

Original Paper

A Constructional Analysis and Pragmatic Functions of the Expression “Who is as X as you”

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Abstract

The construction “shéi yǒu nǐ X” (“who is as X as you”) is a relatively common expression in everyday discourse. It consists of the fixed component “shéi yǒu nǐ” (“who has/is like you”) and a variable embedded component “X.” It is generally assumed that the overall meaning of “shéi yǒu nǐ X” is inferred from the non-referential (non-specific) and negative meanings of the interrogative pronoun shéi (“who”), such that the construction is interpreted as “no one is more X than you.” However, based on observations from daily communication, the author finds that in certain specific contexts, “shéi yǒu nǐ X” does not simply convey the meaning “no one is more X than you,” but additionally carries an ironic sense, expressing a particular counter-expectational meaning. This meaning can only be realized at the level of the construction as a whole and cannot be directly inferred from any individual component. This paper analyzes the characteristics of the components of the “shéi yǒu nǐ X” construction, with particular emphasis on the construction when it conveys counter-expectational meaning, and discusses its ironic pragmatic functions in concrete contexts.

Keywords

construction “shéi yǒu nǐ X”, component characteristics, counter-expectation, pragmatic function

1. Introduction

“Shéi yǒu nǐ X” is a 典型的反问构式 (a typical rhetorical-question construction). In terms of its general meaning, it is mainly determined by the non-referential and negative meanings of the interrogative pronoun shéi (“who”), as illustrated in the following examples:

(1) *Sweat has nurtured the land of the river valleys; trees are carried to serve as bridges, stone slabs borne to make roads. Who works harder than you—turning your homeland into a blessed land of happiness.*

(Source: BCC Corpus)

(2) *The Huashan Sword Tournament is no ordinary event, yet you destroyed seven famous swords in one breath. In the world, who has such momentum as you?*

(Source: BCC Corpus)

In example (1), “*who works harder than you*” is equivalent to “*no one works harder than you*,” meaning “*you are the most hardworking*.” Example (2) follows the same logic: “*in the world, who has such momentum as you*” means “*no one in the world has such momentum*.” In both cases, the overall meaning of “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*” is primarily influenced by the interrogative pronoun *shéi*.

Regarding the interrogative pronoun *shéi*, Yuan Yulin and Liu Bin (2017) have explored the mechanisms underlying its non-referential and negative meanings. They argue that in non-referential uses, *shéi*-sentences eliminate the interrogative force of *shéi* through an indeterminate declarative mood, while in negative uses, rhetorical-question moods such as challenge and rebuttal eliminate both its interrogative and presuppositional meanings under the “doubtful existence, credible non-existence” principle. Zhou Yan and Wang Hongqi (2023), from a functional perspective, examine the referential properties of words such as *shéi* (“who”) and *nǎlǐ* (“where”), offering a detailed analysis of the referential function and referents of *shéi*.

There is extensive scholarship on rhetorical-question constructions and negative constructions, many of which involve rhetorical questions beginning with the interrogative pronoun *shéi*. Wu Leixu (2024) investigates the usage patterns and discourse functions of the rhetorical construction “*shéi shuō X*” (“*who says X*”), pointing out its roles in discourse negation, cohesion, and stance expression. In this construction, the information domain of the interrogative element *shéi* is an empty set (Xu Shengheng 1999), and the verb *shuō* (“say”) has undergone semantic bleaching, resulting in a fixed, fossilized constructional meaning. This line of research is similar to the present study of “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*,” as both focus on the meaning expressed by a fixed construction and its role in discourse cohesion and the expression of special meanings.

Huang Junfeng, Cheng Lele, and Zhou Bing (2024) examine the counter-expectational negative construction “*wǒ cíái bù X ne*” (“*I definitely do not X*”), identifying *cíái* as a marker of counter-expectation and discussing the construction’s pragmatic functions, such as indicating presuppositions, introducing corrections, providing justifications, or adding supplementary information. Other scholars, such as Zhang Yanhua and Bian Tingting (2022), analyze the formation mechanism of the construction “*zhěng yí gè X*” (“*a complete X*”) from the perspective of interactional construction grammar.

