Learning Languages Through Cognition:

Death and Excess Extent

APPRENDRE DES LANGUES VIA LA COGNITION:

LES MOTS MORTS ET L'AMPLEUR DE DÉPASSEMENT

LIU Hsiu-ying[1]

KUO Cheng-chung[2]

Abstract: This paper presents a preliminary research regarding death words and the excess extent. Mandarin *si* presents a close relation of DEATH and EXCESS, and such a relation would be further proved to be universal-like by the additional data of other languages. Cognitive operations are thought to be the main that bring about DEATH-EXCESS linking. It is also cognition that makes the linking universal.
Keywords: cognition; taboo; image schema; metaphor; death; excess extent

Resumé: Cet article présente une recherche préliminaire sur les mots morts et l'ampleur de dépassement. Le mandarin présente une relation étroite entre les mots morts et l'ampleur de dépassement, et une telle relation serait en outre avérée être universelle, comme par les données complémentaires d'autres langues. Les opérations cognitives sont considérée comme le principal qui cause des liens Mort-Excès. C'est aussi la cognition qui fait la liaison universelle.
Mots-clés: cognition; tabous; schéma de l'image; métaphore; mort; ampleur de dépassement

1. INTRODUCTION

A language has its own specific characteristics; however, there are some universal features that could help to make different languages closer. Mostly, these language universals originate from human's concept. Once when the operations in human's cognition are known, language learning will become easy.

In Mandarin, there are various ways to express EXTENT; among them, the use of degree adverbs is the most common in formal speech. Nowadays, the young generation adopt the structure V-*si* to indicate excess extent colloquially, and the frequency of use of it even overrides the use of the degree adverbs *hen* 很 "very" and *feichang* 非常 "very". The use of death words to indicate excess extent does not seem to be a

specific phenomenon in Mandarin only. Many southern dialects (e.g. Southern Min, Hakka) also present the same phenomenon. What is more, *dead* and *deadly* in English indicate excess extent as well.

Being aware of this consistence between Mandarin and English, the present study collects data from some other languages, attempting to prove that the DEATH-EXCESS linking is universal. The main discussion will fall on how cognition makes the linking universal, and it would be concluded that cognition will benefit to language learning and teaching. The data presented in this paper are mainly collected from the Google searching engine and on-line dictionaries.

2. A TENDENCY IN LANGUAGES

Words related to death, in all languages, are regarded as taboo. However, they appear with a high frequency in colloquial languages in this modern time. In such cases, a death word no longer preserves its prototypical or literal meaning but refers to the excess extent. Such a tendency is found in Mandarin. *Si* 死 (die ; death) in Mandarin could function as an excess adverb and excess complement.

> (1) si mei liang xin 死沒良心 "extremely unconscionable " (adverb)
> (2) Ta shuai si le. 他帥死了 "He is extremely handsome." (complement)

According to Zhu (2006), other death terms (including *si-ren* 死人, *yao-si* 要死, *yao-ming* 要命, *ban-si* 半死) indicate excessiveness as well.

> (3) qi si-ren 氣死人 "to make someone very angry"
> (4) Ta qi de yao-si 他氣得要死 "He's very angry."
> (5) Ta qi de yao-ming 他氣得要命 "He's very angry."
> (6) Ta qi de ban-si 他氣得半死 "He's very angry."

In (4)-(6), the structural particle *de* 得 is required to link the predicate and the extent complement.

English has similar linguistic phenomenon. *Dead* and *deadly* are used as degree adverbs. Besides, phrases with *to death* always describe the excessive extent of the predicates.

> (7) I hate English Literature lessons, they are dead boring.
> (8) Everything is so deadly boring.
> (9) He was tired to death after a day's work.

In addition to Mandarin and English, the link of death to excess extent is also found in other languages, as follows:

French *mourir* "die"

> ourir de faim "starve to death"/ "very hungry"
> urir de soif "very thirsty"
> mourir de rire/ mort de rire "laugh to death"
> mourir de froid "freeze to death"
> s'ennuyer à mourir "extremely bored"

German *sterben* "die"

> sterbenslangweilig "deadly dull"/ "deadly boring"
> sterbensmüde "deadly tired"/ "tired to death"
> *tod* "death"
> todlangweilig "deadly dull"/ "deadly boring"
> todernst "dead serious"/ "bloody serious"

Spanish *morir* "death"; morirse "die"

> me muero de frío "I'm freezing"
> me estoy muriendo de hambre "I'm starving."

me <u>muero</u> por una cerveza "I'm dying for a beer."

