping Hill Script ·the story of sharp-tongued CuilianLi)

(Mandarin) 我觉得她好不贤惠，每天要接送孩子、做饭洗衣。家里的花草要打理，日用品要购买补给，时不时还能烤个面包蛋挞什么的给老公孩子吃。(Tianya BBS·Emotion)

Example (4)

(Old Mandarin) 师徒们入此山，正行到嵯峨之处，三藏道：“悟空，我这一日，肚中饥了，你去那里化些斋吃？”行者陪笑道：“师父好不聪明。这等半山之中，前不巴村，后不着店，有钱也没买处，教往那里寻斋？” (Journey to the West ·27)

(Mandarin) 这孩子好不聪明，三岁会用筷子，五岁就自己洗澡，不晓得父母是怎么生的。(Baidu BBS)

Based on this, a number of scholars started to focus on the nature of “AP” in “hao + bu + AP”, attempting to find out the influence of AP on the construction.

Interpretation of “AP” in Affirmative Construction “hao + bu + AP”

The affirmative meaning of “hao + bu” is named the “affirmative construction ‘hao + bu + AP’”. In explaining the characteristics of affirmative/negative constructions of “hao + bu + AP”, Yuan (1984, p. 211)

pointed out that “‘hao + bu’ is affirmative when the AP following ‘hao + bu’ has negative meanings, expresses unhappy feelings such as pain, sadness and surprise, or has a pejorative connotation somewhat in specific language circumstance”. On the other hand, the affirmative construction “hao + bu” is often followed by positive words that “mostly reflect the happy mood of someone or the prosperity of something at a time” (p. 211). Though “piaoliang (beautiful)” in the above example (1) is just a common commendatory word which relates to neither mood or scene, most people agree that the whole sentence is affirmative, namely, the handwriting is beautiful.

Shen Jiaxuan believed that when AP is a specific social commendatory term (e.g. “moral terms” denoting ethical or behavioral standards in a particular social and cultural environment such as “an fen (well-behaved)”, “jiang li (reasonable)”, and terms expressing people’s expectations of certain behavioral outcomes in social activities such as “shangsuan (worthwhile)”, “jing ji (economical)”), “hao + bu” is often negative in the conventional sense. In contrast, when AP is a commendatory term of other nature (e.g. “gaoxing (happy mood)”, “re nao (lively)”, “congming (clever)”) or a derogatory word (e.g. “man heng (rude and unreasonable)”, “hu tu (silly)”, and “can kui (ashamed)”), it is often interpreted as a redundant negative (affirmation and emphasis). Shen Jiaxuan’s classification of AP is very detailed and can explain most cases of affirmative construction “hao + bu + AP”. However, with the development of language, especially network language which has low requirements of grammatical conformance, constructions have been generalized. Gradually, opposite cases occur:

“Hao + bu + AP” can be positively interpreted when the AP in the construction is a commonly negative “moral term” (such as “an fen”) or a “term of psychological expectation” (such as “shangsuan, jing ji, and shi hui (practical)”):

Example (5) 我家宝宝今天好不安分哟, 乖乖吃饭乖乖睡觉, 一点儿都没闹腾。(Baidu BBS)

Example (6) 我趁着巴黎老佛爷的打折季买了长草<注: 心痒、渴望义>好久的衣服, 原价六千多, 赶上打三折才买了两千出头, 好不上算呢! (SOHU BBS)

Example (7) 这辆日系车的动力也不比宝马X6小, X6要烧14个油, 它才烧12个, 好不经济实惠! (SOHU BBS)

Meanwhile, “hao + bu + AP” can also be negatively interpreted when the AP expresses a happy mood such as “gaoxing” and “kai xin”.

Example (8) 费了好大的工夫才绣好这幅画送给莲姐, 莲姐姐看都没看就做顺水人情送给了同来的阿娟, 小云心里好不高兴。(Sina-Reading)

Example (9) 才拿起一个玩具就被那没礼貌的小侄子推搡了一下抢走了, 舒云好不开心, 妈妈却还和五婶齐声大笑起来。(Sina-Reading)

In the above examples, (5)-(7) are complex sentences whose first-level relations are all explanatory. (5) takes the “total-sub” model while (6) and (7) take the “sub-total” model. In example (5), “乖乖” and “没闹腾” in the clause determine that “好不安分” in the main sentence is a affirmative, having the same meaning as “安分”.

