Markedness of Opposite

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Abstract. In the studies of opposite pairings, the saying that some opposite pairs have one member as unmarked and the other marked “covers a number of disparate and independent phenomena” (Lyons 1977: 305). A lot of work has been done on selecting criteria for determining the unmarked/marked members (e.g., Lehrer 1985). This paper reviews the three most used criteria (morphological mark, semantic meaning and context-frequency) in previous studies and examines the theoretical criteria with natural language facts, especially with examples of Chinese. The aim is to discuss whether such criteria are capable in practical using.

1 Introduction

The concept of markedness has been used in many linguistic researches. Started from the phonological field of distinguishing words with different features, then it is synchronically introduced into the areas such as morphology, syntax, pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, language acquisition, and of course lexical semantics. However, a close look at the using of marked/markedness may find the term is overused in some many cases that the sense itself has been developed into many different meanings. And for the causes to the markedness/unmarkedness within one pair, Haspelmath (2006: 25) mentions some possible candidates like structural asymmetries, phonetic difficulty and pragmatic inferences.

Among the various related terms and categories, however, this paper only deal with the markedness that can appear in the opposite pairings, which mainly from the aspects of morphology, semantics and frequency in contexts. Other aspects, although very interesting and sometimes also closely related, such as phonology or psychology, have to be saved for our later paper, due to the limitation of time and writing.

2 Markedness and Its Criteria

The best summarized and also the most cited list of markedness criteria is that of Lehrer (1985). The eight criteria she presents cover most (if not all) of the standards people use to determine markedness, and three of which are mentioned most frequently as the main practical approaches.
2.1 Morphological Markedness and Opposite

This standard claims that the word member which takes a morphological mark is considered as the marked one. Languages like English usually add prefixes to produce the derivational morphemes. Many of them are negative prefixes such as un-, a-, in-, dis-, non-. Such prefixes are very common in English vocabulary. Lehrer (2002) reports that un- and in- are the most productive prefix of negation and both of them can generate contradictories and contraries antonyms. Examples of contradictories are like mortal: immortal and true: untrue; while ones of contraries like happy: unhappy and wise: unwise. And, some prefixes, such as non-, are also able to create opposites which are complementaries, for example, grammatical: nongrammatical. According to Zimmer (cf. Lehrer 2002) “most of the non- derivatives listed in Webster’s International Dictionaries have neutral stems, with a few negative ones” (2002: 504).

However, in most of the case, for the words which have lexical and morphological antonyms, Lehrer notes, “the morphological antonym will have more general meaning than the lexical antonym” (2002: 504). For example, happy: unhappy/sad, unhappy negates the meaning of being happy while not indicate what kind of emotion is being hold by the subjective; on contrast, sad definitely points out the emotional status, not angry or depress, but the one of showing sorrow.

The negative morphology is widespread in many languages. In Chinese, we have the negative prefixes such as bu4- (“not”), mei3- (“not”), fei1- (“not”), fan3- (“against”), wei4- (“not yet”) and so on. But in Chinese, the situation is a little bit more complex than that of English. Since Chinese words are combined by characters, the suffixes usually also take one character position, and that will make the derived one more likely to be treated as a compound or even a phrase, which is considered to be less likely to combine an opposite pair with the stem word. For example, hao3 (“good”): bu4 hao3 (“not good”)/ huai4 (“bad”). The word bu4 hao3 (“not good”) negates the semantic meaning of hao3 (“good”) in a wider scale than only asserting huai4 (“bad”); but my intuition, if I am right with most of the native Chinese speakers, would probably prefer to take huai4 (“bad”): bu4 hao3 (“not good”), as one opposite pairing, since it is more balance in both phonology and morphology. Only very few Chinese words take the derivational morphemes within the new characters. The most common example is wai1 (“not straight, not upright”). The upper radical of it is bu4 (“not”) and the bottom radical is zheng4 (“upright”) and the whole meaning of wai1 is almost the same as bu4 zheng4\(^1\). But this kind of morphology is very rare in Chinese. Hence, for the most cases in Chinese, the stem word and the derived one with a negative suffix would probably not be considered as constructing an opposite pair in morphological aspect.

2.2 Semantic Markedness and Opposite

From the semantic aspect of distinguishing marked and unmarked members, it is important to decide which one has a neutralized reading. Usually, the one which can be used in a how-question or a related nominalization of measurement is considered to be the unmarked member.

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\(^1\) The pronunciation of bu4 zheng4 is actually bu2 zheng4, due to the phonetic restriction of Chinese compounds.