

Lexical Transfer of Chinese Tongue in English Learning from the Perspective of Markedness

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The study of mother tongue transfer is an important part of second language acquisition. The study of language transfer, which began in the 1950s, is influenced by the authoritative theories of linguistics, psychology and other disciplines in various periods, and has gone through several stages of development. Nowadays, people's understanding of the function of mother tongue transfer has gradually moved from excessive exaggeration and excessive contempt to rationality and objectivity. The markedness of language is regarded as one of the main constraints of transfer. Although the development of markedness theory is becoming more and more mature, there is no denying that markedness theory is not perfect enough. The application of markedness theory needs to be further discussed.

1.2 Literature review

Trubetzkoy, a phonologist, put forward the concept of marking in 1931: ^[1] "A pair of phonemes has markers and the other component does not."

In general, unmarked constituents are easier to learn than marked ones. Since the 1970s and 1980s, the study of mother tongue transfer has found that whether different features of mother tongue are transferred depends on the degree of marking: a) when the target language form is marked, the learner will transfer the unmarked form of the mother tongue; b) when the target language form is unmarked, the learner will not transfer the marked form of the mother tongue. ^[2]

In the process of learning English, Chinese students often transfer from Chinese to English because they do not understand the differences between Chinese and English in marking. These transfers are reflected in phonological, lexical, syntactic and other levels.

With the development of linguistics, many linguists pay attention to the phenomenon of marking, which has been studied by linguists from different angles. ^[3] For example, in the *Application of Markedness Theory in the study of Mother tongue transfer*,^[4] Ling Xi and Fan Wei, taking students of different majors as subjects, point out that the transfer of marked items in mother tongue is closely related to learner's second language proficiency. This also shows that mother tongue transfer occurs more frequently in people with lower second language proficiency, because most of the knowledge available is native language knowledge.

1.3 Methodology

Based on the markedness theory by comparing the differences in vocabulary between Chinese and English, the paper analyzes the language errors produced by Chinese English learners. In order to help Chinese English learners to learn English better and to minimize the interference of their mother tongue. Besides, the main research methods are: literature research, comparative analysis and case study.

2 Marked Lexical Transfer of Chinese Tongue in English Learning

In the same language system, there are different degrees of marked difference. Chinese and English belong to two completely different linguistic systems, forming their own linguistic features. The marked differences of lexical between English and Chinese are mainly manifested in semantic and morphological differences.

2.1 Reference range

Words make up a sentence. Only by understanding the meaning of the word can we understand the meaning expressed in the sentence and the text. When we encounter a new word, we often only remember its common meaning, which refers to the high frequency of use of the meaning. This part is unmarked and we can learn quickly. However, English contains a large number of words with more than one meaning, which we are called polysemy. The emergence of polysemy makes English learners whose mother tongue is Chinese confused in the process of English learning. A word has multiple meanings. Apart from its common meaning, we call this part of meaning is marked. Frequency criterion is the most important criterion for determining the markedness of lexical collocation. For example:

- (a) good fire
- (b) He almost drives me crazy.
- (c) I have some change.
- (d) I went to visit employer without carrying a resume.
- (e) I like the feeling in desert very well.
- (f) We have the interest of 500,000 customers to think of.
- (g) My mother gave me a magic gift when I was born and I could learn music very easily and quickly.

In example (a), fire means "fire (the flames)," where good can be translated as "exuberant" and therefore "exuberant fire". The common meaning of drive is to drive a vehicle, in example (b), instead of matching a vehicle, it means forcing someone to be in a state. In example (c), change, its original intention is to change, but in this sentence it represents money. "Resume" in example (d) means a paper which send to people, then let them know some information about you and often happen to situation when we want to find a job. However, it also represents start again at the very beginning. In example (e), we usually hold the idea that the meaning of "desert" is a place where there is nothing but sand. It also means a person who runs away from other's chase. In the next example, "interest" represents benefits to particular person or group in some way. This meaning is greatly differs from the usage in our daily life. In our daily life, we usually use "interest" to express that we want to learn or hear more and we enjoy it very much. In example (g), if we say someone has a gift for doing something, they have a natural ability for doing it. For example, someone have a gift for teaching, or have the gift of making people happy. "I had received a gift last year", "gift" in this sentence means just a birthday gift or birthday present.

In another case, the semantic range of some Chinese words is wider than that of the corresponding English words. It also contains a large amount of information, which is broad in denotation and shallow in connotation; and its corresponding English vocabulary is narrow in its meaning. For example: 会议 can be called meeting, conference or congress. This phenomenon is everywhere. More examples will be given below to explain this phenomenon:

- (a) He was injured by negligence in the field.
- (b) He was wounded by negligence in the field.

The Chinese "get hurt" is a relatively broad concept with a wide range of usage, and the meaning of the two in the corresponding English is different. According to the first sentence (a), the word "injured" refers to an action to harm yourself or somebody else physically, especially in an accident. However, in sentence (b), "wounded" means that someone is injured by a weapon, especially in a war. All in all, the second sentence is not right in here. Therefore, in English, The usage of wounded and injured has a range of limitations so they have high mark degree.

- (c) There is a lot of noise over there.
- (d) There is a lot of voice over there.

Sound in Chinese corresponds to the difference between sound and voice, in English. There are greatly differences between sound and voice. "Sound" refers to something you can hear, such as the sound from television or radio. However, "voice" means that the sound or sounds produced through the mouth by a person speaking or singing. The usage of sound and voice has a range of limitations so they have high mark degree.

