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The essential difference between English and Chinese as explored from a blank-sign perspective

Abstract: English and Chinese are two quite different languages, the distinctive features of which take on various forms, but cannot reflect the fundamental differences between them in the most general sense. By analyzing key features such as hypotaxis vs. parataxis and rigidity vs. flexibility, I argue that the essential difference between the two languages lies in their contrasting use of concreteness and void. English, with its rich morphological and syntactic markers, tends to emphasize concrete, definite structures, facilitating clear, logical, and linear thinking. In contrast, Chinese, with its sparse cohesive devices and implicit relationships, allows a more flexible, open-ended interpretation, reflecting a cognitive tendency toward abstract, holistic thinking. This flexibility in Chinese facilitates a higher tolerance for ambiguity, often leaving space for multiple interpretations. I suggest that these linguistic distinctions are deeply tied to the respective ways of thinking in the two cultures, with English reflecting an analytic, individualistic mindset and Chinese expressing a more holistic, collective orientation.

Keywords: concrete sign; holistic; hypotaxis; parataxis; void

1 Introduction

English belongs to the Indo-European language family and Chinese the Sino-Tibetan language family, and therefore the two languages show very different characteristics in language use and also reflect the different ways of thinking of the two cultures. A large number of English–Chinese comparative studies have revealed a variety of differences in terms of language and language-based ways of thinking. Many more differences have been found with respect to specific linguistic phenomena. However, the differences between English and Chinese summarized at a more abstract level are comparatively speaking much fewer and have gained a broader consensus. These differences mainly include: *hypotaxis* vs. *parataxis*, *rigid* vs. *flexible*, *explicit* vs. *implicit*, *static* vs. *dynamic*, *synthesized* vs. *analytical*, *aggregated* vs. *dispersed*, and so

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on (Humboldt 2011; Lian 2010; Pan 1997; Xu 2010). Although these discussions on the differences between English and Chinese are expressed differently, many of them overlap to a certain extent in terms of what they focus on. For example, *hypotaxis, explicit,* and *static* all focus on the formal or syntactic features of English; the *synthesized* and *aggregated* characteristics of English are just descriptions of particular linguistic structures, as are *analytical* and *dispersed* for Chinese. Most importantly, although the above differences are usually regarded as the basic differences between English and Chinese, they do not in reality reflect the whole picture of English and Chinese, and they do not describe the differences between the two languages at the most general level; in other words, most of these so-called differences just cater for large linguistic structures such as syntax or text, or they just focus on a certain aspect of language (e.g., nouns, verbs, word formation). Therefore, these claims do not reflect the most fundamental differences between English and Chinese and consequently do not reflect the most basic ways of thinking of the two language groups.

Based on the analysis of the abovementioned differences between English and Chinese, this paper will explore the most basic distinguishing features of the two languages from a semiotic perspective, and we will extend the analysis to explore the essential ways of thinking of the two language groups, their cultures, and their societies. In order to avoid repetitive analyses, we categorize the typical and obviously different distinguishing features of English and Chinese into two kinds, i.e., *hypotaxis* vs. *parataxis* and *rigid* vs. *flexible,* and analyze their distinguishing features by means of the semiotic view of language so as to argue for the reasonableness of the hypothesis: the essential difference between English and Chinese speakers, and their two ways of thinking is the contrast of *concreteness* and *void.*

2 Language as a sign system

It has long been a consensus in the academic community that language is a sign system, and the most important type of sign system, but for a long time, the study of signs and the study of language have been moving in two different directions and drifting apart (Lv and Shan 2015; Wang 2004), resulting in the fact that linguists have left behind the sign, and semioticians have left behind linguistics. To a large extent, modern linguistics does not take linguistic symbols as the basic unit of language study (Tobin 1990; Zhang 1997). It is now increasingly difficult to see studies that use the general method of semiotics to systematically analyze linguistic phenomena (Wang 2007: 107). There are many reasons for the separation of linguistics and semiotics, but the most important one is possibly caused by the contradiction between the systematic nature of language and the discrete nature of symbols. Instead of saying that linguistics has abandoned semiotics, it would be more

