

The Negative Auxiliary in Chinese Imperatives

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The negative auxiliary in Chinese imperatives is a much more important and complex area of linguistic study than might be indicated by the seeming simplicity of its surface grammatical formation, due to the variation in its meaning affects its usage in different contexts. This paper attempts an explanation of the variation in meanings and uses of the negative auxiliary, and the co-occurrence of the polite imperative marker 请 in the context of Chinese imperatives. The survey data were mainly derived from a medium-length novel and a record of spontaneous speech. The analysis has strong implications for teaching foreign language learners of Chinese how to use negative auxiliaries correctly in Chinese imperatives.

0. Introduction

The negative auxiliary in Chinese imperatives is a much more important and complex area of linguistic study than might be indicated by the seeming simplicity of its surface grammatical formation, due to the variation in its meaning when it is used in different contexts. These discrepancies often cause non-native speakers of Chinese to misunderstand and improperly handle the negation of Chinese imperatives. Unfortunately, very little research seems to have been done in this particular area of Chinese linguistics.

This study attempts an explanation of the variation in meanings and uses of the negative, and the co-occurrence of the polite imperative marker 请 'please' with the negative auxiliary in the context of Chinese imperatives. The polite imperative marker 请 can co-occur with 不必 'not need' and 不用 'not use' in negative imperatives.

The findings of the present study are based on the survey responses of 20 native speakers of Mandarin Chinese. All of the informants had at least an undergraduate college degree, and ranged in age from twenty-five to fifty. The questionnaire for the survey contained 68 sample negative imperatives in a multiple choice format. The samples were mainly derived from a medium-length novel 夜与昼 'Days and Nights' (He 1986) and a record of spontaneous speech. The analysis offered by this study is very useful for teaching Chinese language learners how to use negative imperatives.

1. The use of 别 'not' and 不要 'not want'

The meaning of both negative auxiliaries 别 'not' and 不要 'not want' is similar since 要 in 不要 has lost its original meaning when used as auxiliaries. This can be seen in 1.

- (1) a. 别 管 我, 救 火 要紧。
not bother me save fire important

不要 管 我, 救 火 要紧。
not bother me save fire important
 'Don't bother about me! Put out the fire first.'

In these sentences, both 别 and 不要 are correct, but 不要 is not as casual as 别. People tend to use 别 when they know each other well, such as family members, good friends and peers. The context in 2 is that of a father wanting to smoke one more cigarette for the day. His daughter pretends to hide the cigarette package because his doctor has forbidden him to smoke. The father asks his son to lend him a cigarette (jokingly). His daughter tries to stop her brother from giving a cigarette to her father (He 1986:73).

- (2) 哥, 你 别 借给他。
Older Brother you not lend him
 'Older brother, don't lend him that.'

Here one part of the humor is that of course one cannot lend a cigarette to someone, just as one cannot lend food: it is consumed, therefore not returnable. However, people tend to use 不要 in sentences such as the following:

- (3) 你们 不要 考虑 礼貌 不 礼貌。
you not think politeness not politeness
 'Don't think about politeness or impoliteness.'

- (4) 你 不要 再 来 纠缠 我 了。
you not again come entangle me (PERF¹)
 'Don't get me entangled again.'

- (5) 阿姨, ... 不要 这么 急 嘛。
Aunt not this anxious (PERF)
 'Aunt, ...don't be anxious like this.'

¹ PERF is the abbreviation for "perfective marker".

In 3 (He 1986:48), an old man of high social status is talking to his son's classmates. Here 不要 implies that the old man does not know this group of young people well. In 4(He 1986:246), two lovers break up. The man does not want to be involved with his ex-lover. Therefore his use of 不要 implies the emotional distance between the two, in addition to the man's intonation. In 5 (He 1986:290), the conversation is between a young girl and a maid, in an apartment where the girl comes to visit her father's friend. The girl's use of 不要 implies her ritual politeness to the maid because the maid is a stranger.

2. The use of 不要 'not' and 不必 'not need'

To the native speaker, 不要 means only 'not to do something' since its literal meaning of 要 'want' is lost. However, the meaning of 必 'need' in 不必 'not need' still remains in this negative auxiliary. This can be seen from the meaning that 不必 conveys in 6 and 7.

