

# Semantic Foundation and Evolution Mechanism of the “好不 X” (*haobu X*) Structure

Qian Wang<sup>1\*</sup>, Qinwei Zhou<sup>1\*</sup>, Di Zhang<sup>1</sup>, Jiajia Shi<sup>1</sup>, Siqian Cheng<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Hefei Information Technology University, Hefei 230000, Anhui Province, China

<sup>2</sup>Anhui Technical College of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering, Wuhu 241000, Anhui Province, China

\*Corresponding authors: Qinwei Zhou, 455145698@qq.com; Qian Wang, 779632596@qq.com

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**Abstract:** In Chinese, the “好不 X” (*haobu X*) structure expresses three types of meanings (negation, affirmation, and both affirmation-negation), where X exhibits differences in semantic symmetry. So far, no systematic explanatory theory has been proposed to account for these differences. Therefore, this paper presents and argues for an explanatory hypothesis that progresses through four stages: “很不 X” (*henbu X*) => “好不 X” (*haobu X*) (negation) => [ironic use] “好不 X” (*haobu X*) (affirmation) => expansion and obstruction of affirmative “好不” (*haobu*). Specifically, (1) the basis of the negation “好不 X” (*haobu X*) is attributed to “很不 X” (*henbu X*), and the semantic asymmetry of X (excluding negative words) is explained using politeness principles, irony, and the semantic valence of negation results; (2) the ironic use of the negation “好不 X” (*haobu X*) gives rise to the affirmation “好不 X” (*haobu X*); (3) the grammaticalization and expansion of the positive meaning of “好不” (*haobu*) extend to X, which cannot appear in the negative meaning “好不\_\_” structure (including words with opposite meanings and high polarity positive words). This explains the semantic symmetry of X in the positive meaning “好不 X” (*haobu X*) structure; (4) when the affirmation “好不” (*haobu*) expands to the negation “好不 X” (*haobu X*), it encounters both obstacles (X includes neutral and some positive words) and compatibility (X is some other positive words), thus explaining the semantic asymmetry of X in the affirmation-negation “好不 X” (*haobu X*) (i.e., X is positive words).

**Keywords:** *haobu X*; Semantic (a)symmetry of X; Politeness principle; Irony; Semantic valence; Adverb “hao”

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## 1. Background and literature review

The study of the “好不 X” (*haobu X*) structure in Chinese began in the 1980s<sup>[1,2]</sup>. Since then, this structure has been a focus of scholars' attention. The reason for this is related to the semantic complexity of the structure. “好不 X” (*haobu X*) can express both negation (e.g., “好不讲理” [*haobujiangli*] meaning “very unreasonable”) and affirmation (e.g., “好不霸道” [*haobubadao*] meaning “very domineering”), and even both negation and affirmation depending on the context, which is referred to as affirmation-negation (e.g., “好不高兴” [*haobugaoxing*] can mean both “very unhappy” and “very happy”). Furthermore, the words

that can enter these three types of structures show differences in symmetry and asymmetry from a semantic perspective: the words following the negation “好不” (*haobu*) are basically positive words, while the words following the affirmation “好不” (*haobu*) can be both negative and positive words<sup>[3]</sup>. The affirmation-negation “好不” (*haobu*) is similar to the negation “好不” (*haobu*), with the words following it also being basically positive<sup>[4]</sup>. So far, research on the “好不 X” (*haobu X*) structure has mainly covered the following aspects.

### 1.1. Diachronic investigation of the “好不 X” (*haobu X*) structure

Diachronic investigation can be divided into two levels: micro and macro. The micro-level investigation focuses on the earliest appearance of the negation and affirmation meanings of the “好不 X” (*haobu X*) structure. Based on the textual research of modern Chinese literature, Bin Yuan found that the “好不 X” (*haobu X*) structure first appeared in the *Dunhuang Bianwen Collection*, expressing a negation meaning. Therefore, he cautiously concluded that the negation “好不 X” (*haobu X*) originated no later than the late Tang and early Song dynasties (i.e., 9–10th centuries)<sup>[2]</sup>. This conclusion has basically become a consensus in the academic community. Regarding the emergence of the affirmation “好不 X” (*haobu X*), although there are disagreements, an overview of existing evidence suggests that it appeared in the 13th century. Bin Yuan, citing works such as *Journey to the West*, believed that the affirmation “好不 X” (*haobu X*) first appeared after the mid-Ming dynasty (16th century)<sup>[2]</sup>. Jinsong He, citing dialogue from Yuan dynasty plays, argued that the affirmation “好不 X” (*haobu X*) first appeared in the 14th century during the Yuan dynasty<sup>[5]</sup>. However, Qingzhang Meng disputed Jinsong He’s view, citing evidence that the dialogue in Yuan dynasty plays was added by Ming dynasty scholars. Using *Qinyuanchun: Farewell to Chen Qixin Returning to Changle* and *Compendium of the Five Lamps* as evidence, he dated the emergence of the affirmation “好不 X” (*haobu X*) to the end of the Southern Song dynasty in the 13th century (note: the Southern Song dynasty ended in 1279 AD). Xiaoyun Cao, citing *A Folk Narrative History of the Five Dynasties: The History of the Han Dynasty*, pushed the date of the affirmation “好不 X” (*haobu X*) back to before the fall of the Jin dynasty (1234 AD)<sup>[6]</sup>. Thus, based on existing evidence, we have clarified the chronological order and earliest appearance of the negation and affirmation meanings of “好不 X” (*haobu X*).

