

Study on Markedness in Linguistics*

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Markedness Theory is one of the most important theories in structural linguistics. Its academic significance has long attracted more scholars and linguists. This paper intends to explore markedness from both formal and semantic perspectives: formal markedness, distributional markedness, and semantic markedness. These three types of markedness are accounted for in detail from their definitions to their characteristics. Then the relationship of these three types of markedness is explicated. The ultimate aim of this paper is to give an insight to markedness phenomenon not only from linguistic form or structure, but from its semantic distinctions and pragmatic use. The study also aims to help foster the greater application of Markedness Theory to other linguistic fields' study.

Keywords: markedness, Markedness Theory, formal markedness, distributional markedness, semantic markedness

Introduction

Markedness Theory proposes that in the languages of the world certain linguistic elements are more basic, natural, and frequent (unmarked) than others which are referred to as marked. The concept of Markedness is first proposed by the Prague School scholars Nikolai Sergeyevich Trubetzkoy and Roman Jakobson. They explained Markedness in phonemic contrasts. That is, in an opposing phoneme pair, one element is marked, while the other element is unmarked. Take a phoneme pair *t/d* as an example, in this phoneme pair, *t* is unmarked for voice, while *d* is marked for voice. As is shown above, Markedness is initially explored in phonology. However, with scholars and experts' constant study, Markedness forms a theory and its application is widened and deepened. Markedness Theory is widely applied to phonetics, semantics, pragmatics, and psycholinguistics. Consequently, the study on markedness touches not only the structural form of language, but also the implicit meaning of language. Here, the paper focuses on three types of markedness: formal markedness, distributional markedness, and semantic markedness. Through explanation and comparison of these three kinds of markedness, the nature of markedness and its role in relevant linguistic study are explored.

Three Types of Markedness

Formal Markedness

Formal markedness, as it suggests, is defined through the absence or presence of certain formal features or

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marks. In phonetics, in phoneme pairs of *t/d*, *p/b*, *k/g*, the former are unmarked for voice, the later are marked for voice. “Voice” here is the “certain formal feature or mark”. For *p/b*, *p* is marked by the feature of aspiration, while *b* is unmarked for the lack of the feature of aspiration. It can be seen from the above examples that when two phonemes are distinguished by the presence or absence of a single distinctive feature, one of them is said to be to marked and the other unmarked of the feature. These are called privative opposition, which refers to what is the only one distinctive feature to distinguish A from B. if A has this feature, B does not.

Another illustration of formal markedness is certain word in vocabulary. Unlike in phonology, the formal markedness depends on whether there exist distinctive features, while in vocabulary, formal markedness mainly reflects through derivation and inflection. Derivation is a major method of English word-formation, which refers to the creation of new words through adding the prefix or suffix to the original words.

In some complementary words such as *god/goddess*, *prince/princess*, *healthy/unhealthy*, *lucky/unlucky*, the later are the antonyms of the former, and are formally marked by either the prefix *un* or the suffix *ess*. However, the former are formally unmarked. Here, the prefix and suffix express the opposite or negative meaning. Sometimes, prefixes or suffixes do not necessarily express negative or opposite meaning and they can also play the role of “formal marks”. As in *happy/happiness*, *kind/kindness*, *value/valuable*, through adding the suffixes *-ness* and *-able* to the original words, it is the part of speech of the original words changes, not the meaning of the original words turning to the opposite ones. Besides derivation, inflection is another way of reflecting formal markedness. It mainly refers to the creation of new words through the change of number, gender and case of noun, and the change of tense of verbs. For example:

Teacher/teacher's, wife/wife's girl/girls, family/families

Go/going/went/gone, kick/kicking/kicked/kicked

The singular form of words is usually unmarked like *girl* and *family*, while the plural form of words is marked like *girls* and *families*. The regular English verb is marked for past tense like *went* and *kicked*, unmarked in the present like *go* and *kick*.

