Negative Transfer of Chinese in English Learners' Lexical Learning: A Markedness Theory Perspective

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Abstract

Based on the markedness theory, the article discusses the negative transfer of Chinese in English learners' lexical learning from the morphological, semantic and pragmatic perspectives, proposes that raising the English learners' markedness awareness and encouraging the students to read extensively to enhance their communicative competence facilitates overcoming the negative transfer.

Key words: Markedness theory; English lexical learning; Negative transfer

INTRODUCTION

Having witnessed the thriving between the 1950s and the early 1960s, the decline between the late 1960s and 1970s, and the re-rising in the mid-1980s, the study of language transfer in SLA,one of vital components in the SLA research, has developed from the perspectives of the behavioral Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) to Interlanguage Hypothesis and the current cognitive approach with the focus shifting from the L1influence in SLA to how L1 influences SLA. Both CAH and Interlanguage Hypothesis are somewhat limited in that the former holds that SLA is a continuous process of eliminating negative influence of L1 by comparing the differences between L1 and L2 to predicate L2 learners' possible difficulties in SLA, exaggerating the L1's passive influence while the latter denies L1's importance in SLA by belittling the roles of L1 in SLA and the existence of language transfer.

English learning in China has long been criticized for being time-consuming and ineffective because many English learners fail to communicate fluently and appropriately despite China's boasting of having the largest number of English learners and increasingly early English education. As transfer of the native language (NL) is a complex cognitive process as well as a pragmatic problem, its study not only concerns with contrastive analysis, but also deals with the pragmatic environment, cognitive mentality, learners' individual differences and their interactions. Markedness theory provides a new insight into the study of the negative transfer of Chinese in English learners' lexical learning by predicting possible difficulties in their English lexical learning and areas where the negative transfer of Chinese might take place so as to improve their lexical learning efficiency.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Studies in the Concept of Markedness

The very notion of markedness, a specific kind of asymmetry relationship between elements of linguistic or conceptual structure, was initiated by N. S. Trubetzkoy, a Russian linguist of Prague School structuralism in 1931 to analyze distinctive features of phonemes by distinguishing privative opposition, gradual opposition and equipollent opposition. For example, in the pair of opposite phonemes /t/ and /d/, the former is unmarked for being voiceless whereas the latter is marked for being voiced.

Jacobson (1932 & 1939) introduced the concept of markedness to the study of morphology and language acquisition, holding that the marked element of grammatical meanings "announces the existence of [some meaning] A" while the unmarked element "does not announce the existence of A, i.e., does not state whether A is present or not" ,and the marked and unmarked terms can be shown respectively by using the symbols of "+" and "-". As a result of the differences in degree, frequency, and number, the unmarked tends to be much more basic, natural, normal, and easier to attract people's attention, store and retrieve than the marked.

With the publication of *The Sound Pattern of English* (1968), Chomsky combined markedness theory with generative phonology to relegate the notion of markedness into the generative grammar research system, holding that phoneme is a combination of marked and unmarked features, markedness is a bilateral, arbitrary and dynamic concept, a part of UG, shared by all languages. According to UG, grammatical rules can be divided into core and peripheral, with the former as such; markedness is one of the structural components of phoneme, a method of generalizing different categories in phonetic systems of different languages. To Chomsky, the core grammatical rules are unmarked whereas the peripheral ones marked.

Analyzing and comparing some linguistic phenomena in probing into communalities of different languages in the world and their interrelations in the data-driven approach, Greenberg (1966) holds that linguistic universals are based on the linguistic typological research and the notion of markedness in linguistic typology is relative in contrast to that of absolute markedness of Prague School. The universal linguistic features shared by most languages are unmarked whereas those owned by a specific language or accessible in few languages are marked, consequently, the unmarked linguistic components are much more extensively distributed and larger in number than the unmarked ones. Besides, Greenberg lists the hierarchy of markedness in terms of number: trial, dual, plural and singular, with one category (like number) connecting with the other category (like noun) to form a related marked continuum. Take noun as an example, an individual noun is unmarked whereas a collective noun is marked; for an individual noun, its singular form is unmarked while its plural form is marked; however, for a collective noun, its plural form is unmarked whereas its singular form is marked.

