

# 大学外语 教学与研究

COLLEGE LANGUAGE  
TEACHING & RESEARCH

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# 序

迎着 21 世纪灿烂的曙光,浙江省大学外语教学研究会郑重地向新世纪献上一份礼物:《大学外语教学与研究》。这本论文集凝聚着我省大学外语教师辛勤耕耘的汗水,是我省大学外语教学与研究成果在新世纪的一次展示。

新世纪是知识经济飞速发展的时代,中国即将加入世界贸易组织,时代的发展需要更多高质量的外语人才,我们大学外语教师深感责任重大。江泽民同志在第三次全教会上指出:“高素质的教师队伍,是高质量教育的一个基本条件。”在高校规模不断发展的今天,我省大学外语教师不辞辛苦,承担着繁重的教学任务,仍然坚持孜孜不倦地进行教学研究和科研工作,努力提高自身的素质。今年收集的论文有一定的学术造诣,其中不乏教学创新的思维,许多新的研究理论和教学指导思想使我们深受启迪,对大学英语教学有着积极的指导作用,反映出我省大学外语教师的科研水平又有了新的提高。

该论文集内容广泛,涉及到语言学、修辞学、文学评论、教学法研究、翻译理论和经贸英语。入选的论文均经浙江省各院校推荐,并经过编委们的认真审阅和仔细修改。论文集的出版是全省大学外语教师集体智慧的结晶。

在论文集即将出版之际,我们谨向踊跃投稿的广大外语教师表示深深的谢意,并感谢复旦大学出版社对我们研究会工作的大力支持。

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2001.3.23

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# 语 言 学

## Markedness Theory and Second Language Acquisition

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**Abstract:**

This article is to have a general survey on the relationship between markedness theory and second language learning. Markedness is an old linguistic theory and it has exerted great influence on the analyses of language. From a psychological or cognitive perspective, the influence in second language acquisition is largely realized in difficulty areas and the order of language learning. Such survey gives insight into second language teaching and learning.

**Key Words:**

markedness, criteria, second language acquisition

### 1. Introduction

Markedness is a universal phenomenon of language. Its studies cover a wide range and have even gone beyond the pure linguistics, i. e. phonetics, syntax (Greenburg, 1966; Chomsky, 1969), lexicon (Greenburg, 1966; Lyons, 1977). As an analytical as well as a theory (Andrews, 1990; Qian Jun, 2000; Zhang Feng, 1999), it can also be used in applied linguistics such as second language acquisition (Chomsky, 1969), artificial intelligence, discourse

analysis (Givón, 1995). This article attempts to explore the rules set by markedness theory in second language acquisition so as to provide a possible basis for language teaching and learning.

Markedness theory in modern linguistics originated in the 1930s, in the writings of the Prague School structural phonologists Nicolai S. Trubetzkoy and Roman Jakobson. The essential insight is this: sounds are differentiated by binary phonological features: for instance, [p] vs. [b] (-voiced vs. +voiced) and [b] vs. [m] (-nasal

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vs. +nasal) in which the two poles of the features are not on equal footing with each other: one is marked, the other unmarked. In other words, in any pair of related phonemes, the one which contains a distinctive feature is marked; otherwise, it is unmarked, e. g. [k] and [g] both possess features [STOP] and [VELAR]; however, [g] carries another feature [VOICED]. Consequently, [g] is marked, [k] unmarked.

Apart from phonemes, other linguistic phenomena consist of polar opposed pairs, too. For instance, the phonological feature unvoiced — voiced, the antonyms *light* — *heavy*, the grammatical relations of singular — plural, active — passive, etc. However, in such binary oppositions, the poles are not usually opposites: typically, there is an asymmetry, such that one pole may be special or specialized, more focused or constrained, less general and more complex than the other. In such cases, the specialized element is marked. Thus, nouns are listed in singular in dictionaries; unvoiced [s] is more common in English than voiced [z]; the active sentence “John hit the ball” is simpler than the passive “The ball was hit by John”; “How *long* is that stick” is normal, but “How *short* is that stick” is used only under special circumstance.

## 2. The Criteria of Markedness

There is no unanimous agreement on the criteria of markedness among linguists. For the sake of this article, we attribute the following features as criteria of markedness.