appropriate to say that semiotics has left linguistics, because the object and scope of semiotics have long since transcended linguistic symbols, focusing on a wider range of non-linguistic symbols and symbolic phenomena in various modalities and contexts. Saussure's view of signification has been largely replaced by post-Saussurean semiotics (Chandler 2007), in which signification is no longer limited to abstract mental entities but can be directed to a material entity (Dong 2005; Zhang 1997). Even the first element of Peirce's three-dimensional concept of signification, the "representamen," can be regarded as a signifier (Sebeok 2001: 6; Zhao 2016: 95). This has completely liberated the classical Saussurean signifier, which was once bound by the "sound image," resulting in the fact that anything that can be called a sign possesses a signifier. This is why Zhao (2016: 1) has refined the concept of sign as a kind of "perception that carries meaning": meaning is the signified, while what can be perceived is the signifier. So, although the same words *signifier* and *signified* are used, they mean very different things for the Saussurean community and the post-Saussurean community.

When examining linguistic signs from the post-Saussurean perspective, we find that every word, every Chinese character, or even every meaningful word's/ character's component is a materialized sign that can be directly perceived; language has become a system consisting of the most basic materialized signs arranged and combined in accordance with a certain set of structural rules. This view of language does not seem new at all, but when we think a bit further about the relationship between language and the world, we find that, when we are confronted with the infinitely rich world and thoughts, the number of linguistic symbols and their ability to express meanings are extremely limited. In other words, the linguistic capacity of expressing meanings is completely asymmetric with the external world and the internal thoughts. On the question of how to make better use of the limited number and capacity of linguistic signs as tools for meaning expression, English and Chinese speakers seem to have adopted quite different strategies. In order to understand these two different strategies, we need to introduce the concepts of concrete signs and blank signs.

When semioticians talk about signs, they usually refer to concrete signs, i.e., signs with a material carrier that can be perceived directly, such as linguistic signs (including written symbols and speech symbols) and various non-linguistic signs (e.g., gestures, traffic signs, acoustic signs, odor signs). However, another kind of sign, the blank sign, has long been underestimated or even overlooked. One major definition of blank sign accepted by Chinese semioticians was given by Zhao (2016: 25–26), who stated: "the perceived carrier of signs may not be a materialled entity but the absence of the entity: blankness, darkness, silence, speechlessness, smelllessness, tastelessness, absence of expression, refusal to answer, etc. Absence can be perceived

and often carries significant meaning."[1] The basic idea of this definition is more or less the same as those proposed by Wei (2012), Sebeok (2001), and Cantor (2016); they all focus on the aspect of absent signifier without any mention of absent signified, which will be tackled below. It is true that absent signifier is the most obvious and prominent semiotic phenomena that can be easily perceived in language (e.g. the omission of words, logical components, major figures in a story), pictures (e.g. blank space with potential senses), communication (e.g. pause or silence during conversation), and so on. However, as a less obvious but equally important form of blank-sign, the absent signified also deserves appropriate attention, especially in the context of evaluating the fundamental nature of English and Chinese.

Tanaka-Ishii (2017) and Wang (2021) hold that blank signs should include two major categories, namely, absent signifier and absent signified. The so-called absent signifier does not simply mean that the signifier is absent; it actually means that the carrier of the signifier is manifested as a blank. The same is true for absent signified, which does not mean the signified is totally absent. According to Jakobson (1984: 153), the absence of the signified, or zero value, actually represents an undifferentiated or nonspecific meaning. In other words, the absence contains meaning, but a very general meaning that can be specifically defined by the addressee in various ways. Take the line of *To be or not to be* from *Hamlet* as an example. The word *be* is undoubtedly meaningful, but it can hardly refer to any specific behavior; it opens up a blank space in which the addressee can interpret it in various ways in various contexts. Thus, *be* can be treated as containing a blank sign, which is related to the referent of the concrete sign of *be*; in this case, it is called an absent signified.

