

## Original Paper

# An Offensive Pragmatic Analysis of “不然呢” in Spoken Chinese

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### Abstract

*This article takes real cases as the starting point to explore the reasons why “不然呢” leads to impolite feelings. Firstly, the pragmatic function and historical origin of the relationship between “不然呢” and “不然” are discovered. Then, by comparing “你说呢” and “不然呢” horizontally in the same context, it is concluded that in addition to the language structure of “不然呢” itself, offensive speech acts in conversation are influenced by factors such as the social identity of both parties, kinship, and language sensitivity of the recipient. Finally, it was found that “不然呢” has a trend of being widely used in spoken language, with its meaning becoming blurred and its function in expressing emotions and tones greatly strengthened.*

### Keywords

“不然呢”, What do you say, Pragmatic Analysis of Verbal Offense

### 1. Introduction

In daily life, harmonious interpersonal relationships can be established through appropriate verbal behavior, and sometimes inappropriate verbal behavior can cause the other party's unhappiness and make them feel offended. Offensive words often occur in daily life. The author conducted a literature search on CNKI using the keyword “不然呢” and found that there were no articles specifically discussing this topic.

Offensive refers to the impolite language or behavior that offends the other party. Verbal offending can make the listener feel uncomfortable and is an impolite speech act. This speech act may be unintentional, the speaker has no intention of offending, and the recipient may feel impolite. Shen (2010) pointed out that offensive speech act refers to the intentional or unintentional threat, derogation, or infringement of the listener's personality, prestige, reputation, views, etc. by the speaker's words, which objectively causes displeasure or psychological harm to the listener. It is a conflicting speech act.

Verbal offenses can be divided into unintentional and intentional offenses, with insults, sarcasm, teasing, and complaints, questioning, questioning, interruptions, corrections, etc., which may constitute offensive speech acts.

The corpus involved in this article includes real-life dialogues, real corpus from social media platforms such as Weibo, and corpus from literary and film works. Through a questionnaire survey, the acceptance level of “你说呢” and “不然呢” among 20 Chinese international education students in the same context was calculated. At the same time, interviews were used to record the reasons why some respondents felt offended by “你说呢” or “不然呢”. Finally, the principles of pragmatics and discourse analysis methods are used to explore the pragmatic function of “不然呢” from the corpus.

## 2. The Source and Pragmatic Function of “不然呢”

### 2.1 “不然”

“不然呢” has two parts of speech: adjectives and conjunctions. The use of “不然呢” a conjunction in modern Chinese is very frequent. The adjective “不然” indicates a negative meaning. The two most commonly used definitions of “不然” in modern Chinese are hypothetical meaning and selective meaning

Wang (2018) stated that “不然呢” undergoes a process of evolving from a phrase to a notional word. After a long period of grammaticalization, the lexical meaning gradually disappears and the grammatical meaning continues to strengthen, but it is still in the process of grammaticalization. The negative meaning of “不” and the meaning of “然” still exist, and can also refer back to the content mentioned above.

### 2.2 “不然呢”

In modern Chinese, the co-occurrence and combination of “不然” and the modal particle “呢” form a new form - “不然呢”, which literally means not like this. However, in practical communication, it often expresses the opposite meaning to the literal meaning, that is, if not like this, what else can it be? The question itself is also a form of negation, using double negation to express affirmation, in order to strongly affirm the questioner’s question.

Wang (2008) searched the CCL corpus and found that “不然呢” first appeared in the Qing Dynasty’s “Twenty Years of Witnessing the Strange Phenomenon”.

- (1) “所以他要望补缺，只好叫他再等几年的了。不然呢，差事总还可以求得一个，谁知他去年.....记大过三次.....”

The phrase “不然呢” in the corpus of the Qing Dynasty is located at the front of the response turn and appears in the form of a clause, with subsequent content. At this point, “不然呢” and “不然” can be equated in meaning.

But “不然呢” has an additional modal particle “呢”, and the meaning of “呢” is very complex (there is no consensus in the academic community). Based on the content of its collocation and the context it is in, emotions will change. Therefore, “不然呢” has more tension in emotional expression, enhancing

helplessness towards what has already happened, as well as feelings of regret, regret, and regret for not being able to achieve the latter. In short, “不然呢” is not a simple addition of the conjunction “不然” and the modal particle “呢”, and its rich meaning is closely related to the specific communicative context.

