A Contrastive Study on Mark Phenomena of English and Chinese Languages

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Abstract

Linguistic marker is a common phenomenon, and there are different levels of markers in various languages. Mark theory was first proposed by the Prague School in 1930s, which is an important principle of language analysis system. The function and meaning of markup languages are mainly pragmatic, which have procedural meaning and no conceptual meaning. Markedness phenomenon is not only the inherent characteristics of language symbols, but also the product of social life and different cultures. Due to the great difference between cultural background and social environment of Chinese and English speaker, thus there are many similarities and differences in the language, society and culture mark. The mark phenomena of English nouns are mainly related to the category of nouns and the opposite nouns. However, Chinese nouns have no strict morphological changes. In this paper, we discuss the theory of mark phenomenon and analyze a contrastive study on mark phenomena of English and Chinese Languages.

Keywords: Contrastive Study, Phenomena of Markedness, English and Chinese, Language Culture.

Introduction

Marked phenomenon exists in different languages and different levels of language. The contrastive study of English and Chinese in China has been gradually developed since late 1970s, and experts have made achievements in pronunciation, grammar, semantics and pragmatics. However, the contrastive study of English and Chinese marked phenomena is very rare. The purpose of this paper is to make up for this gap, we analyze the similarities and personality of the markers in English and Chinese languages in order to enrich and develop the contrastive study of English and Chinese.

Markup theory is a very important concept in structural linguistics. Marking theory refers to the basic concept of the term "unmarked" and "marked". Many scholars have pointed out that the theory of marking has become a major theoretical thought, which can be applied to all aspects of languages, and the opposition of "marked" and "unmarked" plays an important role at all levels of language analysis. After more than 70 years' development, this theory has been widely used in phonetics, grammar, semantics, pragmatics and other different fields.

John Lyons, a British linguist, introduced the marked theory into semantic level, and he divided marked phenomenon into tree types:

- Formal mark.
- Distributional mark.
- Semantic mark.

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Marked phenomenon reflects in many aspects, such as form, distribution, semantics, frequency of use, cognitive complexity, standard degree and so on.

- **Form:** Unmarked items have no external features and tags.
- **Distribution:** Because of the wide range of unmarked units, they can be used in a large range. The meaning of an unmarked item is broader than a marked item.
- **Semantics:** Generally, the expression of marked items is more specific and peculiar, however, unmarked items have more meaning.
- **Use Frequency:** Apparently, the use frequency of unmarked items is higher than marked items.
- **Complexity:** The meaning of unmarked items is much simpler than marked items, thus, unmarked items are more likely to be understood and accepted by people.

![Figure 1. Markedness of Core Grammar and Periphery Grammar.](image)

**The Proposed Methodology**

**Asymmetry in Languages.** Symmetry and asymmetry are common phenomena in the real world, which are also the basic concepts in people's daily life. Where there is a corresponding relationship is called symmetry, conversely, where there is no one-to-one correspondence is called asymmetric. The concepts of symmetry and asymmetry have been widely used in many disciplines, and have formed a systematic theory, such as linguistics. Symmetry and asymmetry in language are generally found in the aspects of speech, word formation, syntax, semantics, pragmatics and so on.

Markedness theory is one of the important theories in structural linguistics which was used in phonology in 1930s. After many years' development, it has been widely used in many languages, such as voice, grammar, semantics, pragmatics, linguistics and applied linguistics. Some linguists regard opposition of marked-unmarked as simple-complicated. Jakobson pointed out that marked items have more complex meaning, thus marked-unmarked is equal to simple-complicated. Battistella believed that markedness theory is sort of valuative relation, namely, all opposite things have their internal inequality phenomenon. He also compared marked and unmarked relationships to normal and abnormal states. Although each scholar has different definition of markedness phenomenon, they are related anyway.

**Comparative Linguistics.** A comparison of linguistic studies can take place within the same language, or between different languages. The so-called comparative study, is a comparative study of multiple languages, and linguists describe the differences between
different languages. Comparative linguistics is a branch of general linguistics, which appeared in 1800.

As a branch of linguistics, English-Chinese contrastive research has the characteristics of theoretical linguistics and applied linguistics, which is to carry on the contrast research on English and Chinese. The contrastive study between English and Chinese should be divided into three levels:

- The surface structure of a language.
- Language expression.
- Philosophy of languages.

The contrast between English and Chinese can be divided into three disciplines: English-Chinese contrastive linguistics, English-Chinese translation and English-Chinese contrastive culture. From the practical point of view, comparative linguistics has two directions: theoretical research direction, and applied research direction.