The macro-level investigation focuses on changes in the frequency of “好不 X” (*haobu X*) structure usage across different eras. The basic consensus in the academic community is that the development process of the “好不 X” (*haobu X*) structure includes a germination period (Tang and Five Dynasties), a development period (Song, Jin, and Yuan), a prosperity period (Ming and Qing), and a decline period (modern Chinese stage)<sup>[7,8]</sup>. However, there are disagreements regarding the relative dominance of the negation and affirmation meanings of “好不 X” (*haobu X*) in modern Chinese. Bin Yuan believed that the negation “好不 X” (*haobu X*) gradually fell out of use in modern Chinese, leaving only the affirmation “好不 X” (*haobu X*) in use<sup>[2]</sup>. Conversely, Haitao Zhang, based on statistical results from Peking University’s Modern Chinese Corpus (CCL) and the Media Language Text Corpus of Communication University of China, found that the negation “好不 X” (*haobu X*) accounts for 74% and 87% of the total “好不 X” (*haobu X*) structures in the two corpora, respectively<sup>[8]</sup>. Given this disagreement, we conducted a re-examination based on the CCL corpus. The statistical results show that among the 322 cases that match the “好不 X” (*haobu X*) structure, only 58 cases are negation “好不 X” (*haobu X*), accounting for only 18%. This indicates that the affirmation “好不 X” (*haobu X*) is used more frequently but is not exclusively used.

## 1.2. Explanation of the semantic symmetry and asymmetry of X in the structure of “好不 X” (*haobu X*)

As mentioned earlier, “好不 X” (*haobu X*) can express negation, affirmation, and even both affirmation and negation. However, when expressing these three types of semantics, X exhibits differences in semantic symmetry and asymmetry. The reasons for this are explained below.

Jiaxian Shen's explanation relies on the politeness principle and irony. He pointed out that when “好不 X” (*haobu X*) expresses negation, X is mostly a moral word (such as “reasonable” or “fair”), or a word that expresses people's expectations of behavioral results in social activities (such as “economical” or “worthwhile”) <sup>[9]</sup>. He refers to moral words and words that reflect people's expectations as “socially positive words.” He believed that people use words like “unreasonable” or “uneconomical” based on the politeness principle, rather than directly expressing meanings like “rude” or “wasteful.” When “好不 X” (*haobu X*) expresses affirmation, and X is a negative word, it is initially the result of the use of irony (such as “好不霸道” [*haobubadao*, very domineering]). As the use of irony increases, the grammaticalization of “好不” (*haobu*) improves, and it is finally applied to other positive words besides socially positive words. Jiaxian Shen did not clearly explain why X in “好不 X” (*haobu X*) with both affirmation and negation is a positive word. He only said, “This is because the aforementioned socially positive words do not have a clearly defined scope, especially words that express people's expectations of behavioral results. It is difficult to draw a clear line between them and other positive words” <sup>[9]</sup>. Moreover, X in “好不 X” (*haobu X*) with negation does not only include “socially positive words” but also neutral words (such as “好不一般” [*haobuyiban*, very unusual] can only express negation), which cannot be explained by the politeness principle.

While Lizhi Zou agreed with Jiaxian Shen's explanation of “好不 X” (*haobu X*) with negation, that it is a euphemistic expression used by speakers for politeness, he disagrees with Shen's explanation of “好不 X” (*haobu X*) with affirmation. Shen believed that there was first the ironic usage of “好不 (*haobu*) + negative words,” and then “好不” (*haobu*) gradually became grammaticalized (i.e., semantically equivalent to the adverb “very”) before being applied to positive words. However, Zou argued that the reason X in “好不 X” (*haobu X*) with affirmation can be both negative and positive words is due to the effect of irony; irony can be used for sarcasm by saying the opposite of what is meant (i.e., with negative words such as “好不蛮横” [*haobumanheng*, very rude]), or for humor by saying the opposite of what is expected (i.e., with positive words such as “好不热闹” [*haoburenao*, very lively]) <sup>[4,9]</sup>. Lizhi Zou also did not provide a convincing explanation for why X in “好不 X” (*haobu X*) with both affirmation and negation is a positive word. He only said, “The affirmation-negation form is derived from the affirmation form containing positive words, because the form containing negative words can only produce affirmation and not negation.” This seems to suggest that the affirmation meaning of “好不 X” (*haobu X*) (where X is a positive word) precedes its negation meaning, which is lacking in evidence and contradicts the historical evolution of “好不 X” (*haobu X*) where the negation meaning precedes the affirmation meaning.

Yi Dai believed that the reasons for the emergence of “好不 X” (*haobu X*) with affirmation meaning include not only the use of irony but also rhetorical questions and doubts, citing the following two examples as evidence:

(1) 黎岭天高，建溪雷吼，归好不知行路难？(The peaks of the Li Ridge rise high, the thunder roars over the Jian River, do you, returning home, not know the hardships of the journey?) (Jingguo Chen, *Qinyuanchun: Farewell to Chen Qixin Returning to Changle*)

(2) 通忽悟曰：“荣者自荣，谢者自谢。秋露春风，好不著便？(Tong suddenly had an epiphany

and said, “Those who flourish do so on their own, and those who wither do so as well. The autumn dew and the spring breeze—how could they not affect them accordingly?”) (Volume 14 of *Compendium of the Five Lamps*, Buddhist Monk Nifotong)

We believe that adding rhetorical questions or doubts as explanations does not have much significance because it does not contradict the explanation of irony. Let’s look at Bin Yuan’s (1984) explanation of example (3) <sup>[10]</sup>.

(3) 婆儿道：“你去见他便了，却如何在这里打转？”土地道：“若去见他，他那棍子好不重，他管你好歹就打哩！” (The old woman said, “You should go and see him, why are you wandering here?” The deity replied, “If I go to see him, his stick is so heavy. He will hit you regardless!”) <sup>[11]</sup>

Bin Yuan pointed out, “If we look at it from another perspective and try to add a question mark after ‘his stick is so heavy,’ it seems to make sense to interpret this sentence as irony (i.e., to see “好不” (*haobu*) as a negation). This phenomenon can inspire us: the affirmative form of “好不” (*haobu*) evolved from the negative form of “好不” (*haobu*) through the rhetorical device of irony <sup>[2]</sup>. Moreover, in example (2) above, the punctuation mark after “好不著便” (*haobuzhaobian*, not affected) is a period in the original sentence, not a question mark.

