# A Constructive Study of English and Chinese Double Negation

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*Abstract*—As a universally used linguistic structure, double negation has long attracted the attention of scholars in Chinese and foreign countries. But so far the research of double negation is limited to the study and analysis of negative words, negative markers and the surface structure of double negation, and is also restricted to one particular language. In this essay, based on contrastive linguistics and cognitive linguistics, I launch a comparison between English double negation and its Chinese counterpart from the cognitive perspective to identify similarities and differences between them, and furthermore I also attempt to elaborate the causes and motivations for its meaning.

*Index Terms*—double negation, cognitive, iconicity, M—Principle

What is the basis of the sense of double negation? Many linguists are interested in and concentrate on this issue. Palmer and Otto Jespersen are the most typical representatives of these scholars. Palmer said that two negative elements cancel each other to form a positive sense in a sentence. Otto Jespersen (1939) explains "All the languages seem to have a common law, that is, two negative makes a positive". In fact, this theoretical basis used the principle of logic that "two noes mean a yes".

As to the issue why double negation can strengthen the. negative tone Otto Jespersen (1939) gives an explanation as following "the reason why this situation happened is that the pronunciation of negator is short, and the speaker not only adds a negative word in front of verb, but also adds negative in other part of sentence repeatedly in order to make his negative tone understood by the hearer clearly, for fear that a negative word may be ignored by the hearers". As far as this problem is concerned, Evans Bergen (1957) interprets: "in English, two negatives in the same sentence generally reinforce one another. "I didn't say nothing is a emphatic denial and no one who speaks English can misunderstand it. This is normal way of strengthening a negative in all Teutonic languages, of which ours is one".

As to the issue why double negation conveys the weakening negative sense, Otto Jespersen (1939) explains in detail as following: "the expression with two negative is comparatively weak and implies some hesitation on the part of speaker".

To this issue, domestic scholars mainly concentrate on the logic point of view as "negation plus negation means affirmation". The study of the problem why the affirmative sense double negation expresses is different from the positive meaning affirmative sentence conveys is rare.

In summary, with regard to the causes of the semantics of double negation, language scholars have not yet found their commonness behind the language. In this essay, we will attempt to give a cognitive explanation from the perspective of cognitive linguistics.

## I. ANALYSIS FROM COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

According to cognitive linguistics, language changes are based on human experience of speech, and it is likely that same cognitive mechanism toward similar linguistic phenomena exists across languages. What is the cognitive mechanism that guides double negative sentence in English and Chinese?

From the above comparison and analyses, we can conclude that there are both some common ground and individual features between English and Chinese double negation. The meaning expressed by double negative sentence is different from that of affirmative sentence.

There is a correlationship between the grammatical form and semantic structure of language. That is to say, each grammatical form is corresponding to a specific semantic structure. Semantics can not separate from grammar. Meaning is the reflection of the reality rules. The grammatical forms are motivated. The motivation mainly comes from three aspects, namely, the law of reality, the thinking of human and systematicness of language. We are not satisfied to tell people what the language laws are, but try to elaborate why these language laws are, and where they come from.

At first, we keen on the concrete embodiment of contradiction in antonyms. There do exist some antonyms that the positive of one implies the negative of the other, which we call binary pairs. Examples would include: dead/ alive, pass,/fail, hit /miss.

Using these words literally, dead implies not alive, pass implies not fail, and hit means not miss etc.

But there are large numbers of opposites that the positive of one term not necessarily imply the negative of the other, which we call gradable antonyms, e, g, rich/poor, fast/slow, young/old, beautiful/ugly. This relation is typically

associated with adjectives and has two major identifying characteristics: firstly, there are usually intermediate terms so that between the gradable antonyms hot and cold we can find: hot (warm, tepid, cool) cold. This means of course that something may be neither hot nor cold. Secondly, the terms are usually relative.

We think the concept of negation of affirmation does not contradict each other just like the relationship between gradable antonyms. The positive of affirmation does not necessarily imply the negative of negation. There are some intermediate terms between the concept of negation and affirmation: emphatic negation, negation, weakening negation, weakening affirmation, affirmation, emphatic affirmation.

That is to say, the concept of negation and affirmation are not against each other.

