

# *A Study on Distance Iconicity in English Euphemism*

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**Abstract:** The paper explores distance iconicity in English euphemism from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. It covers introduction, syntactic iconicity, English euphemism, distance iconicity and conclusion. From the study, it can be seen that the smaller social distance between speaker and listener it has, the less linguistic units, the less information and the less euphemistic it is. Conversely, the bigger social distance between speaker and listener, the more linguistic units it is, the more information and the more euphemistic it has.

## 1. Introduction

English Euphemism has been a hot topic in pragmatics for a long time. Most of the articles and books on English euphemism describe English euphemism from the perspective of pragmatics, social culture or human psychology, but there are few studies on English euphemism from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. This paper aims to find some characteristics of non-arbitrariness of language by analyzing the distance syntactic iconicity of English euphemism.

## 2. Syntactic Iconicity

Language symbols are arbitrary. For example, the same animal may be named by different language systems. Cat in Chinese becomes cat in English and katze in German. Without learning English or German, we have no idea what cat and katze mean. From this point of view, the relationship between linguistic symbols and objects in reality is arbitrary and conventional, but within a language, the relationship between linguistic units is rational and verifiable. In fact, for a long time, Saussure's arbitrariness principle has been regarded as the standard in traditional linguistics. Moreover, beginners in linguistics will also believe that arbitrariness is the common character of human language and an unshakable principle, that is, there is no justification between the form and the meaning of language, and the relationship between the signifier and the signified is established by convention.

However, with the rise of cognitive linguistics, the arbitrariness principle of language has been questioned. Cognitive linguistics holds that the relationship between the form and the meaning of language is not unrelated, and there is a rational basis between them, so it puts forward the principle of iconicity.

Pierce, an American semiotician, was the first to put forward iconoclast, using the term icon to indicate that the meaning is similar to a symbol. Iconicity not only means that language reflects the reality it represents to some extent, but also means that the form of language is similar to people's

cognitive way. In 1985, Haiman was the first to explore and analyze iconicity in language. Since then, the study of iconicity in foreign countries has been carried out from all aspects of language. In 1988, Mr. Xu Guozhang, a Chinese linguist, translated iconicity into iconicity for the first time. [1] Domestic scholars such as Lu Weizhong points out that the study of object similarity should be carried out from two aspects: on the one hand, to explore new principles of iconicity; On the other hand, attention should be paid to the interdisciplinary research of iconicity, which can also enrich the research content of other disciplines.

According to cognitive linguistics, iconicity is the justification between a language symbol and the meaning expressed by the symbol, which reflects the way of human perception, and iconicity is a universal principle in language. The author thinks that iconicity refers to the “simulacrity” and “imitation” of language, and the form of language imitates the meaning expressed.

Syntactic iconicity means the iconicity of some aspects of language symbols, their relations and the relations between meaning structures. “Some aspects will reflect the world structure experienced by people and directly reflect the conceptual structure of people” in syntactic structure, which is the most insidious form of linguistic iconicity since iconicity involves human cognitive processes. Shi Shuzhi views that “syntactic rules are the projection of the laws of real objects in language.”, which is also the view of many cognitive linguists. Language is not a gift, but is generated and formed in the interactive experience between people and the objective world, so the structure of the real world must affect the syntactic structure of language to some extent. [2] Philosophically, language and reality are isomorphic.

Many linguists believe that grammatical structure is the imitation of real structure and the projection of real structure on language. However, such reflection is a variable mirror reflection, since language is the result of man's conceptualization of reality. "There cannot be a direct relationship between realistic rules and grammatical rules and it needs to be through the medium of man's cognition". Through human's cognition, the projection of language sign that is in relation to the real world is not objective mirror projection any more, but metaphorical and tortuous. So what we mean by syntactic iconicity is the syntactic structure of language is the result of human cognition to the real world, which is the conceptual structure of thinking.

