

Lesson 5

Negatives

There are many ways to say “no.” We must learn not only to acknowledge them but also to see the real differences among the various modes of negation. Each of the many different negatives in literary Chinese has a discrete meaning. The basic vocabulary of negatives is:

不 *bù* modifies and negates **verbs**: the action does not occur. A noun following *bù* becomes a verb.

未 *wèi* negates **the occurrence of actions**: the action designated by the verb has **not yet** occurred but still may. Sometimes, in terms of rhetorical force, *wèi* suggests that since the action has never happened, it therefore will not and cannot.¹

無 *wú* is a **verb** that **negates existence**: “there is no” It is the opposite of 有. Since 無 is a verb, it takes a **noun** as its object; a verb following *wú* becomes a noun.

非 *fēi* may reflect early Old Chinese syntax and is the “negative copula” that **negates the identity** of a topic with a **nominal predicate**: “A is not a case of B.” Later usage occasionally treats 非 as a verb, but it should be seen as modifying noun phrases, and a verb following *fēi* becomes a noun.

弗 *fú* is a special **fusion** character derived from 不 + 之. The placement of the 之 reflects a characteristic of early Old Chi-

1. Pulleyblank (*Outline of Classical Chinese Grammar*, p. 114) suggests that 未 is a fusion of a negative root *m- with 既, “to complete.”

nese: 之 here is the *transposed object of a negated verb*. (See below.)

勿 wù is another fusion, derived from 毋 + 之. It usually appears as a *negative imperative*: “Don’t”

莫 muò is the *negative distributive*: “in no case” It is the opposite of 或.

The sense of each of these characters is distinct, and the particular usage of each must be taken into account.

One special aspect of early literary Chinese that disappears in later writing is the **transposition of objects** of negated verbs.² This insertion of the **object** of the verb **between the negating modifier and the verb** does not occur with all objects—in fact, it occurs primarily with pronouns:

歲不吾與	The years do not give us [respite].
莫之知	None knew it.
未之信也	He did not yet believe it.

Text: 矛盾 (韓非子)

1. 楚人有鬻盾與矛者，譽之曰吾盾之堅，物莫能陷也。
2. 又譽其矛曰吾矛之利，於物無不陷也。
3. 或曰以子之矛陷子之盾，何如。
4. 其人弗能應也。
5. 夫不可陷之盾與無不陷之矛不可同世而立。

Vocabulary

矛	máo (n), spear	*鬻	yù (v), to sell
盾	dùn (n), shield		

2. When such constructions appear in later writing, they are usually self-conscious **archaisms**, a stylistic technique designed to give the writing an “ancient” quality.

與	yǔ (v), to give > (fw), “and”]	以	yǐ (v), to grasp > (cv) us- ing . . .
譽	yù (v), to praise	何如	hé rú, “What about it?”
堅	jiān (v), to be sturdy	何	hé (n), what?
物	wù (n), [phenomenal] thing	如	rú (v), to resemble
莫	mò (adv), in no case	弗	fú (fw) [fusion of 不之]
能	néng (av), to be able to	應	yìng (v), to respond
陷	xiàn (v), to fall into > to sink into	夫	fū (fw), “now . . .”
利	lì (v), to be sharp	同	tóng (v), to partake of > be of the same . . .
無	wú (v), there is not	立	lì (v), to stand
或	huò (fw), some > (n) someone		

Grammar Notes

1. 楚人有鬻盾與矛者 By now the classical usage of 有 should begin to be clear. 楚人 is the topic: “Among the people of Chǔ, *there was* (verb of “existential predication”) one who”
2. 譽之曰 Here 譽 and 曰 are *coordinate verbs*: “in order to praise it, he said”
3. 吾盾之堅，物莫能陷也 The nominalizing character 也 has an important function here. Rather than simply making the observation that “As for objects, in no case can they penetrate it,” the sentence becomes “As for the hardness of my shield (*topic*), well, it is so hard that nothing can penetrate the shield.” That is, the addition of the 也 makes the sentence nominal; it sets up a definition: **shield’s hardness** = the **state** in which nothing can penetrate it. This is an unalterable fact, true under all circumstances and defines precisely what sort of hardness the spear seller attributes to his shield.
4. 於物無不陷也 It is clear *what* this phrase means: “There are no objects into which [my spear] does not sink.” The question is *how* the

phrase says this. In English, we use an empty subject “there” and a relative clause beginning with a preposition, “into which,” to modify “objects.” Literary Chinese uses a different strategy. To understand this strategy, we need to ask two questions: Why does the topic begin with the locative marker 於? And what happened to the object of the verb 陷? These questions can be answered in two different but related ways. First, the phrase can be viewed as a *topicalized* construction. The normal word order would be: 不陷於X, “it does not sink into X.” Here, however, the spear seller wants to emphasize that there **is no X** such that “it does not sink into X.” Thus he raises as the topic the general category “*things taken as possible locations*, that is, targets” and uses the locative marker 於 to indicate the relation explicitly. Often, however, sentences that topicalize a locative object leave the *resumptive pronoun* 焉 (equivalent to 於之) as a “trace” to mark the locative object position. For example,

萬取千焉 As for ten thousand, take one thousand *from it*.

