

English and Chinese Culture Differences from Linguistic Viewpoint

DIFFÉRENCES DE CULTURES CHINOISE ET ANGLAISE D'UN POINT DE VUE LINGUISTIQUE

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Abstract: According to the idea of some Anthropologists, i.e., Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, Sapir's student, the unique organization of universe that is embodied in each language might act as a determining fact or in the individual's habits of perception and of thought, thus forming and maintaining particular tendencies in the associated nonlinguistic culture. The idea provides us with a refreshing angle in understanding one of the important underlying causes for the difference between English and Chinese people in their ways of thinking, and thus induced ways of behavior toward their surroundings and some linguistic light on the historical myth mentioned by the famous British sinologist Joseph Needham and on why Chinese science ceased its development after Middle Ages.

Key words: Whorfian hypothesis, language, culture difference

Résumé: D'après certains anthropologues comme Edward Sapir et son étudiant, Benjamin Lee Whorf, l'organisation unique de l'univers implanté dans chaque langage peut être servie comme un déterminant sur l'habitude individuelle d'observation et de la pensée, qui détermine et maintient une tendance particulière dans la culture non-linguistique. L'idée nous permet de comprendre une des raisons implicites des différences dans la pensée entre les chinois et les français, et induit des manières de comportement envers leur environnement et donne une lumière sur le mythe histoire mentionné par le fameux sinologiste Joseph Needham et explique pourquoi le développement de la science chinoise a arrêté après le Moyen âge.

Mots-Clés: Hypothèse de Whorf, langage, différence culturelle

INTRODUCTION: LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

The exotic character of American Indian semantic structures, as manifested not only in their vocabularies but also in the relationships expressed by their morphological categories and syntactic patterns, has led a number of scholars to speculate on the relationships between language, culture, and habitual thought patterns or "world view". It was hypothesized that the unique organization of universe that is embodied in each language might act as a determining factor in the individual's habits of perception and of thought, thus forming and maintaining particular tendencies in the associated nonlinguistic culture.

As Edward Sapir put it: Human beings do not live in objective world alone, ... but are very much at the

mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society ... The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.

This idea was further developed, largely on the basis of work with American Indian languages, by Sapir's student Benjamin Lee Whorf, and is now often known as the Whorfian hypothesis. Whorf's initial arguments focused on the strikingly different organization of experience that can be found between English and Indian ways of saying "the same thing". From such linguistic differences, Whorf infers underlying differences in habits of thought. It then remains to show how these habits are manifested in non-linguistic cultural behavior. Thus Whorf points out that, in Hopi, words referring to units of time (e.g. "day") differ from

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other nouns in that they have no plural form; furthermore, they cannot be counted with the cardinal numbers (“one”, “two”, etc.) but only with the ordinals (“first”, “second”, etc.). From this he infers that when the English speaker speaks of “ten days”, as if the days were an aggregate of separate units, the Hopi speaker, on the other hand, thinks in terms of the cyclic recurrence of single phenomenon. Whorf attempts to support this idea by reference to Hopi ceremonial behavior, which involves repeated preparation for future events. If, in the Hopi view, each day is really a recurrence, rather than something new, then it is reasonable to believe that the daily repetition of ceremonial acts will have a cumulative effect on the future. As Whorf says, the Hopi belief is diametrically opposed to the English proverb that “Tomorrow is another day”.

The Whorfian hypothesis provides us with a refreshing angle in understanding one of the important underlying causes for the difference between English and Chinese people in their ways of thinking, and thus induced ways of behavior toward their surroundings and some linguistic light on the historical myth mentioned by the famous British sinologist Joseph Needham and on why Chinese science ceased its development after Middle Ages.

From years of language teaching, I constantly noticed the English Chinese language differences in their reaction to the world. These linguistic differences speak volumes for the different qualities of these two cultures. And it is this hidden factor that plays a much more fundamental role than the obvious, much discussed political, religious and geographical ones in leading to our present beings.

1. DIFFERENCES IN THE USE OF WORDS DESCRIBING NATURAL PHENOMENA AND FAMILY RELATIONS

Let’s start by comparing the richness of words the two languages have for certain category of things. For example, English has a richer variety of words describing animals making sounds than Chinese .

