

## Cross-cultural Composition and the Zi-centered Theory

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**[Abstract]** The systematic negative transfers engendered thus can be easily obtained in four dimensions of cross-cultural composition, namely forms, uses, grammar and texts. Through analysis, the paper maintains that the essential causes lie with the differences between Chinese Zi-centeredness and English Words-as-basic-unit. Then starting from Zi to Word, it explains their motivations respectively, thus advocating a comparative solution to seek its outlet.

**[Keywords]** Zi-centered theory, composition across borders, linguistic dimensions, negative transfers

### Introduction

It is generally believed that the culture acts correspondingly upon the generation and effect of the texts. In western society one worships and conforms strictly to the expressions of real-attitude ideas or their explicit and coherent flow-out, while Chinese prefer indirect or roundabout ways of speech in communication in that the hierarchical order and complex relations are hereby attached far more importance to (Young, 1994, p.120). Although they have studied this issue from several different perspectives, many scholars argue that there ought to be some unique reasons to be found out for the interpretation of cultural role in the production of second language composition. The paper serves as a tentative trial to search those reasons related to cross-cultural factors by means of inter-structural linguistics, which offers a new approach to draw attention to.

### Deviations in Composition across Borders

The cross-cultural negative transference caused by the cross-cultural factors may be systematically represented in the following dimensions showing that it is important to find solutions in this light.

#### *Morphological Strife*

Phonetic alphabet is employed by the English-native speakers, while hieroglyphics is adopted in Chinese. The English word-formation processes mainly covering three types: derivation, compounding and conversion, when in operation affixes and word bases often serve as their basis and the positions of their component parts in question can't be altered randomly; for Chinese their major technique is none other than compounding whose workouts are mostly made up of radical or monosyllabic morphemes as a great majority usually positioned flexibly leading to the casual change of the finally acquired meanings. For example, "Zhengdou (struggle)", "Douzheng (conflict)", or the like. Another case as such involves plurality. Even English major students of higher grades in China normally don't bear in mind the singular or plural forms of the nouns in use. When forming English nouns, they tend to follow the stereotypes encountered in their mother tongue.

#### *Pragmatic Supposition*

It hereby refers to the inference of the uses of English expressions by extending the pragmatic meanings of their corresponding ones in Chinese as seen in inappropriate collocations of words, cultural misjudgment of lexical connotations, etc.. As to the former, the different collocations of the Chinese character "da (beat)" ought to be assigned to the various specified in English. Thus "da dianhua" is equivalent to "call up a

phone”; “da shui”, to “fetch water”; “da pai”; to “play cards”; “da maoyi”, to “knit a sweater”, and so on. As to the latter, the Chinese “dragon” serves as an innuendo to royal power, which is a substitute for “dignity, prestige and authority”, whereas in English it simply symbolizes “evil influence”. Or, “Zhangshang Mingzhu (the pearl on one’s palm)” becomes “apple of one’s eye”, and “Huijin Rutu(waste money as if it were as cheap as soil)” becomes “spend money like water”.

### *Syntactic Diversity*

The extent to which the Chinese grammatical practice exerts influence on that of English represented in cross-cultural composition covers too much, and the mistakes made thus are amazingly alike. Although the two adhere to the syntactic pattern ‘S+V+O’ strictly on the surface, quite a lot of syntactic differences in typology such as word order, or basic construction, which make the students’ English grammar appear more like that of their native language often lead to some striking errors: the inversion of tenses or aspects, improper choice of predicates, lack of subjects, and paratactic or running-river sentences in composition. Briefly they may be classified into two major types, namely omission of morphological markers and redundant expressions, with former usually embodied by the absence of connectives beyond clauses or inflectional labels attached to predicates and the missing subjects, and the latter by redundancy in ‘there + be’ or confused sentence order.