We will divide affirmation and negation into three levels:

The scale of — weak — intermediate — strong—

The scale of negation — weak — intermediate — strong —

Positive sentences and negative sentences carry the sense of general affirmative and negative meaning respectively, but how to convey the intermediate sense between negation and affirmation grammatically? Cognitive linguists suggest that semantics is not only objective true-conditions, but also related to -human's subjective cognition and unlimited knowledge system.

What is more, from the perspective of philosophy of language, every thought has a self-contradictory idea; this contradiction can be established through a negative word then. If there is an affirmative sentence, is there a negative sentence that parallel to it in grammatical structure and semantic content from a linguistic point of view? Here are some examples:

a.他昨天晚上回了北京。

He returned to Beijing last night.

b.他昨天晚上没回北京。

He didn't return to Beijing last night.

c.他昨天晚上已经回了北京。

He has already returned to Beijing last night.

d.他昨天晚上已经没回北京。

He has not already returned to Beijing last night.

e.我已经三年去了北京了。

I have gone to Beijing for three years.

f.我已经三年没去北京了。

I have not gone to Beijing for three years.

Observing the natural language phenomena, we can conclude both positive and negative are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The affirmative construction and negative construction are asymmetry, which is the result that the asymmetry of concept between affirmation and negation is mapped onto the affirmative structure and negative construction sentence. The use of law of structure is essentially like the use of words.

The intermediate sense between positive and negative can not be carried by general negative sentences or affirmative sentences in the grammar form, and thus gave rise to this particular form of language, namely, double negative sentence. Why can double negative sentence carry the meaning that differs from the sense of an affirmative sentence or a negative sentence conveys? We will give a detailed explanation in the later part based on the theory of iconicity.

## II. ANALYSIS FROM THE PRINCIPLE OF ICONICITY

The principle of iconicity which is prevalent in all languages has a common cognitive basis. However, the cognitive psychology of all ethnic groups is affected by social and cultural constraints. We think that the reason why some English double negation can carry the negative meaning is their specific cultural background affected. Hence, this issue is out of our research in this paper.

So-called iconicity refers to that there is a necessary link between the form of language and its meaning, that is to say, the relationship between meaning and form is motivated and can be proved. Peirce maintains that the notion of icon to cover similarities between the structure of language and the structure of world, and the structure of language means that we are concerned with grammar and, more generally, with the arrangement of linguistic elements.

The structure of language reflects in some way the structure of experience. The structure of language is therefore motivated or explained by the structure of experience to the extent that the two match.

The theory of iconicity reflects that the more similar the forms are, the closer the meaning are. Haiman (1985) spreads the theory of iconicity from the lexical level to sentence structure, and gets the conclusion that the similar the structures are, the closer the meaning is. He classifies iconicity of syntax into isomorphism and motivation. Cognitive linguistics divide icon into two categories, namely, diagram and metaphor.

Diagram iconicity refers to the phenomenon that the structure of Language reflects the structure of cognition, that is to say, a linguistic expression (length, sequence and the relationship between the composition) is consistent with conceptual structure from the perspective of the speaker; he should adhere the principle that the outside world is mapped into language. To the hearer, he should understand different content according to different forms. .The simple

concept is generally expressed by short and small units such as words and simple sentences, while the complicated concept is conveyed by some complex units like compound words and complex sentences.

The iconic principles which have been proposed for this area are iconic sequencing, iconic proximity and the iconic quantity of linguistic material, especially the iconic quantity.

Iconic sequencing means the sequence of the two clauses corresponds to the natural temporal order of events. Iconic proximity states that elements which have a close relationship must be placed close together. Iconic quantity is a relationship between the length of the linguistic expression and the complexity of the cognitive model.

Let's try to compare Chinese and English double negation and the general semantics of certain sentences:

a. 她的生活使她不能不忘掉羞耻，可是遇到正经事，她还是个有真心的女人。

她的生活使她只能忘掉羞耻，可是遇到正经事，她还是个 有真心的女人。

b. 一切为人师者都不能不注意教授法的问题。

一切为人师者都要注意教授法的问题。

c. He doesn't lend his books to nobody.

He lends his books to anybody.

d. He did not deny that he had made mistakes.

He admitted that he had made mistakes.