English	Chinese
a dog (barks)	狗叫
a cat (mews)	貓叫
a cow (bellows)	牛叫
a horse (neighs)	馬叫
a pigeon (coos)	鴿子叫
a hen (cackles)	母雞叫
a cock (crows)	公雞叫
a duck (quacks)	鴨子叫
a sparrow (chirps)	麻雀叫

From the above comparisons, we can see English has a specific word for each animal making sound, whereas, Chinese uses the word “cry” to describe them, except a few words used in written languages. Nevertheless, Chinese language has much richer cluster of words describing family relations than English does.

English	Chinese
Father-in law	岳父, 公公
Mother-in-law	岳母, 婆婆
Brother-in-law	姐夫, 妹夫; 內兄,
Sister-in-law	內弟; 大伯, 小叔
Uncle-in-law	姑子, 姨子; 嫂子,
Aunt-in-law	弟媳
Uncle	小叔子, 舅舅
Aunt	姨父, 姑父; 伯伯;
Niece	叔叔
nephew	伯父; 叔父; 舅父;
cousin	姑丈; 姨丈 姑媽; 姨媽 侄女、外甥女 侄子、外甥 堂/表兄弟; 堂/表姐妹

We can see in this example Chinese has much of a playfulness in its not unintended redundancy while forgets about the two proper terms for “uncle-in-law” and “aunt-in-law”, simply because they are too distant to be worthy of the trouble of making two more terms. The significance of these comparison means that the English has a strong sense of accuracy in observing the nature whereas the Chinese people concern themselves more about their internal affairs. This statement is also coherent to the self-evident historical facts in modern history.

2. DIFFERENCE IN NUMERICAL PERCEPTIONS AND PUNCTUATING

Then there is the difference in the numerical perceptions. The fact that Chinese nouns have no plural forms signifies a random, empirical attitude that sees no need for any far-reaching formal implementation. The casualness and subjectiveness in Chinese language are further demonstrated at the syntax level—the use of punctuations. The ancient written Chinese uses certain words to punctuate sentences, later there was the use of periods. At the turn of last century, Western system of punctuation, together with its grammar, was introduced into Chinese language. But because Chinese is not an inflectional language, there are no formal implements such as non-verbal and clause signifying words to signify its grammatical structure, so the uses of commas and periods are hard to find their disciplines. Much of today’s Chinese writings have run-on sentences in Western sense and many Chinese writers tend to punctuate their sentences according to the sense groups

rather than grammatical structure. The following passage is an example:

One way of smoking was this: the American Indians threw some tobacco leaves on a fire; then they put long tubes in their mouths. The other ends of the tubes were able to draw the smoke in their mouths.

有這樣一種吸煙的辦法：美洲印地安人把一些煙葉扔在火上，然後用嘴叼著長管子的一端，將另一端放在火焰上方，這樣就能把煙吸入口中。

3. DIFFERENCES IN RESPONDING TO NEGATIVE QUESTIONS

One more phenomenon worth noticing is the different response to negative questions. English responds only to the fact regardless of the questioner's way of inquiring "yes" or "no", whereas, Chinese responds to the questioner's way of inquiring, regardless of the fact. For example, a Chinese person who hasn't been to London replies to the question in Chinese: "你沒到過倫敦嗎?" ("Haven't you been to London?"), "是的，我沒有到過" (Yes, I haven't). This phenomenon tells much about the qualities of the two peoples. Chinese cares more about interpersonal relationships. They first take trouble to confirm the questioner's attitude and then to state the fact. Nevertheless, English stresses the importance of logical clarity.

4. CONCLUSION

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To sum up, the above linguistic difference shaped, and was shaped by the two different cultures, both of the two are great cultures of the world. In world's science history, Chinese culture played a very important role in the early stage and, because of the natural limitations, it contributed little to the later development in science which was, after the Middle Age, accredited to English and Western culture. Let's say this is two sides of a coin. Chinese way of thinking shines with its intuitiveness, non-linearity, and, often terms with the quality side of things, which are important characteristics of any initial process. That's why China made the great inventions of gunpowder, navigation compass, paper and the early printing technology known to the world and was unable to further their developments. For instance, the later development of gunpowder was largely quantitative precision and analysis which were then beyond Chinese ability and scope. The English stands out with objectiveness, formal soundness and instinctive quality perceptions that rationed out modern science. As modern science up to present is but, to an extent, a constant division and proportion of human understanding of the nature world. Or we should say it is a scientific relay. With the coming of the Pacific Age in the world's economic development, the relay baton is reaching Chinese hand and Chinese intelligence will have its play again.

Notes:

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