

The Cognitive Perspective in Teaching Chinese measure words

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- Difficulties and controversies surrounding Chinese measure words are mainly due to:
 - the categorization concept from which it is approached in grammars and textbooks (Aristotelian view)
 - the common practice is providing sentence level descriptions while leaving the discourse and pragmatic levels unattended.
- Difficulties are not intrinsic to the category itself, but rather stem from the focus adopted in its study

- In the traditional view categories are conceived as separate compartments in which all the elements share one or several common characteristics; that is to say, they are discrete, homogeneous sets, each having a number of necessary and sufficient properties.

- Need for a new theoretical framework of reference. **Cognitive linguistics** provides a heterogeneous, interdisciplinary and holistic model, postulating that language is inseparable from the other facets of human cognition, and therefore syntax, semantics and pragmatics form an indissoluble whole.
- According to cognitive linguistics, categories are fuzzy, are defined by groups of family features and relationships, and are made up of both prototypical and peripheral members, which means that some members are better examples of their respective categories than others.

- Delimitation of the category (what should or should not be considered a measure word):
 - cease to be relevant because the problem is no longer black and white but rather one of degree;
 - there may be measure words which are more central and therefore more representative of the measure word category, while others are more peripheral (and even overlap with other categories), marking fuzzy boundaries with other categories;
 - categories include marginal examples whose membership to the category is doubtful or indecisive.

- Consistency of categories:
 - Whether or not an individual belongs to a category depends on the degree of its similarity to the prototype (family resemblance principle).
 - Categorization depends more on the properties that we attribute to entities rather than to their intrinsic properties (subjective perspective), which is why cultural conventions play such an important role in categorization.
 - A single entity may belong to more than one category, either because it can be analyzed from different points of view or because it naturally straddles two or more categories.

- Measure words as complex categories:
 - The lines of association linking the members of a category are not necessarily established between the individual examples and the prototype, but rather because a given element resembles another and it is the latter which shares a certain attribute with our mental image of the prototype.
 - It is therefore not necessary for all the members of a category to share any single attribute, or even for them to share any single attribute with the prototype; indeed, the possible lines of association are multiple. Accordingly, the members which make up a category are not necessarily homogeneous.

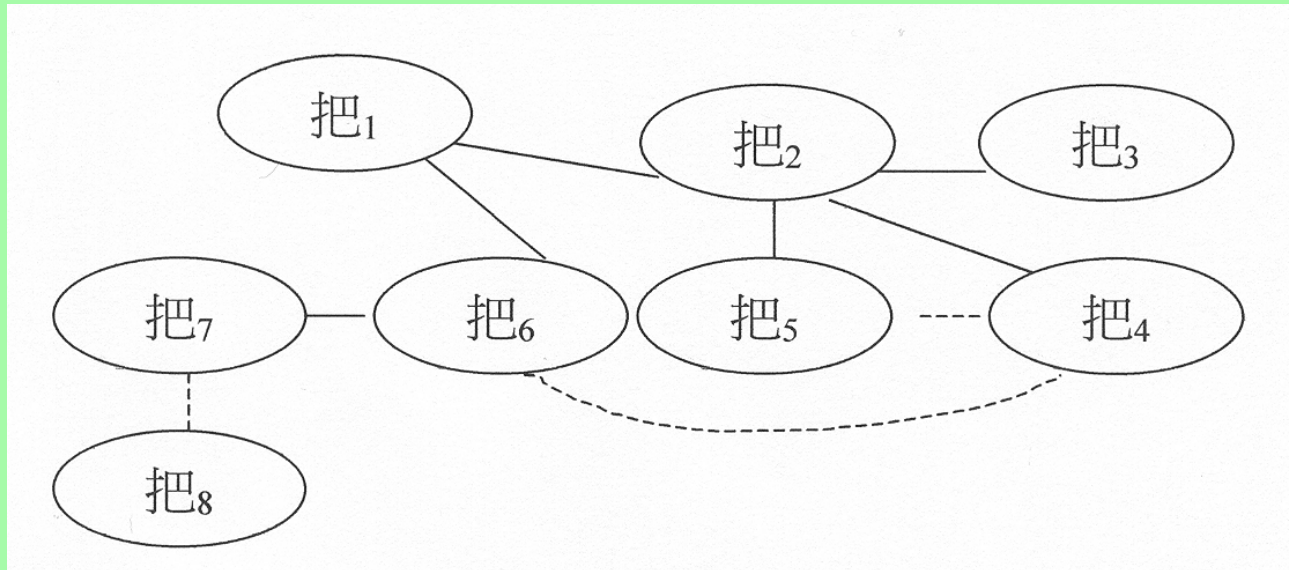
In order to represent the internal structure of a complex category, we have taken as our example the polysemic measure word 把 (ba).