### 1.3. Meta-language negation and polarity interpretation of the stability of “好不 X” (*haobu X*) with affirmation meaning

Zi Yang and Xueming Wang explored the emergence and stability of “好不 X” (*haobu X*) with affirmation meaning from a construction perspective <sup>[12]</sup>. Firstly, they argued that “好不 X” (*haobu X*) with affirmation meaning is a result of meta-language negation. Taking “我好不喜欢你” (*wohaobuxihuanni*) as an example, they believe that the meaning of this sentence is based on “I don’t like you—I love you!” The difference between meta-language negation and conventional negation lies in that “不” (*bu*, no) in conventional negation negates the semantic lower limit, indicating “less than, lower than,” while meta-language negation negates the semantic upper limit, indicating that the actual degree is higher than what the degree word refers to <sup>[12]</sup>. Regarding the stability of “好不 X” (*haobu X*) with affirmation meaning, they only focus on the case where X is an adjective and believe that X must be a “gradable” adjective. The higher the polarity of the adjective, the higher the stability of “好不 X” (*haobu X*) with affirmation meaning. For example, “欣喜 – 开心 – 平静 – 伤心” (delighted–happy–calm–sad) forms a continuum expressing human emotions, with “delighted” and “sad” having the highest polarity. Therefore, the affirmation meanings of “好不欣喜” (very delighted) and “好不伤心” (very sad) are the most stable, while “happy” and “calm” have relatively lower polarity, so the stability of the affirmation meanings of “好不开心” (very unhappy) and “好不平静” (very uncalm) is lower.

However, this explanation relying on meta-language negation and polarity has limitations. Firstly, the explanation of meta-language negation violates the diachronic fact of the emergence of the affirmation meaning of “好不” (*haobu*), namely, the ironic usage of “好不” (*haobu*) with negation meaning <sup>[13]</sup>. Moreover, in terms of X being an adjective, “polarity” cannot perfectly explain “stability” because adjectives include not only polar adjectives but also non-polar adjectives, such as “hypocritical.” Although we can say “somewhat hypocritical,” this is just a euphemism and does not indicate that “hypocritical” is a polar adjective (see the discussion on “complementary antonyms” below); “hypocritical” is not in a graded system because “not hypocritical” means “honest.” We also know that “好不虚伪” (so hypocritical) only expresses affirmation meaning. Additionally, this study does not address the semantic symmetry and asymmetry

interpretations of X.

Based on existing research, the basic consensus reached on the structure of “好 不 X” (*haobu X*) includes: Firstly, the emergence of “好 不 X” (*haobu X*) with negation meaning preceded its affirmation meaning; secondly, the earliest mechanism for the generation of “好 不 X” (*haobu X*) with affirmation meaning was the use of irony; thirdly, in “好不 X” (*haobu X*) with negation meaning and “好不 X” (*haobu X*) with both affirmation and negation meanings, X exhibits semantic asymmetry, that is, X does not include negative words. On the contrary, X in “好 不 X” (*haobu X*) with affirmation meaning exhibits semantic symmetry, that is, it includes both positive and negative words. However, existing research has not proposed a systematic theory on the emergence and semantic evolution of “好不 X” (*haobu X*), making it difficult to fully explain the semantic symmetry and asymmetry of X in the “好不 X” (*haobu X*) structure. For example, X in “好不 X” (*haobu X*) with negation meaning not only includes the “socially positive words” mentioned by Jiaxian Shen but also neutral words (such as “好不平常” [very unusual]), which cannot be explained by the politeness principle. Another example is that although the use of irony in “好不 (*haobu*) + negative words” was the initial mechanism for generating “好不 X” (*haobu X*) with affirmation meaning, promoting the grammaticalization of “好不” (*haobu*) (i.e., affirmation meaning), why can this grammaticalized “好不” (*haobu*) be extended to certain positive words (such as “happy”) but not to other positive words (such as “reasonable”) and neutral words (such as “usual”)? In other words, although X in “好不 X” (*haobu X*) with affirmation meaning exhibits semantic symmetry, including both negative and positive words, this symmetry also implies restrictive conditions.

To fully explain the aforementioned issues, we propose and argue for a systematic theoretical hypothesis, namely, “很不 X” (*henbu X*) => “好不 X” (*haobu X*) (negation meaning) => [use of irony] “好不 X” (*haobu X*) (affirmation meaning) => expansion and resistance of “好不” (*haobu*) with affirmation meaning.

## 2. The negation meaning of “好不 X” (*haobu X*): Semantic foundation and asymmetry

The negation meaning of “好不 X” (*haobu X*) first appeared in the late Tang and early Song dynasties. Why did it emerge? Based on diachronic investigations, database statistics, and daily observations, we reasonably believe that the foundation for the emergence of the negation meaning of “好不 X” (*haobu X*) is “很不 X” (*henbu X*)<sup>[2]</sup>.

From a temporal perspective, “很不 X” (*henbu X*) preceded the negation meaning of “好不 X” (*haobu X*). For instance, the usage of “很不 X” (*henbu X*) can be found in *Huayang Guozhi* (Volume 1: Bazhi) by Dongjin historian Qu Chang, as seen in example (4).

(4) 但，黄土分布地面很宽，又都是一样平坦腴沃的，而文化发展的时间却很不一致。河东解池地区，大河绕于前，群山阻于后，山谷盘错，沮洳泻卤，甚不利于农业文化的发展，而乃偏偏最先成为孕育中华文化的核心地区。However, the loess is widely distributed on the ground, and it is all flat and fertile. Yet, the timing of cultural development is very inconsistent. The Hedong Jiechi region, with the great river winding in front and mountains blocking behind, has a complex landscape of valleys and marshy areas, which is very unfavorable for the development of agricultural culture. Nevertheless, it was precisely this region that first became the core area for nurturing Chinese culture.

As mentioned earlier, the negation meaning of “好不 X” (*haobu X*) generally excludes negative words in X. Does “很不 X” (*henbu X*) exhibit such a semantic feature in X? To answer this, we conducted a

statistical analysis of “很不” (*henbu*) usage cases in the Beijing Language and Culture University Chinese Corpus (BCC) and the Peking University Modern Chinese Corpus (CCL).

