

***Bushi* as an Evaluative Negation in Mandarin Chinese**

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Abstract

Following the definition provided by Yoon (2011a), the current research investigates the prosodic, semantic and pragmatic features of the Chinese negator *bushi*. When *bushi* does not negate the statement made, it serves as an evaluative negation (EN) in the context. Phonetically, EN *bushi* is distinguished from NC *bushi* in terms of duration and pause, but cannot be identified by its pitch range. Semantically, *bushi* can create a quasi-subjunctive mood. In the non-veridical situation created, the speaker can add his or her evaluation by saying EN *bushi*. Pragmatically, EN *bushi* mitigates the speaker's tone; while it can also intensify it on particular occasions. Moreover, the semantic property and pragmatic function of *bushi* noted the distinctive features of Chinese negative polar items (NPIs), and thus highlights the importance of language specifics. Hopefully, the findings may contribute to the teaching and learning of negations in Chinese.

Key words

Chinese negator, evaluative negation, prosodic marker, NPI, evaluation

1. Introduction

When negation does not alter the truth condition of the sentence, it is considered to be expletive in sentence (Jin and Koenig 2020, Krifka 2010, Liu Haiyong 2011). However, whether “expletive” negation is semantically vacuous is still controversial. Those who justify the semantic significance of it have coined another term evaluative negation (EN) to refer to the “expletive” negation (Yoon 2011a). To date, studies of EN remain rather limited, especially in Chinese (Qian 2022). Therefore, by focusing on the prosodic, semantic, and pragmatic features, this study aims to investigate *bushi* as a Chinese EN in natural language use.

2. Literature review

As a universal phenomenon in human communication (Horn 1989:156), negation is distributed widely across languages (Bhatia 1981, Givón 1987, Greenberg 1973). Canonically, negators are negative copulas (NCs) that convert the truth condition of sentences; while negators can also be expletive in the sense that they are semantically weak but pragmatically highlighted. And such expletive negation has become a recent research focus (e.g., Yoon 2011a, Qian 2022).

Traditionally, expletive negation is defined as semantically vacuous (Espinal 2000, Van der Wouden 1994). However, some scholars oppose this view by sustaining that such negation contributes to the sentence meaning by evaluation (Yoon 2011, Delfitto 2020). A new concept named evaluative negation (EN) was thus coined to discriminate from the traditional view. As a notional mood evaluative marker, EN creates a subcase of subjunctive mood (denoting nonveridicality) to convey the speaker’s evaluation that the proposition in the subjunctive mood is unlikely or undesirable (Qian 2022, Yoon, 2011a, 2011b). Based on previous generalizations, Yoon (2011) proposed several unique properties to identify EN: 1) no licensing of strong NPIs, 2) creating no double negation, 3) prosodically marked, and 4) lexically or morphologically distinctive.

EN has already been observed in a wide range of languages (van der Wouden 1993, 1994, Yoon 2011a). However, studies examining EN in Chinese are very limited (Qian 2022), for most research focused on the typology or psychological mechanisms of expletive negation (Wang 2022). Though some noticed the semantic significance of Chinese expletive negation (Qiu and Liao 2021), few further explored on this point, leaving Chinese EN under-researched (Qian 2022).

In Chinese negation studies, the negative marker *bushi* (not) is a key focus (e.g., Po-lun and Pan 2001, Wang 2020, Xiao and McEnery 2008). Compositionally, the core meaning of *bushi* is mostly stored in *bu*, because *shi* is further grammaticalized into a word-internal element prosodically and syntactically (Dong 2004, Yan 2014). Sometimes, *shi* is even eliminated from the lexical term, leaving *bu* alone functioning as the negative marker.

Studies of *bushi* have classified its uses into different categories according to its positions in the sentence and its etymological origins. By sentence positions, *bushi* could be categorized into the right-periphery (RP) marker, left-periphery (LP) marker, and middle-positioned marker (Chen 2018, Horn 1989, Ran 2015, Qian 2022, Xiao and McEnery 2008, Zhan et al. 2021). By etymological origin, *bushi*(s) are classified by functions. One is as the negative copula (NC), and the other is as the pragmatic marker (Zhan et al. 2021).