Linguistic signs are composed of concrete signs and blank signs, which complement each other and are both indispensable. Concrete signs are explicit, while blank signs are implicit. When a certain language relies too much on explicit concrete signs, it tends to be strict and refined in formal structure, and its language meaning can be expressed more precisely (Fang 2011: 130). But meanwhile, the precise expression of meaning may restrict the generation of open-ended readings, leaving less room for free interpretation by the addressee. However, when a language does not rely so much on explicit concrete signs, it will relax the management of the formal structure of the language, thus generating more blank signs, and the addressee has more opportunities to interpret the meaning of signs freely. Languages with a heavy emphasis on concrete signs are more likely to be structurally and semantically self-sufficient, with less reliance on context, especially immediate linguistic or situational context, whereas languages with more blank signs are often unable to be structurally and semantically self-sufficient and therefore must rely more on context for acquiring an adequate amount of information. Comparatively

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1 Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Chinese to English in this paper are my own.

speaking, English is a typical concrete-sign language, while Chinese is a blank-sign language, although both concrete signs and blank signs are necessary for both languages.

3 Concreteness and blankness as manifested in English and Chinese

To demonstrate the claim that concreteness and blankness are two fundamental differences between English and Chinese languages and between the thinking modes of the two cultural groups is an onerous task, because the process of demonstration presupposes countless aspects and factors of language. It is a mission impossible. However, we can approach the goal of demonstration by focusing on some well-established claims about the major differences between the two languages, i.e., hypotaxis/parataxis and rigidity/flexibility, trying to see if these claims contain conspicuous clues of concreteness or blankness, and further if these clues indicate the more essential distinct nature of the language concerned.

3.1 Hypotaxis versus parataxis

Hypotaxis and parataxis are regarded as the most important distinguishing features of English and Chinese (Nida 1982: 16). This distinction is mainly reflected in whether words or clauses are connected with each other by using explicit means of linguistic form or by expressing specific grammatical meanings and logical relations (Lian 2010: 73). Although both English and Chinese use the means of hypotaxis and parataxis to express themselves, in terms of the overall use of the language, English attaches more importance to hypotaxis, while Chinese attaches more importance to parataxis. The two disparate features are concerned with language properties at a rather abstract level, because they are not only reflected at the sentential level, i.e., cohesion between clauses, but also at the lexical level, say, in the morphological changes in verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs, in terms of gender, number, case, aspect, tense, mode, person, comparative rank, agreement relationship, and so on. Since each of the explicit morphological features conveys a particular meaning (such as semantic meaning, grammatical meaning, or logical meaning), this lends greater precision and definition to the expression of meaning. Consequently, the addressee does not need much effort to work out what the sentence possibly means. When examining from the semiotic perspective, we find that a language that features hypotaxis (e.g., English), depends a great deal on explicit concrete signs,

i.e., logical connectives and morphological changes, for meaning expression. This is why Shen (2015: 37) argues that a hypotactic language is one that "requires the addresser to take more responsibility," that is, the addresser is responsible for utilizing refined and accurate linguistic forms to express their intentions.

As for Chinese, a typical parataxic language, things are quite different. In Chinese, unless it is for the sake of clarity or emphasis, explicit logical connectives are more often than not omitted. This omission does not mean that certain logical connections have been lost, but rather that the logical connections are implicitly expressed by way of semantic relations, together with contextual effects. In addition, at the lexical level, Chinese lacks morphological changes. This is partly due to the fact that it is impossible for Chinese characters to have any inflectional or derivational elements attached to them in the way that English words do. Another reason is that the flexible use of characters or words in Chinese can compensate to some extent for the lack of morphological changes. In any case, from a semiotic point of view, the absence of logical connectives and morphological changes can be regarded as examples of blank signs with the absence of signifier.

