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Discussion 1E

Analysis Paper 2

1. Introduction

While my native language is English from growing up in California, I grew up in a Chinese-speaking household. While my parents are bilingual due to their time spent in America, we also lived with our grandparents, who only spoke Mandarin. This resulted in the majority of spoken communication occurring in Chinese, which is why I first started picking the language up. Most of this communication occurred in Standard Mandarin, but, because of my mom's time in Shanghai and Hong Kong, I was also exposed to the regional dialect of Shanghainese and Cantonese.

2. Morphology

Compared to some of the languages we've studied in class, English has a fairly limited inflectional morphology.

When it comes to the inflection of verbs in English, we typically only see inflections used to modify the tense of a verb. For instance, given the word "cook" we could add "-ed" as a suffix to create the past tense of "cook", "*cooked*". Likewise, we can add the information that some verb is in the process of acting using the suffix "-ing", such as when we say, "someone is *cooking*". Finally, we have access to the ending "-s", which provides more information than the rest. "-s" can be used to mark a verb as a third-person, singular, present verb, such as when we

say, “Tom cooks”. Within English, we typically don’t see morphological inflections that imbue words with any other pieces of information.

Nouns in English are even simpler. The most common use of inflectional morphology is to express the number of a certain noun. By adding “-s” to the end of a noun, we make that noun plural, such as when we change “hat” (singular) to “hats” (plural). We also commonly make use of the “-’s” ending, which indicates possessiveness. This ending transforms the noun into a genitive, meaning it now modifies another word. For instance, if we say a certain hat is “Tom’s hat”, we’re modifying the hat by indicating that Tom has possession of the hat.

3. Syntax

In the English language, a noun phrase is generally broken up as an optional determiner, followed by an optional adjective, followed by a mandatory noun, followed by an optional prepositional phrase. We can see an example of this breakdown in the sentence, “The large cat in the box jumped”. “jumped” is the verb phrase, so we don’t need to worry about it in our analysis. “The” is the determiner of the noun phrase, as it tells the reader which large cat jumped. “large” is an adjective modifying the noun, “cat”. Finally, we can extract the phrase “in the box” as a prepositional phrase, as “in” acts as the preposition and “the box” acts as a small noun phrase, where “the” is once again the determiner and “box” is the noun. This smaller noun phrase shows us how the adjective and prepositional phrase are optional, as both are omitted.

Following the discussion on the structure of noun phrases, it’s also important to note that the default word order of an English sentence is SVO, or subject-verb-object. Compared to a lot of other languages, this ordering is strict, and very few sentences are constructed differently. Given a sentence like, “Mary ate the apple”, we can clearly identify each part of this structure. “Mary” is the subject of the sentence, “ate” is the verb, and “the apple” is the object. If we

attempt to switch the ordering around, such as trying to morph this into an OVS structure (“The apple ate Mary”), we’ll see that we generally either transform the entire meaning of the sentence, or we end up with some nonsensical mash-up of words (SOV becomes “Mary the apple ate”). Repeating this exercise with most other sentences will end up yielding the same conclusions, reinforcing the relative strictness of English word ordering. The common exception to this rule is when there are infinitive clauses present in the sentence. An example of an infinitive is when we say “to drive”. For instance, if we say “Tom told Mary where to drive”, “to drive” is clearly the verb, but it comes after the objects “Mary” and “where”, resulting in an SOV sentence structure.

On a surface level, simple Mandarin sentences take on a very similar structure to English. Many basic Mandarin sentences utilize an SVO structure, such as “我吃了苹果”, which translates to “I ate the apple”. We break this down as “我” as the subject (I), “吃了” as the verb (ate), and “苹果” as the object (apple). However, as we take a deeper look, we see that this structure is much less strict than that of English. In fact, we can express a sentence with the same meaning using an SOV structure by simply adding one word: “我把苹果吃了”. This word, “把” functions as a grammatical tool in this sentence that allows for this reorganization to be valid. Once again “我” acts as the subject of the sentence, but we can see that “苹果”, the object of the sentence, has been moved ahead of “吃了”, the verb.

4. Comparison about the grammar of possessives

While English also makes use of affixes for possessives, both English and Mandarin can use a single word to address them. As briefly mentioned earlier, English nouns can generally be followed by an -’s to indicate possessiveness (“Tom’s hat”). In less general cases, we also introduce new words to provide this same meaning. For instance, we have a set of possessive

pronouns to use such as “my”, “hers”, “his”, etc. Instead of simply adding a suffix to the end of a noun, we make use of an entirely new word.

In the case of Mandarin, all of this work is taken care of by a single possessive particle, 的. This possessive particle can simply be placed directly after a noun to indicate possessiveness. We can use this with pronouns, such as “他的”, which means “his”, as well as regular nouns, such as “车的”, which means “the car’s”. In this way, Mandarin’s addressing of possessives is slightly simpler than English’s, however both are relatively easy and don’t employ the use of phrases.

5. Conclusion

While I didn’t explicitly write about it, I did give a lot of thought about how these prompts would have been answered from a Mandarin perspective. My biggest takeaway from that exercise is realizing how mechanical knowledge of a language isn’t necessarily required to be able to utilize a language. While my Mandarin is far from perfect, it’s certainly serviceable in a conversation, but I couldn’t even come close to answering some of these questions about the morphology and syntax of Chinese. It definitely helps put into perspective how much of our knowledge of language is truly subconscious.