The Relations between NNSs and NSs’ Cognitive Manifestations of Prototypes in the Linguistic Categorization Revealed in Chinese Classifiers

汉语母语者与非母语者对量词语言学范畴的认知表征原型的关系

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Abstract

Inspired by Chang-Smith’s (2000) study, this experiment aims to investigate the relations between NNSs and NSs’ cognitive manifestations of prototypes in the linguistic categorization revealed in Chinese classifiers. Five classifiers belonging to two different categories were selected: three SHAPE classifiers (條 tiáo, 張 zhang, 粒 li`) and two FUNCTION classifiers (台 tá, 把 bā). All these classifiers denote multiple concrete objects that are commonly seen and used in daily life. The goal of this experiment was to examine to what extent the NNSs’ cognitive manifestation overlapped with those represented and manifested by NSs.

A six-page booklet was provided to the subjects with the instructions for this experiment on the first page and with the following five pages each containing one of the five classifiers discussed above. The subjects were asked to list up to 5 objects in Section A that could co-occur with the classifier in question. In Section B, subjects are asked to rank the objects in Section A based on the level of typicality of a certain object that can be denoted by the classifier in question. 29 Korean and 29 American subjects were tested as they studied Chinese in Taipei Taiwan.

The results show that 1) with shape classifiers, the most typical objects produced by L1 subjects were also the most typical ones produced by L2 subjects; 2) there is a great degree of overlap between L1 and L2 subjects’ cognitive association of objects with the CLs tested; 3) there is a great discrepancy concerning what the most typical objects should be for the shape classifier 條 tiáo between L1 and L2 subjects; 4) there is also less overlapping of perceptional association of the classifier 條 tiáo than with the other two shape classifiers; 5) overall, in terms of response frequency, the L2 subjects’ results to a great extent resemble those produced by L1 subjects; 6) the distributions of response tokens overlap overwhelmingly between L1 and L2 subjects; 7) L2 subjects produced an increasingly wider range of response tokens as their CPL advanced; 8) shape classifiers generated a relatively higher number of response tokens compared to function classifiers; 9) Korean 184 subjects produced a higher percentage of correct responses with function classifiers than English-speaking subjects; 10) English-speaking subjects produced a higher percentage of correct responses with shape classifiers than Korean subjects.

The pedagogical implication is that not only do the semantic association of classifiers and denoted nouns need to be taught, the salient features of the denoted nouns perceived by native speakers also need to be explained and exemplified with other similar nouns. Although this will
not eliminate the need to learn and memorize exceptions, L2 learners would have higher confidence and accuracy in using Chinese noun classifiers correctly after receiving instruction on how native speakers use classifiers.