To start with, markedness is psychologically bound up with the relationship of language to thought. In this case, complex thought tends to be reflected in the “complexity of expression” (Clark & Clark, 1978: 230). The research findings in psycholinguistics (Clark, 1973) show that comprehension of more complex items requires slightly more processing time. In other words, the complex marked form requires more time to understand than the unmarked one. Morphologically, the complex expression is reflected in the addition of morphemes (Greenberg, 1966). To be exact, the unmarked element carries certain features while the marked element involves an additional feature besides the ones the unmarked elements possess.

The second criterion, contextual neutralization, is the natural result of the first one through the addition of some feature. Contextual neutralization means that if an “expression A can neutralize in meaning in contexts that (where) the almost equivalent B cannot, then B is more complex than A” (Clark & Clark, 1978: 231). Here “more complex” is equal to “more marked”. From phonology to semantics, it is not difficult to find paired elements, where one member of the pair but not the other “will always appear in certain specified contexts” (Rutherford, 1982: 87). In phonology, any given segment becomes marked by the addition of features for voicing, aspiration, or nasalization, their unmarked counterparts are characterized by the absence of that feature. In lexicon, positions of neutraliz-



ation with polar adjectives force the appearance of the unmarked member. One prefers "how *big* is the house" to "how *small* is the house". In semantics, the further one moves from "ego" through kinship systems, the more marked or complex the relationships become, such as in English: father > grandfather > great grandfather.

Our third criterion, frequency, is closely related with neutralization. The unmarked member of an opposition is more frequent than the marked member, e. g. the word *good* appears more frequently than *bad*. In other words, the unmarked member in neutralized contexts occurs more frequently than the marked one.

An extension of frequency leads to the criterion of specialization. Any generalized word has a much wider range of application, whereas the specialized one appears only in special circumstances. For example, in the pair *duck* vs. *drake*, *duck* is a general word, thus it is less marked while *drake* is a specialized kind of *duck*, it is a more marked word. Similarly, the pairs *dog* vs. *bitch* and *pig* vs. *swine* connote the same semantic relationship.

Overt marking, our last criterion, has to do with morphology of a language. This is reflected by "the presence of additional morphological or phonetical material" (Moravcsik & Wirth, 1986: 6). *Authoress* has an overt marking as opposed to *author*; nasal vowels are overtly marked over oral ones. Of a pair of antonyms, if one member of an affix is added to the other member, it is "the marked form with the additional

material" (Lehrer, 1985: 399). Thus, *happy* is un-marked, while *unhappy* is marked. Similar pairs of antonyms are numerous: *honest* vs. *dishonest*, *important* vs. *unimportant*, *regular* vs. *irregular* etc.

It should be stressed that among what we termed as criteria of markedness, there is no clear dividing line; they are at one instance or another closely connected with each other. The principle should be more exactly stated as the more complex, the less neutralized; the more infrequent, the more special; the more special, the more marked.

### 3. The Relations between Markedness and Second Language Acquisition

We attribute so much space to the discussion on the criteria of markedness, for it is these criteria that determine the relationship between markedness and second language acquisition. In this section, we will briefly investigate the difficulty and the order of second Language acquisition in terms of markedness criteria.

#### 3.1 The Difficulty of Second Language Acquisition

Markedness theory can predict the difficulty of second language learning. Traditionally, areas of difficulty in language learning can be predicted from contrastive analysis. A L2 structure will be difficult to learn if it is different from the corresponding structure in L1 and if it is more marked than the L1 structure (Ellen Broselow, 1988: 199). However, Eckman (1977) argues that traditional contrastive analysis does not

predict any difference in difficulty whereas the notion of markedness makes just the right predictions. He compares the German speaker's task of learning to produce a word-final voice contrast in English obstruents (a fairly difficult task) with the English speaker's much easier task of learning to suppress this contrast in German. As a result, English speakers learning German are learning a less marked system, while German speakers learning English must master a more marked system. Thus, markedness can partly predict the difficulty areas in second language learning where we can spend more time.

The weakness of markedness in predicting difficulties of learning is that it makes reference solely to the distribution of surface characteristics of language; moreover, it is possible to have different predictions by the same facts. The internal mechanism is thus unknown to us. The order

of second language acquisition may tell us something about it.