The absence, being able to be perceived and having a certain meaning, is in line with the basic definition of signs proposed by Zhao (2016: 1), although such signs are not concrete ones but blankness. The perceivable blank signs should not be taken as substitutes for concrete signs, because concrete signs usually have clear and definite meanings, while blank signs may refer to more than one thing. For example:

(1)   人   来   了，咱们 走。
       person   come   *le*,   we   go

a.   They/People are coming. Let's go.

b.   They/People are coming, so let's go.

c.   They/People are coming and let's go.

d.   ……………have come…….L(l)et's go.

e.   The person/He/She/Tom is coming. Let's go.

f.   The person/He/She/Tom is coming, so let's go.

g.   The person/He/She/Tom is coming and let's go.

h.   ………………………….has come……L(l)et's go.

Although the Chinese sentence in (1) is very simple, it is actually impossible to translate it into a single English equivalent when no specific context is provided. In terms of logical connective, the Chinese sentence expresses it in blankness without using any explicit term, but English has to deal with it in at least three ways. First, one

can use two independent clauses, as in *a*, *d*, *e*, and *h*. In this way, no connective is needed. Second, it can be expressed as a causal relation by using the connective *so* as in *b* and *f*. Third, it can be taken as a parallel structure by using *and* as in *c* and *g*. Chinese speakers are not concerned about what specific logical relation the sentence has, for they are satisfied with getting the basic or rough idea of it. However, in English people must try to make the logical connection clear by using formal cues. The absence of connective, or the absent signifier, does not mean it is a complete void; the absence opens up more possibilities for interpretation. In terms of individual words, the English words need to be more specific so as to distinguish number and gender for nouns and morphological changes for marking tense, aspect, or agreement. The bare noun "人" is habitually used to refer to a person or some people, which is a general reference, and the following verb "来" (come) also takes on a bare form, once again as a general reference, without explicitly indicating its status in terms of tense and aspect. However, the English translation has to be specific in tackling "人" and "来": "人" has to be translated into either a singular word, such as *person*, *he*, *she*, *Tom*, etc., or a plural word, such as *they*, *people*, etc. There is no such English word when it appears in a particular sentence that can indicate both singularity and plurality all at the same time. Moreover, in the same context, while a general reference is adequate and natural for Chinese, the gender or personal identity, such as the person's name, should be explicitly expressed. So, from the blank-sign perspective, we would say that the reference of "人" and "来" in (1) has an "undifferentiated" and "nonspecific" sense (Cantor 2016: 211); they both have absent signifieds.

3.2 Rigidity versus flexibility

Similar to hypotaxis and parataxis, rigidity and flexibility are another pair of properties that are used to show the fundamental differences between English and Chinese. This pair is mainly concerned with grammatical features, while hypotaxis and parataxis are about the contrast between form and meaning. Very much constrained by strict syntactical and morphological rules, English grammar tends to be concrete, or lacking flexibility, while Chinese grammar is soft or filled with flexibility (Wang 1951: 197). This has been widely acknowledged among Chinese linguists. As is well known, in every grammatically correct and semantically plausible English sentence, every single word must have a single specific grammatical status in terms of word class and syntactic role, and its syntactic and semantic relation with neighboring words, phrases, or clauses can be definitely specified. Every single word seems to be fixed tightly in that particular position. Except for meeting the requirement of the syntactic movement principle as proposed by Chomsky (1985) in

transformational generative grammar (TGG), the movement of a certain word from one syntactic position to another would most likely result in ungrammaticality or/ and semantic absurdity. In Chinese, however, at the lexical level, it is very popular for a certain word to be used as a noun, a verb, an adjective, or other word classes. Even when a word is embedded in a particular sentence, such as in (2), two diverse class senses may be expressed.

(2)   你   漂亮   了。
       you   beautiful   *le.*

a.   You are beautiful.

b.   You have become beautiful.

c.   You are getting beautiful.