Japanese sinu 死ぬ "die"

> Sinu hoto tsukareta 死ぬほど疲れた. "I'm exhausted."
> Sinu hoto ni isougasii 死ぬほどに忙しい!!! "I'm extremely busy."

Italian *morte* "death", *morire* "die", *mortale* "deadly"

> fa caldo da <u>morire</u> "extremely hot"
> fa un freddo da <u>morire</u> "it's freezing cold"
> <u>morire</u> di noia "be bored to death"
> c'era da <u>morire</u> da ridere "it was hilariously funny"
> Ti voglio bene da <u>morire</u> *"I like you to death."*
> ggnoioso da <u>morire</u> "deadly dull"

Basically, the use of death as an intensifier appears colloquially. The consistence among the languages hints that there is something shared by all the cultures lying beyond, which encourages us to explore the profound cognition.

3. THE LINKING OF DEATH AND EXCESS IN COGNITION

Although different languages undergo different degrees of grammaticalization, the close relation between death and excess does exist. Then, how is death linked to excess? There are some approaches proposed. In the following, the Mandarin data would be used to explain the cognitive operations.

Humans' Subjective Opinions

In the study of *si*-type terms in Mandarin, Zhu (2006) states that humans' subjective opinions bring about the meaning of excess. According to her, the following series of concepts of death endow *si*-type words with excess sense.

1) Being life and being dead bear a complementary relation.
2) Human beings are born with the affection for life and dread of death.
3) The loss of life is an extremely serious incident.

Inference

In order to make an inference, predicate types should come into play. In terms of Zhu (2006), *si* originally stands for an objective result caused by other people/things. V-*si* phrases then represent a cause-and-effect relation indicating "to die because of Ving', telling a change from possessing a life to the loss of it. In consequence, *si* appears with only verbs that could cause someone's death, such as *bing* 病 "ill" and *ni* 溺 "drown".

> (10) Ta zui-hou bing-si le. 他最後病死了 "He died of disease finally."
> (11) Xiao-gou ni-si le. 小狗溺死了 "The doggie was drowned."

Since some of human psychological feelings might bring about one's death (e.g. *e* 餓 "hungry", *xia* 嚇 "frighten"), there are phrases composed of *si* and a psych verb. Nonetheless, such a combination is ambiguous.

> (12) Ta xia-si le. 他嚇死了
> a) "He died of frightenness."
> b) "He's extremely scared."

Later, even psych verbs which cannot cause one's death enter the V-*si* construction.

(13) Ta gao-xing-si le. 他高興死了 "He's very happy."

In Zhu's opinion, such a combination plays the crucial for the generation of the excess sense. As to a psychological state that cannot directly cause the death of someone, an inference is necessary to make the expression semantically interpretable. Basically, in the process of inferring, *si* somewhat retains the prototypical meaning－death.

lei-si 累死 "very tired"

work very hard ⇨ feel very tired ⇨ die

qi-si 氣死 "very angry"

feel very angry ⇨ heart attack or high blood pressure ⇨ die

Based upon human's experience, an extreme psychological or physical state will possibly cause someone's death. In this case, the semantic feature [+excess] could be extracted from the whole phrase, which then bridges death and excess.

Metaphor

According to Liu (1999), Mandarin *si* generates the excess meaning from the metaphorical meaning "no where to turn". In Fu's (2007) point of view, it is the literal and prototypical sense "loss of life" that contributes to the meaning of excess. Metaphorically, losing life is an extremity of life and the end of life. Dai & Gao's (2006) hold similar opinions. In terms of them, since death stands for the ultimate of human life, English *dead* and Mandarin *si* indicate extremity.

In general, the approaches listed above are all parts of cognition. We are for that all of them contribute to the generation of excess sense. However, the inference approach fails to explain the case in which the predicate is completely irrelevant to death (e.g. *handsome*, *beautiful*).

