Three Perspectives on the Characteristics in the Studies of Chinese Language

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ABSTRACT: As international promotion of the Chinese language has been the country’s cultural development strategy, especially after the establishment of Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL) as an independent discipline, the characteristics of the Chinese language are absolutely extracted from typology, cognition and Sinology comparison and reflected in the system of Chinese language studies. Meanwhile, the characteristics of the Chinese language must attract great attention from academic circles, and also needs an in-depth study with theoretical and thorough thinking. As the significant improvement of international status of China and its language, to construct research system of the world linguistics must embrace the Chinese pattern, for which the development of Chinese linguistics should be understood by the external world.

1 INTRODUCTION

The development of modern Chinese linguistics has a history of 110 years, if it is counted from the publication of Ma Jianzhong's *Ma's Grammar (Mashi Wentong)* in 1898. However, putting the development process of Chinese Linguistics against the background of international linguistics study, senior specialists such as Zhu Dexi have found some special phenomena of the "Indo-European perspective", namely the theoretical system of Indo-European linguistics that has been used to study facets of Chinese language. For example, the study of Chinese language has provided a large amount of materials to prove the general applicability of Western linguistic theories; the study of Chinese language thus has abandoned its own traditional linguistic advantages to turn blindly and slavishly to Western linguistics, resulting in the emergence of a large number of "tracking researches", among which some are even willing to "inherit it completely", "stretching the seams in putting on the coat".

However, this is not to say that Western linguistic theories do not apply to the research of Chinese language, but to point out the problems of the perspectives on the Chinese linguistic study and to cast off a narrow nationalist focus. We must admit that traditional Chinese linguistics has provided limited theoretical achievements. Its causes are various, but the most important one is the huge differences between Chinese and Western linguistics in the three aspects of materials, methods and purposes, among which the research purposes and methods of Western linguistics are vividly dissimilar to Chinese ones, for the ultimate goal of the latter is to interpret classics, but not to analyze the features of their own language.

In addition, Chinese linguists do not attach much importance to learning and understanding the languages of other nationalities, leading to a lack of research on the resemblances between languages. Mr. Shen Jiaxuan, a linguist of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has made an academic report titled “Chinese Is not English”, whose emphasis lays on the features of Chinese language, and coincidentally, Yu Guangzhong, an expert and a poet from Taiwan, has also made an presentation named “When Chinese Encountered English”, which also stresses the unique nature of the Chinese language. The former is, of course, from the linguistic perspective, while the latter a literary view, but both stress the research of features of Chinese language.

As international promotion of the Chinese language has been the country’s cultural development strategy, especially after the
establishment of Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL) as an independent discipline.

In my opinion, study of the characteristics of the Chinese language must attract great attention from academic circles, and also needs an in-depth study with theoretical and thorough thinking, or it will be difficult to carry out the teaching process of Chinese to foreigners effectively and even harder to reach the goal of international promotion in the future.

2 PERSPECTIVE ONE: TYPOLOGICAL VIEW

The famous Swedish Sinologist Bernhard Karlgren has made many precise elaborations on the typological layer of Chinese characteristics in the early 1920s, and also has pointed out numerous key points in Sound and Symbol in Chinese published by Oxford University Press in 1923:

Chinese is a kind of mono-syllable isolating language with no inflection and adjunct, but plenty of monosyllabic compound words; it has not real part of speech and expresses grammar category by word order; it consists of distinguishing written and colloquial types, etc.

Since the late 1930s, research of Chinese ontology has attracted much attention, which Li Jinxin and other great masters have been devoted to. In the 1980’s, Lv Shuxiang, Zhu Dexi, Zhang Bin, Hu Yushu, Lin Tao and other great experts have made fairly accurate interpretations and conclusions about Chinese phonetic, lexical and grammatical features in the Encyclopedia of China. After the 1990s, some experts who study in TCSL have put forward it’s pedagogy, i.e. that it must focus on characteristics of Chinese language. As Professor Lv Bisong has once put it:

Abstract frame the correct understanding and elucidation of it benefits in improving the teaching methods, grasping the focus, strengthening teaching pertinence, and helping students overcome the interference of L1, enhance confidence in learning, and shorten the duration of development of Chinese thinking process.

As for the study of the later age, it just has had in-depth discussion of the divisions of voice, vocabulary, grammar respectively, lacking general summary and analysis of primary and secondary. In the foreign language field, scholars have made a long-term effort on it, but most of them are limited to the study of pure linguistics or the study used to guide foreign language teaching, which is of a little use to guide TCSL.

