On Application of the Principle of Iconicity in English Grammar Teaching

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Abstract: *The language iconicity refers to the connection between the signifier and signified of the language symbol, and as an important theory of cognitive linguistics, it provides a new perspective and theoretical basis for English teaching. This paper interpreted some difficult phenomena to be explained in English grammar teaching by using distance iconicity, quantity iconicity and sequence iconicity, and analyze the example to probe the importance of iconicity in grammar teaching. The study shows that the syntax iconicity has a certain extent to reveal the relationship between the universal cognitive mechanism and the internal structure of the language, which is of great practical significance to English grammar teaching. So as to help teachers in the daily teaching, consciously guide students from the perspective of iconicity to understand and memorize grammar rules, reduce the burden of information processing and memory, and make up the lack of traditional grammar teaching.*

Keywords: *Quantity Iconicity; Sequence Iconicity; Distance Iconicity; English Grammar Teaching*

1. INTRODUCTION

The originator of modern linguistics, Saussure, argues that the linguistic sign is arbitrary and that there is no necessary connection between the signifier and the signified, there is no fundamental connection between the language and the real word, form and meaning, it's conventional. In the traditional foreign language teaching, teachers use the stimulation method to repeated practice the grammatical structure to be grasped, rather than helping students to fully understand thelaw among language form, the meaning, and the objective external word. This grammar teaching based on arbitrary, obviously cannot meet the requirements of students, and inevitably lead students to rely on rote to master grammar rules, thereby increasing the burden of learning, reducing learning efficiency.

Modern linguistics is experiencing the shift from "description" to "cognitive interpretation", and the theory of iconicity becomes one of the developmental directions of cognitive linguistics, which is important to reveal the relationship between real world, cognition and language. It also provides a new perspective for English grammar teaching, which can explain the relationship between the meanings of the grammatical structure. In view of this, this paper attempts to apply the principle of iconicity to grammar teaching, and try to make up the shortcoming of traditional grammar teaching. The results show that the principle of iconicity is of great help to English grammar teaching and learning, but we should also see that the widespread existence of iconicity does not completely negate the arbitrariness of language.

Based on this, the main problems of this paper are:

- Whether the iconicity is associated with certain grammatical phenomena.
- How to use the iconicity principle explain grammar phenomenon.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study of cognitive linguistics on language iconicity mainly focuses on the language structure, they hold that the language structure to a large extent exist an "iconicity" basis, the syntactic structure is non-arbitrary and motivated, has a natural relationship with the human experience (Zhang Min, 1998). Language in the syntactic structure of the iconicity phenomenon, such as distance iconicity, sequence iconicity, and quantity iconicity has many practical significance.

2.1. Quantity Iconicity

Quantity iconicity refers to the information that is larger, more important, and more predictable in terms of concepts, and its language is longer and more complex, and more effort is needed to process information. Relatively simple concepts are generally expressed in relatively simple expressions, while relatively complex concepts are generally expressed in complex language constructs. Such as "banana tree" is longer than "banana" and "tree", and "banana trees" is longer than "banana tree", so the amount of concept to be expressed is naturally more. Another example is adjective and adverb comparison and superlative degree. The prototype of these two words is zero affix, no inflexion, from the prototype to the comparative degree and then to the superlative degree, the suffix from zero to -er and then to the –est, characters are gradually increased, the degree of concept also gradually increased. The iconicity of language exists extensively in all aspects of human language, revealing the relationship between human general cognitive mechanism and the internal structure of language.

2.2. Sequence Iconicity

Sequence iconicity means the time sequence of the event and the time order of the concept correspond to the linear order of the language description (Zhao Yanfang, 2000). The cognitive order is narrative in chronological order, that is, the sequence of occurrences and the sequence of time, the concept of time in mind should be consistent and mapped to each other. For example: he opened the bottle and poured himself a glass of beer. This iconicity reflects the linear order of language description, correlate with the temporal order of objective events, and the conceptual order of time.