In (2), "漂亮" as a word is typically used as an adjective in most cases, but in this particular sentence, it can be interpreted as an adjective, meaning "beautiful" as in *a*, or as a verb meaning "become/get beautiful" as in *b* and *c*. In fact, in this case both adjectival and verbal senses are expressed all at the same time.

In Chinese, with the obvious lack of connectives between words, phrases, or clauses, the grammatical relation between these linguistic units tends to be quite loose. This makes it possible for words to move freely and for syntactic relations to be interpreted in multiple ways. This is why Chinese grammar has long been regarded as being flexible.

The basic for distinguishing Chinese flexibility and English rigidity is a matter of the number of explicit grammatical cues at both the lexical and syntactic levels. Language can be regarded as an interrelated network with quite a lot of nodes. Semantic words, such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, numerals, etc., are nodes that carry the main information of the expression. As different semantic words mean quite different things and cannot be put together to express coherent sense without cohesive ties, they must depend on connectives, explicit or implicit, to clue them. In this particular point, Chinese and English depart from each other by employing different strategies: English has developed a quite complex and refined marking system at both the lexical and syntactic levels so as to pin down nuanced and definite lexico-syntactic relations, constituting the property of rigidity. In contrast, when the marking system has not been well-developed, as in Chinese, multiple readings on words or syntactic relations arise, thus forming the property of flexibility. To reduce the possibility of ambiguous readings, a language featuring flexibility has to depend a great deal on linguistic and situational contexts, which require both the addresser and the addressee to actively participate in communication.

The opposition of rigidity and flexibility is basically the opposition of the use of concrete signs and blank signs. A language featuring rigidity, like English, must use large numbers of concrete linguistic cues or signs to ensure precise meaning expression, while a language featuring flexibility, like Chinese, leaves a great deal void or blank centering around words and lexico-syntactic relations, which opens up the possibility for multiple readings. What is striking is that the Chinese can to a large extent tolerate or even enjoy multiple readings on the part of the addressee.

(3)   枯藤   老树   昏鸦
       rotten vines old trees   evening crows
       小桥   流水   人家
       small bridge flowing water people's cottage

The above two lines are the beginning part of a very famous Chinese poem named "天净沙 秋思" (Sunny sand, autumn thoughts). Stylistically, it is typical of the general Chinese way of thinking and expressing thought, because the two lines are composed of six nouns or noun phrases without any explicit cohesive devices employed. This poem has been translated into many versions of English, in which the most-cited and highly acknowledged one is provided by Yuanchong Xu (许渊冲) (1921–2021), a distinguished senior translator. His translated version is as follows (Xu 2013):

(4)   Over old trees wreathed with rotten vines fly evening crows;
       Under a small bridge near a cottage a stream flows;

Comparing (3) and (4), we can easily find that the original isolated Chinese nouns have been connected with each other in English using the explicit terms *Over… wreathed with…fly…*; *Under…near…*, which make the relations between the nouns clearer, more fixed, and definite. The Chinese and English versions are likely to give rise to very different visual images or imaginings in the mind of the interpreter. For the English version, the interpreter may simply follow the construction of the specific nouns and their relations and arrive at a relatively fixed or rigid visual image, with not much room for other interpretations. Whereas for the original Chinese version, due to unspecified or implicit cohesive cues, the interpreter is relatively free to construct the visual image in their own way; the interpreter needs to "add the possible relations in the mind" (Shen 2015: 37) in a way that is highly individualized or idiosyncratic.

The lack or loss of morphological and cohesive cues can be regarded as absent signifiers, which expect undifferentiated and nonspecific interpretations. If a language frequently employs this strategy in communication, as Chinese does, this language reveals an obvious void-prominent feature that is not only shown in language expression but also in language understanding. But for a language with rich and strictly defined varieties of morphological and syntactic cues, as English is, there

are fewer absent signifiers employed, and consequently there is less room for the addressee to interpret linguistic meanings freely. Thus, concreteness turns out to be a typical feature of this language in sharp contrast to the void-prominent language.