Markedness defined from the linguistic angle is a relative, ambiguous concept as the identification of markedness of certain linguistic features must use other linguistic features as a frame of reference, resulting in researchers' divergent judgments of the markedness of the same linguistic features. Kellerman (1977) argues that markedness may be defined from the cognitive angle by employing the native speakers' perception of a given feature of NL such as whether it is prototypical and regular, whether its meaning or structure is explicit and whether its denotation is extensive to decide the markedness of the feature rather than depending on linguists' data analyses. Kellerman (1983) regards such markedness as the linguistic prototypicality, which is closely connected with markedness despite various perspectives and data-collecting approaches. Markedness is linguists' observations and descriptions of the core-peripheral relationship of different parameters within the same linguistic category whereas prototypicality is the learner's perception, a psycholinguistic markedness. Ellis (1994) holds that markedness defined in the cognitive perspective is more practicable.

1.2 Language Transfer in SLA: A Markedness Theory Perspective

Eckman (1977), Kellerman (1979), Zobl (1982) and Ellis (1986) relegate the notion of markedness into the study of language transfer in SLA with one of the important conclusions that the markedness degree of the target linguistic form in contrast to that of the native language may determine the possibility of NL transfer.

Eckman's Markedness Differential Hypothesis (MDH) (1977) states that the degree of difficulty in SLA corresponds to the notion of typological markedness, one of the important factors to decide the interlingual transferability; and differences between a learner's NL and TL will lead to the following situations:

• Those areas of the TL that are different from the NL and are relatively more marked than in the NL will be difficult;

• The degree of difficulty associated with those aspects of the TL that are different and more marked than in the NL corresponds to the relative degree of markedness associated with those aspects;

• Those areas of the TL that are different than the NL but are not relatively more marked than in the NL will not be difficult.

Kellerman (1979) argues that at the preliminary stage of his/her TL learning, a learner tends to transfer marked and unmarked components of his/her NL; the transfer of marked parts will gradually stop with the improvement of his/her learning. Zobl (1982) regards language transfer as a complimentary device to language learning, taking place when a learner finds the TL linguistic rules obscure or ambiguous, i.e., marked, he/ she tends to use his/her NL, with such ambiguity originating from the typological specialization, incompatibility or uncertainty of the TL rules, indicating that when the markedness of TL is much more salient than that of the NL,NL transfer is of strong likelihood. In other words, language transfer carries structural predispositions.

Ellis (1986) argues that Markedness theory makes up for the deficiency of CA by answering why some differences between the NL and the TL can cause learning diffculties. He generalizes the relationship between the NL transfer and markedness in the following chart.

	Native language	Target language	Interlanguage
1	unmarked	unmarked	unmarked
2	unmarked	marked	unmarked
3	marked	unmarked	unmarked
4	marked	marked	unmarked

The above research involves the L2 learning with the learner's NL and TL belonging to the same typology. As English belongs to the Indo-European language family whereas Chinese falls into the Sino-Tibetan language family, their differences in culture, history, geography, customs, logical thinking, and linguistic structures outweigh their similarities, which means that Chinese vocabulary fails to find absolute equivalents in English, even the same phrase or word may carry different meanings leading to glossary vacancy. Probing into Chinese transfer in English learning in China is of vital practical importance and theoretical value. However, research in markedness theory in China somewhat lagged behind with the first introduction of Markedness theory in the 1980s. The 1990s and 2000s have witnessed Chinese scholars' introduction of the latest findings of markedness theory research in the western countries and application of the theory into language learning in China.