There is no doubt that such characteristics are absolutely extracted from typological comparison and reflected not only in the system of Chinese language but on multiple levels, which embodies the ideas of the stereo research paradigm called “Pu-Fang-Gu” (Pu means Putonghua, Fang means dialects, Gu means the Chinese language used before 1919) highly praised by the academia. From linguistic typology, Chinese is a non-morphological language, and the independence of syntax is weak in Chinese Language. As such, it has been proposed that some systems of covert syntax must exist to compensate. Moreover, these covert syntactic forms would be expected to be closely linked to semantic relations. Particularly, it is much more important that the comparison should be based on synchronic states, and thus we can express the extractives through the perspective of typology. Furthermore, It should be different from the characteristics of ancient Chinese diachronically, and, synchronically to say, also be diverse from what are got form the research of Chinese ontology, if we want the aim that the characteristics of Chinese language will be highlighted through the comparison with the various language all over the world to be achieved.

The syntactic and semantic features of words are sensitive to context in many languages, and these features suggest that the processing involved in Chinese simple sentences is similar to those involved in Indo-European languages. In recent years, influenced by the western linguistics emphasizing the research of the universalities of language, the study of Chinese characteristics has been weakened, which is just the tip of the iceberg. What is worst is that neither the research of typological features in the Chinese language nor the description of it is enough, and even more problematic is how to make use of it in TCSL, for which the attention of academia is still far inadequate.

The research of TCSL strongly distinguishes itself from the study of pure linguistics, as it does not pursue the systematization of the theories and integrity of knowledge, but starts from its own requirements, and focuses on the difficulty of the practical teaching processes, as well as the similarities and especially the differences between the Chinese language and the mother tongues of the students. For these reasons, the research team at the Southern Base of the Confucius Institute Headquarters at Xiamen University has attached particular importance to the typological research nowadays.

3 PERSPECTIVE TWO: COGNITIVE VIEW

At the beginning of this century, a round table putting forward a concept of converging technologies had been jointly launched by the international scientific community led by the U.S. in Washington, with dignitaries from all walks of life including scientists and government officials. The subject of the conference was on the "converging technologies for improving human performance",
which focused on coordination and cooperation of four major areas: nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology, and cognitive science, abbreviated as NBIC, and has been a key point of the scientific system by now. And among the four areas, the focus on cognitive phenomena such as perception, learning, memory, reasoning, language understanding, attention, and emotion, consists of multiple research disciplines, including psychology, philosophy, neuroscience, linguistics, and anthropology, for which linguistics deserved an unique place in the modern scientific system.

The Linguistics in modern cognitive system, that it is a kind of science of language distinguishing from the narrow and traditional one and embraces Formal Linguistics and Functional Linguistics as well as other subjects related to linguistics, is a general concept. Although a part of cognitive science, it is such an important principle, gradually developing toward the direction of cognition, that takes a fairly significant responsibility to explore the nature and rules of structure human languages (including prosodic features, syntactic structures, semantic relations), so the study of the characteristics of the Chinese language should inevitably conform to such trends.

It should be noted firstly that with the perspective of cognitive research, the essential feature of Formal linguistics presented by the Transformational Generative Grammar in 20th century is "decontextualization", that is, to analyze discourses out of a certain context completely. And the historical logic of such study background in the twentieth Century can be grasped if one takes the theory of Saussure's structuralism linguistics as the point of observation. However, a new trend of development of linguistics emerges, i.e. The increasing tendency of "contextualization", among which the "cognitive linguistics" reflects such phenomena more than any other linguistic branches. To classify the social attributes of a language based on communication into the category of context is closely related to the change of universal ideology of a language phylogenetically.

At the same time, the reintroduction of the study of vocabulary is also an important direction. As far as cognitive linguistics is concerned, the contextual function of it is most fully embodied in Construction Grammar. This theory starts from an understanding that syntax and vocabulary are not completely separated, and there is a continuum between them, a so-called "construction", referring to the syntactic structures containing lexical materials. In fact, this theory is also a very obvious trend even within the generative linguistics field. And it seems that such tendency indicates that the rules of the language description actually can be applied to the description of vocabulary, so the lexical features of Chinese language is worth exploring.

Finally, the significance should become the center of research of the system of linguistics theory. The performance of structure of a language is conceptualization. That is to say, the conceptualization, containing the images of words, the path of perception and combination of meaning and so on, is the core content of the language structure and more profound than the pure reference. In addition, languages are based on experience, whose products are the very conceptualizations. In other words, conceptualization and the reality of human-experience are closely related and even so is the semantic feature of Chinese language. The interaction between language and conceptualization has become the focus of the study of language, and, in this sense, what is reflected in the cognitive study of language is the ideas and concepts whose significance has been contextualized.

The trend of contemporary linguistics, which is based on the cognitive perspective, make us reflect on whether the study on the features of Chinese must also be put against the cognitive background, which may be completely in tune with TCSL that is regarded as a cognitive process.