The phrase “不然呢” in modern Chinese is often used in dialogue as a response sentence, which reflects the beginning of the turn and expresses “it’s what you said on the opposite side”. The tone emphasizes a sense of helplessness and asking questions knowingly.

For example:

- (2) 海轶被她戳穿故事真相后, 反而落落大方的说: “不然呢? 今天在场的几个人, 还会有谁看起来比我更蠢呢?” (瞬间倾城《当老牛遇见嫩草》)

Alternatively, simply form a separate sentence to highlight the speaker’s impatience and intention to end or switch turns. For example:

- (3) “仙人也有办不到的事情, 才如此说吗” 姜尚望他, 他点头, “不然呢?” (澄凜《狂然封神》)

The above corpus mainly comes from written language, and the use of “不然呢” does not make people feel impolite.

Otherwise, after transitioning from written to spoken language, there will be some added pragmatic color. As a small sentence form, “不然呢” has gradually increased in frequency in oral use in recent years. It is a non interrogative sentence form + “呢” interrogative sentence, but it does not mean asking. Generally, the listener does not need to answer, but rather uses the interrogative sentence form to express rhetorical questions, playing an emphasizing role.

The biggest difference in form between “不然” and “不然呢” mentioned in the above content is the addition of a “呢”. In related research on sentence completion, modal particles have a sentence completion function. Therefore, “不然呢” can also be used as a separate sentence to answer the question. Qi (2002) concluded on the basis of examining real language materials that the most basic meaning of “呢” is to express the interrogative tone, and non-interrogative meanings are developed on this basis. The meaning of expressing non questioning can be divided into expressing rhetorical questions and expressing questioning. The “不然呢” and “呢” mainly enhance the rhetorical and questioning tone.

1. Interrogative tone:

- (4) 吴京在接受晨报记者专访时感慨: “人们总问我为什么不放弃, 我说不然呢, 放弃等于把理想和精神全部放弃了。……”
- (5) 至多在看书时被哭声吵到, 抬头看上一眼, 了解是什么情况, 重新把头低下去, 尽量把自己的注意力集中到书本上去。不然呢? 难不成, 我还顶着这一把年纪, 冲着人家一个吃奶的娃娃骂回去?

The use of double negation to affirm the correctness of “然” in two “不然呢” places serves as an emphasis, both of which are accompanied by subsequent content as supplementary explanations for “然”.

## 2. Question tone:

(6) 当了妈妈再看《唐山大地震》，你们能理解李元妮为了给婆婆家留个香火二最终选择救儿子吗？可是不然呢？救女儿？这个问题太虐心了！（人民网）

“不然呢” here expresses doubt and a helpless choice. From the above corpus, there is no impolite tendency to say “不然呢”, but rather to express the speaker’s helpless emotions.

### 2.3 “不然呢” and “不然”

The meaning of “不然呢” mainly comes from “不然”. Wang (2018) pointed out that “不然” has hypothetical meaning, selective meaning, suggestion meaning, and awakening meaning. And “不然呢” mainly reflects two types of meanings from the corpus: hypothetical and selective, mainly based on hypothetical meanings.

In the dialogue, “不然呢” is used as an independent response sentence, emphasizing agreement with the speaker’s content and expressing the psychological state of “what else can we do if it’s not like this”. Compared to “不然”, “不然呢” is more of a question sentence. “不然呢” mainly appears in spoken language, as it is a rhetorical form that serves as an emphasis and expresses helpless emotions.

## 3. “不然呢” and “你说呢”

### 3.1 The Pragmatic Function of “不然呢”

Using “不然呢” in a conversation is actually affirming the other person’s words in the form of a rhetorical question. Similar expressions include “你说呢？”

(7) 如情侣之间对话

A: 你是爱我的对吗？

B: 不然呢？/你说呢？

“你说呢” is frequently used in Chinese oral communication. The specific pragmatic function depends on the situation. Speakers can use discourse markers to express their attitudes and emotions. It can also appear separately in the conversation.

Yu (2014) used real conversations in daily life and corpus from film and television novels to study the discourse marker “你说呢” and summarized four pragmatic functions of “你说呢”, namely seeking opinions, confirming propositions, implicit negation, and moderation markers.