LIAO Fei (1998) proposes that differences in grammatical rules between Chinese and English are not sufficient to be major evidence of language transfer in SLA. Language transfer will not take place when the NL is marked while the TL is unmarked, but it may happen when the NL is unmarked whereas the TL is marked. SHEN Jia-xuan (1999) proposes four criteria of distinguishing markedness from unmarkedness: structure, distribution, frequency and cognitive complexity; and advances a new markedness theory by emphasizing the relativity and relevance of a new markedness pattern. WANG Li-fei (2002) describes the historical development of markedness theory research and discusses its new extensions into other linguistic fields. XI Xiao-ming (2005) employs Markedness theory in teaching lexicology in terms of morphological structure and meaning of words with an analysis of its cognitive motivation.WANG Yuan-ying (2010) proposes that negative transfer plays a major role in learners' acquisition of non-agentive passive voice, and offers the pedagogical implication. These findings pave the way for the author's further study.

3. NEGATIVE TRANSFER OF CHINESE IN ENGLISH LEARNERS' LEXICALL LEARNING: A MARKEDNESS THEORY PERSPECTIVE

Vocabulary is an organic combination of sound, form and meaning. The markedness degree forms a continuum from small to big. The stronger the markedness, the more difficult it is to learn. Negative transfer of Chinese in Chinese students' English learning can take place at the morphological, semantic and pragmatic levels.

3.1 Morphological

The abundant English morphological changes are marked in contrast to Chinese, an unmarked isolated language, having no grammatical morphemes. As articles are absent in the Chinese grammar, many students tend to make mistakes in the following cases: a) using *a* instead of *an*; before the vowel phoneme, e.g., have *a* English class; b) abusing *the* in place of the zero article, e.g., I plan to *the* New Zealand…; c) omitting *the*, e.g., a part of (*the*) environmental protection law; d) misusing *a* in the place of zero article, e.g., *a* beautiful sights; e) omitting *a*, e.g., if you fail to find *(a)* new job.

Case does not exist in the Chinese grammar either; neither does Chinese has morphemes to denote the grammatical relationship such as subject, direct object and indirect object within a sentence. In addition, the possessive case of Chinese nouns has no inflectional changes in English. Consequently, many Chinese students are likely to make mistakes in omitting" or *'s*, e.g., the nation (*'s*) pride.

As far as number is concerned, most common nouns in English can be divided into countable nouns and uncountable nouns, and a plural noun may have a plural marker like -s. However , seldom manifesting itself in morphological changes, the concept of number in Chinese is indicated by adding a quantifier denoting plurality "XIE" after a dexis like "NA XIE CHUAN SHUO" or by an adverb "DOU" to denote the plural meaning of subject or object. Therefore, the negative transfer of the Chinese and the students' ignorance of such grammatical differences or failure to command them lead to their omission of the plural marker -*s*, as can often be seen in the example of *one of the outstanding strength(s) is….*

Besides, English adjectives and adverbs often show differences in quality, quantity and manner by suffixes -er and -est or by using adverb modifiers such as most, more, less, and lest. In contrast, Chinese adjectives have no such grammatical categories as comparative degree or superlative degree to compare things but resort to lexical devices like "BI", "JIAO", "GENG" and "ZUI". The sentence "*She is beautiful than any girl in her class*" is semantically acceptable but grammatically incorrect for an English native speaker.

As various forms of English prefixes denoting negation such as mis-, un-, ir-, il-, dis- are marked in contrast to the unmarked Chinese word "BU", some students might coin some words with wrong prefixes. Besides, "man" in English may denote the masculine while "woman" refers to the feminine in general, but "man" can be neutral and unmarked in a specific context to denote the human beings as in the sentence "Anxiety is modern man's natural state". Similarly, an unmarked masculine noun can cover the meaning of the marked feminine noun such as host-hostess, waiter-

waitress, and hero-heroine. But in Chinese "ZHU REN is neutral, unmarked whereas "NAN ZHU REN" and "NV ZHU REN" are marked denoting the "host" and the "hostess" respectively. For an English beginner in China, he may feel it easy to master the word "host" for it is unmarked in Chinese and English as well, but he might not use "hostess" correctly and fluently until he realizes "*woman host*" is inappropriate with the increase in his linguistic knowledge and language awareness in gender differences.