In the “Literature” module of BCC, there are 8,836 cases of “很不 X” (*henbu X*). Among them, X represents negative words in 1,119 cases, accounting for 12.7%. However, it is important to note that “很不 X” (*henbu X*) implicitly contains two structures: (1) 很 [不 X], where “不” and “X” are closely integrated, such as “很 [不错]”, “很 [不坏]”, “很 [不赖]”; and (2) 很 [不 [X]], such as “很 [不 [高兴]].” Therefore, although words like “错,” “坏,” and “赖” are negative in meaning, given their structure as “很 [不 X],” they should not be simply categorized as “X representing negative words.” If we exclude phrases like “很不错 / 坏 / 赖” (a total of 1,023 cases), the number of cases where X represents negative words is reduced to only 96, accounting for approximately 1.1%. Compared to “很不 X” (*henbu X*), “好不 X” (*haobu X*) generally consists of words with two or more syllables in X<sup>[13]</sup>. Considering this point, if we only consider cases where X has two or more syllables, there are 6,367 cases. Among these, there are only 11 cases (i.e., 很不寂寞<sup>[2]</sup>; 很不俗气<sup>[2]</sup>; 很不费事<sup>[2]</sup>; 很不费力<sup>[2]</sup>; 很不费劲<sup>[1]</sup>; 很不感冒<sup>[1]</sup>; 很不害臊<sup>[1]</sup>) where X represents negative words, accounting for only 0.17%.

In the CCL Modern Chinese Corpus, there are 15,738 cases of “很不 X” (*henbu X*). If we only consider cases where X has two or more syllables, there are 11,625 cases. Among these, X represents negative words in only 13 cases (i.e., 很不费钱<sup>[1]</sup>; 很不费劲<sup>[1]</sup>; 很不费事<sup>[1]</sup>; 很不含糊<sup>[1]</sup>; 很不渺小<sup>[1]</sup>; 很不感冒<sup>[2]</sup>; 很不糊涂<sup>[1]</sup>; 很不介意<sup>[1]</sup>; 很不心疼<sup>[1]</sup>; 很不在意<sup>[2]</sup>; 很不怕死<sup>[1]</sup>), accounting for only 0.11%.

From the statistical results above, it can be seen that it is rare for words with negative meanings to follow “很不” (*henbu*), which is consistent with Shuxiang Lu’s observation that if “很不” (*henbu*) is followed by a two-syllable word, these words are generally positive in meaning<sup>[14]</sup>. Furthermore, based on observations from the two corpora mentioned, words that cannot follow “好不” (*haobu*) to express negation also cannot follow “很不” (*henbu*). For example, negative words like “霸道” (*badao*, domineering), “蛮横” (*manheng*, rude), “放肆” (*fangsi*, unrestrained), “凶狠” (*xionghen*, fierce), “狼狈” (*langbei*, disheveled and embarrassed), “悲惨” (*beican*, tragic), “悲伤” (*beishang*, sad), “难堪” (*nankan*, embarrassing), “失望” (*shiwang*, disappointed), “沮丧” (*jusang*, depressed) cannot follow “好不” (*haobu*) to express negation, and similarly, we do not see them following “很不” (*henbu*). On the other hand, words that can follow “好不” (*haobu*) may not necessarily be able to follow the negative “好不” (*haobu*). For instance, words containing “好” such as “好听” (pleasant to hear) and “好受” (pleasant to feel) can follow “好不” (*haobu*) but not necessarily “好不” (*haobu*). Therefore, based on the semantic similarity of words following the negative “好不” (*haobu*) and “很不” (*henbu*), as well as the broader range of words that can be used with “很不” (*henbu*), it is reasonable to believe that the semantic foundation of the negative “好不” (*haobu*) is “很不” (*henbu*). As a result, the semantic asymmetry of the negative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) is closely related to the semantic asymmetry of “很不 X” (*henbu X*).

Before discussing the semantic asymmetry of X in “很不 X” (*henbu X*), three issues need to be clarified: Firstly, the scarcity of examples in the corpus that fit the pattern “很不 (*henbu*) + negative word” indicates that it is not a common usage. Secondly, X in “很不 X” (*henbu X*) is not limited to positive words but can also be neutral words without clear positive or negative connotations (e.g., “很不一样” [very different], “很不普通” [very unusual], “很不相同” [very dissimilar]). Thirdly, not all positive words can be used in the “很不 X” (*henbu X*) structure<sup>[14,15]</sup>.

So, why can X in “很不 X” (*henbu X*) only be a word with a positive meaning (or neutral word), but not a word with a negative meaning? Why can’t some positive words fill in the blank of X? Shuxiang Lv

believed that the reason X is a word with positive meaning is because “it may be very useful in rhetoric. For example, in general situations, ‘很不乐观’ (very not optimistic) is used as a ‘euphemism,’ while ‘很悲观’ (very pessimistic) is used less frequently, so it sounds heavier when used”<sup>[14]</sup>. This “euphemism” theory is consistent with the politeness principle that Jiaxian Shen relied on to explain why “好不” (*haobu*) is followed by socially commendatory words including moral words. However, as Shuxiang Lv acknowledged, this explanation is not universal<sup>[9]</sup>. For example, neutral words (such as “平常,” “一般,” etc.) are not suitable for this explanation. Xiaoming Xie and Yubo Wang explored the conditions for the establishment of the “很不\_\_” (*henbu\_\_*) structure based on Yuzhi Shi’s concepts of “quantitative” and “non-quantitative”<sup>[16]</sup>. They believe that X that can enter “很不\_\_” (*henbu\_\_*) must satisfy the necessary condition of being “non-quantitative” (i.e., having flexibility in quantity). Only by satisfying this condition, X can be modified by “不” (*bu*, no), and then possibly modified by “很” (*hen*, very). For example, “庄严” (*zhuangyan*, solemn) does not belong to non-quantitative words and cannot be modified by “不,” so it cannot enter the next round of being modified by “很.” Moreover, just because X can be modified by “不” does not mean that “不X” can necessarily be modified by “很”; only when the negative form “不X” also has a magnitude can it be modified by “很.” Based on Yuzhi Shi’s “positive magnitude” test, Xiaoming Xie and Yubo Wang introduced a formula similar to testing “negative magnitude”: “有点不X” => “很不X” => “非常不X” => “最不X” (somewhat not X => very not X => extremely not X => most not X)<sup>[17]</sup>. For example, the negative forms of “honest” and “civilized” (“not honest,” “not civilized”) both have magnitudes, so they can enter the “很不\_\_” structure; while the negative forms of “cunning” and “barbaric” (“not cunning,” “not barbaric”) do not have magnitudes, so they cannot enter the “很不\_\_” structure.