### 1. Inquiry function

(8) A: 这件衣服挺好看的，你说呢？

B: 好看是好看，就是有点贵，你说呢？

A: 那我们再逛逛。

“你说呢” is a very obvious interactive marker, which uses an explicit way to seek the opinions of the listener and ask them to express their opinions. In this mode, the speaker uses “你说呢” to express, minimizing the obstacles that the listener needs to understand. The listener can understand the communicative intention without excessive reasoning, ensuring the normal progress of the communicative turn.

## 2. Proposition confirmation

(9) 小桔：你爱我吗？

王毅：你说呢？（电影《我爱你》）

The protagonist, Xiao Ju, who has been traumatized, lacks a sense of security, and hopes that the male protagonist Wang Yi can personally say “I love you”. However, the male protagonist is a reserved person who feels that saying “I love you” directly is too straightforward and embarrassing. Therefore, answering “你说呢” implicitly and tactfully expresses a positive attitude towards Xiao Ju’s question. Avoiding embarrassment and making the other person understand their attitude.

In terms of functional use, “不然呢” and “你说呢” have similarities and differences, both of which can play a role in confirming propositions, expressing a very positive attitude towards the stated proposition. It is equivalent to saying, “does this still need to be asked?” and “does that still need to be asked”, without causing any offense. But in certain contexts, there may be a tone of questioning and blame, expressing anger and dissatisfaction, which can cause the recipient to lose face and feel offended.

## 3. Implied Negative Function

On the level of language expression, there is no negative form, but the content is negative. The negative expression is implicit and tactful. The implicit negation of “你说呢” is different, as the speaker can indirectly and tactfully express the opposite viewpoint. Following the principle of politeness, maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships and avoiding hurting the other party’s face.

## 4. Relaxation markers

The speaker weakens the driving force of language by using a questioning “你说呢”, avoids aggressive tone, promotes smooth communication, and maintains the positive image of the speaker.

Summary: When “你说呢” is placed in the question sentence of a turn, it has the function of inquiring and easing the tone, and when placed in the answer sentence of a turn, it has the function of expressing affirmative and negative propositions.

### 3.2 Comparison and Analysis of Offensive Levels between “不然呢” and “你说呢”

Returning to the initial example, let’s try:

A：你们是来参加运动会的吗？      A：你们是来参加运动会的吗？

B：不然呢？      B：你说呢？

“不然呢” and “你说呢” have the same implicit behavior here, and in the context of Q&A, there is also a way to express affirmation through rhetorical questions. The implicit meaning is “not to participate in the sports meet, what else can we do”. Passing out the impatience of the respondent towards the questioner’s conscious questioning in emotional communication. After the recipient understands the implicit meaning of “不然呢” in this context, they may feel embarrassed and think that the other person is impolite, and then remain silent in response, indicating that the recipient believes that “不然呢” has offended them.

## 1. Survey results

Do you feel offended when using “不然呢” or “你说呢” as answers in this context? If so, which one is

more offensive? Through an online survey of 20 teachers and classmates majoring in Chinese international education, their language perception was investigated. Among them, 19 respondents reported feeling uncomfortable in both cases, with 15 believing that “不然呢” was more uncomfortable, while 4 respondents believed that “你说呢” was more uncomfortable. Only one student believed that neither of them was offensive. In addition, some classmates were interviewed to discuss their feelings about “不然呢” and “你说呢” and to analyze the reasons for their unhappiness.

## 2. The reason why “不然呢” is more offensive than “你说呢”

When meeting for the first time and both parties are not familiar with each other, using “不然呢” or “你说呢” when answering questions can lead to awkward situations.

In terms of language structure, “不然呢” contains two negative elements, which allow for less room for turning and a more singular meaning. The negative word “不” and the question “吗” enhance the rhetorical tone, and in spoken language, it serves as a reply without any subsequent content, making it easy for the other party to feel impolite.

“你说呢” Has fewer negative elements, a stronger tone of inquiry, more euphemism, and richer semantics.

Compared to the affirmative form, negation is less popular in pragmatics. From the perspective of information quantity, it means that there is no equivalent affirmative sentence that provides a large amount of information, which violates the quantity criterion in conversation cooperation. Therefore, there are many phenomena of implicit negation in daily communication. Otherwise, such direct or explicit negation provides less information, resulting in less space for pragmatic inference and compressing the room for discourse maneuver, which is not conducive to adhering to the politeness principle in language communication.

