

## **A Brief Exploration on the Guiding Significance of Contrastive Linguistics in College English Vocabulary Teaching**

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**Abstract:** There are similarities among people's thoughts which lead to the comparability among different languages. This paper takes the comparison between Chinese and English as a guidance for college vocabulary teaching in the aspects of word pronunciation, formation, and meanings.

Language is the expression of mind, so there are inherent connections between languages and human minds and these connections also exist in the perspective of human physiological mechanism. Now that there is consistency or similarity among the thinking mode of human beings, we can reasonably conclude that there is also consistency or similarity among different language patterns, which explains why people from different languages tend to have the same feeling toward the things reflected from the objective outside world. There is common experience among English learners that their mother language plays a role in almost every aspects of their English learning process and they subconsciously make comparison between English and their mother languages. As English teachers, if we can provide proper guidance and make appropriate comparison and analysis between English and Chinese, we can doubtlessly achieve better teaching effect.

### **1. Brief introduction of Contrastive Linguistics.**

The term "Contrastive Linguistics" was first put forward by American linguist B. L. Whorf in 1941. From 1945, another American linguist C1C1 Fries began to talk about Contrastive Linguistics in many articles and lectures. By compiling language learning textbooks on the base of Contrastive Linguistics, he had laid foundation for Contrastive Linguistics in the University of Michigan. The contrastive research of language in China was developed under the influence of western linguistic theories and syntactics. Chinese scholar Lu Shuxiang had systematically adopted the contrastive way to research the grammar of Chinese language in the book *An Outline of Chinese Grammar* which had thoroughly and detailedly compared the differences and similarities between literary classical Chinese and vernacular. He claimed in the book that "it is only through comparison that the differences and similarities of the expression of different language could be revealed". He also pointed out in the book *Chinese People Learn English* that "During the entire English learning process of Chinese students, they treat English as the language similar to Chinese and unconsciously compare the two languages".

The task of Contrastive Linguistics is to conduct contrastive research among two or more languages, describe the differences and similarities especially the different parts and apply the research result in other relative fields.

### **2. The present situation of college English vocabulary teaching in China.**

It is clearly stated in the revised edition of *College English Curriculum Requirements* issued by Ministry of Education in 2007 that vocabulary teaching is a significant part of college English teaching whose objective is to cultivate students' comprehensive ability of application, especially the ability of listening and speaking in order to enable them to effectively communicate in English in their future study, work and social interaction life. Meanwhile, their self-study ability and comprehensive cultural accomplishment are supposed to be enhanced so as to adapt to the rapid

development of society and the need of international communication. However, although the vocabulary teaching is placed in a crucial position, it is still very conservative and obsolete in China. The teaching is confined in the vocabulary list of textbooks and most of the college English teachers conduct the vocabulary teaching and explanation by combining the words in the context with the content of the passages or giving examples. They emphasize much on the surface meaning of the words but neglect the actual application of the words in real life. There is another very common phenomenon that the teachers focus a lot on the teaching of CET 4 vocabulary and the high-frequency words in the CET 4 exam papers, which had somewhat turned the college English class into CET 4 tutorial class. The present college English vocabulary teaching situation had led to the consequence that students can not find right words to express themselves in actual communication and they are lack of the ability of actual application as well. However, the contrastive linguistics have provided us with a new solution in the vocabulary teaching and is able to help the students to actively study and memorize English words in a more relaxed and natural atmosphere.

### **3. The instructive significance of the comparison between Chinese and English in vocabulary teaching.**

#### **3.1 In the phonetic aspect**

Both English and Chinese are very influential languages in the world. English words are composed on the base of Latin alphabet which however is adopted in Chinese language to mark the pronunciation of Chinese characters. There are many phonemes that share similar pronunciation in both Chinese mandarin and English. In Chinese mandarin, the pronunciation of the rhinolalia *n*, the lateral *l*, the cacuminal *zh*, *ch*, *sh*, *r* and the distinction between *n* and *ng* are the difficult part of Chinese mandarin learning. Although the place of articulation and detailed form of expression are somewhat different from Chinese mandarin, there are also rhinolalia, cacuminals, laterals in English. Furthermore, we can even find many identical phonemes in both the two languages such as [ p][ t][ d][ k][ g] and vowels [ a: ][ i: ][ u: ], so it is not very difficult for students who can speak Chinese mandarin to master the pronunciation of those letters. However, it is also undeniable that there are some phonemes whose pronunciation are very different in the two languages such as [ θ] , [ s] , [ z] which deserve teachers' attention and effort when preparing lessons.

