Thinking Differences Between English and Chinese and Their Pragmatic Characteristics

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to explore the differences in thinking styles between English and Chinese, as well as the expression of these differences in the structure, expression habits and other linguistic phenomena of the two languages. By comparing the pragmatic features of English and Chinese, such as grammatical structure, vocabulary use and context dependence, this study reveals the different modes of thinking, such as the analytical thinking of English and the holistic thinking of Chinese. The study found that English tends to use pragmatic features such as explicit grammatical markers and strict word order to express logical relations, while Chinese relies more on pragmatic features such as context and context to convey information. English's directness and clarity are in sharp contrast to Chinese's implicitness and euphemism.

***Keywords*:** mode of thinking, language structure, grammatical markers, context-dependent

1. Introduction

Language is not only a tool of communication, but also a carrier of thinking. In today's increasingly frequent cross-cultural communication, it is particularly important to understand the differences in thinking modes and their pragmatic features behind different languages. This paper makes an in-depth analysis of the differences between English and Chinese in the expression of logical relations and information organization from the aspects of thinking mode, language structure, grammatical markers and contextual dependence. English tends to express logical relations clearly through "grammatical markers", while Chinese relies more on "contextual dependence" to convey information. This difference is not only reflected in the language structure, but also profoundly affects cross-cultural communication. Understanding these differences is of great theoretical and practical significance for improving intercultural communication competence, optimizing language teaching methods and promoting mutual understanding between different cultures. Through a comparative analysis of the thinking differences between English and Chinese and their linguistic features, this paper aims to explore the differences in thinking modes between English and Chinese, and analyze the manifestation of these differences in language symbols such as language structure and expression habits, so as to provide new perspectives and strategies for cross-cultural communication and language teaching.

2. Theoretical basis

Language and thinking are the two core elements of human cognitive activities, and there is a close and complex relationship between them. Because of their unique cultural background, historical accumulation and social environment, different nations have formed their own distinctive ways of thinking, which are reflected in the language level.

2.1 The relationship between thinking and language

Thinking is the process of human brain's reflection and cognition of objective reality, while language is the product and expression tool of this process. Humboldt's theory of "Linguistic worldview" emphasizes that every language contains a unique worldview, and learning a foreign language means a new starting point in the field of worldview (Miao Lifeng, 2022). This theory deeply reveals the inner connection between language and thinking. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis further states that language not only reflects thinking, but also shapes thinking to a certain extent. Therefore, language and thought influence and interact with each other and represent each other.

2.2 Differences in thinking modes between East and West

The differences in history, culture, geographical environment and other aspects of the Eastern and Western nations lead to significant differences in their thinking patterns. These differences are fully reflected at the linguistic level.

2.2.1 Intuitive thinking versus rational thinking

Traditional Chinese thinking pays special attention to intuition and emphasizes the role of inspiration and understanding.

In Chinese, this way of thinking is mainly manifested as a large jump between sentences, a lack of formal connection in the middle, and a characteristic of fluidity (Li Ruihua, 1996). English people emphasize rational thinking, carrying out conceptual analysis and judgment and reasoning on the basis of concepts, and finally drawing logical conclusions. In language, this way of thinking is manifested by neat sentence patterns, rigorous writing, interlocking clauses, and radiating core structure of the whole sentence (Lian Shuneng, 2010).

2.2.2 Holistic thinking and analytical thinking

Chinese people tend to think as a whole, from the whole to the part, emphasizing the overall positioning, the relationship between the whole and the part is harmonious and unified. This way of thinking is characterized by "parataxy" in language, that is, the text unfolds according to the sequence of actions or the causal logical relationship of things, and the implicit correlation between clauses can only be connected by meaning. On the other hand, the British and Americans tend to think analytically, from the part to the whole, emphasizing the independence of individuals. English language has full form, clear sentence structure, and distinct language components, which can be cut by direct analysis method, showing the characteristics of "formation" (Lian Shuneng, 2010).

2.3 Dialectical logic and formal logic

There are also significant differences between Chinese and English in the way of logical thinking. The main thinking mode of Chinese language comes from dialectics, emphasizing Yin and Yang opposition and unity, and paying attention to grasping things from a holistic and dynamic perspective. In language, this mode of thinking is manifested as attention to parataxis and fluidity, flexible sentence structure, and logical relations implied in it. English, on the other hand, is heavily influenced by formal logic, emphasizing rigor in concepts, judgments and reasoning, and focusing on analyzing things from an individual and static point of view. This way of thinking manifests itself in language as a focus on syntactic and rigor, with clear sentence structures and obvious logical relationships (Pan Wenguo, 1997).

2.4 Influence of culture on mode of thinking

Language is the carrier of culture, and culture is an important factor affecting the way of thinking. The different natural environments, historical backgrounds, religious beliefs and social customs of the East and the West have led to significant differences in their ways of thinking. Chinese culture emphasizes the unity of nature and man and puts people first. This cultural concept is reflected in the use of personal subject and active voice in language, and the expression pays attention to subjective feelings and emotional experience. While Western culture emphasizes nature-based and object consciousness, which is reflected in the use of subject and passive voice in language, and the emphasis on objective facts and logical reasoning in expression (Shen Xiaolong, 2008).