As is seen before, formal markedness describes linguistic structure through the outer structural characteristics of language. That is to say, formal markedness only presents opposite relationship through formal or structural opposition. In English vocabulary, not all the opposite relationships are reflected through formal or structural opposition like *old/young*, *positive/negative*, *white/black*, *long/short*. Two words in each pair share no formal or structural similarities, but they express totally opposite meaning. Sometimes, two words share similarities, but they do not stand for opposite meaning like *partial/impartial*. And even two words share similarities and express opposite meanings, it is not necessary for one to be marked in opposition to the one unmarked as in *careful/careless*, *joyful/joyless*, *thankful/thankless*, *meaningful/meaningless*.

As is seen above, formal markedness describes markedness only within formal or structural frameworks, which shows obvious limitations and is far from covering the overall markedness phenomena in language use. Linguists discover that in a marked-unmarked pair, the marked one and the unmarked one do not enjoy the same scale or level, and the use of the marked one is limited compared with the unmarked one. In phonetics, the marked *d* and *b* are distributional limited compared with *t* and *p*. *t* and *p* are archiphonemes and can appear after *s* as in *stop* and *spot*. However, *sdop* and *sbot* are not correct. Similarly, *skate* is correct, but *sgate* is abnormal. Therefore, the unmarked one possesses wider use scale in phonetic environment than the marked one. This rule is also true in

semantics.

Distributional Markedness

In semantics, the unmarked ones are more general in meaning than the marked ones. Take *old/young* as an example, if you are asked “how old are you”, it does not mean “you are old”. Instead, you are required to tell your age. *Old* here is not the opposite of *young*, and “how old are you” equals to “what is your age”. Another example is about “how far is the station?”. Here *far* does not mean the station is far away, and maybe the station is one minute’s walk or even nearer. However, we still use “how far” to ask the distance to the station whether it is far or near. Similar example is as following: How big is the mooncake? *Big* here just refers to the size of the mooncake, and the mooncake is not necessarily big. If the mooncake is small, “how big is the mooncake” is still acceptable.

From above, we can see *old*, *far*, and *big* do not stand directly opposite to *young*, *near*, and *small*, and their meanings are generalized and neutralized to “age”, “distance”, and “size” respectively. However, if *young*, *near*, and *small* take place of *old*, *far*, and *big*, the meaning of the sentences are totally different. “How young are you” presupposes that “you are young”. “How near is the station” implicates “the station is not far”. “How small is the mooncake” suggests “the mooncake is small”. Therefore, we can see the unmarked *old*, *far*, and *big* have neutral meaning and can be more widely used, while the marked *young*, *near*, and *small* are meaning-limited and can not be used under certain circumstances.

Moreover, there are some other examples of the neutralization of the unmarked and the marked ones.

(1) Taotao is stronger than me.

(2) Taotao is weaker than me.

In the above example, *strong* is an unmarked adjective and it can either express the meaning of “having great power esp of body” or the generalized meaning of “the degree of being strong”. In (1), *strong* is neutral and (1) does not mean “Taotao and I are both strong”. Maybe “we are weak” instead, but “Taotao is a little stronger than me”. However, (2) presupposes “Taotao and I are both weak definitely”. Another example:

(1) How high is the building?

(2) How low is the building?

(1) has the neutral or general meaning of “what is the height of the building?”. It is unmarked. Even the building is one centimeter. *High* can also be used in this sentence. While (2) implicates the building is low. Why the unmarked *high*, *old*, *far*, *big*, and *strong* can be used in above contexts while the marked *low*, *young*, *near*, *small*, and *weak* cannot? More attempts are made to explore the causes.

Boucher and Osgood employ Pollyanna Hypothesis to account for this phenomenon. Pollyanna Hypothesis believes that people tend to focus more on the bright side of the world, and they prefer to regard the words with positive meaning as the unmarked ones and the negatives as the marked ones. Therefore, we like to say “the object is not so large”, instead of saying “it is not so small”. *Large* becomes the unmarked one and is generalized and neutralized. Since different languages can easily provide counterexamples, their explanations seem lack of power. In Japanese, *thin* is the unmarked one and possesses the generalized meaning. Besides, for certain pair of antonyms, it is hard to distinguish which one is positive and unmarked and which one is negative and marked.