In conclusion, no matter from what perspective scholars have analyzed the nature of “hao”, “bu” and “AP” in “hao + bu + AP”, it seems impossible to fully explain the circumstances under which “hao + bu + AP”

should take positive or negative meanings. Besides, with the development of language, some interpretations that used to be correct under particular language circumstances have changed in modern Chinese.

Development of “Hao + AP” and Affirmative Construction “Hao + Bu + AP” in Modern Chinese

Usage in Modern Written Chinese

This paper selects social commendatory terms such as “qin re (intimate)”, “shufu (comfortable)”, “jingshen (spirited)”, “qingjing (quiet)”, “re nao (lively)”, “zizai (at ease)”, commendatory terms of other nature such as “kai xin (delighted)”, “tong kuai (very happy)”, “xiaosa (unrestrained)”, “jingzhi (delicate)”, “congming (clever)”, “de yi (pleased and proud)”, and derogatory terms such as “chou chang (melancholy)”, “beishang (distressed)”, “langbei (embarrassed)”, “shangxin (sad)”, “shi wang (disappointed)”, “hu tu (silly)”, “pianxin (biased)”, “qi qiao (odd)” and “saoxing (disappointing)”, as well as “rongyi” to investigate their use in modern written and spoken Chinese respectively.

Table 1

Corpus of “Modern Chinese” in Peking University CCL Corpus

	AP	“Hao + AP”	Affirmative construction “hao + bu + AP”
(1)	chou chang (惆怅)	1	1
(2)	beishang (悲伤)	4	2
(3)	langbei (狼狈)	5	2
(4)	shangxin (伤心)	42	24
(5)	shi wang (失望)	12	5
(6)	qin re (亲热)	5	5
(7)	kai xin (开心)	61	12
(8)	shufu (舒服)	27	2+3*
(9)	tong kuai (痛快)	21	11+2*
(10)	xiaosa (潇洒)	16	8
(11)	hu tu (糊涂)	21	/
(12)	jingshen (精神)	5	/
(13)	jingzhi (精致)	2	/
(14)	pianxin (偏心)	2	/
(15)	qingjing (清静)	1	/
(16)	congming (聪明)	23	/
(17)	de yi (得意)	9	17
(18)	qi qiao (蹊跷)	/	2
(19)	re nao (热闹)	53	175
(20)	zizai (自在)	6	10+5*
(21)	saoxing (扫兴)	1	8
(22)	rongyi (容易)	958*	2528*

Notes. The figures followed by “*” indicate the corresponding use case is negative construction “hao + bu + AP”.

In Table 1, the difference between the frequency of (1)-(21) in “hao + AP” and that in affirmative construction “hao + bu + AP” can be roughly divided into two types: the frequency of (1)-(16) in “hao + AP” is basically equal with or far greater than that in “hao + bu + AP” (among the above, no “hao + bu + AP” use cases

have been found for (11)-(16) in CCL Corpus). The frequency of (17)-(21) in “hao + AP” is less than that in “hao + bu + AP”. Terms like “shufu”, “tong kuai” and “zizai” also appear in the negative construction “hao + bu + AP”, but they are not “moral terms” or “terms of psychological expectation” as mentioned by Shen Jiaxuan, but “commentary terms of other nature” that express a happy mood. The “hao + AP” and “hao + bu + AP” constructions of “rongyi” are both negative, with the latter having wider applications.

Usage in Modern Spoken Chinese

The use of affirmative construction “hao + bu + AP” is sharply decreasing in modern spoken Chinese (Zhang, 2008, p. 21). Instead, the use “hao + AP” is increasing rapidly and even has replaced some of the commonly spoken “hen + AP” and “zhen + AP”.

There is a growing number of AP that can be placed in “hao + AP”.

Lv (1981, p. 76) pointed out in his “Hao + Bu” that adjectives such as “an fen”, “zheng qi (hardworking)”, “shangsuan”, “zhizu (satisfied)”, “gong ping (fair)” and “jiang li” cannot be emphasized with “hao” themselves, but it becomes possible when a negative “bu” is placed before them. Shen (1999, p. 123) agreed to this and further put forward that “terms such as “an fen” and “jiang li” alone cannot be emphasized with “hao” in the general sense, but this restriction does not apply when they are used specially, e.g., as an irony. Phrases such as “hao an fen”, “haozheng qi”, “haoshangsuan”, “haozhizu” and “hao gong ping” may occur in modern Chinese to express affirmative meanings. But they are rarely seen in written language, but often occur in network language.