The similarity of syntactic structure and conceptual structure is reflected in many aspects of language, including the length, complexity, overlap, order, and marking. There are many syntactic iconicity principles corresponding to these syntactic representations, but generally speaking, in the study of linguistic iconicity, the three most deeply studied and generally accepted are distance iconicity, quantity iconicity and sequence iconicity. [3] These three principles of iconicity play an important role in both theoretical research and practical language teaching. This paper attempts to explore the distance iconicity in English euphemism to look for some characteristics of language, especially language's non-arbitrariness.

### 3. English Euphemism

Euphemism is a universal linguistic phenomenon in world culture. In order to avoid mentioning some concepts or things directly and avoid using language that may cause unhappiness, dissatisfaction or damage feelings and relationships, people often use some vague words in a roundabout way. This linguistic phenomenon is euphemizing and a large number of euphemism has come into being.

Euphemism, originally from Greek, meaning good speak, refers to the replacement of an unpleasant meaning or disrespectful expression with an unknown, pleasant or ambiguous term. Replace words that are repugnant, frightening or disgusting with words that are pleasant, subtle and less stimulating.[4] The use of euphemism will make the communication between people more

smooth and the effect more satisfactory.

#### 4. Distance Iconicity

The distance iconicity of language is the distance iconicity of symbols and concepts and the formal relation mirrors the meaning relation. The more closely connected the symbols are in the surface of the sentence, the more closely the meanings are in the concept and vice versa. Distance iconicity refers to the language units that are conceptually similar and belong to the same semantic field are closer together in a sentence. Distance iconicity can be explained from the perspective of intimacy distance in reality. If the distance between two people is from 0 to 0.5 meters, it indicates that the two people have a close relationship. The distance between people will be controlled according to the degree of closeness, and the distance between language units will certainly be controlled according to the degree of “closeness”.

The cognitive basis of distance iconicity is that similar or related things in reality are easy to be activated at the same time in human perception to form (psychological or cognitive) similar concepts, which tend to be processed together in thinking.[5] In the transformation from cognition to language, adjacent conceptual information naturally tends to be combined together, so the phenomenon of iconicity between symbol distance and concept distance appears on the surface of language.

##### 4.1 Distance Iconicity Principle

Generally speaking, distance iconicity involves both formal and conceptual relationships between linguistic elements, which is also named proximity iconicity. Givón has proposed the proximity iconicity and provided such statements as that the closer together the two concepts functionally or semantically, the more likely they are to be placed contiguous to each other lexically, morphotactically or syntactically. This idea is correspondent to the principle that what belongs together mentally is put close together syntactically. Newmeyer argues that the language’s distance between elements is equivalent to their conceptual distance.

From the perspective of vocabulary, the order of adjectives before English nouns can best reflect distance iconicity. If more than one adjective modifies a noun, the distance iconicity principle can explain the order of attributives. The research shows that the arrangement rule of many attributives in English is determined by the same cognitive reason, namely the principle of distance iconicity. Zhang Min has pointed out that the distance between attributive and central language depends on the distance between the concepts they express. According to Seilor, the attributive can be divided into “specialized signified” and “representational concept” based on its function. The former is mainly used to determine the object of reference, so it acts on the extension of the central language concept, such as “(that) table”. The latter is mainly used to influence the content of the concept, and therefore the connotation of the central concept, such as “(wood) table”. According to the definition of concept distance, if two concepts affect each other, then they are closer, so it is obvious that the latter is closer to the concept of the central language, while the former is far from the concept of the central language. Accordingly, we can only say,

(1) The wooden table

Instead of saying,

(2) Wooden the table

The more the adjective expresses the essential attributes of the noun, the closer it is to the noun. According to Marxist principles, the world is material, and the only property of matter is objective reality, so objective attributes are closer to things than subjective attributes [6]. For example,

(3) in a nice new black plastic pen

- (4) a pretty Chinese leather coat
- (5) the little white wooden houses

In the three noun phrases, plastic, leather and wooden are essential properties of things, so they are closest to the central noun. The tenses of verbs and the comparative or superlatives of adjectives are changed before and after themselves by adding the corresponding grammatical units, rather than by changing other words. For example,

- (6) She is the most beautiful girl in the class.