2.3. Distance Iconicity

Distance iconicity is defined as the distance between the language components reflects the distance between the expressed conceptual components (Haiman, 1983: 782). That is, the similar concept of cognition is also closed in the language form of time and space, in function, concept and cognitive aspects, the closer entity is more intimate in the code level. From the point of information processing, the adjacent concept is easily activated, thereby shortening the processing time (Zhao Yanfang, 2000). When many adjectives co-modifies a noun, the closer to the concept of the central word is placed closer to the central word, and the adjective better illustratethe essential feature is closer to the central word. The order is: subjective scale words + objective scale words. Such as: the old red woolen sweater.

3. ICONICITY AND ENGLISH GRAMMAR TEACHING

3.1. The Principle of Quantity Iconicity and English Grammar Teaching

Quantity iconicity refers to the number and complexity of the language units and the concept of expression (Liu Shiying, Cao Hua, 2006). Increasing language symbols will increase the amount of information passed by the statement, semantic strengths are also different. The principle of quantity is well used in English grammar teaching.

3.1.1. The emphatic pattern

Many English beginners seem to be at a loss when they begin to contact with emphatic pattern, and think that they are very different from those in Chinese. In fact, as long as the teacher appropriately use the principle of quantity iconicity to explain, students will suddenly see the light. The emphatic pattern has more part to be explained than declarative sentence, so the emphasized information are more important, the amount of information is larger than declarative sentence, and bigger in number of language sign.

For example: A: it was last night that I saw the comet.

        B: I saw the comet last night

Obviously, the number of words in sentence A is less than sentences B, and the extra part "it was ... that" is the structure of emphatic sentence, A sentence is through this structure stressed the time adverbial last night. Therefore, teachers in the teaching can emphasized the comparison between the emphatic sentence and declarative sentence, to explain the emphatic sentence contains more important information, and these are reflecting through the number of language sign.

3.1.2. Passive Sentence

Passive sentence is also a good example. In many cases, the action of the sender is known to the two sides and no need to explain, which belong to the small amount of information, so the form is often omitted. For instance, "You are wanted on the phone." (Someone call you) and "I cannot be changed in our class" (in our class, I cannot be changed). And "it is said / reported / estimated that ..." who said, reported or estimated is self-evident. So in this structure by people (action of the actor) did not appear. In fact, fully predictable information is often abbreviated or omitted in language using.

3.1.3. Simple Sentences and Complex Sentences

Due to the difference in the amount of language sign, simple sentences and complex sentences are different in meaning and complexity. This is more evident in some request structures. E.g.:

A: open the door.

B: please open the door.

C: will you open the door?

D: would you please open the door?

E: would you mind if I open the door?

F: would you please be kind enough to open the door?

The basic meaning of the sentence: open the door, but from A to F sentence structure is more and more complex, the meaning of its expression is gradually increased. This is reflected in the different degree of polite, from A to F, the tone is more and more polite and formal. In grammar teaching, students can be summed up as follows: In general, the more words, usage will be more formal. So in this way students can easily establish a direct link among the meaning of the sentence, the formal level and language form. So as to learn in the communication according to the different meaning of the expression and formal degree to choice different complexity sentences level.

3.2. Sequence Iconicity and English Grammar Teaching

Psychologists believe that in the process of human and natural contact, cognitive model has formed. Although the same conditions will lead to different images, the basic cognitive order is the same: schema --- object --- description. The unit of language arrangement is like the order of thinking and the view of culture (Wang Yin, 2001). Sequence Iconicity can be applied to the sentence order teaching.

3.2.1. Multiple Time Adverbial or Place Adverbial Ranking

English embodies the cultural consciousness and values of western countries. Westerners pursue individualism, independence, and personal freedom. It is the "ego" of English national culture that often reflected in the word order, the triangular model of "near to far, light to heavy, known information to new information."

This rule determines the small-to-big order in English time and space. When several English adverbials are used side by side, in general, the smallest unit of time is at the top and the latest one is at the end. For example, we will have a meeting at 2:00 tomorrow afternoon, instead of we will have a meeting tomorrow afternoon at 2:00.

This principle is followed when multiple places adverbials are used side by side. Such as "there is a book in the box on the top of table in the kitchen". "In the box" to "on the top of table" to "in the kitchen" is becoming larger in space extent, and less specific. So in the syntactic relationship, followed by rearward order, which is the performance of sequence iconicity.