This paper discusses the relationship between thinking and language, the differences between Eastern and Western thinking modes, dialectical logic and formal logic, and the influence of culture on thinking modes, etc., which provides a solid theoretical foundation for understanding the differences between English and Chinese thinking modes and their pragmatic characteristics. These theories not only reveal the root causes of the differences between English and Chinese, but also lay an important foundation for the subsequent analysis of the pragmatic features of English and Chinese.

3. Analysis of different thinking modes and their causes

Language is the carrier of thinking, and thinking mode is the deep mechanism of language formation and development. Rooted in different cultural backgrounds and cognitive systems of the East and the West, Chinese and English have formed their own thinking modes. The formation of different thinking modes in English and Chinese is the result of many factors, among which cultural background, cognitive habits and language structure are the most critical factors. Understanding these differences will help us to have a deeper understanding of the characteristics of English and Chinese as well as the thinking modes behind them, and provide useful references for cross-language communication, translation and language teaching.

3.1 An Analysis of Thinking Modes of English and Chinese

3.1.1 Holistic thinking and individual thinking

Chinese thinking tends to be holistic, emphasizing the internal connection and harmony among things. This mode of thinking is manifested in the attention paid to context, parataxis and topic coherence in language. In contrast, English thinking puts more emphasis on individuality, emphasizing the independence and analysis of things. English sentences are rigor structured and emphasize formal logical connections, such as articulating inter-sentence relationships through conjunctions and prepositions (Lian Shuneng, 2010).

3.1.2 Intuitive thinking and logical thinking

Chinese thinking is rich in intuition, and tends to understand the world through experience, intuition and overall grasp. In language, this kind of thinking is characterized by flexible sentence patterns, large leaps, and emphasis on illocutive meaning and implied logic. English thinking, on the other hand, emphasizes rationality and logic, reasoning and judging based on concepts, with clear sentence structure and tight logic (Hu Zhuanglin, 2002).

3.1.3 Image thinking and abstract thinking

Chinese people are good at using image thinking to describe abstract concepts in concrete and vivid language to make the expression more vivid. English speakers, on the other hand, tend to use abstract nouns and concepts to express complex ideas, and pay attention to logical reasoning and abstract analysis (Shen Xiaolong, 2008).

3.2 An Analysis of the Causes of Different English Thinking Modes

3.2.1 Cultural background

The different development tracks of the Eastern and Western cultures have formed their unique cultural and psychological characteristics. Western civilization is built on the ancient Greek tradition and emphasizes logic and analysis; While Eastern culture, heavily influenced by Confucianism and Taoism, focuses on dialectic and holism. This cultural background difference directly shapes the different thinking patterns of English and Chinese.

3.2.2 Cognitive habits

There are also significant differences between English and Chinese in cognitive habits. Chinese people tend to start from the whole and pay attention to the internal relations among things; While English people are more inclined to start from the individual, emphasizing the independence and analysis of things. Such differences in cognitive habits further strengthen their unique thinking patterns (Lian Shuneng, 2010).

3.2.3 Language structure

Language structure is the external manifestation of thought patterns. English sentences are rigor structured and attach importance to formal logical connections, such as clear subject-verb-object structure, frequent use of conjunctions and prepositions; While Chinese sentences pay more attention to parataxis, sentence patterns are flexible and changeable, and topic prefix and ellipsis are common. This difference in language structure reflects the different thinking patterns of Chinese and English (Hu Zhuanglin, 2002).

4. The differences in thinking modes between English and Chinese are reflected in language

4.1 Vocabulary

At the lexical level, the differences between English and Chinese modes of thinking are mainly reflected in the expressions of abstract concepts and concrete things. English tends to use concrete words to describe abstract concepts, while Chinese tends to use abstract words to express concrete things. For example, "time" in English can be concretized as "a long time" or "short time", while "time" in Chinese keeps its abstractness more and needs to be determined by context (Lian Shuneng, 2002). In English-Chinese translation practice, translators need to have a deep understanding of the culture and thinking tendency behind the words to ensure the accuracy and idiomatic translation.

4.2 Syntactic Structure

In terms of syntactic structure, the differences between English and Chinese modes of thinking are manifested as hypotaxis in English and parataxis in Chinese. English sentences are rigidly structured and rely on morphological changes and grammatical rules to express semantic relationships, while Chinese sentences rely on semantics and context to express relationships (Hu Zhuanglin, 2002). For example, the passive voice in English is expressed through conjugation, while in Chinese it is implied through word order and context. The passive voice is used more frequently in English, especially in scientific and academic writing, to emphasize the receiver of the action rather than the performer. In contrast, Chinese is less likely to use the passive voice and more likely to use the active voice (Lian Shuneng, 2010).