### 3.2 The Order of Language Acquisition

The order of language acquisition can be conveyed by two or more than two related expressions, the less marked one will be preferred. If a word can represent two or more than two meanings, the more marked one is likely to be avoided. Based on the criteria of markedness, we provide the following illustrations.

Language learners tend to grasp simple items earlier than the complex ones — the unmarked elements are learned much earlier than the marked ones. Several studies will prove this point.

Fathman (1975) lists more than 20 English morphemes and syntactic markers of which some are learned earlier than the others. The orders obtained by Fathman are listed in the following graphics.

Sequence of Learning for Items Within Selected Subtests (Fathman, 1975)

Subset	Order of Acquisition		
Affirmative-Declarative	S + V	before	S + V + O
Possessive, Plural, Present	/s/ /z/	before	/z/
Preposition	on	before	under
Subject Pronoun	he	before	they
Past-Regular	/d/ /t/	before	/d/
Wh-question	where	before	why
	A		B

It is apparent from the list that for each set "A before B", A is unmarked and B

marked. That is, of the subtests listed, subject (S) is the only obligatory syntactic

relation and is therefore unmarked: direct object (O) is the morphologically marked relation. Possessive and regular past reveal phonological complexity and syncretism in their late acquired allophonic variants. *On* and *under* are respectively unmarked and marked by reference to complexity features of perceptual space. *He* before *they* follows from unmarked singular before marked plural. *Where* is unmarked with respect to *why* in terms of "cognitive complexity" (Clark, 1973). By observing the regularities in the first language acquisition of spatial and temporal deixis, Clark (1973) formulates an explanatory hypothesis (complexity hypothesis) to account for data in which markedness principles are at least implicit. He mentions:

Given two terms A and B, where B requires all the rules of application of A plus one more in addition. A will normally be acquired before B. (Clark, 1973: 54—55).

Thus, in English first language acquisition, the prepositions *at/on/in*, which bear semantic feature of [LOCATION], are learned before the corresponding *to/onto/into*, which carry an additional semantic feature: [LOCATION + DIRECTION]. And this addition of features corresponds to an increase in markedness. It is obvious that Fathman's data for second language acquisition is correspondent with Clark's first language acquisition. In other words, Clark's study proves Fathman's list above, which in turn support our claims of the order of second language acquisition.

Markedness factors can influence second

language acquisition in such a way that the order of the following group of *wh*-questions can be explained by markedness theory (Burt & Dulay, 1980):

- (1) What's that?
- (2) What are those?
- (3) I don't know what those are?
- (4) I don't know what this is?

Simple questions such as (1) and (2) can be considered unmarked in relation to embedded questions such as (3) and (4), and are learned first. Singular (1) is unmarked in relation to plural (2), and is learned first. But plural embedded question (3) is learned before singular embedded question (4) because the "unlearning" of the inversion rule for simple questions occurs with the last learned (i. e. plural) question type first (Ellis, 1985: 205).

As far as frequency is concerned, items with high frequency are learned earlier than those with low frequency. In that case, we'd better combine this criterion of frequency with that of neutralization, for these two criteria are inseparable. Frequency refers to the number of times an item appears within a limited period of time, while neutralization makes reference to the environment or context an item appears. Neutralized items appear more frequently and thus less marked. Conversely, those less frequently occurred items bear less neutralized characteristics, and consequently give more prominence in terms of the degree of markedness. J. C. Catford (1984) finds that in a pair of grammatically-related items, the marked element appears less frequently than

the unmarked one. He points out that English verbs can carry no or one to several markers. Thus, he differentiates verbs into seven markers: a. non-present tense; b. negation; c. emphasis; d. mood; e. perfective aspect; f. progressive aspect; g. passive voice. In English sentences, some

sentences carried only one marker, some can reach as many as 3 or 4 English markers. After the statistical analyses of 1434 English verbs chosen from spontaneous, conventional discourse, he points out the following percentage :

Number of Markers	Number of Verbs	Percentage
No	1 290	53
One	221	9
Two	50	2.09
Three	10.5	0.45

It is quite apparent from the above table that the frequency of unmarked verbs surpasses the rest (marked) combined. The unmarked verbs appear more widely because these verbs are not restricted by tense, aspect or voice, etc. Therefore, learners of second language would grasp the unmarked one first while the less frequent one would be learned later.