Overall, there is abundant research from a construction-grammar perspective on the formation mechanisms and pragmatic functions of various constructions, as well as extensive discussion of the meaning formation of interrogative pronouns such as *shéi*. Building on previous studies, this paper explores the formation mechanism of the “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*” construction and its distinctive counter-expectational and ironic meanings that differ from those in examples (1) and (2). A representative example is shown below:

(3)

A: *So, was the knowledge popularization okay? Acting like a know-it-all! Who knows more than you!*

B: *I really wasn't pretending—you think too highly of me.*

(Source: BCC Corpus)

In example (3), if “*who knows more than you*” is considered in isolation, it appears to have the same meaning as in the previous examples, namely “no one knows more than you,” or “you know the most.” However, it is very clear that speaker A is not actually praising B as “the most knowledgeable.” The preceding expression “*acting like a know-it-all*” reveals the speaker’s ironic intent. What A actually means is that B is pretending to be knowledgeable, when in fact B knows very little but puts on a façade of omniscience. In this context, the meaning expressed by the construction shifts from the original “you are the most X” to “you are the least X.”

The following sections will explore the internal composition of “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*,” the conditions under which its special meanings arise, and the corresponding pragmatic functions it serves.

2. Component Characteristics of the Construction “*Shéi yǒu nǐ X*”

The construction “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*” consists of the fixed components *shéi* (“who”), *yǒu* (“have”), *nǐ* (“you”), and the variable embedded component *X*.

2.1 The Components “*shéi*,” “*yǒu*,” and “*nǐ*”

In “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*,” *shéi* is used as a free-choice (indefinite) expression, conveying the meaning “no one” or “nobody.” As noted in the introduction, *shéi* has developed non-referential and negative meanings from its original free-choice usage, and it plays a crucial role in this construction.

Yǒu is a verb. In this construction, however, it does not carry its common meanings such as “possess,” “own,” or “contain,” but rather a comparative meaning. *Yǒu* has long been a focal point of scholarly research, as it may function as a pronoun or as a modal particle. Pan Yukun (2014) distinguishes between the indefinite pronoun *yǒu* and the verb *yǒu* and their related sentence patterns, noting that under certain conditions the two can substitute for each other. In “*yǒu...zhě*” (“there are those who...”) constructions, *yǒu* may function either as a pronoun or as a verb.

As for how *yǒu* came to develop a comparative meaning, consider the following example:

A: *I have a super-large Lego model.*

B: *I have one too! And I even have a dollhouse.*

Although no explicit comparative markers such as *bǐ* (“than”) or *gèng* (“more”) appear in this exchange, a strong sense of comparison is clearly conveyed. Speaker B uses “*also have*” and “*even have*” to indicate that not only does B possess what A has, but also something better, thus expressing an implicit comparison. The verb *yǒu* in the construction “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*” functions in this comparative sense. Consequently, the construction may express either “no one is more X than you” or “no one is not more X than you.”

The component *nǐ* is a second-person pronoun, which restricts the use of “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*” to

face-to-face daily conversations or dialogic discourse. The existence of a hearer addressed as *nǐ* is a necessary condition for the construction to be licensed.

2.2 The Component “*X*”

The variable component *X* in “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*” may take the form of a verb–object phrase, a modifier–head phrase (including adverbial–predicate and attributive–head phrases), a verb–complement phrase, or an adjective.

In example (1) above, “*shéi yǒu nǐmen gèng nǔlì de gōngzuò*” (“who works harder than you”), “*gèng nǔlì de gōngzuò*” (“work harder”) is an adverbial–predicate phrase. In example (2), “*shéi yǒu nǐ zhè zhōng qìshì*” (“who has such momentum as you”), “*zhè zhōng qìshì*” (“such momentum”) is an attributive–head phrase. In example (3), “*shéi yǒu nǐ dǒngde duō*” (“who knows more than you”), “*dǒngde duō*” (“know more”) is a verb–complement phrase. Similarly, in example (4) below, “*shéi yǒu nǐ hǎokàn ne*” (“who is as good-looking as you”), “*hǎokàn*” (“good-looking”) is an adjective and can be replaced with adjectives such as “*piàoliang*” (“pretty”), “*měi*” (“beautiful”), “*xiánhui*” (“virtuous”), or “*jīzhì*” (“witty”).

(4)

A: *Taking an artistic photo and still managing to make you look this ugly—unbelievable.*

B: *If you don't like it, you could just keep quiet. You talk as if you were so good-looking yourself.*

A: *Who's as good-looking as you?*

(Source: BCC Corpus)

In example (4), given the discourse context, speaker A's utterance “*Who's as good-looking as you?*” does not mean “no one is better-looking than you,” but instead serves to rebut speaker B, implying that B's appearance is quite ordinary and conveying a strong sense of irony.

