

Differences Between Chinese, English, and Russian Languages' Reflections on Thinking

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ABSTRACT

Language was never only a tool people used to communicate but also a reflection of a nation's thinking mode and cultural values. Due to the differences in the speakers' perceptions, the phonetics, grammatical rules, and morphology all differ. This article is concerned with the influence of a culture on a language, making comparisons between English, Chinese, and Russian. Based on the use of family titles, greeting phrases, and pronouns to examine the three countries' perceptual differences in gender, cordiality, and conscience of superiority and inferiority.

Keywords: *English Language, Chinese Language, Russian Language*

1. INTRODUCTION

A shared language is an important tool to bond a nation together. Every language is a great witness of a country's history and culture. People define themselves as people of one descendant because of their shared values. They have similar traditions, holidays, beliefs, but more importantly, they use the same language. Only people who share the same language can fully understand each others' intentions, meanings, and ideas. The language contains every aspect of the nation, from its core, government and religion, to the edge, food and holidays. To fully assimilate into a new culture, the best way is to learn its language. Not only because it can be used to communicate with the native speakers, but also because it can help to understand the uniqueness and essential values of that nation.

2. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND THOUGHTS

Language is a symbol system composed of speech, vocabulary, and grammar. It is the most important cross-linking tool for human beings, people use it to communicate with each other, exchange ideas, and achieve the purpose of mutual understanding. Language is the direct result of thinking, and it is one of the most essential characteristics that distinguish humans from other animals. It comes into being with the emergence of society and develops with the progress of society.

The relationship between language and thinking is not one of who decides who, but one of mutual dependence, mutual influence and mutual restriction. Neither comes first, they coexist. The expression of human thinking is inseparable from language, and the organization of language is inseparable from thinking. The relationship between language and thinking can be summarized using the famous linguist Humboldt's phrase: "Language is the formative organ of thought. Intellectual activity, entirely mental, entirely internal, and to some extent passing without trace, becomes, through sound, externalized in speech and perceptible to the senses. Thought and language are therefore one and inseparable from each other. [1] Humboldt rejects to look at language only a tool of communication, or a result of thinking. However, he believes that language is a reflection of mind activity. Language is a worldview. Language is a possible spirit, accompanied by emotion and will of human activity. Humboldt also deeply believes that language and nation are inseparable. Every nation has its own special language because people from different nations look at the world differently, and the difference between their languages reflect the distinctions between their world views. [2]

I support Humboldt argument because I can clearly see the difference between how people from different nations perceive the world through their use of language. For example, Russians are very passionate, sometimes even to people they never met

before. We can see the reflection of their passion in the way they interact with others. They will call someone “Брат”, which literally means brother even if they have never seen each other before. On the other hand, the Chinese, as a nation with a more implicit nature, they will not refer to someone as “兄弟 (xiongdi)” which means brother when they first meet. From this example, we see how language can successfully reflect the nation’s character. The word choices of people in certain scenarios are so deeply engraved in their mind that the language has become a part of the nation’s culture, rather simply a tool for communication.

Next, let’s shift our discussion to the function of thinking in the process of using language, such as choosing the correct grammatical form. According to Ferdinand de Saussure said that “the connection between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary.” [3] This means that there is no logical or intrinsic relationship between signifier (sound pattern) or signified (concept).” It is a combination of sound and meaning in the conventions that people are commonly used to, which does not require any rules or thinking.

However, as language develops over time, grammar begins to appear. After creation of individual words, words will have morphology and sentences will have syntax. Although these grammatical rules are formed and fixed in the process of using language, but the classification and use of lexical and syntactic components (what kind of words belong to the same part of speech and what types of words can be composed together), this already involves the thinking, and it is no longer the combination of sound and meaning mentioned above, which relies on common agreement and memory. Wittgenstein’s famous family resemblance principle support this view: “I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblance'; for the various resemblances between the members of a family: build, features, color of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. - And I shall say: 'games' form a family.”[4]

In conclusion, the development of language is a type of social psychological phenomenon, which follows certain developmental stages and laws. Thinking is a psychological activity, is also a psychological process, its development also follows a certain stage of development and law. The development of language promotes the development of thinking, and the development of thinking also has an important impact on the development of language. As George Yule put it in his study of language acquisition, human ancestors began by walking upright and changed the function of their forelimbs.

