# Optimizing Language Teaching with Markedness Theory

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**Abstract.** Markedness Theory is an important principle used to analyze language systems in linguistics. The descriptive and explanatory potential of markedness optimizes the application of linguistic markedness theory to aspects of second-language learning and it has practical application value in daily life. Its purpose is to establish marked patterns by analyzing the marked phenomena in each subsystem of language, so as to better explain the transfer phenomenon in second language acquisition. By analyzing the marked phenomena in phonetics, vocabulary and syntax, this paper tries to find out what aspects should be paid attention to in teaching and how to explain them, so that students can better understand and the theory of markedness also helps foreign language teacher to adopt an appropriate and effective pedagogy.

## 1. Introduction

Markedness Theory is one of the important theories in structuralist linguistics. The theory was proposed by Trubetskoy N.S. of the Prague School in his book *The Principles of Phonology* in the 1930s. Markedness is a very comprehensive term which can be used in any discipline like phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, social sciences, among many other disciplines. As for linguistics, it means the way words, phrases, are changed, added, deleted or foregrounded, mid-grounded and backgrounded. All these changes take place in accordance with the intentionality of the speaker whenever a certain idea should be confirmed. Markedness theory refers to the pair of terms "marked" and "unmarked" as the basic concepts to describe or analyze the asymmetry of linguistic components based on the basic features of "marked term" and "unmarked term". Since its inception, Markedness theory has been used by many schools of linguistics to analyze the subsystems of language such as phonetics, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, etc. Markedness theory has also been paid attention to in the fields of translation research, stylistics, cross-cultural communication, language acquisition research, etc. Especially in the research of second language acquisition, Markedness theory has had a positive impact on the research of the order of second language acquisition and native language transfer.

## 2. Meaning of Markedness

The basic meaning of Markedness theory is that unmarked items are more basic, more natural, more common, more simple, more regular, more standardized, and more in line with people's expectations than marked items in a language, while marked items are not so.

1) According to the Prague school, the component that has a certain (distinguishing) feature among two opposing linguistic components is marked, and the component that lacks a certain (distinguishing) feature is unmarked. For example, in the two opposing phonemes /t/ and /d/, the former is unmarked because /t/ has no voicing, while the latter is marked because it has voicing. And, the plural of the English noun "number" is marked, usually with - (e) s, while the singular is unmarked, without - (e)s. For some reason, English has got more comparative forms on the "less" side than on the "more" side. However, the violation of expectations found in there being more comparative forms on the "less" side than on the "more" side causes "fewer" to get replaced (by "less") in the usage of many native users of English. And like one instance of "more", "fewer" is marked both on account of its being a comparative form and because of its use with plurals, which

are more marked than singulars. Indeed, it is the replacement of "fewer" by "less" in the speech of many that shows us that "fewer" is more marked than is "less", when it is an adjective. Thus, both the forms and word order get reversed under the specifiable marked or non-default condition; the attributive order, with adjective preceding the noun, is the unmarked or default order in an unmarked context, but the form and order are switched in the marked context. Incidentally, compound nouns are more marked than simple nouns and sometimes employ marked forms of participles, e.g. store-boughten, guilt-laden, conscience-stricken, well-girt, misshapen, misspelt, overwrought, and others.

2) In linguistic typology, the notion of Markedness refers to the asymmetrical phenomenon of linguistic constituents (e.g., flexion changes). Those features which are universal or present in most languages are unmarked, while those features which are specific to a language or visible in a few languages are marked. The typological theory of marking is based on cross-linguistic comparative analysis, so the concept of Markedness is no longer absolute in the traditional sense (i.e., the Markedness theory of the Prague school), but a relative concept. Take the category of "number" as an example, typological research has found that most languages have "singular" and "plural", and many languages also have "dual". "Some languages even have 'ternary' (trial), 'few and several' (paucal). In this way, the grammatical category of "number" constitutes a "hierarchy of markedness". And lst-person/3rd-person singular, singular/plural NP, a/an, infinitive/gerund, and active/passive all involve markedness aspect. According to Shen Jiaxuan (1997), this hierarchy of markedness means that "plurals are marked relative to singulars and unmarked relative to doubles and triples; plurals are less unmarked relative to doubles than singulars are relative to doubles".