In the above sentence, the superlative of “beautiful” is achieved by adding “the most” to it, rather than adding “the most” to other words in the sentence. Distance iconicity in English is not only reflected in vocabulary, but also exists in syntax, such as,

- (7) Emily thinks it is her who breaks the window.
- (8) Emily doesn't think it is her who breaks the window.
- (9) Emily thinks it is not her who breaks the window.

In the above three sentences, by comparison, we find that “not” is farther away from the verb of the clause, the negation degree is weaker, and the tone is more euphemistic, while the third sentence is a sentence that does not conform to English grammar, indicating that English sentences follow distance iconicity.

In a word, the essence of distance iconicity is that the farther the formal distance between the linguistic forms indicates the farther the conceptual distance between the concepts they stand for, while the closer formal distance implies the closer conceptual distance.

## 4.2 Distance Iconicity in English Euphemism

Distance iconicity reflects the correspondence between formal distance and conceptual or semantic distance between linguistic components. The distance of linguistic form mirrors the conceptual or semantic distance. The closer an entity is cognitively or conceptually, the closer is the linear distance of its linguistic form, and vice versa. From the perspective of cognitive processing, the significance of distance similarity is that if components that are spatially adjacent to each other have imaginal proximity in neural structure, and then neuronal activation can occur cooperatively, thus shortening the processing time. This also fits the economic or labor-saving principle of language. The conceptual structure works like a network system. When a node is activated, the corresponding nodes are also activated. All other things being equal, the greater the degree of iconographic experience encoded, the easier it is to store, extract, and communicate.

The semantic distinctions reviewed so far may originate by what Breal 1897 called repartition. Through borrowing or sound change, a language attains doublets- more or less synonymous ways of expressing the same thing. To these fortuitous causes, one may add the transformational cause of “stylistic variation” which may, with constructions like the antipassive, be motivated by purely syntactic factors.

From the perspective of sociolinguistics or functional linguistics, pragmatics follows the principle that the complexity of language form is inversely proportional to the familiarity between speakers, that is, the more complex the language form, the less familiar the speakers are. The reverse is also true: the simpler the language, the greater the familiarity between speakers. Pragmatic distance iconicity refers to the fact that people often use different registers to express the same proposition due to different situations or contexts. Pragmatic distance iconicity is also called social distance iconicity. Specifically, the social distance between speakers corresponds to the length of information in the language they use, that is, the more polite the register, the greater the length of information in the language people use. And vice versa. This pragmatic principle reflects a symmetrical social distance between speakers.

In a way, the linguistic style can embody the separation of linguistic content and form. One of the linguistic principles is that politeness means distance. The more polite the speaker speaks, the more linguistic units, the more information and the bigger social distance are. Any X in a clear conversation, X=X while in a polite style, X=AXB, i.e., X is concealed in some special attached information. Generally speaking, an euphemism is longer than its substitution, e.g. die- pass away, be with God, fall asleep; criminal- social misfit; elevator operator-engineer of vertical transportation etc., as follows.

(10) Will you please close the window?

(11) Won't you close the window?

(12) Close the window, if you please.

(13) I would like you to close the window.

(14) Would it be too much to ask you to close the window?

The above five sentences all express “open the door”. The linguistic units in the first three sentences are smaller than that of the last two sentences. The first three sentences are less euphemistic than the last two ones, so we can feel that the social distance between the speaker and the listener in the first three sentences is smaller than that of the last two ones. From the above, we can see that the smaller social distance between speaker and listener it has, the less linguistic units, the less information and the less euphemistic it is. Conversely, the bigger social distance between speaker and listener, the more linguistic units it is, the more information and the more euphemistic it has.

## 5. Conclusion

Iconicity in cognitive linguistics is one of the most promising theories in recent years. There are a large number of iconicity phenomena in vocabulary, grammar, syntax and other aspects of English. Some aspects reflect the commonality of human beings, but due to the different experience of native speakers of English to the world, there appears a phenomenon that resembles their own experience.

In fact, except for English euphemisms, most languages, including English and Chinese, are characterized by iconicity, which is a common feature of human languages. Iconicity studies are based on cross-linguistic and typology. Due to the limitation of length, this paper only focuses on the analysis of syntactic distance iconicity in English euphemism.

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