1. hao an fen (好安分):

Example (10) 主人给汪星人洗澡澡，汪星人好安分，卖萌无下限。(iQIYI-news)

Example (11) 哇撒表扬你！你好乖好听话好安分好可爱！！(Baidu BBS)

Example (12) 莫言领完奖后好安分哦，是不是日夜不停地数奖金？(Baidu BBS)

2. haozheng qi (好争气):

Example (13) 这个一路前行的”野心”家，好争气！(SOHU BBS)

Example (14) 黄晓明简直太有福了，baby肚子好争气。(Baidu BBS)

Example (15) 虽然我20岁就当妈，但是宝宝好争气好暖心。(Baidu BBS)

3. haoshangsuan (好上算):

Example (16) 当时是美团39元对折券买的，好上算啊，不过现在没了，希望大众也多搞搞对折活动呀。(Dianping.com)

Example (17) 我发现在卓越网上书城买书好上算啊～还不要运费，哈哈哈～(Baidu BBS)

Example (18) 她先是从“5元特惠享受58元炖肉”这种小恩小惠开始试探，发展到后来，连“276元热卖原价2350元豪华双人温泉SPA”此类单子，也能眼都不眨地秒杀、付款。一边下单，还一边大呼“好上算，倩文你也赶紧来一个。”(Chinese Youth Newspaper)

4. haozhizu (好知足):

Example (19) 作为亲历3·17失利的中国记者，我只觉得昨晚日本球迷都好乖、好知足。全场比赛，日本球迷只有一次下到内场给恒大门将曾诚起哄，当时曾诚因为开球拖延时间，被主裁判口头警告。(Tencent.com)

Example (20) 被问与罗康瑞感情朱玲玲甜笑:我好知足(Ladyband.com)

Example (21) 陈法拉自称绝非拜金女钓得金龟婿好知足(21Century.com)

5. hao gong ping (好公平):

Example (22) 突然觉得这个世界是好公平的，长得好看的当然配富豪帅逼喽，不然社会怎么进步，人类怎么发展。(DouBan BBS)

Example (23) 世界好公平啊，每个人的一天都是 24 小时。(DouBan BBS)

Example (24) 好公平呀，现在已经很少有游戏能做的如此公平了，唉，可惜了，那把四个挂机的忘截图了。(Baidu BBS)

The above “hao an fen”, “haozheng qi”, “haoshangshuan”, “haozhizu” and “hao gong ping” are semantically equivalent to “hen + AP” and “zhen + AP”. They occasionally occur in network language, but are far less frequently used than “hen/zhen + AP”. Nevertheless, due to the strong arbitrariness of network language and much less wording processing at its release, it can reflect the use of spoken language of people at the current era in a more direct way.

The author investigated the perception of “hao + AP/hao + bu + AP” by people of all walks of life and all ages (all are Chinese native speakers) through online and paper questionnaires. A total of 732 valid questionnaires were collected. Through statistic analysis, the author found that:

(1) About 97% of the respondents believed it is possible to express “hen/zhen an fen”, “hen/zhenzheng qi”, “hen/zhenhangshuan” and “hen/zhenzhizu” with “hao an fen”, “haozheng qi”, “haoshangshuan” and “haozhizu” respectively.

(2) Except in the case of “rongyi” where the acceptance of “haoburongyi” is far higher than that of “haorongyi”³, the acceptance of “hao + AP” is far higher than “hao + bu + AP” for all other phrases regardless of their statistical results in written language. The following are some of the statistical results:

Table 2

Acceptability of “Hao + AP” and “Hao + bu + AP” (excerpts)

	AP	“Hao + AP” (%)	“Hao + bu + AP” (%)
(1)	rongyi (容易)	8.36	91.64
(2)	kai xin (开心)	98.45	1.55
(3)	shangxin (伤心)	96.90	3.10
(4)	re nao (热闹)	90.09	9.91
(5)	saoxing (扫兴)	94.43	5.57
(6)	zizai (自在)	88.85	11.15
(7)	hu tu (糊涂)	97.21	2.79
(8)	de yi (得意)	83.23	16.77
(9)	qi qiao (蹊跷)	72.53	27.47
Total number of respondents		732	

³ “haorongyi” and “haoburongyi” are both negative constructions. Among them, “haorongyi” is highly accepted, which will be analyzed below.