The two categorizing criteria are complementary to each other (see Table 1). For example, pragmatic *bushi* has been examined under different circumstances: when it appears in the RP, it is usually a question tag to seek confirmation (Liu Liyan 2005, Wang and Zhang 2017, Zhan et al. 2021); in the LP, it signals speaker’s intent to take the turn (Chen 2018, Liu Liyan 2005); while in the middle position, it is used for interpersonal purposes (Ran 2015). In sum, as a pragmatic

marker, *bushi* loses the original negative meaning regardless of its sentence position. This has thus made pragmatic *bushi* seemingly semantic vacuous, so many scholars investigated it as an expletive negation (e.g., Krifka 2010, Shi Yuzhi 2002, Xiao and McEnery 2008, Qiu and Liao 2021).

However, under the scope of EN, “expletive” negation is considered to have syntactically recognizable semantic value (Yoon 2011). Accordingly, Qian (2022) has found that *bushi* holds the evaluative meaning when it appears as 1) the sentential-final particle, and 2) the interrogative markers (especially in tag questions and rhetorical questions). Also, LP *bushi* has been found to convey some evaluative meaning when used as a turn-taking marker (Ran 2015, Chen 2018, Liu Liyan 2005). These categories coincide with the pragmatic *bushi*(s) in RP, middle position and LP, as mentioned before. Therefore, occurrences of *bushi* of above categories can also be classified by sentence positions and functions as follows (Table 1).

Table 1. Classification of *bushi* by sentence positions and functions

	Evaluative Negation (EN)	Negative Copula (NC)
Left Periphery (LP)	——wo juede zhege zhende hen haoxiao. (I really think this is hilarious.) —— <i>bushi</i> , women dei ganjin xiangxiang zaban. (<i>No</i> , we need to think about how to solve the problem.)	——ni shibushi yijing xiewan le? (Have you already finished writing?) —— <i>bushi</i> , haimeixiewan. (<i>No</i> , I haven't.)
Middle Position	wo <i>bushi</i> gen ni shuole. (Have I <i>not</i> told you.)	zhege bao <i>bushi</i> wode. (This bag is <i>not</i> mine.)
Right Periphery (RP)	ni juede zhege tinghaode <i>bushi</i> ? (<i>Don't</i> you think this is good?)	—————

Current research of Chinese EN mainly focused on typology, without explaining the qualifying features of EN. So there is still more to explain, especially concerning its phonetic, semantic and pragmatic properties.

First, EN is prosodically marked in definition (Yoon 2011a). The prosodic feature is essential for the hearer to understand the speaker's intention and distinguish different contexts accurately (Shan 2015a, 2015b). Multilingual studies have proved that prosodic features can help distinguish pragmatic markers from content words by stresses, pauses, duration, and pitch (e.g., Cai 2019, Gonen 2015, Tanghe 2015). However, as the neglect of systematic prosodic analysis is an acknowledged deficiency in Chinese pragmatic marker studies (Lu 2020, Xu 2009), studies about the prosodic features of Chinese EN are even rarer.

Second, the semantic and pragmatic nature of Chinese EN remains unexplored. EN is semantically defined as non-licensing for strong NPIs, but previous studies seldom elaborated on its semantic restrictions. As Qian (2022) has noted, it is the evaluative nature of EN that constructs an interpersonal meaning, so exploring EN's semantic features requires a more comprehensive view of the context (Chafe and Nichols 1986, Xu 2009). Given that few studies have examined EN in authentic and complete conversations, its meaning and functions are still vague (Qian 2022, Hunston 2000, Hunston and Thompson 2003).

In a word, to claim *bushi* as an EN, there still lacks a careful examination of its prosodic,

semantic and pragmatic properties in real conversational contexts. Accordingly, the current research questions are:

- 1) What are the prosodic features of Chinese EN *bushi*?
- 2) What are the semantic features and corresponding pragmatic functions of Chinese EN *bushi* in conversational contexts?