However, the aforementioned explanation seems to involve circular reasoning in determining “quantifiers” and “non-quantifiers,” which rely on our language experience. For instance, because we rarely or never say “很不庄严” (very not solemn), “庄严” is categorized as a quantifier. In fact, “庄严” means “solemn and serious” and exists within a magnitude system, with words like “solemn,” “serious,” and “formal” falling below it. We have also found the negative form of “庄严” — “不庄严” in the BCC corpus, such as “laughing is not solemn,” “neither beautiful nor solemn,” and “the demeanor is not solemn.” So, why can we say “not solemn” but not “very not solemn”?

We believe that to explain the semantic asymmetry of X in “很不X” (*henbu X*), we need to consider two aspects simultaneously: (1) The principle of politeness and the need for euphemism. This explanation applies to positive words (rather than neutral words) that can enter the “很不\_\_” structure (e.g., “very unreasonable”) and explains why negative words cannot enter this structure, as “when evaluating with speech acts, especially evaluating people’s social behavior, it is necessary to speak euphemistically about bad things and fully about good things.” (2) Whether the semantic valence of the concept resulting from negation is unitary. This is closely related to the two types of antonymous relationships between the original word and its negative form—complementary antonymy and graded antonymy.

The complementary antonymy includes i.e. and either this or that. Taking “honest” as an example, its semantic valence is “+” and can be represented as “honest<sup>+</sup>.” “Very” is an adverb that expresses “polarization” and requires the following word to be conceptually unit-priced. Therefore, we can say “very honest.” The negation of “honest” results in an antonym with a complementary relationship to “honest.” Whether this antonym is expressed as “dishonest” or another form, it is also unit-priced, but its semantic valence is “-,” so it can also be modified by “very,” i.e., “very dishonest.”

For graded antonymy, taking “solemn” as an example, its negation produces results that include both

positive valence concepts (e.g., formal<sup>+</sup>) and negative valence concepts (e.g., casual<sup>-</sup>, frivolous<sup>-</sup>). In other words, the concept resulting from the negation of “solemn” is not semantically unit-priced but rather “solemn<sup>±</sup>.” Therefore, it cannot be modified by the polarizing adverb “very,” and we cannot say “\*very not solemn.”

It is worth noting that just because a positive word exists within a graded system does not necessarily mean its negative form is not unit-priced and cannot be modified by “very.” It depends on the position of the positive word within the “+” polarity—if a positive word has a higher polarity, its negative form is less likely to be unit-priced (e.g., the negative form of “delighted” [“not delighted”] can include “happy<sup>+</sup>,” “sad<sup>-</sup>”), and thus less likely to be modified by “very” (\*very not delighted); conversely, if a positive word has a lower polarity, its negative form is more likely to be unit-priced (i.e., only includes “-”), and thus more likely to be modified by “very” (e.g., happy<sup>+</sup> => unhappy<sup>-</sup> => very unhappy<sup>-</sup>).

Based on the CCL and BCC corpora, we selected three sets of words (i.e., good-looking/beautiful; prosperous/flourishing; happy/delighted) and compared the probability of the negative forms of the two words in each set (one with lower polarity and the other with higher polarity) being modified by “very.” The results were fully consistent with our aforementioned analysis (**Table 1**).

**Table 1.** Results from CCL and BCC corpora

| Negative form    | Number of cases (CCL/BCC) | Proportion of “very + negative form” (CCL/BCC) |
|------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Not good-looking | 651/402                   | 38/651 = 5.8%; 38/402 = 9.4%                   |
| Not beautiful    | 69/29                     | 0/69 = 0%; 0/29 = 0%                           |
| Not prosperous   | 3606/163                  | 89/3606 = 2.5%; 13/163 = 7.9%                  |
| Not flourishing  | 22/1                      | 0/22 = 0%; 0/1 = 0%                            |
| Not happy        | 3235/3044                 | 458/3235 = 14.2%; 427/3044 = 14%               |
| Not delighted    | 18/1                      | 0/18 = 0%; 0/1 = 0%                            |

It can be seen that for positive words in a graded system, the lower the polarity, the closer the relationship between the word and its negative form is to a complementary relationship (i.e., either this or that, such as “unhappy” means “sad,” “angry,” etc.). In other words, the semantics of its negative form is more likely to be unit-priced and thus more likely to be modified by “very.”

Additionally, for neutral words that can enter the “很不\_\_” structure, they inherently do not have a “+” or “-” valence. However, these words express concepts related to “normality” and “universality.” We can refer to these neutral words as “benchmark words,” which are equivalent to the “0” mark on a ruler, serving as a starting point and standard for measurement. Their negative forms imply a deviation from this “benchmark,” and deviations naturally have degrees, thus they can be modified by “very,” such as “很不一样” (very different), “很不寻常” (very unusual), “很不习惯” (very unaccustomed), “很不一般” (very extraordinary), “很不简单” (very complicated), “很不相同” (very dissimilar).

In summary, we believe that the negative form “好不X” (*haobu X*) originates from “很不X” (*henbu X*). The semantic asymmetry of X in the latter is completely consistent with the semantic asymmetry of X in the former. Therefore, the explanation for the semantic asymmetry of X in “很不X” (*henbu X*) also applies to the semantic asymmetry of X in the negative form “好不X” (*haobu X*).



