Exploring Affirmative-negative Question from the Sociolinguistic Perspective

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Abstract: Affirmative-negative question is special in Chinese interrogative systems, with various syntactic forms, and it is also the key and difficult point in teaching Chinese grammar, but it has research gaps in analyzing affirmative-negative questions from a sociolinguistic perspective. This paper used the questionnaire method, collecting 176 questionnaires to analyze and discuss three points of affirmative-negative questions' different forms of acceptance level, target audience and usage errors in sociolinguistic aspect and reached three conclusions. Firstly, people are not accustomed to using VP+不曾(never) in modern social life. They tend to accept the usage of VP+不(not)/没(not yet)+VP. Secondly, people prefer to use affirmative-negative questions with their peers rather than superiors or teachers since the affirmative-negative question represents an unpolite and questioning attitude to some extent. Thirdly, when distinguishing different types of affirmative-negative questions people may have some confusion and errors, even though they are native Chinese speakers. Thus, this paper proposes some suggestions to help identify the differences clearly for people, including non-native Chinese speakers. This paper plays an inspired role in affirmative-negative questions in sociolinguistic research areas, and it contributes to teaching and learning the Chinese interrogative sentences system.

Keywords: affirmative-negative question, interrogative sentence, questionnaire, sociolinguistic, acceptance level, target audience, errors

1. Introduction

The research of interrogative sentences is a popular topic in the study of Chinese sentence types [1]. Its special syntactic forms are different from declarative sentences and occupy a unique position in socio- pragmatic communication [2]. The affirmative-negative question is one of the types, which has three typical forms: VP+不(not)+VP, VP+没(not yet)+VP and VP+不曾(never). 不曾(hereafter: never) is semantically means "never," one to one word translation is "not ever."; VP represents Verb Phrase; 没 and 不 are two of negation words in Chinese [3].

However, as a special type of Chinese interrogative, few studies have connected it with the sociolinguistic aspect. Thus, this paper will be divided into five parts and three hypotheses, taking a sociolinguistic perspective to explore people's acceptance level, the target audience, and the errors in the use of affirmative-negative questions expression.

Since this research has a relatively small sample size, it may be not able to represent all situations of Chinese people in society. Compared with previous research, this paper is from a novel perspective to analyze the affirmative-negative questions and propose strategies to help people correct errors in the use of affirmative-negative questions, providing insight for future study of affirmative-negative questions sociolinguistic.

2. Methods

The purpose of this research is to explore the expressions of affirmative-negative questions in sociolinguistics. Spreading out and collecting anonymous questionnaires on the social platform WeChat was used as a method to collect investigation data. Since this research is based on Chinese language expression, it is required that the first language of every participant should be Chinese. Participants can be divided into three different categories of people. The first category is undergraduate students in University of Queensland. The second category is people who work in Chinese government and the third category is people working in the Chinese enterprises.

The total questionnaire with 23 questions would take approximately 5 minutes to be completed. Participants have rights to exit the survey by closing the questionnaire's applet page. The questionnaire contains basic individual information, such as age, gender, educational background, hometown; it also includes questions regarding the selection of which participants considered to be the best affirmative-negative questions expressions, whether they accept these affirmative-negative questions by using Likert Scale method dividing into four acceptance level and so on.

A total number of 176 people filled out this questionnaire, and all 176 questionnaires were valid, with a questionnaire efficiency of 100%. Among the participants who filled out the questionnaire, among these 176 people, 44.32% of them are male, and 55.68% are female. The age of participants ranged from 18 to over 50 years old, with 56 participants (31.82%), 27 participants (15.34%), 59 participants (33.52%), and 34 participants (19.32%) aged from 18 to 29, 29 to 39, 40 to 50 and over 50 years old respectively.

According to Table 1, there are some typical questions about target audience of the affirmative-negative questions and why people think the option they chose is the most acceptable in the questionnaire.

Table 1: The typical questions of the questionnaire.

1. Who do you usually use this kind of expression with? • Teachers or Supervisors • People of the similar age or level • Children or subordinates • Never use this kind of expression • All people

2. If you want to ask someone if they have seen your computer, which of the following forms of expression do you most often use?
• 你/有没有/看过/我的电脑？
  You/whether or not/ saw/ my laptop?
• 你/看/不看到/我的电脑？
  You/saw/or do not see/my laptop?
• 你/看到/我的电脑了吗？
  You/saw/my laptop?
• 你/看/没看到/我的电脑？
  You/saw/or did not see/my laptop?