Male/Female Ratio *Figure 1.* Acceptability of “Hao + AP” in Genders.

Figure 1 shows that, female’s acceptance of “hao + AP” is much higher than that of male.

Age Ratio *Figure 2.* Acceptability of “Hao + AP” in Ages.

Figure 2 shows that, respondents aged below 35 years have a higher acceptance of “hao + AP” than those aged above 35 years.

Occupational Type Ratio *Figure 3.* Acceptability of “Hao + AP” in Occupation Types.

Figure 3 shows that, students and freelance personnel have a far much higher level of acceptance of “hao + AP” than personnel of state organs and institutions and soldiers.

Everyone’s speaking habit is influenced by his/her national culture, regional culture and culture of his/her times, as well as his/her personal cultural psychology. Specifically, the so-called “personal cultural psychology” is shaped by the speaker’s social class, occupation, cultural education, status, age, gender, personality and other aspects. Based on this, we attribute the above data results to the following reasons:

(1) Females are more susceptible to “Hong Kong Mandarin and Taiwanese Mandarin accents” (or “Southern Dialects”). Most of the Hong Kong and Taiwan TV programs that are popular in mainland China are romances and emotional talk shows, which are more favored by females. Most male respondents said in interviews that “hao + AP” often gave them a feeling of being “feminine” or “pretentious”.

(2) Influenced by the Principle of Least Effort in language, people tend to believe “what they hear is what they get” in communication. Whether interpreting “haorongyi” as “haoburongyi”, or “haobu re nao” as “hao re nao”, we have to make some “twists and turns” in both the form and content. Therefore, we found through questionnaire that “haoburongyi” was far more highly accepted than “haorongyi” in expressing the negative meaning “burongyi”, and the affirmative construction “hao + AP” was widely accepted. Besides, the use of phrases with the negative “bu” started to decrease, and they were less accepted in spoken language of either respondents speaking northern dialects or those speaking Southern Fujian dialect, Cantonese, Wu dialect and other dialects.

(3) “Internet audience” remain at a younger age both at the early stage and during rapid development of the Internet (Yang, 2008, p. 28). As mentioned above, some use cases of “hao + AP” are not found in the literature, but often occur in network language. According to the questionnaire results, the respondents aged below 35 years have a far higher acceptance of “hao + AP” than those aged above 35 years.

(4) Influence of social dialects. Influenced by professional environment, the personnel of state organs and institutions and soldiers are more inclined to use written language even in their oral communication than other practitioners. “Hao + AP” is more often used in dialects and thus less accepted by these groups.

Context Mechanism and Causes of Favored “Hao + AP” in Spoken Language

Allographic synonyms exist extensively in language. “Hao + AP” and affirmative construction “hao + bu + AP” can also be regarded as Allo-graphic synonyms. However, how do ordinary Chinese speakers who have no experience of specialized grammar training and overseas Chinese learners distinguish whether “hao + AP” and “hao + bu + AP” have affirmative or negative meanings in a sentence, and make appropriate choice? The author conducted a paper-and-pencil questionnaire survey on two groups of people: the first consisting of 20 undergraduates from the School of Mathematics and Science of Taizhou University who were all native Chinese speakers, and the second consisting of 20 students from the College of International Education of Nanjing University who were learning Chinese as the second language and have passed the HSK Speaking Test (Intermediate Level). The two groups of students were surveyed on the following questions, and were required to give reasons for each of their answers. The “look back times” in the questions refers to the number of times that the subject repeatedly looked back to read the context of “haobucongming”.

Questionnaire content:

(Note: (a) The questionnaire on the two groups of people was in a paper-and-pencil fashion. (b) The author had explained to the group of international students before they answered questions that “Xingzhe” is Sun

Wukong, “Sanzang” is Tang Seng, Master of Sun Wukong, and “huazhai” means searching for food, in order to avoid interference with understanding of target questions due to lack of background knowledge. (c) The author had explained to all the students before they answered questions that the “look back times” in the questions refers to the number of times that they would repeatedly lookback to read the context of “haobucongming”. The “look back times” of the first question is zero.)