### 3. The generation mechanism of the affirmative meaning of “好不 X” (*haobu X*)

So far, Xiaoyun Cao has traced back the earliest appearance of the affirmative meaning of “好不 X” (*haobu X*)<sup>[6]</sup>. She found the following sentence (Example 5) in *A Folk Narrative History of the Five Dynasties: The History of the Han Dynasty*, a book written before the fall of the Jin Dynasty (AD 1234), in which “好不羞了面皮” (*haobuxiulemianpi*) undoubtedly carries an affirmative meaning.

(5) 当日刘知远与三娘子成亲之后，怎知他三娘子两个哥哥名做李洪信、李洪义的，终日肚闷，背后道：“咱爷娘得恁地无见识！将个妹妹嫁与一个事马的驱口，叫咱弟兄好不羞了面皮。”只管憎嫌他妹夫刘知远。After Liu Zhiyuan married the third daughter, how could he know that her two brothers, named Li Hongxin and Li Hongyi, were always upset and said behind his back, “Our parents are so ignorant! They married our sister to a horse groom, making us brothers feel so ashamed.” They just hated their brother-in-law Liu Zhiyuan.

Qingzhang Meng also found the usage of the affirmative meaning of “好不 X” (*haobu X*) in Jingguo Chen’s *Qinyuanchun: Farewell to Chen Qixin Returning to Changle and Compendium of the Five Lamps* from the late Southern Song Dynasty<sup>[18]</sup>.

(6) 过了梅花，纵有春风，不如早还。正燕泥日暖，草棉别路；莺朝烟淡，柳拂征鞍。黎岭天高，建溪雷吼，归好不知行路难？After the plum blossoms fade, even with the spring breeze, it is better to return early. When the swallow’s mud is warmed by the sun, and the grass covers the parting road; when the warbler sings in the morning mist, and the willows brush against the saddle. The peaks of the Li Ridge rise high, the thunder roars over the Jian River, do you, returning home, not know the hardships of the journey? (Jingguo Chen, *Qinyuanchun: Farewell to Chen Qixin Returning to Changle*)

(7) 通忽悟曰：“荣者自荣，谢者自谢。秋露春风，好不著便？” (Tong suddenly had an epiphany and said, “Those who flourish do so on their own, and those who wither do so as well. The autumn dew and the spring breeze—how could they not affect them accordingly?”) (Volume 14 of *Compendium of the Five Lamps*, Buddhist Monk Nifotong)

These earliest examples of the affirmative meaning of “好不 X” (*haobu X*) can be explained naturally as the irony of the negative meaning of “好不 X” (*haobu X*). As Bin Yuan said, “The affirmative form “好不” (*haobu*) originates from the negative form “好不” (*haobu*). Initially, it may have been an ironic expression of the negative form “好不” (*haobu*) in spoken language. As this ironic expression became more frequent, the meaning of “不” gradually became blurred, losing its negative function and attaching to the word “好.” Thus, “好不” (*haobu*) solidified into a language unit equivalent to an adverb”<sup>[2]</sup>. This explanation, which attributes the origin of the affirmative meaning of “好不 X” (*haobu X*) to the irony of the negative meaning of “好不 X” (*haobu X*), has gained relatively widespread acceptance<sup>[4,7-9]</sup>.

### 4. Grammaticalization, expansion, and obstruction of the affirmative meaning of “好不” (*haobu*)

Both Bin Yuan and Jiakuan Shen agreed that as the ironic expression of the negative meaning “好不 X” (*haobu X*) is used more frequently, the “不” in “好不 X” (*haobu X*) gradually becomes blurred, and the degree of grammaticalization of “好不” as a whole to express affirmation continues to increase and solidify<sup>[3,9]</sup>. Shen Jiakuan even proposed the following specific hypothesis: “This evolutionary process is likely to have first occurred with derogatory terms negated by “不,” and then expanded to other words besides moral terms, such as “好不热闹” (very lively)”<sup>[9]</sup>. However, the affirmative meaning of “好不” does not extend to all words besides moral terms, which has not been explained so far.

We believe that in the process of expansion, the affirmative meaning of “好不” encounters both words that cannot enter the negative meaning “好不\_\_” structure and words that are allowed to enter this structure. Since the words that cannot enter this structure mainly include words with negative meanings (such as “霸道”) and words with highly polar positive meanings (such as “欣喜”), and the affirmative meaning of “好不” not only indicates a very high degree but also expresses a strong exclamation, it is naturally accepted by these two types of words. However, for words that have already entered the negative meaning “好不\_\_” structure, the expansion of the affirmative meaning “好不” is not always smooth, and there are also obstacles. So, under what circumstances will the negative meaning “好不X” “resist” the encroachment of the affirmative meaning “好不”? What are the reasons?

First, in the negative expression “好不X,” the frequency of using the negative form of X (such as “不X,” “没X,” “未X,” “不能X,” etc.) is much higher than that of the affirmative form of X. In this case, either “[不X]” is an indivisible unit, or the ratio of “[不X]” (and other negative forms) appearing is much higher than that of “[X].” Therefore, the “不” in “[不X]” cannot (or is not inclined to) separate from it and combine with “好” to form “好不.” The foundation of “[好不]” as a unit does not exist. Consequently, the affirmative meaning of “好不” cannot expand to this type of negative expression “好不X.” For example: “好不屑一顾、好不伦不类、好不是滋味、好不识抬举、好不可理喻、好不耐烦、好不起眼、好不像话、好不对劲、好不要脸、好不合时宜、好不得要领、好不近人情、好不服气、好不成器、好不合逻辑、好不入流” (respectively, very dismissive, very strange/inappropriate, very unpleasant, very unappreciative, very unreasonable, very impatient, very unnoticeable, very outrageous, very abnormal, very shameless, very inappropriate, missing the point, very inconsiderate, very resentful, very useless, very illogical, very mediocre).