- (6) a. 不要 再 说谎.
not again lie
 'Don't lie again.'
- b. 不必 再 说谎.
not need again lie
 'You don't need to lie again.'

For all intents and purposes, 不要 in 6a simply means 'not'. The speaker tells the listener to stop lying. The imperative is simply a request. However, 不必 in 6b means 'not have to'. The difference is that the imperative in 6b indicates that the listener lied before, to cheat the speaker. Now the speaker knows the truth. It is unnecessary for the listener to lie any more. This can also be seen in 7.

- (7) a. 不要 来 我们 家.
not come our home
 'Don't come to our home.'
- b. 不必 来 我们 家.
not need come our home
 'You needn't come to our home.'

不要 in 7a means only that the speaker forbids the listener to come to her home. But 不必 'not need' in 7b implies that the speaker has spoken to the listener about coming to her home before. They probably even made an appointment. Now something has happened. The listener needn't come to the speaker's home. Perhaps the speaker has cancelled the

plan, or she will meet the listener somewhere else. The following are contrasting examples.

- (8) a. 不要 解释. 我 理解.
not explain I understand
 'Don't explain. I understand.'
- b. 不必 解释. 我 理解.
not need explain I understand
 'You don't need to explain. I understand.'

In 8a the wife tries to explain why she is returning late. The husband tries to stop her. 不要 shows the husband trying to persuade his wife not to say any more about the matter. In 8b the husband tries to explain what he has done. His wife stops him: 不必 indicates that there is no need for him to talk about the matter any more, because the wife is clear about it. 不必 here also implies the wife's dissatisfaction with her husband. However, these examples still sound like natural sentences to native speakers of Chinese. But the example in 9 sounds odd, with 不要 replacing 不必.

- (9) 不要再抽烟了.
not again smoke cigarette (PERF)
 'Don't smoke any more.'

In 9 a young lady persuades her father not to smoke too much because the doctor does not allow it. In 9 no native speaker of Chinese would accept the sentence if 不要 is replaced with 不必 because it sounds unnatural and strange. If 不必 is used, the implication is that the father has been smoking for some purpose. Now the smoking task is over. He does not have to smoke anymore. It is only in a sarcastic tone that the sentence would make sense. But Chinese culture dictates that a daughter would not speak like that to her father. That is why this sentence is not acceptable to native speakers in normal conversation. Therefore, the examples in 7, 8, and 9 show clearly that 不要 and 不必 are not interchangeable negative auxiliaries in Chinese imperatives.

3. The use of 不必 'not need' and 不用 'not use'

The meaning of 用 'use' in 不用 'not use' is lost when 不用 is used as a negative auxiliary. In fact, 不用 means 'not need', which is similar to the meaning of 不必, but 不必 is a much stronger negative than 不用. In addition to 'not need', 不必 also has the meaning of 'not have to' or 'mustn't,' meanings which 不用 does not have.

- (10) 不用 去 找 小丽 了.
not use go look for (name) (PERF)
 'You don't need to look for Xiao-Li.'

- (11) 不必 去 看 他.
not need go visit him
 'You don't need to go and visit him.'

In example 10, 不用 indicates that the speaker had persuaded the listener that she does not need to do something. But in 11 不必 has two possible meanings: firstly, 不必 itself implies a command. The speaker leaves the listener no choice, although the English translation 'You don't need to go and visit him' doesn't indicate this on the surface. Secondly, the speaker gives the listener a hint. The listener does not have to do something that he is not willing to do.

Another difference between 不必 and 不用 is that 不必 shows that the speaker is superior to the listener, while 不用 is a neutral term, so that the speaker's choice to use it shows a gentle, polite and amiable attitude. The use of 不必 and 不用 in 12 shows this difference.

- (12) 不必 打搅 我. 你 看着 办 吧.
not need disturb me you look handle (PERF)
 'You don't need to bother me.
 You may decide what to do.'

