Order Iconicity in English Euphemism

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Abstract: This paper exploresorder iconicity in English euphemismfrom the perspective of cognitive linguistics. The study covers introduction,iconicity of language,order iconicity,the principle of order iconicity, order iconicity in English euphemismandconclusion.Order iconicity is mainly reflected at the syntactic level and it is primarily expressed in linear sequence of time and space.However, since English is a grammatical language, and there are many tenses, aspects and conjunctions to indicate the time of action, English sentence order can be free from the constraint of temporal order and can be arranged by the traditions or by authors' pragmatic intentions.

1. Introduction

Euphemism is a common phenomenon in language use. In human communication, people try to use more implicative language to weaken or eliminate various unpleasant associations, thereby increasing acceptability, identity and appropriateness of words in the process of communication, which can reduce the listener's mental stimulation and pressure, making it easier to accept and to achieve the desired communicative purpose and effect. It can be said that euphemism is a kind of "lubricant" in communicative activities. "Without euphemisms, the world would grind to a halt because of friction and people would be full of hatred." [1]

The English word euphemism comes from Greek and means a pleasant or auspicious way of speaking. English euphemism involves every aspect of western social life and reflects people's code of conduct, social customs, thinking mode, aesthetic taste, values and moral standards from different angles. Euphemism is not only a means of communication, but also a way of existence of "people and their world". This paper mainly uses the syntactic iconicity of cognitive linguistics to analyze English euphemism in order to find some characteristics of non-arbitrariness of language.

2. Iconicity of Language

The relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary advocated by Ferdinand de Saussure, which has influenced the development of linguistics for nearly a century and has been regarded as a "dogma" by many language scholars. With the development of linguistics, many scholars at home and abroad have questioned this. They believe that perception forms cognition of objective things and codes discourse by perceiving the objective world, so as to form a certain connection between language and objective things, which is based on human cognition. The "arbitrary speech" of language weakens the meaning function of language structure in human cognition, while the rival iconicity emphasizes the objective connection between language expression form and meaning. [2]

Especially from the perspective of language syntax, sentence structures are arranged in accordance with conventional expression norms under the influence of human cognition, which makes the organizational structure, form and conceptual structure of language form a mapping, revealing the universal characteristics and essential attributes of language.

The imitation world described by iconicity is not only to explain the inseparable relationship between form and content, but also to show the thinking characteristics reflected by language structure. Some foreign scholars have proposed that iconicity refers to the existence of different degrees of abstract mapping between form and meaning, from concrete attribute similarity to abstract relational analogy. The conflict between iconicity and arbitrariness of linguistic signs does not mean that the former outlaws the latter, but that both describe the relation between signifier and signified. Therefore, we cannot completely affirm the iconicity of language and deny the arbitrariness of language, and vice versa. The two should not be placed in a one-sided situation of dualistic opposition. They coexist, complement each other, and together constitute the essential characteristics of language.

Syntactic iconicity of language refers to the iconicity of some aspects of language symbols, their relations and the relations between meaning structures. In syntactic structure, "some aspects will reflect the structure of the world that people experience and directly reflect the structure of people's concepts". This is the most insidious form of linguistic iconicity because it involves human cognitive processes. Shi Shuzhi has pointed out that "syntactic rules are the projection of the laws of real objects in language." But this projection is not an invariable mirror projection because language is the result of man's conceptualization of reality. Through human "cognition", the reflection of language sign relation to the real world is no longer objective mirror reflection, but tortuous and metaphorical. [3] Therefore, syntactic iconicity refers to that the syntactic structure of language resembles the conceptual structure of thinking, which is the result of human cognition of the real world. There are many principles of syntactic iconicity, including order iconicity, distance iconicity and quantity iconicity. This paper mainly discusses the syntactic iconicity of English euphemism from the aspect of order iconicity.

3. Order Iconicity

Order iconicity can be defined as the order in which the linguistic elements are structurally arranged in relation to the concepts they express. Master Saussure has pointed out that language is linear, that is, the units of language can only be spoken one by one, stretching along the line of time. However, behind this linear surface, it is not the arbitrary jump of language units, but a certain order principle is working.

Language is the result of man's experiential cognition of reality. Living in the real world, people are always in a certain range of time and space, so people's perception of time and space order is bound to be reflected in language. The temporal sequence is typical of the linguistic sequence. Time order is also one of the most important and fundamental order in human cognitive structure. Human has long recognized the one-way flow of time. The one-dimensional state of time is naturally in harmony with the linear structure of language and even the arrangement of language elements is arranged on the time line. In addition, the occurrence and development of all things in the real world, as well as people's observation and cognition of the objective world, are all in time. [4] From the perspective of distance iconicity, the two adjacent events in the time stream naturally tend to be arranged together in the conceptual domain. In this way, the arrangement of concepts seems to appear sequentially with the flow of time, which is reflected in language as the arrangement of language components in the chronological order.