Based on the CCL and BCC corpora, we conducted a statistical analysis on the proportion of negative forms such as “[不X]” among these expressions mentioned above, and the results showed that the proportion of negative forms is very high (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Results of the proportion of negative forms

| “X” (number of cases) (CCL/BCC) | “不X” (number of cases/proportion) (CCL/BCC) | Inclusion of other negative forms of X proportion (CCL/BCC) |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| 屑一顾 (701/441)                   | 不屑一顾 (701/100%; 441/100%)                   | 100% /100%                                                  |
| 伦不类 (408/183)                   | 不伦不类 (408/100%; 183/100%)                   | 100% /100%                                                  |
| 是滋味 (596/218)                   | 不是滋味 (590/99%; 216/99%)                     | 100% /100%                                                  |
| 识抬举 (75/68)                     | 不识抬举 (74/99%; 67/99%)                       | 99% /99%                                                    |
| 可理喻 (175/142)                   | 不可理喻 (152/87%; 142/100%)                    | 98% /100%                                                   |
| 耐烦 (2519/3014)                  | 不耐烦 (2438/97%; 2926/97%)                    | 97% /98%                                                    |
| 起眼 (1211/334)                   | 不起眼 (1124/93%; 298/89%)                     | 98% /96%                                                    |
| 像话 (586/457)                    | 不像话 (470/80%; 429/94%)                      | 94% /97%                                                    |
| 对劲 (697/605)                    | 不对劲 (585/84%; 478/80%)                      | 96% /94%                                                    |
| 要脸 (544/592)                    | 不要脸 (496/91%; 556/94%)                      | 91% /94%                                                    |
| 合时宜 (813/394)                   | 不合时宜 (765/94%; 372/94%)                     | 94% /96%                                                    |
| 得要领 (258/159)                   | 不得要领 (233/90%; 131/82%)                     | 95% /85%                                                    |
| 近人情 (263/208)                   | 不近人情 (244/93%; 184/88%)                     | 93% /89%                                                    |

**Table 1 (Continued)**

| “X” (number of cases) (CCL/BCC) | “不 X” (number of cases/proportion) (CCL/BCC) | Inclusion of other negative forms of X proportion (CCL/BCC) |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| 服气 (1235/349)                   | 不服气 (973/75%; 312/89%)                       | 84% /93%                                                    |
| 成器 (168/77)                     | 不成器 (121/72%; 61/79%)                        | 81% /83%                                                    |
| 合逻辑 (198/93)                    | 不合逻辑 (158/80%; 71/76%)                       | 80% /82%                                                    |
| 入流 (132/36)                     | 不入流 (90/68%; 32/89%)                         | 82% /94%                                                    |

Secondly, the X in the negative expression “好 不 X” (*haobu X*) refers to the socially evaluative commendatory terms described by Jiaxian Shen<sup>[9]</sup>. We agree with Shen’s explanation that “好不 + socially evaluative commendatory terms” can only express a negative meaning, utilizing the politeness principle and the asymmetry of irony. According to the politeness principle, “when evaluating with words, especially when evaluating people’s social behaviors, it is more tactful to speak of bad things and more fully to speak of good things. Generally, criticizing someone’s shortcomings is an act that can harm their dignity, so it is not appropriate to directly use derogatory terms, and thus “不” (not) is used with corresponding commendatory terms as a substitute.” Additionally, “as a rhetorical device, irony often uses positive words to express negative meanings.” Therefore, in words like “好不讲理” (literally “very unreasonable”), “not reasonable” is used to euphemistically express “domineering”; “not reasonable” is already a derogatory term, hence, according to the asymmetry of irony’s application, it is unlikely to apply irony to a derogatory term to express a commendatory meaning. If we want to express that someone is “reasonable,” we would use “(very) reasonable” to positively and fully express it.

Thirdly, the X in the negative expression “好不 X” (*haobu X*) refers to the aforementioned “benchmark words” (such as “一样” (same), “平常” (ordinary), “普通” (common), “习惯” (habitual), “相同” (identical), etc.). We know that the affirmative “好不” expresses a meaning equivalent to the exclamation adverb “好” (very), and the aforementioned “benchmark words” express concepts that are “not worth exclaiming over.” Only deviations from the “benchmark” are “worth exclaiming over.” Therefore, adding “好不” before these “benchmark words” only expresses exclamation over deviations from the “benchmark” (i.e., negative meanings).

Fourthly, if the X in the negative expression “好 不 X” cannot (or rarely) be modified by the exclamation adverb “好” (very), then “好不 X” can only express a negative meaning and cannot express an affirmative meaning. This principle has a relatively broad explanatory scope, covering not only some “benchmark words” and socially evaluative commendatory terms but also other commendatory terms and neutral words. Taking the following words as examples, these words can all be modified by “好 不” to express a negative meaning but cannot express an affirmative meaning. Based on the CCL and BCC corpora, we found that examples of these words being modified by the exclamation adverb “好” (very) are extremely rare, as shown in **Table 3**.

**Table 3.** “好” + X examples

| X                             | “好” + X (number of examples) (CCL/BCC) | X               | “好” + X (number of examples) (CCL/BCC) |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------------|
| 情愿 (Willing)                  | 0/0                                    | 乐意 (Glad)       | 0/0                                    |
| 争气 (Striving to do better)    | 0/0                                    | 讲理 (Reasonable) | 0/0                                    |
| 礼貌 (Polite)                   | 0/0                                    | 公平 (Fair)       | 1/0                                    |
| 晓事 (Understanding)            | 0/0                                    | 仗义 (Upright)    | 0/0                                    |
| 安分 (Law-abiding)              | 0/0                                    | 知足 (Content)    | 0/0                                    |
| 踏实 (Steady and dependable)    | 0/0                                    | 满意 (Satisfied)  | 0/0                                    |
| 值钱 (Valuable)                 | 0/0                                    | 安全 (Safe)       | 0/2                                    |
| 实惠 (Practical and economical) | 0/0                                    | 习惯 (Habitual)   | 0/0                                    |
| 规范 (Standardized)             | 0/0                                    | 平静 (Peaceful)   | 0/1                                    |
| 一样 (Same)                     | 0/0                                    | 相同 (Identical)  | 0/0                                    |
| 普通 (Ordinary)                 | 0/0                                    | 一般 (Ordinary)   | 2/0                                    |

It should be noted that for socially evaluative commendatory terms, some words may be modified by the exclamation adverb “好” (such as “好懂事” [very sensible], but “好不懂事” only expresses a negative meaning). In such cases, of course, the fourth principle alone cannot explain it, and we still need to rely on the politeness principle and the asymmetry of irony to explain.