TABLE 1 Different meanings of the category 把 (ba)

把 ₁ (ba ₁)	把 ₂ (ba ₂)	把 ₃ (ba ₃)	把 ₄ (ba ₄)	把 ₅ (ba ₅)	把 ₆ (ba ₆)	把 ₇ (ba ₇)	把 ₈ (ba ₈)
一把壶	一把花儿	一把野火	一把眼泪	一把年级	拉一把	帮一把	一把好手
一把刀	一把米	一把怒火	一把冷汗	一把骨头	洗一把脸		

- One of the defining traits of 把₁ (ba₁) is that the object grasped by the hand incorporates a part which is specifically designed to come into contact with the hand. This value is lost in the other extensions of the category. Sometimes the predominant value is one of quantity, sometimes it is the part of the body which performs the action, and sometimes there is a balance between the two.
- The values which take precedence when it comes to including a new member within a category vary from case to case.

- The different meanings are semantically related but they do not all stem from the prototypical members, nor do they all share a common feature.
- The relationships linking the different meanings could be represented like this:



- The nodes represent the cores of meaning around which the various subcategories are formed.
- The continuous lines show the origin of the extensions of the different meanings.
- The broken lines show the possible less obvious tensions existing between the meanings.

- According to CL, even though the system may not appear to be very "logical", we must accept that it is semantically motivated.
- It may be, however, that the internal semantic networks of categories have become blurred due to historical and social reasons. Thus, in some cases, it may not be possible to elucidate entirely the relationships which have given rise to the chains.
- Nevertheless, we have to try to work out the internal networks of associations which make up the category and do our best to explain them to our students.

- Their cognitive role:

The same reality may be viewed from different perspectives; in other words, the same situation may be represented by the mind according to various different parameters.



yī fēng luòtuo
a [peak] camel
一峰骆驼



yī tóu luòtuo
a [head] camel
一头骆驼



yī pǐ luòtuo
a [horse-like animal]
camel
一匹骆驼

- The teaching of collocations:
 - All situations allow of different approaches and interpretations and, depending on how the proposition is constructed, we shall project one image or another to our audience.
 - Although these differences in perspective will pose problems for the translator, it should be recognized that the three possible propositions are semantically different, since they present semantically different images and as such they are not strictly synonymous, even though they all possess the same values of truthfulness.
 - We should teach collocations of measure words and nouns as tendencies but not as fixed pairs, i.e. avoid saying “this is the measure word for this noun”.

- Their translation:
 - The use of measure words is in fact a mechanism for the creation of metaphorical images, ranging from the dead (conventional) metaphor to the most poetic literary creation.
 - The translation of measure words should no longer be seen in terms of translatable or untranslatable, but rather as a concept of degree, which moreover implies a notion of equivalence which is more pragmatic or discourse-based than purely linguistic.

- (1) 《阿Q没有说完话，拔步便跑；追来的是一匹很肥大的黑狗。》〔鲁迅《阿Q正传》〕
- (2) 《听说你俩要来，他就说：“得，来了两块麻烦！”》〔老舍《女店员》〕
- (3) 《还有一问：“公理”，几块钱一斤。》〔鲁迅《“公理”之所在》〕
- (4) 《他望着我，眼睛里竟出奇地一汪平静，像那个晚上淡淡的月色。》（张大春《鸡翎图》）
- (5) 《车过了松江，风景又添了一味和平的景色。》（郁达夫《还乡记》）
- (6) 《刹那间全托光了裤子，一顺溜十几颗光屁股朝河里跳踉而去，大吼大叫。》〔韩少功《马桥词典》〕

- The learning of measure words is perceived as a stumbling block in Chinese grammar because this category has not yet been studied in sufficient depth.
- To understand the meaning and internal structure of categories more cognitive studies of individual measure words are required, such as those which have already been carried out on 张 (*zhang*) (Tai, Chao; 1994), 条 (*tiao*) (Tai, Wang; 1990) and 副 (*fu*), 套 (*tao*), 双 (*shuang*) and 对 (*dui*) (Rovira, 2002), as well as global studies dealing with the entire classification system (such as that carried out by Tai (1994)).

- A more flexible approach to collocation, would lead to a less rote learning-based study of measure words.
- A less rigid view of the functions of measure words, taking into account their discourse and pragmatic role, would detract currency from the view that they are somehow arbitrary, superfluous, lacking in meaning and untranslatable.
- Violating the rules does not necessarily lead to ungrammatical sentences; acceptability is linked to discourse. Therefore, we should give our students tools for them to be able to realize when they are in front of a conventional metaphor or unmarked use or, on the contrary, in front of a creative metaphor that seeks irony, humor, a poetic image or simply a marked use denoting dialect, social status, register, etc.

- The lack of discourse explanations not only causes misunderstanding and frustration, but also leaves students unprepared for their communicative tasks, specially if they will be involved in translation practice. Therefore, Chinese measure words should not be taught in isolation without considering relevant discourse and pragmatic information.
- Generally speaking, the establishment of a workable link between linguistic analysis of measure words and their pedagogical presentation is urgent.

- This paper aimed to show that the teaching and learning of Chinese measure words would not only be better approached from the perspective of cognitive linguistics but should also include relevant discourse and pragmatic information, thus leaving aside the traditional approach that presents them as a mere (and rather annoying) grammar device.

END OF THE PRESENTATION