In general, the embedded component *X* tends to quote the core element of the previous turn in the dialogue, serving to express the speaker's evaluation or stance toward the hearer, often in the form of rebuttal or judgment.

3. Contextual Characteristics of “*Shéi yǒu nǐ X*” When Expressing Different Meanings

We refer to the “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*” construction that conveys counter-expectational ironic meaning as a construction with **special meaning**, in contrast to the construction expressing its **ordinary meaning**. Below, we compare specific examples to explore the contextual characteristics associated with these different meanings.

(5) *Festivals meet, and the dances never end. Three thousand years of joy amid suffering—who lives more stubbornly than you!*

(*People's Daily*)

(6) *Songs of liberation are blocked by reactionary walls. Who harbors more of the anger of three thousand years of slavery than you!*

(*People's Daily*)

(7)

A: *I'm not just eating noodles—I'm ordering seafood too.*

B: *Who's more high-maintenance than you!*

A: *You are! Don't forget that look on your face.*

(Source: BCC Corpus)

(8)

A: *Haha, just give it to you then. I've already given up on saving face anyway.*

B: *Who's stupider than you!*

A: *You are!*

(Source: BCC Corpus)

(9)

A: *I'm already staying in a hotel.*

B: *Who's more high-end than you? You're Director Fu, after all!*

A: *Why are you being so sarcastic?*

(Source: BCC Corpus)

(10)

A: *Be beautiful and virtuous every day, dear lady.*

B: *Who's more virtuous than you?*

A: *Oh, not at all.*

(Source: BCC Corpus)

Among these examples, (1), (2), and (5)–(8) illustrate the ordinary meaning of “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*,” while (3), (4), and (9)–(10) illustrate its special meaning. The following generalizations can be drawn.

3.1 Declarative and Exclamatory Uses Typically Express the Ordinary Meaning

Examples (1), (5), and (6), all drawn from *People's Daily*, are parallel sentences from the same poem. Here, “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*” appears mainly in exclamatory sentences. Expressions such as “*who works harder than you*,” “*who lives more stubbornly than you*,” and “*who harbors more anger*” all serve to praise the people's diligence, resilience, and spirit of resistance. In this context, *shéi* functions as a free-choice item meaning “no one,” while “*you*” refers to the readers—implicitly, the Chinese people who have risen from suffering. The conversational examples in (7) and (8) also exhibit an exclamatory tone.

3.2 Interrogative and Rhetorical Uses Tend to Express the Special Meaning

In examples such as (4) “*Who's as good-looking as you?*”, (9) “*Who's more high-end than you?*”, and (10) “*Who's more virtuous than you?*”, the construction conveys a counter-expectational special meaning. Structurally, these can be refined as “*shéi yǒu nǐ + X (typically an adjective) + ne/a (modal particle)?*” They tend to occur in the middle of a conversational turn and function to rebut, question, or express dissatisfaction with the previous speaker's utterance, while simultaneously carrying an ironic tone.

It should be noted, however, that not all declarative or exclamatory uses of “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*” express the ordinary meaning. For instance, example (3) “*Who knows more than you!*” is exclamatory in form but conveys irony. Likewise, not all interrogative or rhetorical uses convey special meaning. Example (2) “*In the world, who has such momentum as you?*” is a rhetorical question but expresses the ordinary meaning—namely, “no one in the world has such momentum.”

3.3 The Nature of the Component “X” Influences the Meaning of the Construction

Cognitive linguistics emphasizes explaining linguistic competence and phenomena from a cognitive perspective. In the construction “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*,” when the embedded component *X* has a negative evaluative orientation—such as the adjective “*zuò*” (“over-the-top, troublesome”) in example (7) or “*chǔn*” (“stupid”) in example (8)—the construction typically conveys the ordinary meaning. “*Shéi yǒu nǐ zuò*” means “no one is more over-the-top than you,” and “*shéi yǒu nǐ chǔn*” means “no one is more stupid than you.”

Beyond a constructional analysis, this can also be explained cognitively. In everyday conversation, when a speaker evaluates another person negatively, there are generally two strategies: one is to use positively oriented words sarcastically, and the other is to directly employ negatively oriented words. When *X* itself is negative, the utterance usually conveys its literal meaning, since speakers rarely use negative expressions to imply a positive, counter-expectational evaluation.

By contrast, when *X* has a positive evaluative orientation, two possibilities arise. One is the expression of counter-expectation, as in example (3) “*know a lot*,” example (9) “*high-end*,” and example (10) “*virtuous*,” all of which convey irony and rebuttal. The other possibility is the expression of the ordinary meaning, as in “*Who’s more virtuous than you, sister? No one within ten miles around here is more capable than you!*” Here, “*shéi yǒu nǐ xiánhùi*” expresses genuine praise, meaning “no one is more virtuous than you.”