4 PERSPECTIVE THREE: WITH REFERENCE TO VIEWS OUTSIDE CHINA

The concept of it, that it makes use of foreign literature material as well as the theoretical awareness of foreign scholars in studying the characteristics of Chinese language, has different perspectives, frameworks and methods. Recently Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters has rolled out "Confucius China Study Plan" program, which in fact helps to guide Western students to understand and study Chinese, while Westerners’ ideas and opinions should be understood by the Chinese. Such an approach can be used to carry out the studies of Chinese characteristics with the view of generalized elsewhere reversely and can be an indispensable complement to the research in typological characteristics of Chinese language and cognition.

Before the Western sinologists started researching specific topics in China in the 16th century, the first step for them was to acquire Chinese, for which a large number of monographs, dictionaries, textbooks and so forth referring to Chinese teaching had left, providing plenty of literature materials for studying Chinese language and portraying an unique and significant view of research of Chinese linguistics among Western Sinologists.

Western Missionaries and Sinologists were shocked by both the thoughts inspired by cross-language contacts and the impact made by alternative linguistic phenomenon in Chinese
language and the extraordinary frame of Chinese culture.

Most of them, with good linguistics foundation, were trained by Latin grammar and familiar with their native language grammar, mainly the Romance Language. Thus, it formed an extremely noteworthy phenomenon of Chinese language and culture existing in the Western world as a special type, so the Western Sinology should have been an indispensable part of Chinese academic system. As Zhang Xiping, a professor of Beijing Foreign Studies University, said there were three regions where the research in the Chinese language was carried out since the modern times: the first one is Europe, the second one is the Hong Kong, Macao, and Southeast Asia, and the third one is mainland China where the research on Chinese grammar was greatly influenced by the achievements of early modern Europe until the end of the 19th century.

The first work of Chinese grammar Arte de la linguæ sinensis (Arte de la lengua Mandarina) by Francisco Varo was published in 1703, followed in 1831 by Joseph Henry de Prémare’s Notitia Linguae Sinicae (the first systematic grammar work), there were dozens of publications of that field after that period. According to statistics, as of 1921, the works on research in Chinese language by Western Sinologists reached 1221. It merely reached 100 before 1800, according to the Statistics of London Library. It was thus clear that most of the works were published after 1800 and thus it showed the high value put on the subject by Western sinologists. Form views outside China, one can extract the relevant materials from those works, which is an important way to carry out research on the characteristics of the Chinese language.

There have been many Western scholars who were simultaneously learners, researchers, and educators of the Chinese language, and many masterpieces whose original purpose though was for Westerners to acquire Chinese more easily, but they objectively play a role in the understanding of the characteristics of Chinese language for Westerners. From the earlier Francisco Varo, to the later Robert Morrison, Joseph Edkins, James Summers, and even today's Jerry Norman, the scholars are not only form Chinese cultural circle including Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Vietnam and other countries, but also the cultural circle of Western culture, who have revealed the peculiarities of the characteristics of Chinese language in their works which need systematically and in-depth studies.

Existing in unique forms, these Chinese researches of Western Sinology connected Chinese Linguistics with European Sinology, prompted the academic construction of Chinese Linguistics system by the collision and interconnection of Sino-Western linguistic ideas, and also pushed the subject development of European Sinology, therefore they are of especial significance in terms of academic history. Therefore, we tried to take early European sinology as the starting point, revealing the results in its research on the characteristics of the Chinese language, which may be cross referenced to today’s domestic researches to complete the considerations on the features of Chinese language.

What still needs to be payed attention to is that there has neither been due importance attached to the studies of the Western Sinology in the fields of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar of characteristics of the Chinese language, nor enough results of comprehensive thematic research obtained by Chinese academia from this point. Therefore, against the background of Chinese international education spreading like a storm, the research in such field is badly needed and the quality of it should be improved.

5 CONCLUSION

There is no other country in the world that possesses richer resources about Chinese language than China, so it should be able to make a greater contribution to the study of the world's language characteristics.

The linguistic facts of Chinese language should observe typologically, Cognitively, and objectively at least, which can correct the mistake of the study of Indo-Europeanized Chinese ontology, get rid of the trend of divorcing from realities and ignoring applications to language teaching, and, at the same time, change the situation that Western teaching theories are just simply copied in TCSL, leaving the characteristics of the Chinese language neglected according to which the class process should have been carried out. Toward those directions, is the very academic aim we pursuit.

As Feng Shengli, a professor of the Chinese University of Hong Kong worries about how valuable the study of Chinese linguistics would be for foreigners after many years. No study, no improvement.

As the significant improvement of international status of China and its language, to construct research system of the world linguistics must embrace the Chinese pattern, for which the development of Chinese linguistics should be understood by the external world. Chinese language is the world’s, and so is the research of it.

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