### *Textual Antipodes*

The sections of both Chinese and English paragraphs are rather different from each other. First of all, the criteria on which Chinese paragraphs need to be built can be called ‘casual’, while the English follow the strict rules consistently in that there is only one single and explicit tenor permitted in each paragraph. Thus the two may be termed in antithesis of emotional to logical section. Secondly, in textual construction Chinese lining is extended as spirally accumulated which attaches more importance to paratactic arrangement; while, the English, the linear foregrounding to hypertactic (Kaplan, 1966). Under the influence of cultural negative transference, Chinese students more often than not write in cross-cultural composition with more focus on semantic contents, covet the wholeness of paragraphing and regard the inductive as major in textual layout with result in higher frequency of arbitrary section of paragraphs, occurrence of vague or indeterminate ideas or subjects, default of morphological markers in cohesion, ... etc. (Wen, 2012a).

## **Analysis on their Motivation**

We maintain that all these phenomena are related to letters or characters, the written forms of language. According to the father of modern linguistics, F. de Saussure, there’s a stable convention of passing linguistic knowledge down from mouth to mouth among the native speakers, relying on no written forms whatsoever. The nature of language is all along of no concern to its writing system, and linguistic study ought to be conducted without its writing taken into account (Saussure, 2007, p.49). But to some degree language relies heavily on its writing system, whether phonetic or ideographic, esp. in its historical comparative branch towards which Saussure feel resignedly at a loss, ‘If a mind is deprived of letters to think with, most probably what he faces is lack of ideas of what to do in front of a shapeless mess.... Speech sounds which dodge away from their written symbols only represent some vague ideas in that speakers prefer to believe what the words show...’(Saussure, 2007, p.59). As is seen from this, the relationship of interdependence between language and word symbols cannot be overthrown easily, so one has to distinguish between the following two cases. One is the dependency of symbols on language, which might as well be called ‘lingua or speech as the basic unit’; the other, vice versa, ‘writing or Zi as the basic unit’.

Different levels of capacities to function against mutation borne at birth may respectively be found in either Chinese or English. The English index against mutation is much lower in that its dominant varieties are lingering everywhere and of higher social dynamicity. One can use English to regulate its writing norm, the former having much more effect on the latter than in the other way, which is said to be lingua or speech-

based. The Chinese anti-mutation index is generally held higher and its social stability is higher, as well. As a result of being based on sinogram, the Chinese characters govern the normalization of language that they are embedded in, which function as a basic unit of construction with a triune combination of graphs, sounds and meanings all of which are enclosed in a motivational relationship where the graph-meaning association has to be consistent with that of sound-meaning only to ensure their graphetic embodiment. Otherwise the graphs written down wouldn't be grounded on the objective existence. Viewed from the grammar, the Chinese characters do form the key core of its linguistics, for which at least one can successively find for proof endocentric predicates based on core characters—for example, 'baobing (remain ill), baobing (become ill suddenly), fabing (fall down with disease), fanbing (be ill), fubing (with illness), wobing (be ill in bed), xiebing (excuse oneself on grounds of illness), yangbing (recuperate)', and so on. This is the reason why we believe Chinese is a type of language focused on 'Zi' as its essence (Xu, 1998, pp. 266-388).

As is mentioned above, language and culture are inter-structural. The English writing covets the linear structure, normal and orderly, not allowing for the connective bonds between sound and meaning and bearing little relation to the denoted outside in world of experience, due to which the western culture intends more to set rail to logical arrangements. The basic grammatical units in modern Chinese are phonogram characters directly reflecting their hieroglyphic features, thus being easier to get them associated with the outside world subconsciously. It is during the May 4<sup>th</sup> period that some Chinese advocate the traditional culture have been retained in the characters in the country (Meng, 2012).

What kind of linguistic models for writing remolds what manners of composition. The English writing, being symbolist, signifying gives a sense of 'abstract logicity' or in parables, 'mechanic spaciousness', and generates the microscopic effect of accurate lopsidedness, when employed to express. But the Chinese characters count largely on their hieroglyphic flavor possessing magic logicity or generalized vagueness hard to be precisely located in meaning, only to turn to macroscopic all-sided generalization for help (Gu, 2004, pp.195-196). All the phenomena listed in 2. as belonging to negative transference are given birth to by such mismatches.