3.2 Semantic

Negative semantic transfer shows itself in the misuse of the meaning of a word, obscuring parts of speech and wrong collocation.

Words with similar connotations in English and Chinese are unmarked whereas those with different connotations are marked. A case in point is "LONG" in Chinese is a mascot in the traditional Chinese culture symbolizing the supreme royal power, dignity, nobility, fortune and success as well whereas "dragon" in English is a monster referring to a wicked person. The disparities between semantic markedness in the connotative meaning may result in some Chinese students' literal translation of "hoping one's children to have a promising prospect" into "hoping one's children to be a dragon in the future". Another example can be seen in using the word "individualism". In English it carries a commendatory sense as innovation, independence, and fair competition are valued in the western culture while in China "GE REN ZHU YI" carries a derogatory sense for collectivism is highly advocated in the Chinese culture. Therefore, "individualism", unmarked for the native English speakers, is marked to Chinese students, which may arouse a communicative breakdown if they fail to master its connotative meaning.

Besides differences in the connotative meaning of a word, those divergences in affective meaning between Chinese and English may cause negative transfer in Chinese students' English lexical learning too. Take "peacock" as an example, with its affective meaning in Chinese being positive, a propitious symbol in contrast to that in English being negative expressing "someone, especially a male, who is arrogant or likes dressing or behaving in a way that draws attention". Chinese students may confuse the meanings of the expressions like "as proud as a peacock" or "a young peacock".

As for parts of speech, many English words may need corresponding morphological changes if they are used as a noun and a verb, a marked phenomenon in comparison to that in Chinese where no such changes are needed. It is quite common to see some Chinese students express themselves in using improper parts of speech, as in the example of "I worry about your *safe* (safety)".

Last but not least, Chinese students tend to make a great number of mistakes in collocations. Many English collocations such as "addled eggs", "a foul fish" and "nauseating airs" are conventional and unmarked, but their Chinese equivalents "CHOU JI DAN ", "CHOU YU" and "CHOU JIAZI "are strongly motivated and marked, which may make Chinese students difficult in mastering these English collocations. Sometimes the combinations of the same word with different expressions like "a handsome boy" and "a handsome lady" may result in divergences in motivations. The Chinese students are liable to master those strongly motivated collocations but use those weakly motivated ones less frequently. Sometimes, they may employ assumed synonyms, e.g., using "common ability" to replace "average ability" for their deficient semantic differentiation ability. In addition, when Chinese students fail to activate appropriate English expressions in their limited mental lexicon to express themselves, they tend to transfer Chinese in their English learning, coining some Chinglish like *little wealthy life* (a moderately prosperous society).

3.3 Pragmatic

Language is the carrier of culture. An individual's speech act reflects his social backgrounds and literacy. The unmarked symbols represent the principle of economy while the marked ones manifest the principle of accuracy. The cultural decoding is essentially a result of the marked being supplementary to the unmarked, and the decoding principles of the social cultural phenomena present the essence of these marked symbols.

The associative meaning of a word or a phrase which may be unmarked in one culture may be marked in the other because of the different illocutionary forces created by the lexical cultural connotations. For example, Chinese idioms related to "mouse" such as "SHU MU CUNNG GUANG" (as blind as bat), "SU DU JI CHANG" (narrow-minded) and "ZEI MEI SHU YAN" (thievish-looking) carry a derogatory sense, for a mouse being a humble and disgusting animal in the Chinese culture. In contrast, a mouse is cute and lovely, unmarked in the western culture. Consequently, a Chinese student may feel it strange when a "mouse" in English can denote figuratively "a girl" , "a rat" a freshmen in the American slang, and "mouse and man" all living creatures.

