Characteristic Analysis of Mandarin Chinese From a Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

The linguistic study of Mandarin Chinese has added new dimension of language research and enriched linguistic theories. Mandarin Chinese displays a number of typologically salient features which is the manifestation of Chinese culture. Chinese empirical synthesis thinking pattern emphasize in changing, recognition of contradiction and the need for multiple perspectives and rely on experience-based knowledge. Western thinking pattern takes logic and formal testimony is the chief concern and concepts. Thus judgment and reasoning dominate the thinking procedures. Culture and mode of thinking permeates in all aspects of the social practice and contributed the diversity of languages. This paper analyzes the features of Mandarin Chinese in three levels from a cultural perspective. The most important characteristic of Chinese is that it is a parataxis language by contrast of English as a hypo taxis language.

Key words: Characteristic; Mandarin Chinese; Culture; Parataxis; Hypotaxis

INTRODUCTION

With the development of linguistics study on Mandarin Chinese, more and more evidence shows the specialty of Chinese that is quite different from the accepted characteristic of Indo-European languages. The research findings of Chinese linguistics has added new dimension of language study and enriched the theories. Chomsky said: "Language is a process of free creation; its laws and principles are fixed, but the manner in which the principles of generation are used is free and infinitely varied. Even the interpretation and use of words involves a process of free creation." The active part or the key of this process is the people who share the same culture. Thus to explain the specialty of a language cannot separated from examining the Cultural traits of the nation. Culture is intertwined with the mode of thought which is manifested through the philosophy, language, art, literature and daily life activity etc. Every culture and mode of thought is shaped by certain geography and the long history. It permeates in all aspects of the social practice and contributed the diversity of languages. We can roughly divide the world into orient and west area with China and ancient Greek and Rome or Europe and North America in modern time as their representatives. Confucius and Daoism can be considered as the great indigenous philosophical traditions of Chinese spirits which penetrate in all aspects of social activities. The core of Confucianism is humanism. Ren and Li are the key moral values. It emphasizes social harmony which is the great goal of Confucianism. Every individual is taught to play his or her part well with the knowledge of his or her place in the social order. Along with Confucianism, "Daoism" (sometimes called "Taoism") shaped the way people view the world. Chinese believe that change is the most basic character of things. In the Yi jing (Classic of Change) the changing patterns are symbolized by figures. In Daoism it is simply stated as yin and yang. Therefore, the east seems to be more comprehensive thinking, paying

more attention to intersecting web of social and personal relationships. It emphasizes the morality, harmony of the society; it promotes the collectivism, responsibility and devotion. In the West, logic was established as a formal discipline by Aristotle, who gave it a fundamental place in philosophy. Values of Western culture have, throughout history, been derived from political thought, widespread employment of rational argument favoring free thought, assimilation of human rights, the need for equality, and democracy. The western way of thinking emphasizes on logic and science, individual achievement, it promotes human right, equality and so on.

These differences are reflected in the languages. Mandarin Chinese is viewed to be Parataxis language (in a paratactic construction, elements of equal status are linked by pronunciation, or juxtaposition and punctuation.). It focuses on the continuous cohesion of meaning. That contrasts with a hypotactic construction, where one element is signaled as subordinate to another. English is more hypotactic focusing on the language cohesion in form.

1. THE CHARACTERISTIC ON THE PHONOLOGICAL AND MORPHEME LEVEL

Compared to other languages of the world, mandarin Chinese displays a number of typologically salient features. On the phonological and morpheme level, it is a tone language without consonant cluster but ample vowels which can be divided into Monophthongs and diphthongs. Each Chinese character generally corresponds to one syllable and one morpheme. And its syllable structure is relatively highly constrained. Since Chinese languages has as rich a vocabulary as any other living language, this results in a tremendous number of homophones with different characters. Since the 1970s the general view of Chinese characters is that it is ideo-phonograph belonging to the pictographic which is artistic, uncertain, vivid and rich in emotion but lack of rationality, while Western text belongs to the alphabet writing that is linear, certain, logic, rational, and lack of emotion. Ideas are expressed and implemented with the help of words. Different language symbols are bound to affect the mode of thinking. Chinese put emphasis on imagery and abstract images from viewing (观物取象). Although ever since last century many scholars home and abroad held to banish characters and take alphabet writing instead, the Chinese characters should not and will not be replaced by alphabet writing due to its cultural deposits.