In terms of language stress, sentences in both mandarin and English have logic accent. Moreover, the place and meaning of the logic accent in the two language are basically the same in order to reflect the emphasized words in the sentence. Therefore, learners who can master the logic accent of mandarin generally have no trouble finding the logic accent of English sentences. However, even a learner who is very prominent at the intonation of Chinese mandarin may also have trouble mastering the stress of English words. The stress and secondary stress of English words can even change the meaning of the word, for instance, *a greenhouse* (a building with glass sides and a glass roof for growing plants) and *a green house* (a house whose color is green). In terms of the stress of English words, there is only one stress in the majority of disyllable words and multisyllable words. Although there are secondary stress in many multicysyllable words, the stress and secondary stress are never been found to be close to each other. In Chinese mandarin, a stress could be found in generally every words that combined to form phrases.

In conclusion, when teaching the pronunciation and intonation of English sentences and words, teachers should encourage students to make full use of the similar and identical phonemes in Chinese mandarin and pay enough attention on the phonemes which have different way of pronunciation in the two language. Moreover, teachers are also supposed to give instruction about the structure of our oral cavity , help students to find the right position of the tongue and gradually enable learners to pronounce according to the correct rules of pronunciation of English.

#### **3.2 In the word-building aspect**

We will conduct the comparison and analysis of the word-building in Chinese and English from

three aspects.

#### 1) Conversion method.

The conversion phenomenon of language is basically the same in both English and Chinese. It is very common that nouns are converted into verbs or vice versa and sometimes adjectives are converted into nouns or verbs in English. For instance, ①.I got an email today. ②.I emailed her today. The word “email” is a noun in the first sentence, however, it is converted into a verb in the second sentence. In Chinese, a word could be classified into different word classes or categories and thus plays different roles in the sentence, which is very similar to English. For example, ①.他改变了自己的人生。②.他的人生有了很大的改变。 The Chinese word “改变” in the first sentence is a verb, but it is converted into a noun in the second sentence.

#### 2) Synthesis method.

Both of the two languages are very similar in this aspect as well. Synthesis method is a major word-building method in Chinese and it is also very active in English too. In English, two or more words could be combined according to some rules to form compound nouns, verbs and adjectives, etc. However, compared with derivative method, synthesis method is not the most common and important word-building method in English and thus should be placed in the secondary place. On the contrary, in the word-building method in Chinese, the compound words play a dominant role. They are not only plentiful but also abundant in the order and relation of the two phonemes. In other word, there are a lot of coordinating relations and syntagmatic relations between the two phonemes that constitute the compound word. Coordinating relations in Chinese could be further classified into synonymy, antonymy, synonymity, etc. For instance, 脸面,上下,父母,姐妹。 Syntagmatic relations include subject-predicate structure, verb-object structure, biased-positive formation, preposition-objective structure, etc. For example, 海啸,照相,红旗,说明。

#### 3) Derivative method.

It is very different between English and Chinese in this aspect. There are a lot of prefixes and suffixes in English, however, the number of prefixes and suffixes in Chinese is very limited. There are about 50 most commonly used prefixes such as un-, dis-, in-, im-, non-, re-, mis-, self-, super-, over-, under-, etc. A new word could be formed by attaching prefixes and suffixes, for example, unlike, dishonesty, supermarket, overload, etc.

There are about 30 noun suffixes in English such as - er,- or,- ist,- ee,- ian,- ese,- ian,- ism,- ness,- tion,- ment,- ship,- al,etc.

There are about 30 adjective suffixes in English such as - ful,- less,- en,- ish,- ive,- ous,- able,- ible. - ly,- y,- ary,- some,- like,etc.

The most commonly used verb suffixes include - ize,- en,- ify,- ate; the most common adverb suffixes are - ly,- ward,- wise and the most common numeral suffixes are - teen,- ty,- th, etc.

Compared with English, the number of affixes in Chinese is very limited and there are only about 20 affixes in total. The most commonly used prefixes are (noun)老~,阿~;(adjective)可~;(numeral)第,初;(similar to the meaning of English prefix *in-* , *non-* )不~,非~;(similar to the meaning of English prefix *anti-* , *counter-* )反~;(similar to the meaning of English prefix *multi-* , *poly-* )多~;(similar to the meaning of English prefix *super-* )超~;(similar to the meaning of English prefix *quasi-* )准~;(similar to the meaning of English prefix *bi-* )双~. For instance, 可爱(lovely),第七(seventh),反主流文化(counterculture), 双语(bilingual).