The changes in the structure of the vocal tract and the physiological evolution of the teeth, lips, tongue and throat led to the gradual acquisition of the ability of human voice. The brain is unilateral, with the left hemisphere responsible for the use of tools and language. In the use of language, humans need partners to cooperate, and human communication emerged after a long evolution. Human beings thus began to use language to impart knowledge and skills. [5] The above viewpoints of Yule can also prove that language is closely related to thinking. Language is the expression form of thinking and thinking is the content of language. They exist together

3. THE COMPARISON BETWEEN CHINESE, ENGLISH, AND RUSSIAN

All of the three languages are official languages recognized by the United Nations and have large numbers of native speakers. English is a Western Germanic language that belongs to the Indo-European language family and was largely influenced by German and French. While Russian also belongs to the Indo-European language family, it is rooted in the Balto-Slavic branch and is derived largely from Greek and Latin. Different from English and Russian, Chinese is from the Sino-Tibetan language family, and since it is as old as Greek and Latin and has a totally different system than the Western languages, it was formed mainly on its own and had very little influence from other languages. [6] [7] [8] All of the three languages have evolved a long way along with their nation’s history. The evolution process reflected many unique characteristics of the country’s culture and its people. Therefore, these languages differ from each other not only in phonetics, syntax, and morphology but also in thinking concepts such as gender, cordiality, and conscience of superiority and inferiority.

3.1 Phonetics

Phonetics, or the way the language sounds is extremely important because it leaves the first impression of the speaker to the listener with its tone and pronunciation. In general, Chinese sounds very lively and bouncy to non-Chinese speakers because it is a tonal language. “Tones play a very important role in Chinese. Each Chinese character has one tone, and the Chinese language has a total of four tones as well as one neutral tone. The same syllable with a different tone may have a different meaning.” [9] On top of that, there are many characters with the exact same pronunciation but mean different things in Chinese. For example, the character indicating lamp (deng55 灯), and the character indicating climb a mountain (deng55 登) are written differently, but pronounced the same way, both “deng55.” The only way to distinguish them is to

understand by context. Sometimes more than twenty characters can all be pronounced the same way but mean different things. There are thousands of these kinds of groups of “false friends.” It is very easy to get them confused even for a native speaker. Different from Chinese, both English and Russian are not tonal languages. And tones are only used to express the emotions of the speaker.

Even though both Russian and English are non-tonal languages, their phonetic rules are also very different. There are five vowels in the English alphabet; however, they are pronounced differently in different situations. For example, in the word *sit*, it has a [i] sound, but in the word *site*, it has a [ai] sound. The same letter could have different pronunciations due to its place in the word and the consonant following it. There are also many special combinations that need to be memorized such as “ph” giving a [f] sound. Different from English, Russian is relatively straightforward in the sense of pronunciation. There are accents in Russian, and its rule is very similar to Spanish, the syllable which consists of the vowel under accent is stressed more heavily than the other syllables in the word. Unlike in English, in Russian everything reads the same way as it is spelled. For example, if the letter in the word is “н”, which has a [i] sound, then it is going to be pronounced the same way. However, there are some exceptions. For example, if the letter “о” is under the accent, then it reads as [o], but if it is not, then it reads as [a].