Firstly, viewed from 'Zi' it is quite difficult to form a system starting from 'word' in Chinese. The English weak forms such as nominal plurals, verbal tenses and word formation affixes of diverse kinds all have their own explicit function, where the English plurals are only an addition to its counting system of qualia structure belonging to purely closed convergent sets with no regard to actions or events which finally lead to their insufficient quantification from within compensated for by the mere use of aspects or aspectualizers (Wen, 2012b). But the Chinese characters are mono-syllabic radical morphemes, and the mainstream of adopting polysemous bi-syllables began later and only become popular so far (Xu, 1998, p.359). Due to the congenital burden that shackles, there are a lot of limits put on the formation or instantiation of Chinese words, thus the Chinese numbers being measured by the shapes things look like. Such quantification undertakes the liaison task emitting an overall effect on the grammar around, so things surely can well be counted as well as acts or events in no need of grammatical aspects for Chinese verbs (Wen, 2012b).

'Zi' also exerts striking influence on word formation structures. Nearly all the majorly employed construction parameters in Chinese are to form compounds in grammatical configuration, and the English formation kinds can be termed quite a lot richer than those in the former. One does not take morphology as seriously for they value parataxis more which allows limited functional devices, otherwise they would have been borrowed, for example, ensuing from 'bar' ('ba' in Chinese) 'jiuba, yangba, wangba, shuiba and ...' are found, or from 'gate' (Chinese 'men') more profound 'yanzhaomen, naifenmen ...'. Accordingly the more common notions denoted with 'modifier+head' in Chinese are expressed by single words in English, such as 'liyu (carp), heiyu (snakehead), shayu (shark), daiyu (hairtail), where although occasionally similar phenomena can be come across as in 'man, superman, gunman; westbound, duty bound, hidebound', they occupy no more than a small portion of a large bulk with poorer performance compared with Chinese. It is believed that lexico-grammar and syntax are present altogether in compounds, so the fact that Chinese morphemes may be positioned flexibly there is just a proof of its syntax being coarse in forms, where the order is left as the only means of representing logical relationship. Whereas to

clarify the ambiguity or over-extension brought about by accommodating different formation processes in one and the same construction meanwhile, the English morphemes, used as such, are not as easily interchangeable to shed light on its strictness in syntax.

Secondly, the influence of 'Zi' on syntactic structure is consistently inherited all the time in view of pragmatic convention. As for a symbolic system, the more arbitrary the relationship is between form and meaning, the more linear and hypotactic the structural relationship appears to be. On the contrary, the more motivation one finds, the more nonlinear and paratactic is engendered. The organization of sentences in Chinese follows the nonlinear parataxis of psychological vision, namely the principle of 'loosely perspectivized', to make syntactic arrangements. Its typical features include, 'comma-separated universe as entities', 'temporal order foregrounding', 'exhaustion of meaning as bounds' (Shen, 1988, p.16).

Verbs don't undertake the core role, while the comma-separated universe of discourse emerge as bounds, "90% of Chinese sentences in communication don't constitute the SVO pattern focused on verbs. The SVO model is not suitable for the Chinese native speakers' psychological mechanism. Therefore the running-river sentences are everywhere in their textual arrangements. The grounding of every comma-separated constituent in logical display of things is more often regarded as the essence of building Chinese sentences."(Shen, 2001, p.166). To make a comparison, the Chinese syntax is consistent with the bamboo structure: no division between trunks and branches, uncertainty in nodes' number, indeterminacy in nodes' bounds, being a complex with a mixture of semantic, grammatical and pragmatic factors, hard to define the categories of every intrinsic constituent and pertaining to open sets of syntactic structure whose grammatical analysis has to be made with the help of context of situation.

In contrast, the English syntax is held as tree structure whose components branching out from a basic trunk. However complex they are, they always evolve around their parent node, in other words its syntactic habits conform strictly to abstract logic, where case analysis is preferred to overall generalization; deduction to induction, belonging to typically closed structure, not as closely connected with pragmatic or cognitive factors, which aims at achieving outgoing expressive effects by means of formal strictness (Wen, 2007). Embodied in lexical collocations, the Chinese values semantic outflow emphasizing the overall analogy; the English, with closed formality of logical classification.