So far we have discussed the acquisition order set by complexity principle, frequency and neutralization. Frequency is closely connected with neutralization because neutralized items can appear in a wide range of context and therefore carries a high degree of frequency. Or we may state briefly: the simpler, the more frequent, the less marked, the earlier one acquires. It is apparent that the relationship between complexity, frequency or degree of markedness is in an inverse proportion.

By the criteria of specialization and overt marking, we mean the specialized

words or items are acquired much later than the general words. Learners of English have the experience of getting familiar with *dog* before grasping *bitch* because the latter makes reference to a special kind of dog. Compound words are learned after the compound elements are grasped.

The criterion of specialization is a relative concept for some linguistic phenomena do not observe the principle. For instance, a close look at the English regular and irregular verbs will illustrate the point. Generally speaking, regular verbs in past tense are considered unmarked, irregular ones marked. However, the past tense of some irregular English verbs such as *came* and *ran* appear more frequently than some regular ones like *welcomed* and *skipped*. In that case, the criterion of frequency gives prominence.

In the second place, elements with overt markers will be learned later than those without. In phonology, the phoneme /n/ is

acquired much later than /p/; the single vowels are learned before the diphthongs. In morphology, *shepherd* is learned before *shepherdess*; *goat* before *he-goat* or *she-goat* etc. In a sense, the order of language acquisition determined by markedness is a true reflection of the psychological or cognitive aspect of language as well as a true reflection of language to thought.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the previous sections, the theory of markedness and its criteria are discussed; the order of language learning is explained on these criteria. The findings in the survey carry great significance in second language teaching and learning. First of all, second language teaching should observe certain order, which has been prescribed by markedness theory, i.e. from simple to complex, from elementary to advanced level. Secondly, a suitable textbook is essential to second language teaching. The textbook must be compiled in accordance with the same principle from simplicity to complexity. The unmarked materials should be presented before the marked materials. Thirdly, frequency is a determinant factor in second language learning, so it is very important to create contexts where second language learning can be facilitated. In sum, the survey just gives us a glimpse of how a linguistic theory influences second language teaching and learning.

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# Linguistic Context and Meaning

杭州商学院 于静波\*

**Abstract:**

This passage is chiefly concerned with the discussion of the linguistic context and meaning. It includes three parts, i. e. : firstly, in the light of certain language circumstances, context can eliminate ambiguities; secondly, it can remove vagueness and indicate referents; and finally supply information which is omitted through ellipsis.

**Key Words:**

ambiguities, ellipsis, homonymy, linguistic context, polysemy, referents

In our daily life, if we are cut off with the context, we may feel puzzled about what is being talked about. When reading an article, if we lack of the background knowledge, we can hardly reach its deep meaning hidden between the lines. This is our common knowledge, however, it reveals a very important principle in semantics, i. e. : A word or a sentence does not have its definite meaning without a certain context. For example: "What a day!" may be explained in more than one way: "What a fine day!" or "What a nasty day!", both will do. The interpretation can be quite different owing to different contexts.

In the context theory, Firth regarded context of situation as one part of linguist's apparatus or rather one of the techniques of

description, for linguistics was for him a sort of hierarchy of such techniques all of which made statements of meaning.

According to him, meaning can never be fully understood without context. Meaning is found in context. Linguistic context has the following three effects on meaning:

## 1. Eliminating Ambiguities

Ambiguity means that a sentence or an utterance can be understood in more than one way. Ambiguity is either caused by homonymy and polysemy or by sentence structure. It can be classified into two kinds:

- i. lexical ambiguity
- ii. grammatical ambiguity

Example:

(1) John drove to the bank.

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(2) They saw her duck.

Sentence (1) is semantically ambiguous, called a sentence of lexical ambiguity, because "bank" is a word of homonym. So it can be expressed as the following:

(1) a. John drove to the bank (of the river).

b. John drove to the bank (for dealing in foreign exchange).