Table 1: (continued).

3. For the sentence above, why do you think the option you chose is the most acceptable?
• It's clear and emphasize the key points.
• Speaking habits
• Relying on feeling
• These four forms are similar, choosing them arbitrarily.

3. Research Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: The affirmative-negative questions of VP+不(not)/没(not yet) form can be accepted well by people, but most people cannot accept the form of VP+不曾(never).

Hypothesis 2: For people who use the affirmative-negative questions they may not be limited by age or rank to use this usage for everyone.

Hypothesis 3: Some Chinese people are still confused about distinctions among different forms of affirmative-negative questions.

4. Results

This section presents the results of the questionnaire based on the hypotheses made previously, respectively. It follows the order of the three hypotheses, illustrating whether they are correct or wrong.

4.1. Hypothesis One

In table 2, for questions 4,5,8, more than half of the participants chose this kind of expression can be accepted totally and accepted partially. People who chose "Totally accept" are the largest percentage, followed by people who chose "Partially accept." (Figure 4: 43.75% for totally accepting and 42.61% for partially accepting; Figure 5: 39.2% for totally accepting and 43.75% for partially accepting; Figure 8: 25.57% for totally accepting and 45.45% for partially accepting.) In figure 7, although few people chose "Totally accepting," the largest number of people chose "Partially accept," accounting for 31.82%. However, for figure 6, most people chose "Partially can't accept" (35.23%), and the second largest proportion is people who chose "Totally can't accept," which is 26.14%. Overall, most people tend to accept VP+不(not)/没(not yet) form of the affirmative-negative questions can be accepted well by people. Still, most people cannot accept the form of VP+不曾 (never), which is consistent with my hypothesis.

Table 2: People's acceptance level of different forms of affirmative-negative questions.

Questions in the questionnaire	Totally accept	Partially accept	Partially can't accept	Totally can't accept
1. 你做这件事想没想过他的感受？ You thought or didn't think about his feelings when you did this thing?	43.75%	42.61%	11.36%	2.27%

Table 2: (continued).

Questions in the questionnaire	Totally accept	Partially accept	Partially can't accept	Totally can't accept
2. 面对危险，你害没害怕？ Facing danger, you're scared or aren't scared?	39.2%	43.75%	13.07%	3.98%
3. 那件事情你曾愿意做不曾？ That thing you ever or not ever would like to do?	13.07%	25.57%	35.23%	26.14%
4. 你知没知道这件事情？ You knew or didn't know this thing?	14.2%	31.82%	31.25%	22.73%
5. 你三年前买的这件衣服，现在过没过时？ This cloth you bought three years ago, nowadays it is outdated or isn't outdated?	25.57%	45.45%	21.02%	7.95%

4.2. Hypothesis Two

By viewing this pie chart (figure 1), among the 176 participants, using these interrogative sentences with negative words for people of a similar age or level accounts for the largest percentage (49.43%), with a total of 87 people. The percentage of people who use this kind of expression with children or subordinates is 14.77%, comprising 26 people. The percentage of those who use them for their teachers or supervisor is relatively small, approximately 9.09% (16 people). Only 8.52% of participants chose to use them for all people, and 18.18% of people chose never to use this expression. In other words, most people use interrogative sentences with negative words for people of a similar age, similar level, children or subordinates. The fewest people chose to use them for people of all ages and levels range. However, this result is contrary to my hypothesis. I supposed most people would use these interrogative sentences with negative words for all people. The result of the questionnaire illustrates that my hypothesis is wrong.
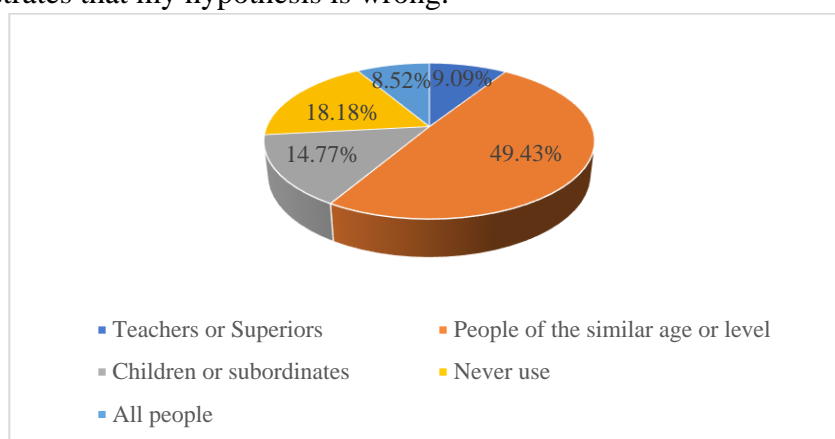

Figure 1: Target audience of the affirmative-negative questions.