As for stylistic meaning, words or expressions unmarked in English and Chinese may be marked for Chinese students in their English learning. For example, "indignation" and its Chinese equivalent "YI FEN" are formal, but some Chinese students are inclined to frequently use the neutral unmarked "anger" instead of "indignation", failing to convey the formality appropriately. Sometimes they may even produce a sentence like "*Welcome to my humble house*" which is grammatically correct but pragmatically inappropriate for it only makes sense for "humble" to be used together with "residence", both formal expressions.

Although location nouns exist in both Chinese and English, using the location of the sun as a reference, they

are not absolute equivalents except for *northeast* and "DONG BEI" in Chinese. The "DONG NAN" and "XI BEI" in Chinese should be put into *southeast* and *northwest* respectively in English, a marked difference for the Chinese students, if they transfer the Chinese way of thinking into their English lexical learning, they sometimes cannot avoid the negative transfer in the cross-cultural communication.

4. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Markedness theory provides researchers a completely new perspective to interpret language transfer, especially native language transfer. What teacher and students should do to reduce the effect of negative transfer of Chinese in the Chinese students' English lexical learning?

4.1 Raising the English Learnerss' Markedness Awareness

Battostella's survey (1996) indicates that it takes L2 learners' 0.3 minutes slower to react to the marked vocabulary than the unmarked ones. Therefore, the learning of unmarked vocabulary in the SLA is of priori importance. As far as the morphological state of a word or its lexical meaning is concerned, the marked lexical items tend to denote a specific and additional meaning, derived from the unmarked typical members. An English teacher, the organizer, guide, promoter, participant and information provider of teaching activities, may start from guiding the students to master those unmarked basic English vocabulary for they are simple, frequently used and easy to memorize, then gradually shift to those marked complicated, irregular and extraordinary vocabulary to enlarge the students' vocabulary on the basis of teaching the basic category as a priority. For instance, a horse?, a general designation, unmarked, belongs to the basic vocabulary whereas a mare? and a stallion? are marked, respectively carrying a feminine and masculine semantic feature to show the gender difference. Meanwhile the idiom "as strong as a horse" is unmarked in the western culture but its Chinese equivalent should be expressed as "LI DA RU NIU", marked in the Chinese culture. Therefore, the teaching of basic vocabulary should go before the instruction of affixations and compounds. In explaining a derivative, the teacher may focus on its root, prefix or suffix to enrich the students' lexical knowledge.

In elaborating the meaning of a word, an English teacher can differentiate English synonyms in their denotations, connotations, collocations, associations, emotions, style, and register. For example, words like "anger", "indignation", "fury", "rage", and "wrath" denote degrees of marked displeasure. "Anger", the most general and unmarked, suggests a strong feeling of annoyance, displeasure or hostility resulting from humiliation, damage, criticizing or offense. "Indignation", somewhat formal, refers to anger or annoyance provoked by what is perceived as unfair treatment. "Fury", the strongest in the sense, denotes wild or violent anger. "Rage" stresses violent uncontrollable anger whereas wrath, a literacy term, describes the extreme anger that implies vengeance or punishment, chiefly used for humorous or rhetorical effect.

As the varieties and changeability in English collocation form a challenging difficulty for the Chinese students, an English teacher can pay attention to cultivating their collocation markedness awareness in the aspects of frequency, complexity, and idioms. Frequency is an important criterion in deciding the degree of markedness. The more frequently a collocation is used, the less marked it is and vice versa.

    e.g., a) He killed his girlfriend impulsively.

      b) It kills me to see her crying alone in the rain.

      c) He killed time all the day by surfing online.