The second approach emphasizes that the construction 無不陷 is equivalent to 無所不陷, “There does not exist that into which it does not penetrate,” much as the common expression 無不爲 means 無所不爲, “There does not exist that which [they] will not do.” Because the object of 不陷 is already represented by the 所, the 於物 is not the verb’s topicalized object. Instead, the seller uses the phrase to make the most general possible statement: “Let’s consider *any* object taken as a location.” Thus, the end result of the two accounts is the same: the seller makes clear that he is talking about “any object as target,” and that “there aren’t any” that can resist his spear.

The distinction between 莫 in the preceding sentence and the 無 in this sentence is a question of scope: with 莫, the sentence refers to *all* objects and makes a statement about them collectively. 無, in contrast, stresses that the second sentence is talking about *no* object: the thing to which it points does not exist.

5. 何如 The word 何 basically is an *interrogative noun*, and 何如 is equivalent to 如何, “What does [it] resemble?” which, in turn, is an idiomatic way of saying “What do you make of that?” This **inversion of verb-object** with question words (and the character 是) is another lingering feature of Early Archaic Chinese. There are several similar inversions:

何以	=	以何	“by means of what”
是以	=	以是	“by means of this”
誰與	=	與誰	“with whom”

6. 其人弗能應 The use of 弗 here is very typical. One starts with a “base” sentence:

其人不能應之 The man cannot respond to it.

Since the object of the main verb 應 in the negated verb phrase is the pronoun 之, it is moved (transposed) to a position **between the negating word 不 and the verb phrase**:

其人不之能應

Finally, the two words 不之 fuse to become 弗: 其人弗能應.

7. 其人弗能應也 This sentence finishes the author’s story, a self-contained vignette that illustrates thoughtless self-contradiction. He uses 也 to indicate this **completion of the account**. In English, we might say, “And it was the case that the man could not respond to [the question].” The 也 used here at the end of a verbal sentence *frames* the action and turns it into a “thing,” a situation that can be analyzed and commented on, with patterns and implications to be explored. This use of 也 to signal the completion of an account occurs frequently in literary Chinese.

8. 不可同世而立 Remember that 可+verb is a **passive** construction: “*cannot be established* in the same generation.” Notice also that the full verbal expression that is the object of 可 is 同世而立. 同 and 立 are *coordinate verbs* where 同 sets up the **antecedent condition** for 立. Also note, however, the syntactically as well as semantically unbalanced quality of the verb pair: 同 already has its own object, 世, and cannot serve as an independent object of 可. That is, transitive verbs should not have objects when used in passive constructions:

Subject_{agent} + verb + object_{patient} > Subject_{patient} + 可 + verb

立 is the actual object of 可, and 同世 is reduced almost to the status of a modifier of 立.

Questions

1. What part of speech is 堅 in 吾盾之堅 in (1)? Why?
2. What is the main verb for the coverb 以 in (3)?
3. What does the phrase 其人 mean? Why is it used in (4)?
4. Given the explanation of 弗 above, what does 弗能應 mean?
5. Explain the use of 也 in (4).
6. What is the function of 與 in (5)?
7. What is the object of 無 in (5)?

Exercises

1. *Basic patterns.* Diagram and translate:

舟中之人莫知其劍之利。

觸株之兔莫不折頸而死。

宋人莫之能得。

此非吾家。

兔走田中而耕者莫之能止。

至今宋國無兔。

孟之反曰非敢後也、馬不進也。(Note: 孟之反 is a man's name.)

我未之見也。

2. 莫 *and* 無. Translate the sentences below to make the differences clear:

吾盾之堅，物無能陷也。

吾盾之堅，物莫能陷也。

3. 不 *and* 非. Translate the sentences to clarify the distinction:

我不求利劍。

利劍非我所求也。

齊王不能好先王之樂。(樂 = “music”)

齊王非能好先王之樂也。

4. 弗. Translate the following sentences to reflect the presence of a “hidden” 之:

耕者待兔而弗得。

楚王弗信。

矛弗能陷。

5. *Negations.* Change the following into negative sentences and translate:

宋人有走於水之上者。

耕者皆亡。

吾有利劍。

舟中之兔或墜於水。

其子求之。

盜所至者富人家也。

牆有雨所壞者。

利民之政，楚王皆用之。

欲以其政利其民。