One of the characteristic of Chinese in this level is that morpheme acts the same role as words. There are considerable number of bisyllable are separable words. For example,

放假 你就放你的假吧。
学习你学好你的习，其他不用管。

The flexibility of Chinese compound formation patterns makes it easy to invent new vocabulary as needed. However, the meaning of compound word is not transparent like "sweetness" in English. Taking "甘苦" for example, knowing the meaning of "甘" and "苦" does not necessarily get the meaning of the compound. It is more suitable to call these compound "integration" (Shen, 2010)

Another characteristic is Chinese noun contain verb. SHEN Jiaxuan (2010) figuratively expressed the relationship of noun and verb in English is like 男人和女人，while in Chinese the relationship is like "men" and "women". The relationship can be illustrated in the chart:
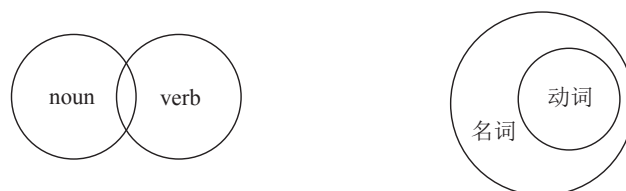
Chinese nouns contain verbs. Verbs can act as noun, for example, 哭没有用。The verb 哭 is subject.

Traditional Chinese grammarians only divided the words into two categories: substantial words and functional grammatical particles. This kind of division is closely influenced by Taoism which views everything in the world to be symmetrical---Yin and Yang only exist because of each other (孤阴不生，独阳不长). Even today, many words cannot be definitively classified as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, unless they are used in specific contexts. They can serve as one part of speech or another with no change in form or pronunciation. For example, in Mandarin, the word "画" can be a noun meaning "painting" or a verb meaning "paint", depending on context.

2. CHARACTERISTIC ON GRAMMATICAL AND UTTERANCE LEVEL

The form of language carries meaning. The east and the west have chosen quite different path in forms. Chinese is considered as parataxis language while English hypotactic language. On the grammatical level, the prominent feature is the fact that Mandarin is an isolating language with practically no grammatical morphology. Functions like tense of verbs or number in nouns are expressed through word order or particles and most modifiers such as adjectives and adverbs precede the words they modify. The adjectives and prepositions have the property of verb. Mandarin Chinese is viewed to be a topic-prominent language. That is different from English which is subject-prominent language. Some linguists have proposed the TC (topic-comment) syntactic model as a more appropriate one for Chinese, where a topic is introduced, and then

some comment is made on it. The problem to distinguish subject and topic has long been one of the core issues in the study of Chinese grammar. Many Chinese linguists suggest analyzing Chinese grammar is inseparable with pragmatics.

The noteworthy fact is that Chinese utterance has strong subjectivity (Subjectivity is used to describe judgments about truth or reality, which has self-marks in the statement, including attitude, position, and emotion and so on. It is often used in contrast to the term objectivity, which is described as a view of truth that is free from such biases.), and the speaker tend to adopt animate subject to describe the action or state. In English nominalization is often employed to avoid subjectivity and well serve the purposes of reasoning, while the Chinese dominant thought that man is an integral part of nature (天人合一) manifests in expression usually through blending knowledge, emotion and significant together, so it is prone to attach the subjective feelings into the description of objectivity. Abundant subjective modifiers like "伟大" "显著" "热烈" etc. in Chinese media well illustrate this trait. Most of the function words in the Chinese language can be used to express a variety of subjective meanings, such as "就" and "才". "玩了一小时就不玩了", "就"indicates a subjective shortness. "玩了一个小时才不玩". "才" express one hour is already too long.

Chinese culture emphasizes introspection. Dao existed in one's heart, and to know the true self is the way to know everything in the world. Ancient Chinese did not consider nature as the target to explore but personify the nature or add individuals' feelings and experiences to the perception of nature. On the contrary, the west philosophers thought that ideas—the forms—had a genuine reality and that the world could be understood through logical approaches to their meaning, without reference to the world of the senses. If the senses seemed to contradict conclusions reached from first principles and logic, it was the senses that had to be ignored (Nisbeet, 2004, p.8).