Another difference between Russian and English is the voiceless sound of consonants. The consonants in Russian are identified as voiced or voiceless, hard or soft. “Consonants that make your vocal cords vibrate when you pronounce them are voiced. Consonants that you pronounce without the vibration of your vocal cords are voiceless. Most consonants in Russian are paired for voicing.” [10] For example, the letter “з” is a voiced consonant, and its unvoiced pair is the letter “с”. There are six of these pairs in the Russian alphabet. And there are also five voiced consonants that do not have an unvoiced match: *р, л, м, н, й*. “For almost every consonant, Russian has two sounds: a hard consonant and a soft consonant. But there are three unpaired hard consonants: *ж, ш, ц* (they have no soft counterparts) and three unpaired soft consonants *ч, щ, й* (these consonants have no hard counterparts).” [11] There are many pronunciation rules depending on the voiceless and hardness of the consonants. One of the simplest rules would be devoicing consonants. In Russian pronunciation, all voiced consonants at the end of the word are pronounced like their voiceless partner. However, in English, there is no pronunciation rule such as devoicing the consonant. The word “red” that ends with a voiced consonant still reads as “red”, but not “ret” because the voiced consonant is at the end. English speakers also do not emphasize the hardness or

voiceless of consonants that much as Russians, therefore, English sounds smoother.

Because of its tones, Chinese sometimes can sound loud and bouncy, leaving the impression to the non-Chinese speakers that Chinese people are emotional and sometimes impatient. This reflects the Chinese rhythm of life: due to industrialization and economic development, Chinese people all work really hard and barely find time to stop and relax. Russian sounds aggressive and rigid to non-Russian speakers because of the big amount of hard and voiced consonants in the language. This impression of the language matches the Russian people’s characteristics and their image on the world stage. English sounds flattered to non-English speakers, which also matches the rational image that English speakers leave to people around the world. Therefore, we can conclude that a part of the people’s image is formed due to how they speak and how their language sounds.

3.2 Syntax

The syntax of Chinese, English, and Russian are very different. In Chinese, it is relatively easy compared to other western languages. The speaker just needs to keep in mind some basic sentence structure. For example, in Chinese, adjectives should be placed before nouns (Adj + Noun), and object nouns should be placed after verbs in declarative sentences without emphasis, no other components can be inserted between the verb and the object noun (verb + object), the question word does not need to be moved to the front of the sentence when asking questions. In Chinese, in order to change the verb to past tense, just simply add a character “了 (le)” to the end of the verb. There are not as many grammatical rules in Chinese as in other languages.

The grammar in English is not that hard compared to Russian, but a little harder than in Chinese. Mainly, the only part of speech that changes depending on grammar is the verbs; they change in tenses: present, past, future, etc. There is an order the sentence structure should follow, such as putting the subject before the verb, prioritizing question words in a question.

Russian is widely considered as one of the hardest languages from a grammatical standpoint. Unlike English and Chinese, every noun in Russia has a gender. The gender can be identified by looking at the word’s ending. However, the nouns ending with “ь” can be both genders. Therefore, people need to memorize which gender the word belongs to. The nouns from different genders conjugate differently.

Also, there are cases of nouns in the Russian language. “The nouns change their forms and get different endings. These forms (and their endings) are called cases. The case of a noun shows what role a noun plays in the sentence. There are six cases in Russian:

nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, instrumental, and prepositional. Very often the case of a noun is connected with a preposition that stands before it. The nouns, adjectives, pronouns, and numerals may have different case forms in the sentence.” [12] Thus, to understand Russian speech and to speak Russian correctly, it is necessary to learn how to use cases in Russian. The endings of the nouns changed depending on its case; the speakers need to always keep in mind the cases and the correct ending for the case to get the sentence correct grammatically. If the speaker uses a wrong ending, it might undermine people’s understanding. The ending of the adjectives also changes to match up the case, gender, and the number of the noun it is describing. The endings of verbs change in tense as well. In this sense, Russian is very similar to Spanish.

Similar to English, it has twelve tenses. The tense of the verb can be identified through its ending. However, unlike English, verbs also change in number and gender to match with the subject who is doing the action. In Russian, almost every word in every sentence changes depending on its meaning, number, place, subject, and gender.