"Kill" in the example "a" is unmarked but marked in the example "b" and "c", and the strongest in markedness in the example "c". As for cognitive complexity, the more complex a collocation is, the stronger its markedness is and vice versa. For example, "a lot of" can modify an uncountable noun and a countable noun, unmarked; but "a great deal of" can only modify an uncountable noun while "a number of" a countable noun, both marked. Collocated with a related word, a verb or a verbal phrase is of daily use and unmarked; but it is marked when used to reach certain rhetorical effects, like in the sentence "We stopped to drink in the beautiful scenery" where "drink" delivers a strong sense of indiocracy. Collocations in most idioms are set phrase, irreplaceable and strongly marked, as their origins can be traced back respectively to an ancient story or a legend. "Never buy a pig in a poke" is a good case in point, an idiom telling us that farmers in England would put the pigs into a poke to prevent their escaping before the sales. However, some inexperienced buyers would not realize they were cheated until they opened up to find that the pokes contained only kittens. The idiom aims at warning people of avoiding making an impetuous decision before taking any actions. Hereby, "buy a pig" is a set phrase, strongly marked, irreplaceable with other animals.

Sometimes, the teacher can combine the four criteria to help the students to judge correctly the degree of markedness. Look at the following examples. a) She stood there speechlessly, playing his mobile phone attentively. b) She cannot stand to be fooled like this. c) She left the kitchen quietly for failing to stand the heat and smell there. d) She was supposed to stand down as a Senate candidate. e) It's time for her to stand up for her rights. It can be concluded that the collocation of stand? here forms a continuum from unmarked to marked: unmarked- stood there < stand to be < stand the heat and smell < stand down < stand up for her rights.

4.2 Encouraging the Students to Read Extensively to Enhance Their Communicative Competence

In such a quick-fixed society, an increasing number of students tend to spend more time in chatting online or playing computer games than reading extensively,

let alone writing. Driven by the examination-oriented education, many college students in China just focus their English learning on textbooks, or even doing some exercises for passing CET-4 or CET-6. Without sufficient input and output, they will habitually find the Chinese equivalents to finish the communicative task, which unavoidably causes the negative transfer of Chinese.

Reading is not a one-way input, but a dialogue of the soul. Just as a Chinese saying goes, "after reading up three hundred Tang poems, you can at least intone poems even if you cannot write them." Generally speaking, the markedness feature of an article is not the author's unconscious breaking away from the conventions but the conveyance of some purposes or implications. Only by extensive reading, especially the original classics, can students find markedness within the article at semantic, syntactical, pragmatic and register levels, perceive the differences between the marked and the unmarked vocabulary in the given context, especially those marked culturally-loaded words and expressions, notice the correct appropriate use of those dictions in the given context, analyze the roles and purposes of the markedness, familiarize with the communicative settings involving the topic, the formality of the communicative occasions, the participants' age, gender, social status, and their intimateness, so that they can read between the lines to understand the writer's writing skills and the pragmatic effects of the discourse, have an insight into the similarities and differences between the eastern and western culture to broaden their horizon and express themselves accurately and idiomatically.

Furthermore, an English teacher can provide a lot of vivid, insightful and challenging learning material to arouse students' eagerness for knowledge, sharpen their markedness awareness, and compensate the monotony and boredom of the textbooks so as to improve their English proficiency. Meanwhile, he can encourage the students to participate in various forms of pre-reading or post-reading activities such as warm-up, presentation, debate, group discussion, literature review, and story rewriting, to leave sufficient room for the students' autonomous learning so as to consolidate what they have learnt, realize that markedness at different levels of language exerts various influences on their English lexical learning, so it is of vital importance to make good use of the positive transfer of Chinese to shorten the gap between their interlanguage and the TL.

CONCLUSION

Findings of SLA research demonstrate that SLA is a creative process of establishing and testifying hypotheses, in which learners always make use of all their prior knowledge to promote their L2 learning, showing the importance of L1 transfer. The understanding and interpretation of the same thing or the same concept vary from person to person as a result of the divergences in the cultural context. In the cross-cultural communication, the participants need to choose the appropriate dictions consciously or subconsciously according to the development of the cultural context to adapt to the various kinds of social systems, ethical cultural mentality, geographical environments and thinking patterns. They not only should have a command of the literal meaning of the TL word or phrase, but also its denotative meaning, connotative meaning, collocative meaning, associative meaning, emotional meaning, social meaning and stylistic meaning, to facilitate the smooth cross-cultural communication.

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