In 12, a secretary is asking her boss about instructions for a report format. The boss thinks that the format of the report is not important. He wants his secretary to decide the matter herself. Here 不必 implies that the boss is superior to the secretary. If 不用 were used in this situation, it would indicate that the boss was speaking to his secretary in an egalitarian fashion. In Chinese culture, this would not occur. Two examples of this contrast are given in 13 and 14.

- (13) 不必 客气.
not need polite
 'You don't need to be polite.'

- (14) 不用 客气.
not use polite
 'You don't need to be polite.'

Both 13 and 14 illustrate the context of a host trying to make his guests feel comfortable. When 不必 is used, it implies a certain distance between the host and the guests. The host sounds formal and superior to the guests, though he doesn't have to be in the higher social position. But when the host uses 不用 'not use', he sounds amiable and casual. Then the host makes him equal to the guests, though he may in actuality be a member of a much higher ranked social group or level of society.

4. The use of 不许 'not allow'

The original meaning of 许 'allow' is lost when 不许 'not allow' is used as an auxiliary. 不许 only denotes a very strong 'not' in a negative imperative. It carries a strong sense of a command that leaves no option for the listener to disobey. Usually the speaker is in the superior position when 不许 is used. Consider 15 and 16.

- (15) 不许 哭.
not allow cry
 'Don't cry.'
- (16) 不许 大声 说话.
not allow aloud talk
 'Don't talk aloud.'
- (17) 爸爸, 不许 说话.
Dad not allow talk
 'Dad, don't talk.'

In 15 a mother is speaking to her little child. In 16 a teacher is talking to a boy in her class in a primary school. Both of these imperatives constitute very strong orders from people in superior positions. In 17 a child is speaking to his father. However, culturally this sounds rude and odd in a child's speech. The proper negative would be 不要.

5. The use of 甬 'not' and '勿'

In addition to the above mentioned negative auxiliaries, there are two other commonly used negative auxiliaries in Chinese imperatives. One is 甬 'not', which is the request form resulting from the fusion of 不 'not' and 用 'use', as in 18.

- (18) 甬 提 了.
not mention (PERF)
 'Don't mention it.'

Originally 甬 belonged only to northern dialects of Mandarin Chinese, typically in Beijing. But more and more native Chinese speakers have come to accept it and use it in their speech. For instance, my informants from Sichuan, Xian all use it.

勿 'not' is another negative, this time a residue of Classical Chinese still lingering in modern Chinese. Usually 勿 is used exclusively in written Chinese.

- (19) 勿 踩 花 草.
not tread flower grass
 'Don't walk on the flowers and the grass.'
- (20) 我 一 切 都 好. 请 勿 念.
I everything all good please not worry
 'Everything is fine with me. Please don't worry.'

Example 19 is commonly seen on park signs. Example 20 is often used at the end of a letter. In both examples, 勿 is used in a frozen written language frame, to meet the needs of the succinct and formal style called for in a particular situation.

6. The position of 请 'please'

请 is a polite imperative markers used to soften a command given in Mandarin Chinese. It can occur in initial position or after the subject 你 'you' in a positive imperative sentence. Consider 21 and 22.

- (21) 请 (你) 喝 杯 茶.
please (you) drink cup cha
 'Please have a cup of tea.'
- (22) 你 请 喝 杯 茶.
you please drink cup cha
 'Please have a cup of tea.'

The negative imperative 请 can only occur in initial position, as in 23. It cannot be used after the subject 你 'you' in an imperative such as 24.

- (23) 请 (你) 别 去 了.
please (you) not go (PERF)²
 'Please don't go.'

² The examples without citations are from the data of spontaneous speech.

- (24) *你 请 不要 去 了.
you please not go (PERF)
 *'You please do not go.'

7.请 co-occurring with 不必 and 不用

In checking with authoritative sources, Li and Thompson (1981:456) claim that “only 别, but not 不用 or 不必 may co-occur with the polite imperative marker 请.” However, all the informants in the survey agreed that 请 can co-occur in some cases with 不必 and 不用. One example is in 25.

- (25) 请 你 不必 着急.
please you not need anxious
 ‘Don't be anxious, please.’

Although Li and Thompson (1981:457) claim that the example in 25 is unacceptable, all the informants in this study accepted it. In this example the speaker is politely trying to persuade the listener not to worry about somebody or something. Another example is 26.

