Litotes in The Analects: Form and Function

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Aug 12-14   University of Waterloo

Outline

- Why single out litotes?

- How to justify its definition & classification?

- How litotes function in The Analects?

- Is litotes processible by computer?

Why single out litotes

- **A universal figure active in many languages and classics**

- Greek, Latin, German, English, Chinese, French,, Dutch, Old Norse,…

- Homer's *Iliad*, *Odyssey*; Thucydides's *History* Cicero's *Brutus*, *De Oratore*; Kafkas' *Das Schloss*, More's *Utopia, King Richard III; The Analects, Xunzi…*

Why single out litotes (con.)

- **Scanty researches in contemporary time**

  - dozens of closely related articles (from1930 till now)

  - a couple of monographs

What is litotes?

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- Definitions from dictionaries

A figure of speech, in which an affirmative is expressed by the negative of the contrary ('A citizen of no mean city') (*The Oxford English Dictionary*)

Understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by the negative of the contrary (" He is not a bad ball player.") (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*)

A figure of speech in which an affirmative is expressed by the negation of its opposite. (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*)

Definitions from monographs & proceedings

- The figure of speech by which a (nearly always) evaluative expression is periphrased by the negation of its opposite. (Hoffmann 1987: 42)

- Litotes occurs when a speaker avoids making an affirmative claim directly and instead denies its opposite. Often this amounts to a double negative. (Farnsworth 2011: 204)

- A stylistic device which seeks to highlight an idea, an impression or a judgement. The negation of the contrary idea takes the place of the simple affirmative expression, in order to give it greater weight, hence the superlative, strenuissima. (Pontier 2013: 353-4)

Working Definition

Litotes is a trope in which an affirmative is expressed by the negation of its opposite.

- Litotes = NEG <O> L (lexeme)   (Hoffmann 1987: 47)

How to classify

- No clear criterion for the existing classifications

- Aristotle's inspiring dimensions of "opposite": contrary (hot-cold), possessive (blindnesss-sight), relative (double-half), and contradictory (being-not being; known-unknown)

- Accordingly, 3 major types of litotes: contradictory, contrary (roughly including possessive), and relative

- # Negation of the Contradictory:
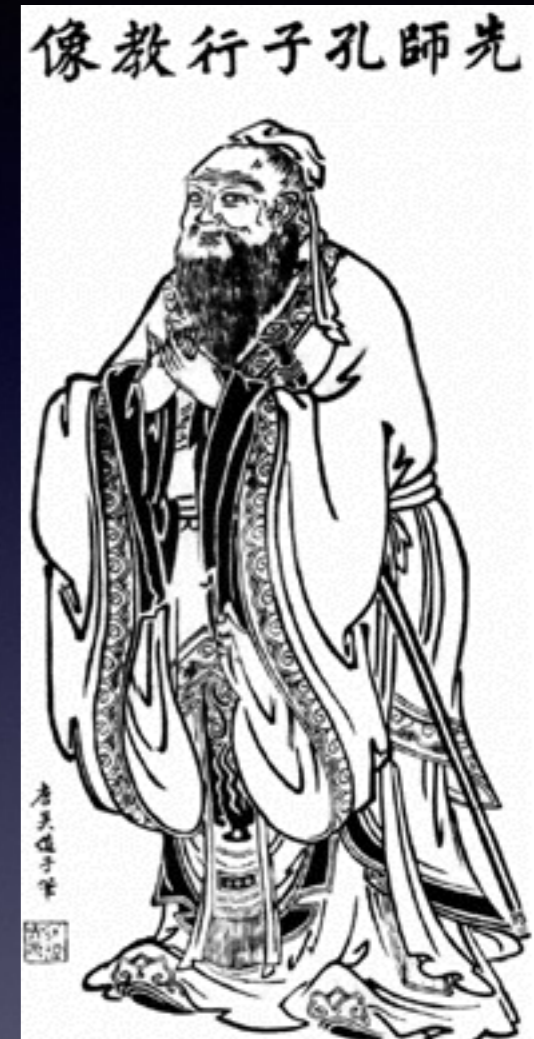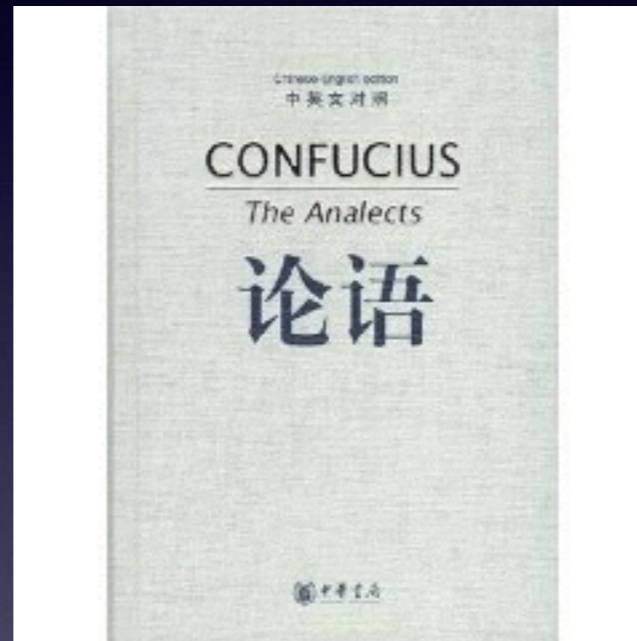## Double Negation