3.3 Morphology

Word formation is the key to every language and directly affects people’s understanding. If the morphology of a language is easy to follow logically, it makes learning new vocabulary much easier. English and Russian are similar in this sense because they share the same method - derivational morphology. In this system, the parts of the word (roots, prefixes, suffixes) play an essential role. In Russian, there are four essential word elements that are used to build a word: prefixes, roots, suffixes, and ending. All of them indicate meanings. Prefixes are used to identify the relationship of the word with the root. Root, which is the most important part, oftentimes tells the meaning of the word. The suffix which comes after the root can help to identify the characteristic of a word. And lastly, the ending of the word tells the characteristic of a word (nouns, verbs, adjectives). And if it is a noun or an adjective, it also tells the gender of the word. For nouns of the male gender, the ending is empty. Nouns of the female gender have an ending of -a or -я. Adjectives have a different set of ending, male gender end with -ый or -ий. Female gender ends with -ая or -ья. And neutral gender ends with -ое or -ее. For example, the prefix “при” means next to something. The root “дорож” means road. Suffix “н”, usually tells that this is an adjective. If I combine all of the elements I used as the example above, I will get a word “придорожный”, which would be an adjective of the male gender meaning next to the road. Since the meaning of the words is strongly connected to their root, learning the

common roots becomes especially important because it would help to understand most words with the same roots. For example, many words connected to water share the same “вод”, meaning the water has many words, such as “водный, водяной, вода”. The word elements made it very easy to find patterns and guess the meaning of the word even if it is unfamiliar.

English morphology is very similar to Russian. Prefixes indicate the relationship between the word and its root. For example, the prefix “in-” usually means “not”. Therefore, when it is combined with the root “direct”, a new word “indirect” comes out, and it means “not direct.”

Chinese morphology is different, but also logical. The structure of a character does not come randomly, it is built with logic. Just as in other Western languages, there are similar parts as roots of the word; in Chinese, they are called radicals. A radical is a component of a Chinese character that indicates its meaning. Many characters have the same radical due to their common connection to a certain object. For example, many characters that are related to water, such as river (河), stream (流), sea (海), have the same radical that means water (氵) in them.

4. LANGUAGES’ REFLECTION ON THINKING

Due to the cultural differences, the speakers of English, Russian, and Chinese hold very different views on many concepts. Chinese emphasize which side the relative belongs to (father’s or mother’s) in their language, whereas Russian and English usually share the same word for both sides. English speakers, such as Americans are also more passionate when it comes to greetings compared to Chinese and Russians. Moreover, English speakers do not stress the importance of superiority and inferiority as much as Russians and Chinese. All of the differences in culture and thinking are reflected in their languages.

4.1 Family Continuation Concept

Chinese values family continuation greatly. Even today, the majority believes that a family has to have a son in order for the clan to last. However, in both Russia and English-speaking countries, such a concept is not stressed as important. This phenomenon is well reflected in languages. In Chinese, grandparents from father’s side call their grandchildren “孙子 sunzi(grandson)” or “孙女 sunnv(granddaughter)”. Whereas the grandparents from the mother’s side call their grandchildren “外甥 waisheng.” The reason for such a difference is because to the Chinese, it is widely considered that the child belongs to the father’s family. In the old times, or even in more traditional families

today, married daughters are not considered as a member of her maiden family. There is a saying in Chinese: “Daughter who has married to her husband is equivalent to water that has been splashed and thus it cannot be retrieved.” Following this logic, the children of daughters cannot be considered as members of their mothers’ maiden families as well. This is also why many Chinese families value sons more than daughters even today. In Russian and English countries, people do not value the family continuation that greatly as Chinese do, therefore, in their languages, the grandchildren are the same for both sides of grandparents, in English is “grandson” or “granddaughter”, and in Russian is “внук” or “внучка.”