4.3 Discourse coherence

At the discourse level, the differences between English and Chinese modes of thinking are reflected in the organization and coherence of information. English discourse usually adopts a linear structure, in which the topic is presented first and then discussed gradually, while Chinese discourse is more inclined to a circular structure, that is, background information is provided first, and then the topic is gradually led to enhance coherence through repetition and contrast (Gao Yihong, 2000). English texts emphasize formal coherence, such as the use of connectives and transitional sentences to clearly express logical

relationships. Chinese texts, on the other hand, place more emphasis on coherence in meaning, which is achieved through rhetorical devices such as repetition, contraries and parallelism.

4.4 Logical structure of language

4.4.1 Syntax notation

There are significant differences in the use of grammatical markers between English and Chinese. As a form language, English has obvious use of grammatical markers, such as tense, voice and number. For example, tense changes in English clearly indicate when an action takes place (e.g., "He goes" vs. "He went"). In contrast, Chinese relies more on context and context to convey time and logical relations, and tenses are usually inferred through adverbs of time or context.

4.4.2 Information organization Mode

English tends to have a linear way of organizing information, emphasizing logical sequence and cause and effect. This linear way of thinking manifests itself in English paragraphs as clear topic sentences and paragraph structure. Chinese, on the other hand, prefers a holistic way of organizing information, emphasizing the background and overall situation, and the presentation of information is more flexible and non-linear. This difference reflects the difference in Chinese and Western ways of thinking: Western culture focuses on analysis and decomposition, while Eastern culture focuses on wholeness and synthesis.

4.5 Language expression habits

4.5.1 Directness and indirectness

In terms of expression habits, English expression is usually more direct, and tends to express intentions and opinions clearly. This directness reflects the individualism and low context characteristic of Western culture. Chinese expressions, on the other hand, are more indirect and euphemistic, often expressed through metaphors, metaphors and roundabout ways. This indirectness is closely related to high-context culture and collectivism in Chinese culture.

4.5.2 Clarity and implicitness

English expression focuses on clarity, using specific vocabulary and syntactic structures to ensure clear message delivery. For example, common definite and indefinite articles in English help to refer clearly to objects. Chinese, on the other hand, is more implicit, relying on context and background information to convey meaning. This implicitness reflects that Chinese speakers pay more attention to interpersonal relationships in communication.

4.6 Context dependence of language

According to cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall, Chinese culture is a high-context culture, while English culture is a low-context culture. In high-context culture, more information is conveyed by the environment and situation in communication, or internalized in the thinking and memory of the communicator, while the explicit code carries relatively less information. In low-context cultures, a large amount of information in communication is carried by explicit codes, while the recessive environment transmits relatively little information. Due to the characteristics of Chinese high-context culture, a lot of information is not directly expressed through speech, but through non-verbal ways, such as body language, facial expressions, social relations and environment (Tang Xiaoyan, 2008). While English, as the language of low-context culture, relies more on explicit verbal expressions to convey information, which is reflected in business communication as English needs more details and clear instructions (Gao Xiaolan, 2016).

Chinese expression is highly context-dependent, and many messages are inferred from context rather than expressed directly. For example, the use of pronouns in Chinese often relies on context to determine the object of reference. Pronouns in English, on the other hand, tend to provide enough information inside the sentence to reduce the reliance on context. English speakers are used to getting the full information from the sentence, while Chinese speakers may need more background information to understand the full meaning of the conversation. Such context-dependent differences may lead to misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication, and special attention should be paid to avoid communication barriers caused by contextual differences.

5. Conclusion

This paper probes into the differences between English and Chinese in the way of thinking, as well as the expression of these differences in language structure and expression habits. By comparing the pragmatic features of English and Chinese, such as grammatical structure, vocabulary use and context dependence, this paper reveals the different thinking modes of English and Chinese, such as the analytical thinking characteristics and the holistic thinking characteristics. English tends to use explicit grammatical marks and strict word order to express logical relations, while Chinese relies more on context and

context to convey information. This difference is not only seen in word choice, but also in syntactic structure and discourse coherence. English's directness and clarity are in sharp contrast to Chinese's implicitness and euphemism, which reflect individualism in Western culture and collectivism in Eastern culture.

The differences between English and Chinese modes of thinking are widely and profoundly reflected at the linguistic level. These differences not only affect the use of language, but also affect the communicative strategies and effects. In cross-cultural communication, these differences in ways of thinking may lead to misunderstandings and communication barriers. English speakers are used to getting the full information from a sentence, while Chinese speakers may need more background information to understand the full meaning of a conversation. Therefore, understanding and adapting to the other person's way of thinking is crucial for successful cross-cultural communication. By deeply understanding these differences, we can better promote cross-cultural communication, improve communicative efficiency, and enhance mutual understanding and respect between different cultures in the context of globalization. Future research could further explore how these differences affect communicative practice in specific fields, and how the challenges posed by these differences can be effectively addressed in education and training.

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