In contrast to the words covered by the fourth principle, the X in the negative expression “好不 X” (*haobu X*) can be widely modified by the exclamation adverb “好” (such as “舒服” [comfortable], “高兴” [happy], “自在” [at ease]). In this situation, the negative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) is compatible with the expansion of the affirmative “好不”; expressions like “好不舒服,” “不高兴,” “好不自在” can express both negative and affirmative meanings. Since the X in the negative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) cannot be a word with a negative meaning, and words like “benchmark words” that have no clear commendatory or derogatory connotations do not accept the encroachment of the affirmative “好不” therefore, the X in the “好不 X” (*haobu X*) that has both affirmative and negative meanings can only cover positive words. This explains the semantic asymmetry of X in the “好不 X” (*haobu X*) with both affirmative and negative meanings.

It is worth pointing out that the phrase “好不容易” (*haoburongyi*) which is often seen as a special case, because its affirmative form “好容易” also often expresses a negative meaning<sup>[9,19-21]</sup>. Why can't “好不容易” express an affirmative meaning? “容易” is not a socially evaluative adjective as mentioned above, nor is it a “benchmark word.” Moreover, “容易” is not inseparable from the modifier “不” and it can also be modified by the adverb “好” (“好容易”). According to the criteria mentioned above, “好不容易” should seemingly be able to express an affirmative meaning. However, we know that “好容易” has two meanings (i.e., “very difficult” and “very easy”). When expressing the former meaning, it serves as an adverbial, modifying a VP (such as “好容易才弄到一张票” meaning “it was very difficult to get a ticket”), while the latter can only serve as a predicate or an adverbial modifying a bare verb (such as “这道题目好容易 [做]” meaning “this question is very easy [to do]”)<sup>[19]</sup>. We searched for more than 2,500 examples of “好不容易” in the CCL corpus, and almost all of them serve as adverbials (a few serve as complements, such as “这篇文

章写得好不容易” meaning “this article was written with great difficulty”). Although we can say “好容易,” the syntactic component that “好容易” actually expresses when meaning “很容易” is different from the syntactic component that “好不容易” serves. In other words, if “好不容易” also expressed an affirmative meaning and served as an adverbial modifying a VP, it would contradict the existing negative “好容易” that can serve the same syntactic component. That is, the negative “好容易” serving as an adverbial prevents the affirmative “好不” from encroaching on the negative “好不容易.”

## 5. Conclusion

So far, research has clarified the diachronic sequence of the emergence of the negative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) and the affirmative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) recognizing that “好不 X” (*haobu X*) can express three types of semantics: negative, affirmative, and both affirmative and negative. Moreover, it has been recognized that the X in negative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) and both affirmative and negative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) mainly covers positive words, while the X in affirmative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) includes both negative and positive words. However, there has not been a comprehensive and systematic explanation for the semantic symmetry (i.e., X in affirmative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) includes both positive and negative words) and asymmetry (i.e., X in negative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) and both affirmative and negative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) mainly covers positive words) of X.

To address this, we propose and argue for a comprehensive and systematic explanatory model: “很不 X” => “好不 X” (negative) => [ironic pragmatics] “好不 X” (affirmative) => expansion and resistance of the grammaticalization of “好不.” Based on diachronic investigations, database statistics, and daily observations, we believe that the negative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) emerged from “很不 X” (*henbu X*) and the semantic asymmetry of X in negative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) originates from the semantic asymmetry of X in “很不 X” (*henbu X*). The semantic asymmetry of X can be explained by the politeness principle, the asymmetry of irony application, and whether the concept generated by negation has semantic monovalency. Furthermore, we argue that X in negative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) includes not only positive words but also some neutral words without clear commendatory or derogatory connotations. This means that the semantic asymmetry of X in negative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) should be more accurately described as “X does not include negative words.” The ironic usage of negative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) led to the emergence and grammaticalization of affirmative “好不.” Subsequently, affirmative “好不” began to expand, targeting words that were not accepted by negative “好不,” namely negative words and highly polar positive words. This explains the semantic symmetry of X in affirmative “好不 X” (*haobu X*). However, words already accepted by negative “好不” (i.e., some positive words and neutral words) do not uniformly accept the expansion of affirmative “好不.” Therefore, we have summarized four criteria for negative “好不\_\_” to resist the expansion of affirmative “好不”: Firstly, when the frequency of various negative forms of X in negative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) is much higher than that of the affirmative form of X (i.e., X), affirmative “好不” cannot invade. This is because, in this case, [不 X] is almost an indivisible unit, or “不” is not inclined to be separated from X. Therefore, the probability of “不” in [不 X] breaking away and forming “好不” with “好” is low, making it difficult for [好不] to exist as a unit. Secondly, when X in negative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) is a socially evaluative commendatory term, the politeness principle and the asymmetry of irony application prevent the encroachment of affirmative “好不.” Thirdly, when X in negative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) is a “benchmark word” such as “一样” (same), “相同” (identical), “平常” (ordinary), 一

般 (usual), etc., affirmative “好不” also finds it difficult to encroach. This is because “benchmark words” express concepts that we are accustomed to, and it is extremely rare to modify them with the exclamation adverb “好” (equivalent to affirmative “好不”). Only deviations from the “benchmark” are worth exclaiming over, so “好不” + benchmark words can only express negation. Fourthly, if X in negative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) cannot (or rarely) be modified by the exclamation adverb “好,” then “好不” in “好不 X” (*haobu X*) naturally finds it difficult to express affirmation (i.e., equivalent to the exclamation adverb “好”). Therefore, affirmative “好不” finds it difficult to encroach on this type of X. These four criteria work simultaneously. Since X in negative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) includes positive words and neutral words, and neutral words resist the encroachment of affirmative “好不,” the target of encroachment of affirmative “好不” can only be some of the positive words. This explains why X in both affirmative and negative “好不 X” (*haobu X*) can only be positive words.

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