2.2 Phrase collocation

The more complex phrases are used, the more marked they are. On the contrary, the use of simpler phrases is less marked and can be better mastered by us. For example, let's look at the following three sets of words

- (a) a (little) bit of, a great deal of, a (great/large) amount of, a little, much, less, (the) least, (great/large) amounts of
- (b) a great many, both, another two, a few, a (great/large) number of, (great/large) numbers of
- (c) a lot of, plenty of, a (great/large) quantity of, (great/large) quantities of

It is not difficult to see that only uncountable nouns can be followed by the first set of words. And only countable can be added to end of the second set of words. When we use these two phrases, we need to consider whether the modified nouns conform to the grammatical rules. When learning these three set of phrases, English learners naturally prefer to use the third phrase. The third set of words can add either countable nouns or uncountable nouns. Compared to the complexity of the first two groups of usage, the third group appears simpler than the former two. The more complex the phrase collocation is, the stronger the marking is. On the contrary, the lower the complexity of the phrase is, the easier it is for English learners to understand and master.

The collocation of verb preposition phrases is also a major obstacle in English learning, which hinders Chinese learners from learning English. In the process of learning Chinese, the transitive and intransitive verbs are not very obvious. However, as we continue to learn English, we will find that

when we use verbs to form sentences, then we should take full account of the transitivity of verbs used in sentences. Only in this way can we speak or write grammatically correct sentences. For example:

(a) V+about

我为你的健康担忧。

I worry about your health.

The meaning of “担忧” in Chinese sentence are equal to the meaning of “worry” in the English sentence “ I worry about your health”, but we must add “about” after worry. Only in this way can we make right sentences.

(b) V+away

洪水把房子和人冲走。

The flood washes away house and people.

他把放在桌子上的书拿走了。

He took away books which are put on the table.

(c) V+for

我在网站上查找资料。

I search for some information on the website.

这些话代表着愤怒。

The words stand for anger.

(d) V+down

我记下老师说的话以免忘记。

I take down the words my teacher said in order to remember.

妈妈让我把电视机的声音关小一点。

My mother told me to turn down the television.

2.3 Part of speech

The negative transfer on the lexical level is also reflected in the misuse of parts of speech, mainly as follows: the misuse of adjectives and nouns; the misuse of adjectives and adverbs; and the misuse of nouns and verbs.

English belongs to synthetic language. It uses morphological changes to express grammatical relations, through morphological changes, changes in parts of speech, flexible sentence composition, to express the same meaning. Chinese is a typical analytical language. It does not use morphological changes, but relies on inherent logical relations to express semantics. For example:

语言学与语言之间有着密切的关系。

(a) There is a closely relationship between linguistics and language.

(b) There is a close relationship between linguistics and language. (right)

我爱大自然的空气。

(c) I love the air of natural.

(d) I love the air of nature. (right)

我做这件事很失败。

- (e) I failure to do this thing.
- (f) I fail to do this thing.(right)

In the extensive or intensive reading, you may have encountered a situation in which the words you read in text are known. But the whole sentence or paragraph is not clear. Or, because of the lack of understanding of a word or phrase affects the understanding of the entire sentence. There is always a vague sense of ambiguity. This situation is likely due to a large number of abstract words or phrases in the sentence. Abstract nouns are concepts that describe quality, state, emotion or action. For example, notion, concept, object, vision, element, emotion. The character of these kinds of words is that it is difficult for you to materialize it and to form a clear image in your mind. Therefore, they can become obstacles to our understanding of the meaning of a sentence because some phrases are not commonly used or have many meanings. Here are two examples:

- (a) Test the pliability of the wood.

There is an abstract word “pliability”. The English definition of pliability is the quality of being easily bent; flexibility. Therefore we can replace it with flexibility. In this way, the whole sentence becomes: Test the flexibility of the wood.

- (b) Now, the gene they discovered today doesn't account for all those cases.

There is an abstract phrase “account for”. It has two common meanings; one is give reasons for; the other is what to be responsible for. Here in example (b), the meaning of account for can be replaced by the first meaning. So the sentence will become: Now, the gene they discovered today doesn't explain all those cases.

All in all, we can get through something in these two examples: without changing the meaning of the word, find a familiar, simple synonym or expression when we meet this situation. And to replace it would be more effective method.

3. Conclusion

This paper makes a contrastive analysis of the transfer of vocabulary between Chinese and English, summarizes the relevant rules. The following part will put forward the enlightenment of language markedness to foreign language teaching.

- (a) Re-examine the interlingual generality of English and Chinese

Under the influence of contrastive analysis and early interlanguage studies, it is often emphasized that the differences between mother tongue and target language have a negative impact on foreign language learners, while ignoring the promotion of interlingual commonality to foreign language learning.

- (b) Attach importance to the Markedness Features in English

English emphasizes the correct and complete form of grammar and the accurate transmission of meaning in Chinese. In these aspects, because the learners know little about the marked features of the target language, they usually apply the Chinese language knowledge directly to English, resulting in the negative transfer of their mother tongue and even the failure of communication.

- (a) Cultivate the perceptual ability to the distance of language

From a psychological point of view, in the process of foreign language learning, students first perceive similarities rather than differences, so that students can perceive that interlingual commonality has a great impact on language. The change of learners' awareness of language varies with the increase of learners' knowledge of second language. It is especially important to increase the input of mother tongue and target language for foreign language learners, which can highlight the similarities and differences between the mother tongue and the target language. Improve learners' awareness of language distance, thus contributing to the positive transfer of the mother tongue.

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