4.2 Cordiality

Chinese, Russian, and English speakers generally all are friendly, but the way they express their passion to people they meet the first time is very different. One of the most common greeting phrases in English is “How are you?”. People use it everywhere with everyone, no matter they know the person or not. The response usually is “I am doing well”, even though this might not be the truth. This phrase is used more like “hi” rather than its actual meaning. People do not expect a person they meet the first time to answer the question truthfully.

However, Chinese people oftentimes, do not ask people they do not know well “how are they?”. This is considered a more private question. This question is usually only between close friends who have not seen each other for a long time. And the response Chinese people get is different from English speakers as well. Friends would answer the question truthfully and share about their recent happiness or problems.

Russian people are in between Chinese and English speakers. They ask “how are you” or “как дела” in Russian more often than Chinese. The question can be asked between classmates, colleagues, or people who are not very close friends but know each other. Unlike Americans, they would not ask a random person they meet on a plane or taxi driver. And the answers Russians get are somewhat more realistic. It will not be “I am doing well”, as most Americans say. Instead, it can be “Нармально” (so so.) Russians will not share the specifics of their problems with the person, as the Chinese do, either, since they might not know each other to that extend.

The ways Chinese, Russian, and English speakers greet reflect their characteristics. Chinese are more introverted but real with their friends, while English speakers can seem very passionate, but actually care less about the actual conditions of other people. Russians are in the middle of the two, they are less exaggerated than

Americans, but also reveal about themselves less the Chinese.

4.3 Conscience of superiority and inferiority

Russians and Chinese value the sense of superiority and inferiority more than English speakers. They have a clear sense of the elder’s need to be more respected, and this reflects in their use of pronouns. Americans are freer in this sense and do not like to build a sense of distance by emphasizing respect.

In Chinese, the pronoun used to address the elders or people they do not know well is different than the one used for close friends and families. The respectful form is “您 (nin35)”, and the casual form is “你(ni214).” The pronoun “nin35” creates a sense of respect, but also distance. Chinese people value respect towards elders greatly. It is listed as one of the most important virtues. Therefore, the difference in pronouns reflects this concept.

Russian takes the concept of superiority and inferiority to another extend. First of all, there are differences in pronouns: “Вы” for the respectful form and “ты” for casual. Besides that, there are also differences in greeting: “Здравствуйте” is the respectful form for “hi”, and “привет” is the casual form. The names by which Russians call each other are also different depending on the form. For respected people, they call them by their first name plus the name of their father. This formation is called patronymic, which is the father’s name with a suffix; it is common among all Slavic languages. Therefore, we can see the emphasis on superiority and inferiority in every aspect of the Russian language, from greetings to names. Russian people care about their social status very deeply, they will feel offended and be mad if a person they do not know well use casual form to address them.

English speakers seem to care less about superiority and inferiority. There is not way to reflect if a sentence is spoken in a respectful form or casual form. The pronouns are the same, both you, and everything else is not doing change according to the form either. This reflects English speaker’s characteristics; they are more casual and easygoing in general. Nonetheless, they also seem to be more enthusiastic about each other, since their language does not create barriers or distance between people of different social status or age groups. Everybody can feel equally comfortable while talking.

5. CONCLUSION

A single language bonds a nation together because it contains the reflection of a similar world view and cultural values, such as gender concepts, cognition of superiority and inferiority. Only people who speak, hear, and understand the same language can fully

interpret these values. The way a language sounds can also leave a very basic impression of the nation to the world. Language is greatly affected by the thinking mode of a nation through the use of pronouns, nouns, verbs, however, the relationship is two-wayed. Through the process of leaning a language, the speaker also adopts the world views and thinking modes and the language. Therefore, it can be concluded that culture and language are two things that cannot be separated. Each language represents a unique world view. And English, Chinese, and Russian languages differ greatly because of the three nations' different values in many matters.

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