Semantic Markedness

The last type is semantic markedness. Semantic markedness means that the semantic-marked word is more

specific than the semantic-unmarked word. For example, *actress* is semantic specifically than *actor*. *Waitress* is semantic specifically than *waiter*. *Actress* and *Waitress* only refer to female, while *actor* and *waiter* not only can refer to male, but also can refer to female. *Actor* and *waiter* are unmarked and *actress* and *waitress* are marked. *Actor* and *waiter* are called superordinate, because *actor* includes *female actor (actress)* and *male actor* and *waiter* includes *female waiter (waitress)* and *male waiter*. However, in the following examples, we can see another case:

(1) Is that person an actor or an actress?

(2) Is that person a waiter or a waitress?

We can sense *actor* and *waiter* are not *actress* and *waitress*' superordinate. They are equal in connotation which refers to *male actor* and *female actor*, *male waiter* and *female waiter* respectively. The following examples can illustrate it more clearly:

(1) Is that actor an actor or an actress?

(2) Is that waiter a waiter or a waitress?

Both sentences are acceptable. Here we should pay attention to the first *actor* and second *actor* in the first sentence. And first *waiter* and second *waiter* in the second sentence. The second *actor* and *waiter* are marked and they specifically refer to male dog and male waiter in contrast with *actress* (female actor) and *waitress* (female waiter). They are equal in connotation. However, the first *actor* and *waiter* are superordinate of second *actor* and *waiter*, because they include the male actor and male waiter. The first *actor* and *waiter* are also superordinate of *actress* and *waitress*. From above we can see that *actor* and *waiter* (see first *actor* and *waiter* in the above example) can be superordinate of *actress* and *waitress*; they can also be coordinates of *actress* and *waitress* and hyponyms of *actor* and *waiter* (see second *actor* and *waiter* in the above example). It can be seen that *actor* and *waiter* are more generalized than *actress* and *waitress*. However, not all words enjoy the same level of unmarkedness. For example:

In *cow/bull*, *cow* is unmarked and *bull* is marked. So the sentence “those cows are over there” is acceptable. Maybe there are some *bulls* in those *cows*. However, it is illogical to say “that cow is a bull”. But it is acceptable to say “that dog is a bitch”. From here, it can be seen that *dog* is semantically distributed larger than *cow*. Another evidence is that: We can say *female dog* or *male dog*, but we can not say *female cow* or *male cow*. *Male cow* is self-contradictory, while using *female* to modify *cow* is meaningless. Moreover, *man* is much weaker than *cow* concerning unmarkedness. *Man* is in contrast with *woman*, and *man* can also refer to people, including *women*. As in the following example:

Men are born equal.

Here *men* are generalized to refer to people, even human beings. Of course *women* are included here. But *man* is not superordinate of *woman*. We cannot say “that man is a woman”. In “those men are swimming”, *men* does not include *women* here.

The Relationship of Three Types of Markedness

Even through these three types of markedness describe linguistic structure from different perspectives, there are still some similarities. Pairs possessing formal markedness often have distributional markedness at the same time. For example, in *host/hostess* and *healthy/unhealthy*, the later share both formal markedness and

distributional markedness at the same time. Of course, sometimes there are exceptions. For *high/low* and *wide/narrow*, they have distributional markedness but not formal markedness. Moreover, some words are formally unmarked but distributionally marked. For example, *count* and *prince* are unmarked compared with *countess* and *princess*, but they are not suitable to more contexts.

Generally speaking, words bear formal markedness often bear semantic markedness (*happy/unhappy*, *heir/heirress*). However, some words are formally marked but semantically unmarked (*partial/impartial*). And words which are semantically marked are not necessarily formally marked (*dog/bitch*, *cow/bull*). Semantic markedness and distributional markedness are relevant. All semantically marked words are distributionally marked. The differences between semantic markedness and distributional markedness lie in the following two points: Semantic markedness focuses on the distinctions between words and can distinguish different marked level, while distributional markedness focuses on the sphere of use of the words.

Conclusion

With the joint efforts of scholars and experts on the markedness, Markedness Theory achieves a great development and is applied to the study of a wider range of linguistic fields. Markedness Theory provides a new perspective to the study of language structure, and makes it easier to understand the certain linguistic phenomena. However, there are still problems and limitations for Markedness Theory. Continuous efforts should be made to enrich Markedness Theory and enlarge and deepen its application to other fields.

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