- Thus I consent, sir, to this Constitution, because I expect no better, and because I am *not* sure that it is <u>not</u> the best. (Franklin, speech at Federal Ratifying Convention 1787)

- His wife was *not* always <u>out</u> <u>of</u> humor, *nor* his home always <u>uncomfortable</u>; and in his breed of horses and dogs, and in sporting of every kind, he found *no* <u>inconsiderable</u> degree of domestic felicity. (Jane Austin, *Sense and Sensibility*)

Negation of the Contrary

- My guardian will be awfully keen for you to come and stay with us. He is *not* half <u>bad</u> when you know him. (John Galsworthy, *The Dark Flower*)

- John is *no* <u>dullard</u>.

- It does *not* <u>hurt</u> the newest comer to sweep out the office if necessary. (Andrew Carnegie, The Road to Business Success, 1885)

Negation of the Relative

(1) The school is in chaos, but it is *not* the *students'* fault.
(2) I just made moderate suggestions, as my position was *not* to *lead*.
(3) *Not all* teachers of English are experienced.
(4) This plant is *not* to be found *everywhere*.

Confucius and Analects: Brief Introduction

Litotes in Analects

- Hundreds of litotes in 20 passages (1, 5900 characters)

- Contradictory type/double negation: about 100 pairs

・Double negation in Analects

子曰：“不愤不 启，不悱不发。”

[**Lau's**] The Master said, “I *never* enlighten anyone who has *not* been driven to distraction by trying to understand a difficulty or who has *not* got into a frenzy trying to put his ideas into words.”

—Passage VII, Section 8

・Double negation in Analects (con)

- 子曰：非礼勿视，非礼勿听，非礼勿言，非礼勿动。

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The Master said, "Do not look unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not listen unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not speak unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not move unless it is in accordance with the rites."

—Passage XII, Section 1

・Double negation in Analects (con)

子曰：“己所不欲，勿施于人。”

The Master said, "Do *not* impose on others what you yourself do not desire."

—Passage XV, Section 24, the litotes also in Passage XII, Section 2

· Double Negation in Analects (con)

孔子曰："不知命，无以为君子也；不知礼，无以立也；不知言，无以知人也。"

Confucius said, "A man has no way of becoming a gentleman unless he understands Destiny; he has no way of taking his stand unless understands the rites; he has no way of judging men unless he understands words."

—Passage XX, Section 3, ending of *The Analects*

• Logical Function of Double Negation

- **Establish a proposition of high probability (harder to to be refuted than its affirmative)**

"不知命，无以为君子也"
 Strong: A man has no way of becoming a gentleman unless he understands Destiny.

"知命，可以为君子也"
Weak: A man becomes a gentleman if he understands Destiny.

Logical Function of Double Negation (con)

- **Serve as major premise and invite deduction**

子曰："学《礼》乎？"（Have you studied *Li*?）

鲤曰："未也。" (Not Yet.)

子曰："不学《礼》，无以立。" (Whoever doesn't study *Li* cannot take his stand.)

Selected from Passage XVI, Session 13

Logical Function of Double Negation (con)

- Aid in making a strict definition

- Yen Yuan asked about benevolence（颜渊问仁）. The Master said, "To return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self constitutes benevolence."（克己复礼为仁）Yen Yuan said, "I should like you to list the items." The Master said, "Do not look unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not listen unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not speak unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not move unless it is in accordance with the rites."（非礼勿视，非礼勿听，非礼勿言，非礼勿动。）

  - Selected from Passage XII, Section 1

Litotes as Epistemic

- Perelman & Tyteca （1958): Knowledge and opinion

- Knowledge asserted by the negation of its opposite: antithetical knowledge (V. Masse: 2014)

- Well-accepted major premise or definition as shared knowledge or common sense

- Litotes (DN in particular) : one of the most epistemic figures

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