Observing the above sentences, we could easily see that the double negative sentences are more positive than the accordingly affirmative sentences at the semantic level, and the tone is more powerful.

a.不是我们不想给乡亲们效劳，实在是没有法子

我们想给乡亲们效劳，实在是没有法子

b.我想我自己也不会没有特务嫌疑。

我想我自己也有特务嫌疑。

c. It is not uncommon for a teacher to make ridiculous mistakes.

It is common for a teacher to make ridiculous mistakes.

d. His argument is not really implausible

His argument is really plausible.

The meaning expressed by the double negative sentences is weaker than affirmative sentences semantically, and are indirect and euphemistic as far as the tone is concerned.

Obviously, there is a marked difference in the length between double negative sentences and affirmative sentences. This difference corresponds to the amount of information that the speaker refers to.

The theory of iconic quantity states that the more complicated and important the information the speaker conveys is, the longer and complex the syntactic components are.

As we discussed earlier, the syntactical structure of double negative sentences is more intricate, flexible than that of affirmative sentences. It is a marked language phenomenon by means of two negative elements, while affirmative sentences are unmarked. As far as the meaning is concerned, though both can express positive meaning, double negative sentences can carry more than affirmative meaning, to strengthen the positive meaning, or to weaken positive meaning with special pragmatic value.

Just as the theory of iconicity maintains, the larger the syntactic components are, the longer the sentence is, the richer and profounder the meaning and implication is. Accordingly, the expression is more indirect with a high degree of courtesy, which is easy for the hearer (reader) to accept. This cognitive feature is well reflected in the double negative sentences. Compared with double negative sentences, affirmative sentences are simpler in form, and shorter in the length of sentence. Hence, .the expression is rigid and direct.

From the above analysis, we can draw a conclusion that the meaning carried by double negative sentences is more complicated than that of affirmative sentences is mainly due to its complex syntactiCAL FORM.

### III.   INTERPRETATION FROM M—PRINCIPLE

Considering the economy of language, double negation is a redundancy which is not in conformity with this principle. But double negation, being one of the most frequently used language forms in our daily life, plays an important role in communication. People use double negation not entirely out of consideration of logic, but out of certain pragmatic motivation. In our view, Levinson's M-Principle in his GCI can give a reasonable explanation to the phenomenon. Here is the definition and explanation of his M-Principle:

M—Principle:

Criteria of the Speaker: speakers use marked forms to refer to the unusual and uncommon situation, contrasting to the unmarked expression which describes the usual and common scene.

Criteria of the hearer: the Non-normal way of expression indicates abnormal scenario, or the marked speech refers to marked situation.

Horn (1984) in his pragmatic division of labor says: it carries marked information that the unmarked form can not convey in situation where it can be used by unmarked expression, but uses a marked form instead. The marked form is relatively complicated and tedious, while the unmarked form is less effort, complex and within expectations. Horn also

says: If two expressions have the same connotation, then, the marked expression is the supplementary of the unmarked form, for it carries more information. Double negative sentence is an marked expression, which use two negative forms as its markers, while affirmative sentence is accordingly an unmarked language structure. Let's look at the examples below first:

a. The teacher was not unpleased with his students.

The teacher was pleased with his students。

b. He is not unjust.

He is just.

c.我觉得我们的战士太伟大了，太可爱了，我不能不被他们感动得掉下泪来。

我觉得我们的战士太伟大了，太可爱了，我被他们感动得掉下泪来。

d.这马又不是不能治好的。

这马是能治好的。

According to our previous analysis, we know that the above sentences all carry positive sense, but differ in their affirmative degree. Take the first pairs of sentences as an example, the negative marker "not unpleased" means "neither pleased nor unpleased" and "pleased" from logic point of view. The speaker chooses the double negative sentence because he thinks that the students' performance does not reach degree of "pleased". To avoid the absoluteness of contents he conveys uses double negative sentence to weaken positive sense.

For the same reason, to strengthen the affirmative meaning, the speaker can also choose the marked form —double negation to express like sentence"我不能不被他们感动得掉下泪来"，rather than the unmarked form"我被他们感动得掉下泪来"

To sum up, we can not say double negation is a redundancy language phenomenon. Though it carries positive sense like affirmative sentence but the degree of affirmative is different. It can strengthen the affirmative, or weaken the affirmative, for its negative elements act as a marker.

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