

Markedness in Universal Grammar and Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the study of markedness theory in Universal Grammar (UG) and its implications in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), showing that the language learners should consciously compare and contrast the similarities and differences between his native language and target language, which will facilitate their learning.

Key words: markedness; Universal Grammar; language learning

1. Introduction

The term of “markedness” was first proposed by N.S.Trubetzkoy, a leading linguist in Prague School, in his book *The Principles of Phonology*. At first it was confined to phonetics: in a pair of opposite phonemes, one is characterized as marked, while the other one lacks such markedness. Now it has been widely applied to the researches on phonetics, grammars, semantics, pragmatics, psychological linguistics and applied injustices. The term markedness can be divided into three classes: formal markedness, distribution markedness and semantic markedness (WANG Ke-fei, 1991).

2. Theoretical Researches on Markedness

The term “marked” has been defined in different ways. The most underlying one among the definitions is the notion that some linguistic features are “special” in relation to others, which are more “basic”. More technical definitions of “marked” can be found in different linguistics traditions.

2.1 Language-typology-based definition

The identification of typological universals has been used to make claims about which features are marked and which one is unmarked. The broad claim is that those features that are universal or present in most languages are unmarked, while those that are specific to a particular or found in only a few languages are marked. Drawing on language typology, Zobl (1984) offer three senses in which rules can be marked:

- a: Typological specification is marked;
- b: The structural properties of a language may also be marked as a result of typological inconsistency;
- c: Typological indeterminacy occurs when a structure predicted on the basis of a language’s overall typology is not found (Zobl, 1984)

2.2 UG-based definition

Chomsky assumes that this distinguishes the rules of a language that are core and periphery as shown in Figure 1. Core rules or unmarked rules are those that can be arrived at through the application of general, abstract principles of language structure which Chomsky and other generative linguists have held to be innate, peripheral

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on marked rules that are not governed by universal principles, they are idiosyncratic, reflecting their unique historical origins.

Another rather different definition of markedness based on UG is one by Zobl (1983). He proposed a notion of markedness based on the learner's projection capacity as shown in Figure 2. Here markedness is understood in relation to the amount of primary linguistic evidence needed to acquire a given property. Zobl's projection model considers property Z unmarked in relation to V, W, X and Y on the ground that the acquisition device does not require any actual experience of Z in order to acquire it. Instead hearers are able to infer the existence of Z once they have discovered that certain other properties exist.

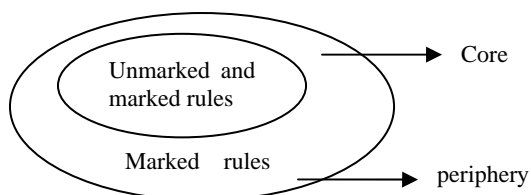


Figure 1

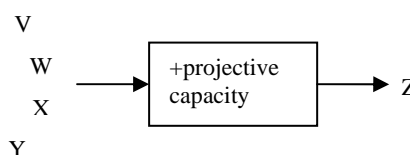


Figure 2

To my opinion the property Z here can be regarded as human being's lost memory according to Plato. Through the triggering of V, W, X and Y, the lost memory is activated. Here the acquisition of V, W, X, and Y are of consciousness while the acquisition of Z is of unconsciousness.

3. Empirical Research on Markedness

Now I'd like to consider some of the empirical research that has examined the relationship between markedness and second language acquisition. Among them Mazurkewich's research and Hawkins' research is more representative.

3.1 Mazurkewich's research on markedness and L2 acquisition

Mazurkewich investigated dative alternation, arguing that the NP+PP pattern in unmarked and the NP+NP pattern marked. One reason for the argument is that the NP+PP pattern is more productive than the NP+NP pattern. Another reason is that case assignment is transparent in the NP+PP pattern, but is problematic in the NP+NP pattern.

The subjects in her study were 45 French speaking high school and college students and 38 Inuktitut-speaking high school students. Judgement that about sentences containing dative verbs with both the NP+PP and the NP+NP patterns were elicited from all the hearers and the controls. The result she found is that the subjects judged sentences with the unmarked NP+PP pattern more accurately than the sentences with marked NP+NP pattern. She also found that the level of accuracy in the marked pattern increased with proficiency.

3.2 Hawkins' research on markedness and second language acquisition

However there have been criticisms of Mazurkewich's research. White (1989) notes that the French learners may have been influenced by their L1 because French share the NP+PP pattern rather than by markedness. Hawkins (1987) goes further, he points out that dative alternative is generally seen as a lexical property of verbs and that lexical properties belong to the periphery rather than the core.

Hawkins' own study of dative alternation investigated ten adult French speakers at a British university. They were given a grammaticality judgement task similar to Mazurkewich's and a sentence construction task that required them to add a preposition to any sentences they thought required them. Based on the analysis of the result he provides evidences of a series of stages in the acquisition of dative alternation: To begin with learners distinguish dative verbs; Later they introduce a distinction between "to" and "for" verbs; At last they still

distinguish native and non-native verb forms on the basis of these findings. Hawkins argues that it is misleading to isolate a single aspect of dative alternation and raise it to the status of UG-determined features of L2 acquisition. His own preference is for a theory of markedness based on cognitive notions of “learning complexity.”

4. My Opinions and Preference

Here the “core grammar” must be mentioned here again to be emphasized. Our ability to speak a language is based partly on UG, partly on the triggering experience of exposure to a specific language. On the basis of these components we develop a grammar of one specific language: the core grammar of the language, which is usually viewed as unmarked. Those that are not taken to be part of the core grammar are marked grammar of the language and will be learnt later. From the above we can see the markedness is based on UG always tend to be language-specific. It is hard to find a balance between a native language and a second language and always raise some burning questions (as the question raised by dative of). It is true that some principles are universal in all languages. At the same time we must see that some marked principles in a second language are less marked once we have acquired them in our native language though these principles are certainly marked according to UG. For example, a Chinese must be easy to grasp the Japanese language, whose lexical items originate from the same language family with the Chinese language than English which does not. The acquisition of the social or cultural conventions is true of this. This phenomenon is widely found in language learners, so some opinions come out:

A: markedness is a relevant term;

B: markedness research should be based on typological universals rather than UG.

The opinion B is more practical since we find the similarities and differences between a native language and a second language, which will benefit our teaching and learning without doubt. Most of all we must pay more attention to the topic is markedness and second language acquisition.

5. Conclusion

Since some knowledge is marked while the other is unmarked according to UG, and the marked knowledge in L2 is less marked and relevant once we have acquired them in our native language, it will hint a lot at our teaching of L2:

(1) Teachers should be good at comparing the marked knowledge with the unmarked knowledge to help their teaching;

(2) Learners, especially adult learners on grammar and lexical items learning, should be capable of eliciting or inferring the similarities between the two languages to facilitate their learning.

The markedness theory on UG may be beneficial in our native language acquisition. However, to be more practical and empirical, the marked theory should or will be better to depend on typological universals in SLA.

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