Last of all, 'Zi' exerts influence on the textual tendency as well. At this level, difference is also related to their respective modes of thing. As mentioned above, the Westerners rely on the linear analytic thinking model (Kaplan, 1966), possessing something of systematic, individuality and partial precision, attaching in texture of writing more importance to structural factors and definite functions of clausal elements. While the Chinese with more regard to the spiral one, are used to drawing inferences intuitively and thinking everything as a unified whole developing the textual subject spirally in a way both generalized and indeterminate, thus the Chinese textual structure is supposed to be measured from the macrocosmic and all-sided perspective, intrinsic operation performed mainly by logically semantic trunks.

### Conclusion

Various kinds of dominant negative transferences discussed in this paper are largely due to the Chinese ontological logic being transferred subconsciously to English language in cross-cultural composition making the outcome inundated with westernized style. The Chinese is always inconsistent with the formal strategies founded by Saussure, in other words, there is an interwoven tension in conflict between the Chinese vagueness and the modernization in pursuit of exactness and quantification (YU Jian, 2012). That's why we hereby advocate a comparative solution to it seeing 'word' as 'Zi' not to simply complain about the restrictions or limitations transplanted by Zi-centeredness, namely to shed light on the deviations cross borders starting from the fundamental difference in units of grammar.

'Zi' is made up of character radicals, rather suitable to be called 'letter morpheme', whose number is quite limited. There are 560 ones listed by *Chinese Characters Fundamental Radicals* promulgated in Dec. 1<sup>st</sup>, 1997, while only 250 in *Word Ocean Dictionary*, 1999. Even in the most recent *Modern Chinese Dictionary: CE Contrasts* published in 2002, there appears no more than 213. How many letters, on earth, are there in Chinese? It is still an issue ready to be agreed on, but one may use quite a limited number of radicals, namely 200 or so, to create an awful lot of, up to millions of characters. Similar to this, although

there is a large vocabulary in English, most of them consist of roots and affixes like radicals. According to Zeiger's *English Encyclopedia*, English morphemes amount to 545, including 359 roots and 186 affixes. Here one can see that radical components and morphemic components are both practical tools in limited quantities with strong productivity. Thus the English morphemes are equivalent to the Chinese radicals in function, so to help obtain lexical meaning from the contexts, exterminate the negative transference from Chinese as much as possible and promote the study efficiency, the English word formation ought to be figured out from the radicals of 'Zi' in Chinese, of which good command is comprehensively expected.

In the long run, 'Zi' is somewhat different from 'word'. Some Chinese characters themselves can be component morphemes akin to radicals in English word formation, for example, 'Putao', 'Qiaokeli', and so on. If broken apart, 'pu' and 'tao, or 'qiao', 'ke' and 'li' do not constitute independent morphemes directed at the meanings of their compounds either. For compounding is overwhelmingly one of its kind in Chinese, except for few components that alter their accomplished positions, such as the ones positioned in front like 'geng (more)', 'ting (rather)'... or the rear-positioned 'ma?', 'ni?', 'ba(isn't it?)', almost all of them can be removed flexibly even with some so-called prefixes or suffixes often treated as content words at every chance in Chinese. The meaning of the words made up of the same clusters of characters are likely to be changed together with the shift of their internal graphetic orders, as is found in 'heping (peace)' and 'pinghe (calm)', 'jisuan (calculate)' and 'suanji (frame)', 'haoting (good to listen)' and 'tinghao (listen well)', ...etc.. There are only a few exceptions like 'xiongdi, dixiong (brothers)', 'jiankang, kangjian (sanity)', 'laiwang, wanglai (come and go)', whose meanings keep intact after being inverted, but in English the components of a compound are generally positioned fixedly not to be altered slightly, in other words the internal structure of English words, their external collocations or lexicon result from the inward condensation of syntax, while as for Chinese the iconic mechanisms of both syntax and lexicon tally highly with each other in flexibility. So one has to avoid the Chinese 'loose chains' as much as possible, try to encode the semantic universe in its due order fostering the graded consciousness of logical syntax when building English sentences or texts based on the linear, partial precision revealed by its morphology, and gradually entrench such a habit of 'you-attitude' thinking.

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