3.2.2. Basic English Word Order SVO

The normal order of English is the subject-verb-object, in general, the English sentence will have a complete subject and predicate structure, which can be well explained by the sequence iconicity. The action of the predicate is issued by the subject, no subject, action cannot produce, whether in the order of thinking or in the chronological order, the subject is appeared before the predicate. Any sentence has such a complete psychological structure: predicate means a relationship process, it is often rely on

and connect the subject or complement to achieve an image schema. In this sense, the subject-verb sequence as a language expression has a common psychological cognition structure, it is the basic human cognitive model reflected in the language level (Fu Yonglin, Chen Pi, 2003).

3.3. Distance Iconicity and English Grammar Teaching

Distance iconicity is also known as proximity iconicity, where the similar concept is also close in the time and space of language form. The principles can be applied to many projects in English grammar teaching.

3.3.1. Sorting Problem of Multiple Adjectives Modify a Noun

When multiple adjective co-modify a noun, the distance between the adjective and central word depends on the distance between the concepts they express. The closer the meaning of the adjective and central word is, the more they can describe the nature, and the closer they are. The general order is: subjective scale words + objective scale words, because the objective nature is the essential attribute of things or concepts, which is closer to the central word. For example, in the noun phrase: a beautiful old brown Chinese stone writing desk, writing is the most essential for the desk, so the closest to the central word; beautiful is purely subjective, so far from the center word.

As for the above structure, in the traditional grammar teaching, teachers generally summed up as follows: "qualifier + describe adjectives + size, old or new adjectives + color adjectives + category adjectives + central word". But this often lack of compelling explanation of the theoretical foundation for the arrangement, which adds the difficulty for student to memory and use. If teachers can use the distance iconicity to make an interpretation, students will receive better results, for they can memory and use on the basis of understanding.

3.3.2. Positional Relationship between the Verb and the Modified Component

When the manner and temporal adverbial modify one verb, the position relation accord with distance iconicity. The way of action, such as speed and amplitude, reflects the nature of the action, in the mind they are more related to action than the occurrence time or environment (Qin Hongwu, 2001). This psychological concept in the syntax can be expressed as follows: the composition of the embodiment of the action is closer to the predicate than the environment or the composition of the time in the linear arrangement. The teaching application of this rational principle, will enhance the students understanding, and improve the consciousness and accuracy.

3.3.3. Restrictive and Non-Restrictive Attributive Clause

The restrictive attributive clause is characterized by no comma between the antecedent and introducer, and thus the distance between the clauses is relatively close, reflecting the distance between the two concepts in human thinking. If the clause is removed, the sentence does not complete, non-restrictive attributive clause's antecedent and introducer are separated from the comma, the distance is relatively far, and the relationship is not close, but to further explain the antecedent, if we removing it, the whole sentence does not affect in meaning integrity. In grammar teaching, students are easy to confuse these two types of sentence, if teachers explain from the distance iconicity, it is easier for students to grasp their essential differences.

3.3.4. Verb-Object Collocation

Distance iconicity in the verb-object collocation mainly embodied in the verb and object direct collocation match with the directly action, and the verb and object indirect collocation resemble the indirect action. The direct relationship between the verb and object means that the distance is also straightforward. The indirect relationship between the two terms mean the distance is far between the verb and object, the meaning is indirect at a distance of preposition.

 E.g.: A: Can you hear me?

    B: I've never heard of him!

Example A means that the direct relationship between hear and me, that is, you can directly hear what I said. Example B indicates an indirect relationship, you may heard of someone who has mentioned him.

4. CONCLUSION

Iconicity is the basis for human beings to understand the world and to sum up things. This paper plainly expound the distance iconicity, sequence iconicity and quantity iconicity. On the basis of this, the author discusses the importance of these principles in English grammar teaching.

In summary, iconicity, as one of the important points in the cognitive linguistics, reveals the general structure of human cognition and the internal structure of language to some extent, and the syntax iconicity has a certain practical meaning for English grammar teaching. Teachers should consciously infiltrate the theory of syntactic iconicity into teaching, consciously guide students to understand and memorize grammar rules from the perspective of iconicity, and improve students' grammatical consciousness, and strengthen language sense, which is imperceptible improve the students' interest in learning English, and enhance the ability of thinking while training students to identify the language iconicity, which make the grammar teaching more intuitive, and finally improve students' grammar learning effect.

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