3) Chomsky's theory of Markedness is based on the theory of Universal Grammar. According to Universal Grammar theory, grammatical rules can be divided into core and periphery. Core grammatical rules are unmarked because they are consistent with the principle of linguistic universality, while periphery grammatical rules are not consistent with the principle of linguistic universality and are specific to each language, so they are marked. Unmarked components are consistent with universal grammar, whereas marked elements are outside the scope of universal grammar. In the core grammar determined by universal grammar, there are marked elements, which become a continuation connecting the core grammar and edge grammar. It should be noted that in Chomsky's Markedness theory, marked and unmarked grammatical rules are not absolutely and diametrically separated, but are relative, constituting a markedness continuum, in which the degree of Markedness of core and fringe grammatical rules is only a matter of high or low, depending on the setting of their parameters.

4) In semantics, marked and unmarked items are semantically complementary, but at the same time, the asymmetry of their distribution determines that the complementarity between them is not absolute. This is mainly manifested in the following ways: unmarked units are generalized, more widely distributed and used than marked units, and unmarked items contain marked meanings semantically and thus can often be used in marked meanings. This has been proved in the opposing ideas of the Prague school, for example, man contains the meaning of woman when it refers to human beings in general. Semantically, unmarked items are semantically more general, whereas marked items are semantically more specific and particular. For example, in dog/bitch, bitch is marked because it indicates a specific gender (female).And usually we don't we say "How young is the boy/How short is the river?" Adjectives such as"old/young" have a high degree of coverage and can serve as a covering word for the entire scale, with a neutral or universal meaning, unmarked, and vice versa. The former assumes that the boy is young, while the latter means that the river is short. To achieve accurate expression of meaning and not violate communication principles, we usually use unmarked words with neutral meanings, such as"How old is the boy/How long is the river" to preset age and length. And when talking about the height of objects, such as mountains, "high" is usually used instead of "low." "How high is that mountain? It's 2, 000 meters high." Instead of saying "How low is that mountain" (unless it is known that the mountain is very low).

5) At the pragmatic level, the phenomenon of markedness can also be seen everywhere, but at this time the markedness of linguistic units is expressed as pragmatic marking. For example, when

friends meet and say "hello" to each other, it is a kind of unmarked pragmatic phenomenon, but if one of the parties does not do so, it is marked in terms of pragmatics. In western communication, one should say "thank you" to someone's praise in person, but if one denies someone's praise for the sake of modesty as the Chinese do, it is a marked expression.

Whether it is marked or not depends on the context, the same structure may be marked in one context and unmarked in another. At the pragmatic level, the markedness of a token will slowly diminish or even lose its markedness as the recurrence rate of the token with the relevant context increases.

6) Sociolinguistics focuses on the social information embodied in language and the influence of social factors on languages, and the markedness is manifested in the specific social information contained in linguistic units, such as the gender, identity, occupation and social roles of the communicators, as well as the sociopsychological and social evaluation attitudes reflected in linguistic units. For example, "nurse" and "male nurse" constitute a set of unmarked items and marked items, reflecting social customs or routines and people's social views on these professions: the profession of nurse usually belongs to women, and vice versa, it seems to be very special, and needs to be distinguished by certain formal markers when "male nurse" appeared. The profession of nursing is usually feminine, and vice versa, it is special and needs to be differentiated by certain formal markers, regional and social dialects, which constitute an important tool of verbal communication, are marginalized in the system of national languages and belong to marked units.

## 3. The Significance of Markedness Theory for Foreign Language Teaching

1) Markedness phenomenon exists in all levels of language. Therefore, in the process of teaching, whether in word pronunciation, word spelling, word lexical meaning, or in phrase structure, phrase meaning, sentence structure, sentence meaning, paragraph structure, paragraph meaning and discourse structure and discourse meaning, teachers need to be keenly aware of what are unmarked items and what are marked items, so as to determine what are the difficult points of teaching, what are the key points of teaching and what are the non-key points of teaching, and to avoid average exertion in order to save teaching time, speed up teaching progress and improve teaching efficiency.