This pattern aligns with general human cognitive tendencies: people readily use positive expressions to praise, and they rarely use negative expressions to convey positive meanings. However, positive expressions are often employed ironically to criticize negative realities.

4. Discourse Functions of the Special-Meaning Construction “*Shéi yǒu nǐ X*”

4.1 Discourse Cohesion

Compared with its ordinary-meaning use, the construction “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*” shows a much stronger dependence on discourse and turn-taking when it conveys a special meaning, and thus exhibits stronger discourse-cohesive functions. When “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*” expresses its ordinary meaning—namely, “no one is more *X* than you”—it may occur independently or appear as part of a larger discourse, but the emotional stance before and after it usually does not show a sharp contrast, nor is the construction tightly bound to the surrounding context.

By contrast, when the construction conveys a special meaning, it typically follows closely upon the preceding speaker’s utterance and displays a “tail-to-head” (chained) pattern of discourse linkage. For

example, in example (10) above, speaker A first refers to B as a “virtuous lady,” and speaker B immediately rebuts this with “*Who’s more virtuous than you?*” The tone is relatively strong and naturally paves the way for speaker A’s subsequent explanation. A similar pattern is found in example (9). Although speaker A does not explicitly use the word “*high-end*,” the statement “*I’m staying in a hotel*” implicitly conveys a sense of showing off. This is precisely what triggers speaker B’s sarcastic response “*Who’s more high-end than you?*” Therefore, the special-meaning construction “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*” plays a stronger role in discourse cohesion.

4.2 Counter-Expectational Meaning

When “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*” expresses its ordinary meaning, it functions primarily as a negative construction: *shéi* is interpreted as “no one,” resulting in a global negation of the proposition. However, when the construction conveys a special meaning, its semantic focus shifts from simple negation to counter-expectation.

For instance, the ordinary meaning of “*shéi yǒu nǐ dōngde duō*” is “no one knows more than you.” In the context of example (3), “*acting like a know-it-all—who knows more than you!*” directly contradicts normal expectations. The meaning shifts from “no one knows more than you” to “you’re pretending to know everything, when in fact you know nothing and can’t compare to anyone else.” This semantic reversal is essentially an expression of counter-expectation.

4.3 Irony and Rebuttal

The counter-expectational construction “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*” with special meaning frequently functions as a vehicle for irony and rebuttal within conversational turns. Because it typically employs positively evaluative expressions—such as “*know a lot*,” “*virtuous*,” or “*good-looking*”—to convey a negative evaluation, it achieves a strong ironic effect. At the same time, since it directly targets and responds to the preceding discourse, it also conveys a forceful sense of rebuttal.

5. Conclusion and Further Discussion

This paper has examined the component characteristics of the construction “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*” and divided its uses into two types: those expressing an ordinary meaning and those expressing a special meaning. Through illustrative examples, the study has explored the contextual characteristics associated with these two meanings and has shown that they are closely related to sentence mood. While “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*” in interrogative or rhetorical form generally conveys the special meaning, exceptions do exist, and interpretation must ultimately rely on the specific discourse context. In addition, the nature and evaluative orientation of the component *X* also influence the overall meaning of the construction.

Finally, the paper argues that the counter-expectational special-meaning construction “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*” exhibits stronger discourse-cohesive functions and typically conveys strong irony and rebuttal.

It should be noted, however, that due to the author’s limited theoretical background and the constraints of data collection, the present study has so far identified only the special function of “*shéi yǒu nǐ X*” in expressing counter-expectational irony and has offered only a general description of this phenomenon.

There remain many issues worthy of further investigation. For example, in everyday speech, expressions such as “Who could eat as much as you?” or “Who could be as handsome as you?” are also common. Is the difference between “shéi yǒu nǐ X” and “shéi néng yǒu nǐ X” merely a matter of linguistic economy, with the modal *néng* (“can”) being omitted, or are these fundamentally different constructions? Can “shéi néng yǒu nǐ X” be further reduced to “shéi yǒu nǐ X ne/a?” And is it theoretically appropriate to divide “shéi yǒu nǐ X” into ordinary and special meanings in the first place? These questions all merit deeper consideration.

It is hoped that through continued effort, broader reading, and a stronger theoretical foundation, future research will arrive at a clearer and more comprehensive account of this construction.

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