Sentence (2) is syntactically ambiguous, called a sentence of grammatical ambiguity. If "duck" is an infinitive verb, taken as the compliment of the object, then it means:

(2) a. They saw her duck (lower) her head.

If "duck" is a noun, as the direct object, it means quite differently:

(2) b. They saw her duck (which belonged to her).

Nevertheless, if such sentences of ambiguity are put in some certain contexts of situation, there will not be any ambiguity. Moreover, such ambiguous words or sentences rarely appear alone, usually collocated with other words or accompanied by the previous or following sentences concerned. The collocation and the context may very well define the meaning, and therefore, eliminate the ambiguity.

Example:

(3) Pass me the glass of port.

Words such as "pass", "glass", and "port" are either polysemy or homonym. But in sentence(3), the collocation of "glass" and "port" eliminates all the other possible semantemes, and lexemes, so its meaning is fixed. The fix of the meaning of this noun

phrase confines the meaning of the verb "pass". Consequently, the whole meaning of sentence(3) is clear, not ambiguous, i.e.:

(3) a. Hand me the glass of wine.

In Chinese, the word "dujuan" is of polysemy, one referring to a kind of birds, the other a kind of flowers. But in the two sentences below, their meanings can never be confused.

Example:

(4) a. Shan shang de dujuan jiao le.

b. Shan shang de dujuan kai le.

The above two sentences a. and b. can be understood as the following:

(4) c. The birds in the mountain are singing.

d. The flowers in the mountain come into bloom.

Here "jiao" and "kai" are the linguistic context for the word "dujuan", so the meaning is obvious.

Example:

(5) a. The books are closed before the dictation gets started.

b. The books are closed, as the company is privately owned.

Here, the word "book" is polysemy, but the above two sentences are not ambiguous, because the second part in each sentence confines the meaning of "book" respectively. So the second parts of the above sentences are also the linguistic contexts. Hence, sentence a. and b. can be paraphrased like this:

(5) c. The textbooks are closed, ...

d. The accountbooks are closed (kept secret), ...



Linguistic context can also eliminate syntactic ambiguity.

Example:

(6) They are flying planes.

(7) He hit the man with a stick.

These two sentences are grammatically ambiguous. However, sentences like these seldom appear independently. There might be a sentence like "Where are John and Mary?" preceding sentence (6). If the previous sentence tells who "they" are in sentence (6), then, the ambiguity of the word "flying" is removed. Similarly, sentence (7) may be followed by such a sentence as: "And the man hit back with his fists." This will indicate the feature of one side, then, easy inference of the other side can be made, and the sentence meaning is self-evident.

## 2. Removing Vagueness and Indicating Referents

Vagueness means that the meaning of a word or a sentence is not specific, not clear.

Example:

(8) Tony said that he has passed the exam.

(9) This is Jane's picture.

The meaning of sentence(8) is not clear, we don't know who "he" is, Tony or someone else.

Sentence (9) is even more vague, it may refer to the picture taken by Jane or the picture owned by Jane, or the portrait of herself.

Vagueness can be divided into two types roughly:

i. Referential Vagueness

ii. Indeterminacy of Meaning

Sentence(8) belongs to the first type, sentence(9) to the second one.

Vagueness of a word can be removed either by its modifier or vice versa:

(10) My grandfather, my mother's father, died.

(11)a. This is a good strawberry.

b. This is a good lemon.

In sentence (10), the appositive "my mother's father" clearly expresses the specific meaning of "my grandfather". As to sentence (11) a. and b., the meaning of the adjective "good" is determined by the word it modifies. Actually, "good" is a common word with many meanings, but the meaning of "good" in either sentence is very clear, not vague, i. e. the strawberry in sentence a. is very sweet, while the lemon in sentence b. is very sour. The word "good" refers to the taste of sweet and sour respectively in sentence (11) a. and b.

In social communication, we tend to use pronouns such as "I, you, he, this, that" to replace noun phrases, "do, can, should" instead of verb phrases, and "there, then" for adverbial of place, time, etc. It is a way of making our speech or statement concise and logic. Normally, sentences containing such pronouns might be understood without the linguistic context.

Firth once wrote such a dialogue:

A: Do you think he will?

B: I don't know. He might.

A: I suppose he ought to, but perhaps he feels he can't.