4.3. Hypothesis Three

Based on figure 2, the number of people who chose "it's clear and emphasizes the key point" for these given interrogative sentences is 87, accounting for 40.34%, which is less than half. 50.57% of people choose to accept it because of speaking habits, relying on feeling and thinking that the four forms of interrogative sentences are similar, accounting for 32.95%, 14.2%, and 3.41% respectively. Therefore, the result is consistent with my hypothesis that some people who chose interrogative forms only rely on their habits and individual thoughts. They don't know the specific differences among different affirmative-negative forms or have some confusions.
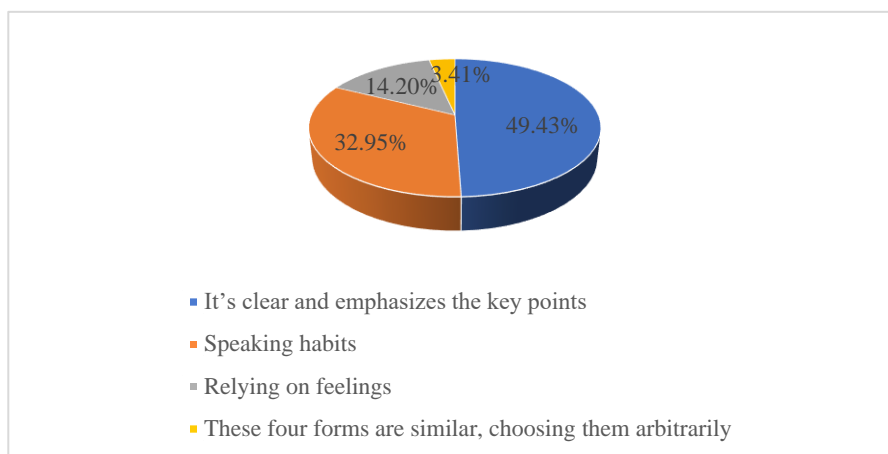

Figure 2: The reason why people think the option they chose is the most acceptable one.

5. Discussion

5.1. Acceptance Level

This paper finds that the affirmative-negative questions of VP+不曾(never) form are not common nowadays. This form was orientated around the Song-Yuan period [3]. In Yan Li's Research of Affirmative - negative question in Awakening Marriage Story, the reason for the frequent occurrences of VP+不曾(never) form is that in the Shandong dialect at that time, it was flourishing, Still, it has already declined gradually [4]. According to the questionnaire in Table 1, question 5, most people cannot accept the usage of VP+不曾(never), which illustrates that modern people hardly use this form in their lives. This form is replaced by the forms of VP+不+VP or VP +没+VP, which is the form of VP+ neg +VP essentially accepted generally by participants in the questionnaire. According to Siming Li's and Yan Li's statistics, the form of VP+不曾(never) appeared significantly more frequently than other forms of affirmative-negative questions in works represented by the Song and Yuan dynasties language [5]. In The Golden Lotus, VP+不曾(never) form was almost twice as often as other forms of affirmative-negative questions [6]. However, in the Dream of the Red Chamber, the frequency of VP+不曾 form experienced a significant decrease. It only appeared 14 times [3]. Therefore, these data demonstrate that the usage of VP+不曾(never) has not already been prevalent since the Qing dynasty. For the reasons of decline, combing with Kaiyu Song's research of Liaozhai Folk Play, this article explains two reasons why most participants cannot accept the usage of VP+不曾(never). From the economic principle of language view, when 不曾(never) is at the end of the affirmative-negative questions sentence, "曾" (ever) is repetitive in its expression, which can be replaced by only one word "不"(not) [7]. As time goes by, the redundant part is easy to be ignored.

Another reason is that "不曾" (never) has literary character and it is not common in modern Mandarin compared with the colloquial expression VP+不(not)/没(not yet)+VP. Thus, it is difficult for people to accept this form in modern society [7].

5.2. Target Audience

By analyzing the selections of participants of whom to use affirmative-negative questions in the questionnaire, this paper finds that people use it only with their peers of similar ages with them in most cases in their daily lives. This phenomenon can be explained by the different tones of affirmative-negative questions and general questions. Take an example of question 2 in the questionnaire:

你/看到/我的电脑了吗？

You/saw/my laptop?