3. Methods

Pragmatic markers are speaker/hearer-dependent, so their meanings and functions need to be evaluated in real contexts (Chen 2018, Qian 2022, Xu 2009). The current research thus retrieved *bushi* from authentic conversations to explore its prosodic and semantic features. The data involved 13 recordings of multi-party conversations, among which, 11 recordings were group discussions after class, and the other two were daily conversations. The participants were informed of the recording with an audio recorder on the table. In total, there were nine interlocutors (five females and four males) involved, and they were all 17-22 years old and well-educated. The total duration of the recordings was 6 hours, 35 minutes, and 30 seconds.

All the recordings were transcribed automatically by an online transcription machine and manually corrected. Utterances with one or several “*bushi(s)*” were clipped and labeled by Praat 6.1.55. After eliminating the utterances that lack contextual information (e.g., the speaker produced a *bushi* unexpectedly and the hearers did not respond) and utterances with too many background noises, there were 196 valid utterances of *bushi*.

According to their sentence positions and discourse functions, all the utterances of *bushi* were classified into different categories (see Table 1). It should be noted that RP *bushi* seldom appeared in the transcriptions, because it is the contraction of *shibushi* (Chen 2018, Zhan et al. 2021), and most interlocutors in this study chose to use the complete form. So, considering the statistical insignificance of RP *bushi*, the current study mainly focused on *bushi* in the LP and middle position. The identification of *bushi*'s functions was based on the speaker's intention revealed by the context and hearers' responses. The researcher also interviewed some of the interlocutors to clarify several *bushi(s)*' functions that were ambiguous in the conversations.

After all the utterances of *bushi* were labeled and categorized, their pitch, duration and pause were processed and calculated by praat (Gonen 2015, Tanghe 2015). Other prosodic features like stress or loudness were not considered for the measuring difficulties in multi-party conversations. The pitches were normalized by increasing the peak value of utterances of all participants to the same level, and the pauses were validated with or without sound waves according to the criteria provided by Arim et al. (2003) and Esposito (2004) for natural multi-party conversations.

4. Results

The distribution of the 196 utterances of *bushi* in the current study is illustrated as follows:

Table 2. Frequency of *bushi* by positions and functions

Function Position in sentence	Evaluative Negation (EN)	Negative Copula (NC)	Total
Left Periphery (LP)	65	44	109
Middle Position	52	35	87
Total	117	79	196

In total, *bushi* appeared more frequently as EN than negative copula NC, and was more commonly observed in the LP.

Among all the *bushi*(s) in the recordings, only 27 EN *bushi*(s) and 23 NC *bushi*(s) had identifiable pauses longer than 100ms (Cai 2019). After eliminating four identifiable pauses after the middle-positioned *bushi*(s) out of statistical insignificance, there remained 26 EN *bushi*(s) and 20 NC *bushi*(s) for the independent sample t-test. The results indicated that there was a significant difference in the duration of pauses between EN *bushi* (N = 26) and NC *bushi* (N = 20), $t(44) = -2.65, p < .01$. EN *bushi*(s) had significantly shorter pauses followed (M = .444266, SD = .37) than NC *bushi*(s) (M = .244376, SD = .12).

EN *bushi* and NC *bushi* were further divided by sentence positions. Two independent sample t-tests were conducted to calculate durations. Results indicated that there was a significant difference in duration between LP EN *bushi*(s) (N = 65) and LP NC *bushi*(s) (N = 44), $t(107) = -6.38, p < .001$. Similarly, the difference in duration was also significant between middle-positioned EN *bushi*(s) (N = 44) and middle-positioned NC *bushi*(s) (N = 35), $t(85) = -4.96, p < .05$. Both confirmed that EN *bushi*(s) had a significantly shorter duration than NC *bushi*(s) despite their sentence positions.

The pitch of EN *bushi* and NC *bushi* was calculated regarding different speakers. In total, three out of nine interlocutors had produced enough *bushi*(s) for comparison. For S1, the results of the t-test showed that there was no significant difference in pitch range between the EN *bushi*(s) (N = 54) and NC *bushi*(s) (N = 22), $t(73) = -.29, p > .05$. Similar results were also found with S2 ($t(38) = -.61, p > .05$) and S3 ($t(57) = .279, p > .05$).

In summary, EN *bushi*(s) had shorter durations and pauses compared to their NC counterparts, but there was not enough evidence proving that EN *bushi* was prosodically marked by its pitch range.