Contrastive cognitive linguistics should start from empiricist cognitive perspective, combining pragmatic and functional characteristics. In the framework of cognitive linguistics, our research should combine with cognitive science, cognitive psychology, philosophy, corpus and other research results.

Figure 2. Unmarked English Grammar.

The basic scope and content of contrastive linguistic studies including:

- A contrastive macro-theoretical framework of cognitive linguistics.
- Language and culture comparison.
- Comparison of conceptual structure.
- Comparison of syntax and semantic interface.
- Comparison of the functional principles of language construction.
- Comparison of language evolution.
- Comparison between discourse and pragmatic level.

**Language Generality and Linguistic Marking Theory.** Language relocation relies, in part, on linguistic commonality. There are two branches of language generality research:
universal grammar and linguistic typology. Universal grammar does not provide ready-made grammatical rules, but it restricts the syntax of individual languages, and only sets up some necessary parameters. Core grammar is a general rule of grammar, and the surrounding grammar is a specific grammar rule. The rules of the surrounding grammar are marked, while the core grammar rules can be marked or unmarked.

From the perspective of language typology, Zobl proposed that grammar rules are marked in three ways:

- Typological Specialization. For instance, in "how + adjective phrase", "how" and "adjective phrase" cannot be separated in English grammar.
- Typological Inconsistency.
- Typological Indeterminacy.

The traditional mark theory suggests that any linguistic component is either marked or unmarked, and unmarked ingredients are more basic and more natural than marked items. In short, the core syntax is mostly unmarked, and the surrounding syntax is marked; grammar with universal law is unmarked and grammars with special rules are marked.

| Table 1. Marking Theory and Mother Tongue Migration. |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Native Language | Target Language | Interlanguage |
| 1 unmarked | unmarked | unmarked |
| 2 unmarked | marked | unmarked |
| 3 marked | unmarked | unmarked |
| 4 marked | marked | unmarked |

**Contrastive Theory and Methodology.** Due to the active introduction of foreign theory and our own creative efforts, China has several diversified theories: structural linguistics, transformational generative linguistics, systemic functional grammar, universal grammar, intercultural communication linguistics, psycholinguistics, semiotics, corpus linguistics, semantics, pragmatics, translation theory, language teaching theory, etc.

Structural theory shows that, language structure is hierarchical. On phonetic level, it can be divided into syllables, speech words, speech segments, speech sentences, etc.; on grammar level, it can be divided into words, phrases, sentences, etc.

Generative transformational theory puts forward that, language structure has a certain regularity, and the task of grammar research is to reveal this regularity. The transformation-generating theory not only applies the concepts of deep and superficiality to the description of syntactic structures, but also describes the structure of speech. As a theoretical framework, transformational generative grammar can analyze similar language deep structures.

System functional grammar theory pays attention to the language of communication skills and language environment. The same form of language used in different occasions may have different meanings. For instance, "Have you eaten" means to greet friends in Chinese, while it means invitation in English.

Overall, passive sentence with marked items is relatively complex in English and Chinese, but active sentence with unmarked items is easy to learn. Compared with Chinese, the passive sentence in English is more widely used. For the widespread use of passive sentences in English, we can explain this phenomenon from the perspective of human thinking. Chinese people are using the way of people-center thinking, and describe the objective things from their own
position. Nevertheless, western culture takes things as the main body, and forms the object mode of thinking.

In English, because the passive voice can express a strong sense of objectivity, thus, it has unmarked relationship with news and technology. The difference of English and Chinese grammar reflects in many ways which is mainly influenced by different cultures and way of thinking. Therefore, a contrastive study on markedness phenomena of English and Chinese languages is important to analyze the difference between English and Chinese.

Conclusion

Linguistic marker is a common phenomenon, and there are different levels of markers in various languages. Mark theory was first proposed by the Prague School in 1930s, which is an important principle of language analysis system, and markedness phenomenon exists in different languages and different levels of language. In this paper, in order to analyze the difference between English and Chinese, we focus on a contrastive study on markedness phenomena of English and Chinese languages. We introduce the markup theory which exists in different languages and different levels of language. The contrastive study of English and Chinese in China has been gradually developed since late 1970s, although many scholars have pointed out that the theory of marking has become a major theoretical thought, which can be applied to all aspects of languages, the contrastive study of English and Chinese marked phenomena is not enough for our further research. Due to the active introduction of foreign theory and our own creative efforts, there are several theories come into beings which provide us many theoretical basis. Markedness theory is one of the important theories in structural linguistics which was only used in phonology in 1930, but now, it has been widely used in many language fields. A comparison of linguistic studies can take place within the same language, or between different languages, which is called comparative linguistics in this paper. Many studies have indicated that the theory of marking is useful in the study of language.

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