- (26) 请 不用 客气. 随便 吃.
please not need polite casually eat
 ‘Please make yourself at home. Help yourself.’

The context of 26 is that of a hostess entertaining her friends. The hostess uses 请 with 不用 to be polite to her friends. Two more examples are in 27 and 28.

- (27) 请 不必 为 我 担心.
please not need for me worry
 ‘Please don't worry about me.’

- (28) 请 不必 惊慌.
please not need panic
 ‘Please don't panic.’

In 27, 请 softens the command by beginning with 不必. In fact, the speaker is trying to persuade the listener not to worry about her. When 请 is used in 28, a certain degree of politeness is implied in the command. It shows that the speaker is trying to calm and comfort the listener in a gentle way.

Through further investigation of the 请 + 不必/不用 structure with the informants in individual interviews, the data shows that in addition to the politeness factor, two kinds

of conversational contexts cause informants to use 请+不必/不用 in imperatives, as in 29 and 30.

- (29) 请 不必 啰嗦.
please not need long-winded
 ‘Please don't talk any more.’
- (30) 请 不用 再 操心 了.
please not need again worry (PERF)
 ‘Please don't worry about me.’

The context of 29 is that of a person who keeps on talking although the other person is not interested. The speaker tries to stop her. Here 请 does not show the speaker's politeness, but together with 不必 shows that the speaker is tired of listening to her. In 30 a husband is telling his wife to take care of this and that. The wife tells the husband that it is not his business to worry about those things. In this example 请 does not signify politeness. On the contrary, it implies a satire of the former utterance.

8. 请 'please' and 不许 'not allow'

请 does not co-occur with 不许 because 不许 is such a strong auxiliary that it allows for no sense of politeness. In 31 请 is not appropriate:

- (31) 请 不许 撒谎.
please not allow lie
 ‘Please don't lie.’

In the survey 请 'please' was placed in the initial positions of all the imperative sentences beginning with 不许, but none of the informants approved of the changes.

9. Conclusion

This study discusses the variation in meanings and uses of the negative auxiliaries and their co-occurrence with the polite imperative marker 请 ‘please’ in Chinese negative imperatives. The results show that 别 and 不要 are the two most common negative auxiliaries, which carry the meanings of persuade someone not to do something. They are for the most part synonymous, though 不要 implies a social distance between the speaker and the listener. 不必 means there is ‘no need’ to do something. So 不要 and 不必 are not interchangeable in meaning. For one thing, 不用 means ‘need not,’ which is similar to 不必 in meaning. However, it is different from 不必 because it lacks the meaning ‘not have to’, which 不必 has. In addition, 不用 expresses a speaker's polite and amiable

attitude, while 不必 implies the speaker's superior attitude to the listener. The use of 不许 implies that the speaker is in a superior social position or situation. It is a very strong command that the listener cannot disobey. On the other hand, 甬 is a negative auxiliary originally from northern dialects. Now more and more speakers use it in spoken Mandarin Chinese. Lastly, 勿 is a negative auxiliary from classical Chinese, which is only used, in formal writing. 请 is one of the polite imperative markers of Mandarin Chinese. It is only placed in the initial position of a negative imperative sentence. 请 not only co-occurs with 别 and 不要, but also with 不必 and 不用 in negative imperatives. In particular contexts in imperatives beginning with 不必 or 不用, 请 expresses sarcasm or impatience rather than politeness. That is to say, the literal meaning of 请 and the actual meaning the speaker wants to convey in the imperative are in contrast. 请 cannot co-occur with 不许 in negative imperatives because it is such a strong command that it cannot convey politeness.

The implications of this study are such that, in teaching Chinese to nonnative speakers, it is very important for instructors to teach the meaning of a negative auxiliary as a whole so that learners will not misunderstand the characters, whose original literal meanings have been lost. In addition, instructors should inform students that the choice of negative auxiliaries depends on language contexts, not on the grammatical structure. Furthermore, 请 can usually co-occur with 不必 and 不用, but sometimes it cannot because of the speaker's attitude and intonation in a given context.

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