The most common suffixes are (noun)~子,~儿,~头;(verb)~于, ~以;(adjective)~切;(similar to the meaning of English prefix *-ity*)~性;(similar to the meaning of English prefix *-ize*)~化;(similar to the meaning of English prefix *-er* , *-ist* , *-eer*) ~家,~手,~师. For instance, 亲切(kind),必要性(necessity),现代化(modernize),科学家(scientist),etc.

Vocabulary study is a very important link in the study of any languages and the understanding of the different word building features of the two languages will significantly help English learners to better master the English words from a more rational perspective so that they can not only enlarge their vocabulary but also improve their English levels.

### 3.3 In the word meaning aspect.

We will discuss the relationship between the form of the word and its meaning from two aspects.

#### 1) Inflectional affix and grammatical meaning

Affix is a letter or group of letters, which is added to either the beginning or the end of a word to form a different word with a different meaning and there are generally two kinds of affixes in English, namely, inflectional affix and derivational affix. The former is often added to end of the word to form a delicate or subtle grammatical meaning such as boys, walks, john's in which the inflectional affix does not change the word class. Moreover, most of the inflectional affix are suffixes.

In Chinese, it is the configuration that changes the grammatical meaning of the word. The configuration in Chinese is very similar to the inflectional affix in English. For example, the word “们” in Chinese means plurality such as (女孩们,工人们), which is very similar to the usage of the inflectional suffix *-s* in (girls, workers) in English. In Chinese, the word “了” is often added to the end of a word to refer to a past event such as (停了,回来了) and this is almost the same with the usage of the suffix *-ed* in English, for example, (stopped, returned). The Chinese character “着” is the symbol of progressive tense such as (看着,听着) and the suffix *-ing* in English also has the same usage such as (watching, listening). Besides, The Chinese character “的” is the symbol of possessive case, which is similar to the usage of English suffix *-s* such as (teacher's, student's), etc.

We can conclude from above comparison that there are a lot of similarities between Chinese and English in the aspect of the change of grammatical meanings of a word, so the teachers should encourage students to make positive use of their mother language when studying English vocabularies.

#### 2) Derivational affix and Chinese radicals

The derivational affix always changes the meaning of a word and it could be either a prefix (comparable, depart, online) or a suffix (slaver,teacher, workable).

The usage of the derivational affix is very similar to the usage of radicals in Chinese. For example, the meaning of Chinese characters with the radical “讠” always involves the meaning of “speaking” such as 认,识,说,话. The same phenomenon exists in English as well, for example, the prefix *-dis* has a negative meaning and whichever word combines with the prefix carries a negative meaning such as disagree, disclose, discount, disappear, dismiss, etc. In the same way, the same root could combine with different affixes to form different words, for example the root “spect” which means “look” can combine with many different affixes to generate a lot of words which involve the meaning of looking such as spectacle (spect + acle), spectator (spect + ator), expect (ex—out + spect), prospect(pro—forward + spect), perspective(per—thorough + spect + ive), Retrospect(retro—back + spect), etc.

### 4. Conclusion

The term “signified” in linguistic semiotics refers to the concept, the meaning, the thing indicated by signifier (the word, the sound-image) and the same “signified” tend to reflect the same concept in human brains. Moreover, in general the concept does not vary much among people who speak different language. The basic elements (water, fire, wood, clay, etc) that constitute the world do not change because of different languages. Human beings give them different names, but in essence, they are the same. Although the language signs are arbitrary to some extent, the things or the entity of the things they represent are not different. There might be different recognition features to the same objective thing or entity of the thing among people who speak different languages, but their material bases are the same. The identity or similarity enable human beings to construct a generally same concept system frameworks which, in terms of linguistics, is the semantic system. So, we, English teachers, could encourage learners to make use of the cognitive similarity between Chinese and English when memorizing new words. Since the language sense of our mother tongue

is definitely stronger than that of English, on the base of Chinese, learners should deepen the understanding of the similarity theory and apply it to the study of English vocabulary, which will have a profound and definitely positive influence on their memorization and acquisition of English vocabulary.

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