In addition to temporal order, the order of language can also resemble our perception and knowledge of the spatial order of objective things. Human beings have been living in a specific space since their birth, and the way they observe, recognize and conceptualize the world around them all affect the syntactic form of language. Different nations may adopt different order of observation and cognition, so that different syntactic order may be adopted accordingly when describing the world in language, but each syntactic order is the image of its conceptual structure.

4. The Principle of Order Iconicity

Order iconicity involves the relationship between the linear sequence of linguistic elements or structures and the concept it represents. It means that the order of linguistic form or structure is a reflection of the conceptual or experiential order the linguistic form or structure represents. According to Greenberg, the principle of order iconicity is that "the order of the element in language parallels that in physical experience or the order of knowledge."[5] It is not uncommon for the order of morphemes, words or sentences to reflect the logical relations among their referents.

Caesar's well-known saying Veni, vidi, vici (I came, I saw, I conquered) is a quite good example to illustrate order iconicity, for the sequence of the three linguistic elements corresponds to the order of the historical events.

5. Order Iconicity in English Euphemism

Order iconicity is mainly reflected at the syntactic level and it is primarily expressed in linear sequence of time and space. Today, more and more linguists have come to realize that in many languages, order of syntactic categories corresponds to the occurrence of actions. James H-Y Tai provides us with the principle of temporal sequence: "The relative word order between two syntactic units is determined by the temporal order of the states which they represent in the conceptual world." Simone gives his maxim of succession by default: If not otherwise expressly indicated, we assume that the order of clause resembles that of actions involved. Haiman points out that the order of clauses in a narrative will correspond to the order of events that they describe. It is obvious that there is no language known in which stories are regularly told backwards, with the narrative order being the reverse of the chronological order. Along the same lines, Jakobson maintains that the relationship in the co-occurring elements of two sentences reflects the relationship of the events described in the two sentences. That is, language structurally adapts to the iconic display of temporal order. This is also Saussure's famous "linearity of the linguistic sign". Consider the following cases in English euphemism:

(1) a. I wonder if you could turn off the lights before you leave out of the room?

b. I wonder if you could leave out of the room before you turn off the lights?

(2) a. Could you please go to the supermarket and buy a bag for me?

b. Could you please buy a bag for me and go to the supermarket?

Obviously, in (1), generally speaking, switches of lights are inside the room instead of outside the room. Therefore, you must turn off the lights first, and you can leave out of the room. In the same way, in (2), you must go to the supermarket at first, then buy a bag instead of buying a bag before going to the supermarket. Intuitively, (1a) and (2a) are acceptable because they follow the principle of temporal or logical order. (1b) and (2b) are semantically unacceptable because they violate the principle of temporal or logical order.

However, since English is a grammatical language, and there are many tenses, aspects and conjunctions to indicate the time of action, English sentence order can be free from the constraint of temporal order and can be arranged by the traditions or by authors' pragmatic intentions. Thus, there

can be or not correspondence between the sentence order and the temporal order. Of course, English euphemism is just the same case. For example:

(3) a. After losing all of his money, John began to need help in learning to respect the property rights of others.

b. John began to need help in learning to respect the property rights of others after losing all of his money.

Losing all of one's money is the euphemism of bankruptcy while to need help in learning to respect the property rights of others is the euphemism of to steal. In English, the subordinate clauses headed by some conjunctions such as after, when, before, etc. may precede the main clause or follow the main clause according to the author's pragmatic intentions. Clearly, the emphasis of the above two sentences is different. In (3a), the subordinate clause headed by after is emphasized whereas the main clause in (3b) is emphasized.

6. Conclusion

Iconicity of language provides us with a powerful external motivation for language structure and a new perspective of language, from which we can see that language is not an entirely autonomous system. It cannot be independent of meaning. Linguistic form is motivated jointly to a considerable degree by non-formal factors such as reality, physiology, cognition, semantics, pragmatics and the like. It is not difficult to predict that the study of iconicity as an approach in general will lend itself to the further understanding of the nature of language, the relationship between language and reality, language and cognition, sign and concept, and form and meaning, and that as a cognitive tool of language study and learning, iconicity will facilitate language analysis and make the learning and the application of language more meaningful and efficient.

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