5. Discussion

The prosodic features of EN *bushi* can be attributed to its semantic nature and pragmatic functions.

Since EN *bushi* has been deprived of its function of negating, it is prosodically marked in conversations to distinguish itself from NC *bushi*. Usually, NC *bushi* is uttered standardly as [p^wu:ʂ̺] according to the phonic pattern; while EN *bushi* is often pronounced in a very quick manner, with its boundaries eroded by other utterances. Such erosion has already been discovered with the pragmatic marker *bushi*, whose pronunciation changes into [puz] in the flow (Wang and Zhang 2017, Yan 2014). The syllable *shi* is eroded into a light tone or even disappeared, possibly because EN does not highlight semantic polarity but focuses on the evaluation of degrees. So the grammatical word *shi* signifying epistemic stance is weakened. A typical feature of the erosion of *shi* is the disappearance of sibilant [ʂ̺] (Figure 1).

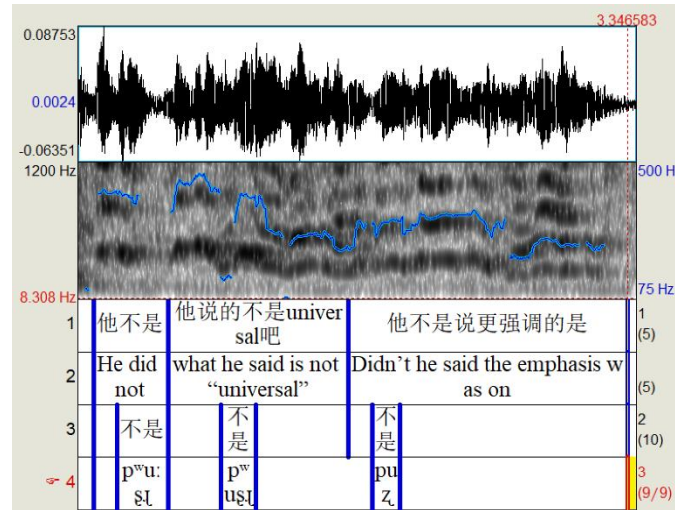


Figure1: The contrast between EN *bushi* and NC *bushi*

In Figure 1, the first and second *bushi* were NCs, while the third one was an EN. The first NC *bushi* was pronounced with sibilants, so its pitch contour broke. In contrast, the pitch contour in the third one was smoothly linked to the following utterances. The result of the t-test also showed that EN *bushi*(s) (N = 117) contain significantly fewer sibilants than NC *bushi*(s) (N = 79), $t(193) = -10.97, p < .001$.

The pragmatic function of EN *bushi* also makes its pauses shorter. Longer pauses attract hearers' attention (Cai, 2019), and might result in strengthening the negative meaning of *bushi* and cause misunderstanding. So prolonged pauses are not preferred by EN *bushi* for pragmatic concerns.

Since its original negative meaning is canceled, the exact meaning of EN *bushi* becomes the chief issue. According to the evaluation framework provided by Hunston and Thompson (2003), evaluation builds and maintains the relationship between speaker and hearer in three main areas: (1) manipulation, (2) hedging and (3) politeness. Among these, manipulation is the core, through which the speaker manipulates the hearer in an unidentifiable way. So, to reach a more comprehensive meaning of EN *bushi*, answers need to be given from both the meaning intended by the speaker and the effects it imposed on hearers. Here is an example taken from a recording discussing computer systems:

- (1) zan bushi zhengle ge shenme xitong. [Chinese]
 we not have made a what system
 1Plur EN V ASP CL PRON (NPI) NP
 [+eval_{unlikely}]
 (although it is unlikely to happen)

- EN reading: 'Haven't we built a system.'
- Expletive negation reading: 'We have built a system.'