(14) Ta shuai-si le. 他帥死了 "He's extremely handsome."
(15) Lin Chiling mei-si le. 林志玲美死了 "Chiling Lin is extremely beautiful."

As for the metaphor approach, it is true that death symbolizes the loss of life, but its linking to extent is not that direct. What follows is a better way to tell the relation of death and excess more straightforwardly.
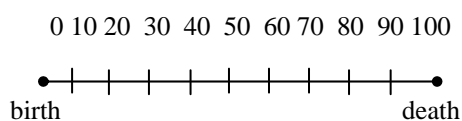
3.1 Scale Image Schema

Life is usually conceptualized as a journey. Then, death stands for the end point of the journey. Strictly speaking, this end point cannot indicate extent unless the journey is a scale. To link the point to excess extent, the adoption of the scale image schema appears to be necessary. By definition, image schemas are embodied pre-linguistic structure of experience concerning space, time, moving, controlling, and other core elements of embodied human experience. Johnson (1987) lists a variety of image schemas, and the scale one is included. On the whole, the scale image schema involves an increase or decrease of physical or metaphorical amount, and consists of the following:

a) A closed- or open-ended progression of amount
b) A position in the progression of amount
c) One or more norms of amount
d) A calibration of amount

With such a schema in human cognition, many things in the real world (both concrete and abstract) are thought to be measurable and have extent.

To measure something, a scale is always required. Adopting the scale schema, life could be conceptualized as a scale. People are born with a time limit, so life is a closed-ended progression of amount. In addition, the years of age could be regarded as the calibration of the amount. The more years of age, the

closer to death. **The extreme of age gives rise to one's death**. The linking of DEATH and EXCESS probably is made here. Even though people die at different ages, a person dies at the oldest on his own scale.

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

birth   death

By means of the scale metaphor and image schema, death could be related to extent more directly. Basically, the highest point of the age scale indicates excessiveness.

3.2 WHY DEATH-EXCESS LINKING IS UNIVERSAL

3.2.1 THE HUMAN BODY

In human's cognition, there is a variety of image schemas (e.g. CONTAINER, IN-OUT, LEFT-RIGHT, etc.) Mostly, the schemas are based upon human's bodily experiences. Once when the experiences are the same, the schemas are the same. As a matter of fact, the image schemas stored in cognition are shared by all the human beings.

To speak strictly, except some subtle differences (i.e. color of eyes/hair/skin, weight, height), every human's body is constructed of the same types of body parts and internal organs. Then, what is experienced from the body is universal. Death, undoubtedly, is a basic and obligatory experience to the body. Actually, death is the center of many traditions and a feature of every culture around the world. In every culture, death metaphorically stands for the end of life, which is mapped to the top of the age scale in cognition. The revealing of this shared cognitive operation in languages then results in the language universal.

3.2.2 TABOO

Death is universally a taboo subject, and even those who hold strong beliefs may avoid talking about it. In the situation when death is unavoidable to be mentioned, euphemisms are the alternatives. As a result, almost in every culture, death words are seldom heard in formal speech and even in the daily life.

As for the linking of death to extremity, it seems that the frequency of use matters to some extent. People always feel more interested in things that are rarely seen. In the same way, linguistic expressions that are seldom heard catch the audience's attention more easily. Basically, the high frequency of use will eliminate the magic power of a word. Since death words are forbidden in public and rarely uttered, their appearance would bring about an unimaginable effect. In consequence, the function of exaggeration is achieved. In Taiwan, people like to adopt the V-*si* form to exaggerate something. The act of exaggerating is the act of doing or representing in an **excessive** manner. In our opinions, the linking of DEATH and EXCESS is made by *si*'s function of exaggeration.

It is easy for a taboo word to become an intensifier because the low frequency of appearance helps to increase the power of it. Every culture regards death as a taboo; therefore, the DEATH-EXCESS appears to be a language-universal.

4. CONCLUSION

Language learning is not merely the memorization of the components of the language and its rules. Language bears an indivisible relation to cognition. What people think is expressed in languages. As a result, tracing back to the cognitive level would more or less make language learning easy. From the study, it is found that the adoption of DEATH to indicate EXCESS extent is universal. Such a linking is possible because human beings over the world treat death the same. With this shared feature in cognition, there is no difficulty in learning the excess expressions in every language.

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