1. “haobucongming(好不聪明)” means: ()

A. 很聪明 B. 很不聪明 C. 不确定

A. hen congming B. hen bucongming C. uncertain

Reason(s): _

Look back times: _

2. 行者陪笑道：“师父好不聪明。”

The “haobucongming(好不聪明)” that is bulleted in the above sentence means: ()

A. zhencongming B. zhenbucongming C. uncertain

Reason(s): _

Look back times: _

3. 师徒们入此山，正行到嵯峨之处，三藏道：“悟空，我这一日，肚中饥了，你去那里化些斋吃？”行者陪笑道：“师父好不聪明。这等半山之中，前不巴村，后不着店，有钱也没买处，教往那里寻斋？”

The “haobucongming(好不聪明)” that is bulleted in the above sentence means: ()

A. zhencongming B. zhenbucongming C. uncertain

Reason(s): _

Look back times: _

4. 师徒们入此山，正行到嵯峨之处，三藏道：“悟空，我这一日，肚中饥了，你去那里化些斋吃？”行者陪笑道：“师父好不聪明。这等半山之中，前不巴村，后不着店，有钱也没买处，教往那里寻斋？”三藏心中不快，口里骂道：“你这猴子，……也亏我救你性命，摩顶受戒，做了我的徒弟。怎么不肯努力，常怀懒惰之心！”

The “haobucongming” that is bulleted in the above sentence means: ()

A. zhencongming B. zhenbucongming C. uncertain

Reason(s): _

Look back times: _

This questionnaire has the following characteristics: the first question has no context; the second question has a single context: the mentoring relationship between Xingzhe and Sanzang; the third question has two contexts: the mentoring relationship, and an isolated place making it impossible to realize the master’s proposal of “huazhai”; the fourth question contains three contexts: the mentoring relationship, an isolated place making it impossible to realize the master’s proposal of “huazhai”, and the master’s unpleasantness and act of scolding Xingzhe.

A total of 40 valid questionnaires were collected. The results are shown as follows:

Table 3

Questionnaire statistics

Question number	Number of Chinese students (native Chinese speakers)		Number of international students (HSK intermediate level or above)	
1	Answer	A (0); B (2); C (18)	Answer	A (0); B (20); C (0)
	Look back times	0 (default)	Look back times	0 (default)
	Reason(s)	“haobucongming” has the same meaning with “hen bucongming” (2); “haobucongming” can be used to express that someone is intelligent or not intelligent (18)	Reason(s)	“haobucongming” means “very unintelligent”.
2	Answer	A (20); B (0); C (0)	Answer	A (1); B (19); C (0)
	Look back times	0 (19); 1 (1)	Look back times	0 (4); 2 (13); 3 (3)
	Reason(s)	Xingzhe will not say that his master is not intelligent (20)	Reason(s)	His/her teacher has taught something similar (1); Xingzhe says his master is not intelligent (19)
3	Answer	A (11); B (2); C (7)	Answer	A (0); B (18); C (2)
	Look back times	2 (1); 3 (5); 4 (8); 5 (11)	Look back times	2 (16); 3 (4)
	Reason(s)	Xingzhe will not say his master is not intelligent (7); “赔笑着说” (Xingzhe is making a compliment to his master) (4); Wukong says that they cannot find any food there (2); Xingzhe wants to say his master is not intelligent, but he thinks that it is not appropriate to say that (7)	Reason(s)	The last sentence is the clue (14); “有钱也没买处” (Xingzhe thinks his master’s proposal is ill-conceived) (2); the last sentence is the clue, but Xingzhe is not polite (3); having no idea (1)
4	Answer	A (0); B (20); C (0)	Answer	A (0); B (20); C (0)
	Look back times	1 (3); 2 (5); 3 (11); 4 (1)	Look back times	2 (6); 3 (12); 4 (2)
	Reason(s)	Sanzang scolds Xingzhe because the latter says it is impossible to find food (20)	Reason(s)	They cannot buy food (10); Xingzhe is scolded (2); “三藏心中不快” (1); Xingzhe is scolded as he fails to buy food (7)

First of all, through horizontal comparison of the answers and reasons given by Chinese students and those given by International students, the author found that:

(1) There is no context for the first question, only the “hao + bu + AP” with negative words. The Chinese students themselves have a good language sense of the affirmative construction “hao + bu + AP”, so most of them were uncertain whether a single “hao + bu + AP” is affirmative or negative. In contrast, the international students have no language sense of “hao + bu + AP”, so all of them chose the negative option “hen bucongming”. As there is no context for reference in this question, the Chinese students thought that there was no basis for their choice, while the international students simply took in the literal meaning.