If *bushi* in (1) was interpreted as an expletive negation, then (1a) and (1b) would be semantically equivalent, but they were not identical. The speaker did not just intend to state the

fact that “we have built”, but also to deliver her evaluation. As Yoon (2011a) pointed out, EN is a subcase of the subjunctive mood marker, which can circumvent a commitment to a truthful event with the combination of attitude. Therefore, in this example, there were two tenses on different layers:

Table 3. The intention of the speaker delivered by EN *bushi*

	Chinese	English	Attitude
Subjunctive	zan bushi zheng le ge shenme xitong.	We have not made a system.	Not likely to happen
Declarative	zan zheng le ge shenme xitong.	We have made a system.	The speaker’s real intention

In the subjunctive mood, *bushi* functioned as an NC; while in the real context, *bushi* was interpreted as an EN, evaluating the possibility of occurrence in the subjunctive mood. Since it was unlikely that “we have not made”, then the intention of the speaker would be “we have made”.

Yoon (2011a) and Qian (2022) both thought the roundabout expression made by EN was out of concern for politeness. However, after a short interview with the speaker, she said did not intend to mitigate the tone, but rather to accentuate it. This is because the middle-positioned EN *bushi* is often used in Chinese rhetorical questions, which are generally assumed to presuppose a negative answer (Yoon 2011b). Therefore, EN *bushi* could also strengthen the speaker’s intention. In the example given above, the speaker intended to highlight her epistemic attitude ME (y)¹ upon the proposition created in the subjunctive mood “we have not made a system”:

- (2) a. $\exists x[\text{we}'(x) \in M_E(y) \rightarrow_{\text{UNLIKELY}} [\text{we}'(x) \rightarrow \neg (\text{have made}'(\text{system}'))(x)]$
 b. $\Rightarrow_{\text{LIKELY}} \exists x[\text{we}'(x) \rightarrow (\text{have made}'(\text{system}'))(x)]$

In (2a), [[the speaker believes that we have not made a system]]_{c=1} iff $\forall w [w \in M_E(y) \rightarrow w \in \lambda w'$. We have not made a system in w'], which is obviously not true in the context.

This epistemic model of Giannakidou (1998) provided a suitable framework to explain the association between the speaker’s intention and EN. Usually, the epistemic model serves a doxastic function (Heim 1992), and it is manifested in the attitudinal component of EN *bushi* in this example. EN has an attitudinal component in its lexical semantics, and this evaluative component (R) is anchored to the speaker y (Yoon 2011a). Therefore, the epistemic stance ME (y) in (2a) is conveyed through EN *bushi*, whose evaluative nature is as (3) shows (a is the individual anchor, d is the degree of likelihood, p is the proposition in subjunctive mood and R is a gradable attitude of the proposition provided by the context) (Yoon 2011a:134).

- (3) $[[bushi]] = \lambda p \lambda q. \exists d R(a)(p)(d) \wedge \exists d' R(a)(q)(d') \wedge q = \neg p \wedge d' > d$

The above formula shows that *bushi* as an EN pragmatically entails that the likelihood of the negation of assertion $p = \text{we have not made } x$ is of a greater extent. If combined with the epistemic model, it would be (Yoon, 2011a):

¹ $M_E(y)$ denotes a set of worlds w' accessible from a world w , compatible with y ’s beliefs in w (Giannakidou, 1998, 2009).

$$(4) \quad \textit{Bushi}(y, p) = M_E(y) - p < \text{LIKELY}M_E(y) \cap p \text{ in } c$$

Combined with the speaker's epistemic stance, *bushi* (y, p) would be true if there is a world in which the speaker y believes that p can be true. While (4) displays that if *bushi* (y, p) is true, then the speaker believes that the possibility of p exists but to a very limited extent (Yoon 2011a).

Nevertheless, the evaluative nature of EN is also implemented by other sentence components. One of the hallmarks of EN is the non-licensing of strong NPIs (Yoon, 2011a, 2011b), and the NPI *shenme* in the example above thus serves as another piece of evidence for the evaluative nature of EN.

Strong NPIs (e.g., *renhe*, *conglai*, *zaiye*, *genben*) can only appear in negative sentences, denoting the negation of universal quantification. In contrast, weak NPIs like minimizers (e.g., *yidian*, *sihao*) denote minimum quantification or extreme situations. EN can license weak NPIs but not strong NPIs, because of 1) the lack of negative force, and 2) its evaluative nature.