## 3. Factors affecting the use of “不然呢”

The following 12 corpora are all from daily monologues of Weibo netizens, involving relationships between superiors and subordinates, elders and juniors, peers, colleagues, classmates, couples, relatives, and drivers and passengers.

- 1) 领导：怎么上班第一天就困成这样？  
我：....（不然呢？）
- 2) 那天化了妆见我妈妈的朋友，他说哇，你今天特别漂亮，我狠狠地点点头：“对呀，但是我平时也很漂亮呀”  
表姐：你脸皮也太厚了！  
我：.....（不然呢？回他一句，叔叔你比较漂亮吗？当然是实话实说呀！
- 3) 六点准时下班，隔老远的同事大声喊道：“你下班啦？”  
我：啊.....（不然呢，不然呢？）
- 4) 科室一个大哥在朋友圈评论我：“只要不加班，我必卡点下班点走。”  
我：嗯...（不然呢？又没有加班费！）
- 5) 真的好无语。被人质问凭什么天天去图书馆学习的人看到好书的概率要更高？

我：.....

（不然呢？躺在宿舍里，好书从天而降？）

6) 姑姑：你爸呢？

侄女：在打麻将呢。

姑姑：糖尿病这么严重了，还打麻将，心可真大呀。

侄女心想，不然呢，要去住院吗？

7) 我不爱吃苹果。上个月领导送了我一箱苹果，我在办公室分掉了。今天党支部发了一箱苹果，看着是很好的苹果，于是寄回家里了，寄完苹果走进办公室，同事问我：“你就寄走了？”我说“不然呢”

8) A：今年跨年还是一个人吗？

B：不然呢？还能变成一条狗？

9) A：“我不给你打电话你硬是不给我打。”

B：“对呀，不然呢？”

10) A：“你们南京的牛肉锅贴都是甜的！”

B：（一脸诧异茫然）啊，不然呢？

11) 坐了一个黑车到机场，那个车疯狂变道，速度很快，在车流中窜来窜去，我习惯性拉紧扶手。

司机：你是不是有点害怕

我：.....（不然呢，为什么坐你车害怕你心里没点数吗？）

12) 室友A一直在宿舍看到B回来了，想打个招呼，

A：你回来啦？

B：不然呢？（可能心情不好）

From the position of the turn, “不然呢” is always in the position of the answer sentence in the turn. Among the 12 corpora, due to the identity and status of both parties involved in the conversation, as well as the polite mentality of maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships, 7 of the responses included “不然呢” not directly responding in person, but venting on social media, indicating that in the majority of people’s language perception, “不然呢” may cause impolite language consequences and should be avoided in interpersonal communication as much as possible. It is found from Weibo corpus that “不然呢” is rarely used in communication with individuals with social identity and seniority higher than oneself. Between peers, impolite language behaviors such as “不然呢” may occur when there are emotional issues. In addition, whether “不然呢” will lead to impolite speech behavior is closely related to the intimacy and tone of the conversation between the two parties.

#### 4. Conclusion

This article takes the comparative analysis of “不然呢” and “你说呢” as the vertical axis, and the comparison of “不然呢” and “你说呢” as the horizontal axis, striving to express the rich meaning of “不然呢”. In turn, as a response sentence, “不然呢” follows the cooperative principle and takes care of

the questioner's question, but in some contexts, intentionally or unintentionally violates the politeness psychology of the conversation, forming impolite speech acts. In the initial sentence, more expression of a helpless emotion or self-deprecation is used to strengthen the tone.

Otherwise, there is a constant semantic meaning, which is what else can I do if it's not like this. When this constant semantic interacts with the specific context, it will generate pragmatic functions such as questioning, affirmative propositions, closing turns, and emotions such as arrogance, helplessness, and impatience. In addition, it was found that the occurrence of offensive speech acts in conversation is influenced by factors such as the identity of both parties, familiarity, and language sensitivity of the recipient.

Through a preliminary listing of both diachronic and synchronic written and oral corpora, it was found that the lexical meaning of “不然呢” is constantly weakening, and “不然呢” has shown a trend of generalization in oral language, with its meaning becoming blurred and its function of expressing emotions and tones greatly strengthened. With the increasing frequency of use, “不然呢” has a humorous roast tone in the online spoken language corpus.

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