The sequence of Chinese words in a sentence follows the natural order. For instance, the answer to the question: "where is the book?" in Chinese is "书在房子里的桌子的抽屉里". It is the order how to find the book. First you enter into the house, and then find the desk, finally open the drawer to get the book. The structure is linear and not necessarily restricted to SVO, with little conjunctive words, abandoning the unnecessary part, only leaving the essence of the sentence. Thus run-on sentences are common in Chinese. By contrast, English sentences are more like a tree and bond to the forms. Western thinking traditions are very firmly based on logical thinking in which we start off with a certain way of looking at things and then see what we can deduce from that, this can be called vertical thinking since it involves building on what is accepted as traditional.

3. CHARACTERISTIC ON DISCOURSE LEVEL

Mandarin Chinese discourse's cohesion is parataxis, which means the relationship between the statements is expressed and interpreted through the internal logical relationship, rather than conjunctives structure cohesion.

E.g. a. 冬天，在四周围都是山地的这里，看见太阳的日子真实太少了。今天，难得雾是这么稀薄，空中融融地混合着金黄的阳光，把地上的一切，好像也照上一层欢笑的颜色。

b. 冬天，（因为）在四周围都是山地的这里，（所以）看见太阳的日子真实太少了。（但是）今天，难得雾是这么稀薄，空中融融地混合着金黄的阳光，把地上的一切，好像也照上一层欢笑的颜色。

c. In winter, sunny days were scarce here, as it was surrounded by hills all around. Today, however, the fog was wonderfully thin and the air was filtered through with golden sunlight that tinted everything on the ground with a joyful hue.(《中国翻译》)

In spite of the lack of cohesive ties, readers in general are satisfied with the interpretation that fits both with the text and with their mental image of the world. When reading, they fill the gap in the textual world with the knowledge derived from their experiential world.

e. g. a. 也不过只是星星点点闪烁的光明，而相看惯了，偶然不见，也有些想望与无聊。（冰心:雨雪时候的星辰）

b.（星星）也不过只是星星点点闪烁的光明，而（我）相看惯了（星星），（我）偶然不见（星星），（我）也有些想望与无聊。（冰心:雨雪时候的星辰）

c. Though they were a mere sprinkle of twinkling dots, yet I had become accustomed to them that their occasional absence would bring me loneliness and ennui (ZHANG Peiji, Trans).

English text emphasizes the lexical cohesion. The logic of Chinese discourse is spiral, which launches circle-like discussions until a mutually agreeable solution is found. Chinese writing usually follow the specific-to-general sequence, or the order of introduction—history review—explanation of status quo—the attitude—task in the future. However, with the influence of English writings, there are certain changes. English discourse linear which is first expresses the main idea, and usually develop it fairly direct and focused by deduction or classification.

Writing in English has often been characterized as based almost entirely on a deductive thought pattern such as that characteristic of Aristotelian logic, in which one properly begins with a general topic sentence and then systematically restricts its meaning by presenting more specific details at several levels of generality—proceeding from the most general to the least general (Norton, 1987).

CONCLUSION

Language and culture are from the beginning inseparably connected. People in the same culture developed shared mode of thinking which in turn shape the form of communication. The Characteristic of Mandarin Chinese is the manifestation of features of its Culture. The Chinese holistic approaches rely on experience-based knowledge rather than abstract logic and are dialectical, i.e. there is an emphasis in changing, recognition of contradiction and the need for multiple perspectives, and a search for the "Middle Way" (中庸) between opposing propositions (Nisbett, 2001, p.300). Westerners are more analytic and tend to involve detachment of the object from its context, and focus on attributes of the object in order to assign it to categories, and a preference for using rules about the categories to explain and predict the object's behavior. Inferences rest in part on decontextualization of structure from content, use of formal logic, and avoidance of contradiction (Nisbett, 2001, p.300). This paper, from cultural perspective, analyzed the characteristic of mandarin Chinese on phonological and morpheme level, utterance level and discourse level. The linguistic study of Mandarin Chinese contributes to the development of linguistic theories. Chinese is a tone language, and each Chinese character generally corresponds to one syllable and one morpheme which act the same role as words. The classification and function of word categories is unique, like Chinese nouns contain verbs. Chinese is a pragmatically-oriented language; as opposed to grammatically-oriented languages such as English. Most Chinese words do not have grammatical inflections. Therefore, the language relies heavily for its interpretation on its speakers'/listeners' knowledge of the real world. Chinese utterance has strong subjectivity. The sequence of Chinese words in a sentence follows the natural order and the discourse's cohesion is parataxis.

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