Weak NPI *shenme* in negative sentences (in linguistic form) usually signifies a small amount instead of an empty set. For example, “wo mei mai shenme dongxi/I did not buy something” is usually interpreted as “I only bought a few things” rather than “I did not buy anything”. So weak NPI is also an evaluation made on small probability events, which thus allows its cooccurrence with EN.

As mentioned, *bushi* indicates that the likelihood of $M_E(y) \cap p$ is not null but very limited. The speaker supposes there is still a world (that is not likely to exist) in which p is true, and this implication echoes the likelihood implied by weak NPI *shenme*. So, EN can license weak NPIs. However, if *shenme* is replaced by the strong NPI *renhe*, the sentence would be pragmatically unintelligible:

$$(5) \quad \begin{array}{llllllll} *zan & bushi & (meiyou)^2 & zheng & le & ge & \textbf{renhe} & [xitong]_F & [Chinese] \\ We & have & not & made & & an & any & system. & \\ 1Plur & EN & & V & ASP & CL & [strong NPI] & NP & \\ \text{'We have not made any system.'} & & & & & & & & \end{array}$$

Example (5) is grammatical, but not semantically correct in Chinese. As (6a) demonstrates, if *shenme* is replaced by *renhe*, the sentence would entail universal quantification, and therefore denies all the possibility, making *bushi* an NC in the context. Then its pragmatic meaning will be just the opposite of the meaning when *bushi* is an EN (as demonstrated in (6b)).

$$(6) \quad \begin{array}{l} a. \quad \forall x[we'(x) \rightarrow \neg(\text{have made}'(\text{system}'))(x)] \\ b. \quad \exists x[we'(x) \rightarrow (\text{have made}'(\text{system}'))(x)] \end{array}$$

From the analysis, we can conclude that the speaker's evaluation is not just restricted to EN *bushi* as a lexical term; other sentence components and syntactic forms all constitute making an evaluative meaning, expressing unlikelihood or undesirability.

Given the evaluative bases of EN, a recent development has further amplified the meaning of EN by its pragmatic enrichment (Delfitto 2020). Though Delfitto (2020) disagreed with Yoon (2011a) by sustaining that EN held a negative meaning to negate the implicature, they both agreed that EN expresses the speakers' attitude. As an operator of the implicature denial, EN can create a pragmatic counterpart that strengthens the original semantic meaning of the speaker, which is also

² *Bushi* in this case was changed into *meiyou* (an equivalent negator of *bushi* used in the perfect tense).

validated in the current research.

This pragmatic function of EN also echoes the evaluation framework. According to the framework, the hearer would be manipulated more successfully if the evaluation is expressed less obtrusively (Hunston and Thompson 2003). The following example revealed how hearers reacted to EN:

Excerpt 1

1	S1: ni zhunbei zenme jiang? S1: How would you present the theory to the class?
2	S2: wo na zhidao wo na zhidao ta you shenme weakness. S2: How would I know? How would I know its weakness?
3	S1: <i>bushi</i> , jiu jiandan jieshao yixia, ranhou zai tiji qi xianzai lilunde... S1: <i>No</i> , we just need to briefly introduce the theory, and then talk something about its theoretical...
4	S3: suoyi zanme xian queli yige gongshi ba, wo juede, ta jiangle sha? S3: So we need to first reach a consensus about the content of the theory, I think.

In the third turn, by using EN *bushi*, S1 successfully redirected the conversation to the topic he intended, without receiving any disagreements.

This proved that EN *bushi* manipulated the hearers' stance by implicitly imposing the speakers' ideology upon them. EN *bushi* revealed the speakers' subjectivity and stance towards the proposition (Qian 2022). The proposition in Delfitto's (2020) view, is implicated and denied by EN, which has a strengthening/emphatic pragmatic effect.

6. Conclusions

In sum, the evaluative nature of EN *bushi* is manifested in levels of prosody, semantics, and pragmatics. Prosodically, EN *bushi* is marked by a shorter pause followed and shorter duration; semantically, EN *bushi* imposes the speaker's evaluation of unlikelihood on the proposition in subjunctive mood and amplifies its evaluative nature by weak NPIs; pragmatically, EN *bushi* strengthens the speaker's statement to manipulate the hearers.

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