2) Without special language input and reinforcement, in the process of natural language acquisition, unmarked items are often easier and earlier to acquire because of their simple form, their intuitive nature and their high social generalization. Our foreign language teachings also need to follow and conform to this natural process of language acquisition. In the process of teaching, teachers need to teach regular first, then unmarked linguistic phenomena, and only after students have accumulated a certain amount of linguistic knowledge can they be taught marked content in a gradual manner.

3) In language, unmarked items are more basic, more natural, more common, more simple, more standardized, more in line with people's expectations, and more universal than marked items. However, this is not to say that unmarked items are not important; on the contrary, they should be the basis for teaching and learning and a prerequisite for understanding marked items. Before proceeding, it will be helpful to help the reader conceptualize markedness itself. The most useful criterion for ascertaining the markedness value of any unit of any component in the grammar is natural change.

4) In contrast to unmarked content, marked content is uncommon, infrequently used, has a specific meaning, is used infrequently, and does not correspond to people's intuitive feelings. Therefore, they are often the difficult part of the learning process for students. Special attention need to be payed to the marked content in more efforts, more examples, and strive to speak clearly, speak thoroughly, so that students understand clearly, memorize firmly, and use flexibly.

5) To accurately distinguish between unmarked content and marked content, and to accurately determine the teaching key points and teaching difficulties, it is necessary to understand the students' knowledge and mastery of the relevant background knowledge before learning. We need to understand the cognitive structure of the students and pay attention to their psychological feelings. At the same time, we need to have the correct psychological transposition, from the students' point

of view, experience and understand the students' subjective feelings about the marked and unmarked content. For students, although some contents objectively have (even extremely strong) markedness, perhaps because they have mastered these contents long ago, they tend to subjectively consider them unmarked in their mind. Therefore, it is necessary to apply the theory of markedness to the practice of foreign language teaching, so as to make it practical to emphasize the key points and students can learn easily and efficiently.

## 4. Conclusions

Due to the unequal structure between English and Chinese, students are prone to errors in areas where English is more marked than Chinese. Especially, the varying degrees of marked differences within English vocabulary and between Chinese and English vocabulary are also important reasons for students' difficulty in vocabulary acquisition. If teachers can adjust and choose vocabulary teaching order and methods appropriately based on the degree of vocabulary markedness, it will effectively reduce the difficulty of students' vocabulary acquisition. And whether it is word pronunciation, spelling, meaning, or phrase structure and meaning, sentence structure and meaning, paragraph structure and meaning, discourse structure and meaning, a keen sense of marked or unmarked idea related with difficulties and non key points of teaching need to be explained to save teaching time, accelerate teaching progress, and improve Effectively teaching, making it easy and appropriate for students to learn.

Markedness theory also helps to express more rare ideas accurately in special syntax. For such phenomena, teachers should distinguish between items with strong or weak markedness in the teaching process, emphasizing the phonetic, lexical, and syntactic aspects with strong markedness, and try to avoid students from making such mistakes. We also need to strengthen practice in these areas, so that students can learn by analogy, draw inferences from one example, and avoid mistakes. At the same time, teacher discourse plays a crucial role in the process of foreign language teaching, as it is the main source of comprehensible input for learners in the classroom. According to the order of human cognition, speakers generally leave new information at the end of a sentence, and present known information at the beginning part. However, from a psychological perspective, it is generally the beginning of a sentence that is most likely to attract attention. So, for the purpose of communication and changes in word order, moving one or two components or important information with the same structural meaning to the beginning of the sentence to form a marked theme can achieve the effect of comparing semantics and strong language momentum. Therefore, to make language classroom teaching more hierarchical in order to get effective achievement, teachers may attach importance to the interpretation of these markedness phenomenon and consider how to use personalized teaching methods to promote teaching advancement through the use of markedness theory. In the whole teaching process, we should make further efforts to know about the essence of markedness, make it assume its positive effects in daily practice and so as to the development of second language teaching and learning.

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