

Grammar Revision 8: Negations

Negative particles fall into two categories with different initial consonants in ancient Chinese: (1) those with an initial p/f and (2) those with an initial m/w. Those in the first group imply simply negation, those in the second non-existence. The prohibitive negations fall into the second category – perhaps they are derived from a meaning like ‘may there be no...’.

1. P/f negations

1.1 *Bù* 不

Bù 不 negates verbs and stative verbs:

子奚不爲政	Why is it that you don't take part in government.
四十而不惑	At forty I was not confused.

Object pronouns are sometimes placed between *bù* 不 and the verb it negates. Note that such an inversion can also occur with *mò* 莫 ‘nobody, nothing’ and *wèi* 未 ‘not yet, never’ (cf. below).

不吾敬也	[He] does not respect me.
不之廢也	[They] did not discard it.
不子欺	[I] don't cheat you.
我寒而不我衣	I am cold, but [they] don't dress me.
余不汝忍殺	I can't bring myself to kill you.
哀不已若者	[He] feels sad for those who are inferior to himself.

Very often, however, the object pronoun is omitted altogether:

一聞人之過，終身不忘。	Had he once learned about another man's faults, he would not forget [them] till the end of his life.
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Sometimes *bù* 不 is used to negate nouns:

君子不器	The superior man (is not “implement-like”:) acts not as a mere tool.
臣實不才	I am indeed without talent.
風雨不時	Wind and rain do not come at the right time.

A frequently encountered combination is *bù dé ér* 不得而 V., an idiomatic phrase similar in meaning to *bù néng* 不能 V.: “not be able to V.”.

臣不得而爲也	I cannot do [this].
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1.2 *Fǒu* 否

Fǒu 否, sometimes written 不, stands for *bù* 不 plus the negated verb: *bù* 不 V. = *fǒu* 否. It is used in yes/no questions:

丞相可得見否	Is the chancellor available?
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The literal meaning corresponds to “can he be seen or can he not be seen” (= *kě dé jiàn bù kě dé jiàn* 可得見不可得見); cf. modern Chinese V. *bù* 不 V.: 你要不要去 “Do you want to go?”

Fǒu 否 is also used as a negative reply to yes/no questions; note the contrasting use of *rán* 然 ‘yes’ and *fǒu* 否 ‘no’ in this example:

孟子曰：許子必種粟而後食乎。	Master Meng asked: “Will Master Xǔ only eat after he has sown his own grain?”
曰：然。許子必織布而後衣乎。	“Yes.” “Will Master Xǔ then only put on clothes after he has woven his own fabric?”
曰：否。	“No.”

1.3 *Fú* 弗

Fú 弗 is by many grammarians understood to be a fusion of *bù zhī* 不之, possibly the result of the inversion of verb and object pronoun after *bù* 不 (cf. above).

得之則生，弗得則死。	If he gets it, he will live; if he does not get it, he will die.
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However, the object pronoun *zhī* 之 is also regularly omitted after *bù* 不, so other interpretations as to what distinguishes this negation from *bù* 不 have been put forward, e.g., *fú* 弗 as ‘to let not happen’ / ‘to prevent from happening’ or ‘to refuse to do’ (given that the action is under the volitional control of the subject).

1.4 *Wèi* 未

Wèi 未 is a verbal negation meaning ‘not yet’ or ‘never’. There regularly occurs an inversion of verb and object pronoun with this negation.

學詩乎曰未也	“Have [you] studied the Songs?” Answer: “Not yet.”
天下未之聞也	(One has never heard this:) This was never heard of in the world.
天下未之有也	There was never such a thing in the world.

1.5 *Fēi* 非

Fēi 非 might be a contraction of *bù* 不 and the (preclassical) copula *wéi* 唯 ‘to be’, and it is thus used as a negation of nominal sentences (“AB *yě* 也”): A *fēi* 非 B (*yě* 也) ‘A is not B’.

非吾徒也	[He] is not my follower!
此非迂言也	This is no nonsense!
解狐非子之讎邪？	Is Xiè Gū not your enemy?

Yet *fēi* 非 is frequently found in a preverbal or sentence-initial position and then acts as a sentential or clausal negative, meaning ‘It is not the case that...’, or ‘It is not as if...’.

悲在心也非在手也	Grief is in the mind; it is not as if it was in the hand.
君問可非問讎也	You asked whether he was all right. It is not as if you asked whether he was my enemy.

In sentence-initial or preverbal position, *fēi* 非 can also have a conditional meaning: ‘if not’, ‘unless’, ‘were it not for’.

非吳喪越越必喪吳	If it is not Wú that ruins Yuè, Yuè is sure to ruin Wú.
非聖人莫之能為	If not a sage, nobody can do it.

2. M/w negations

2.1 *Wú* 毋 and *wú* 無 / 无 (亡)

The characters *wú* 毋 and *wú* 無 / 无 were probably already homophonous in the late Zhou period (4-3rd c. B.C.) but seem to have represented different words initially. *Wú* 毋 has a prohibitive meaning, ‘do not’:

毋怠荒	Don’t be lazy!
毋妄言	No careless talk!

將軍毋失時，時間不容息。	General, don’t lose any time! The times allow for no rest.
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Wú 無 / 无 means ‘to have not’ or ‘there is no’:

越國無君	The state of Yuè was without a ruler.
民無常處	The people have no constant abode.

Wú 無 / 无 can also stand for the phonetically similar prohibitive negation that is properly written 毋:

王如之此則無望民之多於鄰國也	If you know this, then you should not expect that your people will be more numerous than in neighbouring countries.
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The character 亡 (*wáng*: ‘to disappear; to flee’) is often used in the same way as *wú* 無 / 无 and is in this meaning traditionally read *wú*, while some western sinologists prefer to maintain the reading *wáng*.

人皆有兄弟我獨亡	Every one has brothers, I alone have not.
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2.2 *Wù* 勿

Wù 勿 is a prohibitive negation: ‘do not’.

王欲行王政則勿毀之矣	If Your Majesty wishes to practice kingly government, then do not destroy it [= a ceremonial building].
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