(2) The second question has a single context: the mentoring relationship. As the Chinese students have a good language sense of the affirmative construction “hao + bu + AP”, and are influenced by Chinese traditional Master-Apprentice etiquette and concept, they all chose the affirmative option. Only one of the international

students mentioned that he/she had heard similar structures from a teacher and thus knew “haobucongming” is an affirmative construction. The others who were not sensitive to this Chinese grammatical construction still chose the negative option as there was a negative word “bu” in the construction “hao + bu + AP”. This question was not looked back frequently. Both Chinese and international students gave answers quite quickly.

(3) The third question has two contexts, based on which the Chinese students derived two opposite meanings of “haobucongming”. Firstly, “haobucongming” should be affirmative due to the mentoring relationship; secondly, as Xingzhe explained the reasons why they cannot find any food, his “haobucongming” should be interpreted as negative in a conventional manner. The judgement of “hao + bu + AP” by the two groups of students was obviously reflected in this question. Chinese native speakers saw a sharp rise in their look back times. Up to eleven students (more than 50% in the group) looked back at the context for five times, and seven students were uncertain whether the “hao + bu + AP” in this question was affirmative or negative. Most of the international students tended to follow the law of “fact-oriented” thinking. Although three of them believed “it is impolite to directly say someone is unintelligent”, they all chose the negative option. The reasons they gave were based on the reality described in the last sentence of Sun Wukong. In terms of look back times, the international students were apparently not influenced by the reverse context that “it is not appropriate for apprentices to say their master is not intelligent”. Most of them only looked back twice.

(4) The fourth question is quite long and has an even richer context: the mentoring relationship, the impossibility to find food, and Sanzang’s blame on Xingzhe. Though Xingzhe’s “haobucongming” should be interpreted as affirmative due to the mentoring relationship, the master’s outbursts of anger indicate that Xingzhe had actually complained about his “being not intelligent”. As the context is clear in this question, both the Chinese students and international students chose the negative option.

Secondly, the author also analyzed from a vertical perspective. It was found that Chinese students’ answers to the first and third questions were “uncertain”, the second question affirmative while the fourth negative, indicating that context is essential for their understanding of affirmative or negative “hao + bu + AP”. On the other hand, this is again proved from the answers of the international students. Most of them chose negative options for all the four questions, which is because the context of “the mentoring relationship” has no influence on them in their culture. Unlike Chinese students, they failed to get the affirmative meaning of “haobucongming”.

Therefore, when the context has a definitely affirmative meaning, “hao + bu + AP” should be interpreted as affirmative. However, when the context embodies an obviously negative meaning, “hao + bu + AP” can even ignore the impact of the property of AP and is interpreted as negative in a conventional way. This is proved by the example (7) and (8) above.

This change is again caused by the extensive application of “hao + AP” and the Principle of Least Effort in language. There is a growing acceptance of “hao + AP”, indicating that the capacity of “hao” working as an adverb of degree has been improved, which thus leads to a growing acceptance of the conventional negative construction “hao + (bu + AP)”. According to the example of foreign students studying Chinese, they are very inclined to believe “what they see is what they get” in understanding the meaning of phrases. This indicates that

“twists and turns”⁴ in language have less expressive power than direct expressions. Even native Chinese speakers try to reduce “twists and turns” in their oral language in order to avoid misunderstanding. This can be proved from the survey results of the questionnaire.

Conclusion

With the spreading of “Southern Dialects”, the capacity of “hao” working as an adverb of degree is being improved greatly, leading to a growing acceptance of “hao + AP” and the conventional negative construction “hao + bu + AP”. Therefore, more and more APs can be placed in the two constructions. However, due to the influences of the characteristics of spoken language (transitory, non-retrospective) and the Principle of Least Effort in language, we tend to directly use “hao + AP” to express affirmative meanings. This has caused a gradual decrease in the frequency of use of “hao + bu + AP”. As a matter of fact, context is essential in determining whether “hao + bu + AP” is affirmative or negative. In a modern Chinese era when the function of “hao” as an adverb is improved, whether “haobugaoxing”, “haobu kai xin”, “haobucongming” and other similar structures are affirmative or negative can no longer be determined at first glance.

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⁴ The “twists and turns” here refer only to the redundancy negative expression in language and do not involve rhetorical needs.