你/看/没看到/我的电脑？

You/saw/or did not see/my laptop?

The first sentence is the general question, but the second one is the affirmative-negative question. In Chinese, the second sentence has obvious questioning and inquisitorial tone, but the first one is the normal interrogative tone [8]. The first sentence means asking people a question about their computer, but the second sentence has an implicit meaning. By using the affirmative-negative questions, repeating the verb "see" twice implies the asker's eager mood that wants to get people's replies. Liu argues that "affirmative-negative questions have a special expression function to express the urgent mood of the questioner who wants to know the answer eagerly [9]."

Other research also illustrates that the affirmative-negative question is a sentence that strongly demands a reply from the other party and is generally not used for superiors. It is usually used in very close relations [8]. This conclusion also coincides with the results of the questionnaires.

5.3. Errors and Solutions

As two important negative adverbs "不" (not) and "没" (not yet) form the affirmative-negative sentences, they represent different meanings, so they cannot interchange arbitrarily, which increases the difficulty of the acquisition of affirmative-negative sentences, whether in first language acquisition or second language acquisition, especially for those international students whose Chinese is not their first language [10]. For the differences between general questions and affirmative-negative questions, general questions For the differences between different forms of affirmative-negative questions, VP+不(not)+VP form emphasizes the present and future tense of actions [7]. VP+没(not yet)+VP form and, VP+不曾(never) focus on the past tense of action, which is to ask the action whether completed or not [7].

According to the research of Jie Niu, international students in China can also make errors in the distinction between VP+没(not yet)+VP and VP+不(not)+VP [10]. For the example in Jie Niu's article, some international students write the wrong sentences.

Example 1:

你/去过/不去过/上海？

You/went to/or do not go to/Shanghai? [10]

Since this sentence expresses the perfect tense. The negation of perfect tense should use "没" (not yet), so the correct answers should be

你/去过/没去过/上海？

You/went to/or did not go to/Shanghai? [10]

The above mistakes are mainly due to the confusion between the use of the negative adverb "不" (not) and "没" (not yet) [10]. The essence of this error is the misrepresentation of the realis body and the irrealis body [11]. It is mainly influenced by intralinguistic interference and is an error caused by the learner's acquisition of the confusion of tense [12]. In addition, it is difficult to distinguish affirmative-negative questions and other types of interrogative sentences such as general questions. Qingqing You argues that "Teachers should emphasize the differences between affirmative- negative questions and other types of interrogative sentences in teaching [12]."

This paper proposes some insights to avoid confusion about differences. In the early stage of learning, clarifying the definition and types of interrogatives is important. Next, differences among different types of interrogative sentences, especially affirmative-negative questions cannot be ignored and summary them after class to avoid confusion. In addition, the example sentences taken by teachers should be integrated with the context to help students understand deeply. Using VP+不 (not)+VP and VP+没(not yet)+VP as an example, the context of VP+不(not)+VP should be present tense, but the second one VP+没(not yet)+VP should be integrated in past tense context, which can help students have a deep impression of differences.

6. Conclusion

Affirmative-negative question is one indispensable type of Chinese interrogative, and it's a significant part of Chinese grammar teaching. This research focuses on the sociolinguistic perspective to analyze modern people's acceptance of some affirmative-negative questions, the target audience, and the errors used in life. Based on the results of the questionnaires, this paper has three findings: 1) In modern society, people are accustomed to using VP+不(not)/没(not yet)+VP in affirmative-negative questions, but people cannot accept the obsolete usage of VP+不曾 (never). 2) Because the affirmative-negative question has an unpolite and questioning tone to some extent, people hardly use it with superiors and teachers. They will use it with people who have similar ages and levels to them in most cases. 3) Even native Chinese speakers are confused when distinguishing different types of affirmative-negative questions. Most people just rely on their feelings and habits to choose the sentence that they think is correct. Likewise, non-native Chinese speakers have the same problems. Therefore, this paper provides some solutions to help teach affirmative-negative questions efficiently. Based on three independent hypotheses and discussions, the central theme of this paper is constituted. The strategy of teaching interrogative sentences to avoid confusion can be a suggestion for teachers who teach Chinese language and people who learning Chinese. Also, this paper can provide some insights for the researchers studying Chinese interrogative sentences from the sociolinguistic perspective. All in all, this paper is crucial to provide reference meaning for future research, teaching and learning.

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