4 Reconsidering the fundamental thinking modes of English and Chinese

The relationship between language and thought has been researched quite extensively in history in philosophy, linguistics, psychology, culture, communication, etc., but unfortunately no consensus has been reached.

"Traditionally it has been assumed that language is a conduit for thought, a system for converting our preexisting ideas into a transmissible form (sounds, gestures, or written symbols) so that they can be passed into the minds of others equipped with the same language machinery" (Gleitman and Papafragou 2005: 504). Along this line, it can be reasonably inferred that what we have in mind, in terms of both semantic content and structuring properties, can be transferred to language; or, by studying language, we can know what people think and how they think. Eric Sapir (1929) and Benjamin Whorf (1956) moved a bit further in that they think language does not simply act as an interface but plays a formative role in shaping people's thought. Both the strong version (linguistic determinism) and the weak version (linguistic relativity) proposed by them indicate the significant role of language in influencing people's thinking modes. However, after having reviewed various past studies of language and thought relationship, Gleitman and Papafragou (2005: 504–505) argue that "most modern commentators fall somewhere between the extremes – either that language simply "is" or "is not" the crucial progenitor of higher order cognition."

Debates on the nature of language and thought have lasted for centuries, and Fedorenko et al. (2024) presented a brand-new proposal strongly backed up by modern neuroscience and allied disciplines. This proposal holds that language is mainly a tool for communication instead of a tool for thinking, because in the case of complex thought, including symbolic thought, language does not seem to be a prerequisite. Language "plausibly co-evolved with our thinking and reasoning capacities, and only reflects, rather than gives rise to, the signature sophistication of human cognition" (Fedorenko et al. 2024: 575).

The debates over language and thought continue, but a fact about their relationship has to be acknowledged, and that is that language is closely tied to thought. What we can find in language can more often than not be found in thought, no matter whether language and thought develop in cooperative or mutually restricting ways,

or parallel, or relatively independent ways. It is an undeniable fact that both linguistic patterns and thinking modes share some general properties. To demonstrate this point, we turn to consider first the widely acknowledged views about Chinese and English thinking modes, and then we interpret why disparities between Chinese and English thinking modes are also the reflection of disparities between concreteness and void, the most fundamental nature of the two cultural groups.

The differences between Chinese and English thinking modes are rooted in cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts. These differences are reflected in communication styles, decision-making processes, and approaches to problem-solving, among other aspects of cognition and social interaction. Major views of the two different thinking modes include those shown in Table 1.

The holistic mode and the analytic mode are the modal pair most predominant among all thinking modes for Chinese and English speakers, or more broadly for Asians and Westerners (Nisbett 2003; Nisbett and Miyamoto 2005). For Chinese speakers, *holistic* can be regarded as a superordinate concept that is characterized as *contextual*, *dialectical*, *indirect*, and *collectivist*. The inverse is true for the *analytic* concept, which is characterized as *abstract*, *linear*, *direct*, and *individualist*. Chinese culture tends to favor holistic thinking, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of things, context, and the relationships between components. This thinking style is often associated with Confucianism, Taoism, and the historical Chinese worldview, which sees the world as a network of interdependent elements. Qian Mu, a distinguished Chinese scholar and master of Chinese studies, says that "Human Oneness with Nature (天人合一) is the greatest contribution of Chinese culture to the world" (Qian 1990). The unique way to achieve human oneness with nature is to take a holistic view of the world, to think that all things are interrelated (Zhang and Yu 2020). Everything must be examined in its specific context (*contextual*). Instead of focusing on one particular aspect of an entity, Chinese speakers always try to identify relations in terms of their opposing aspects (*dialectical*), evaluating more things before making a final decision. Chinese

Table 1: Chinese and English thinking modes.

Chinese thinking modes	English thinking modes
Holistic	Analytic
Contextual	Abstract
Dialectical	Linear
Indirect	Direct
Collectivist	Individualist

speakers do not go straight into a particular matter but take a roundabout tactic (*indirect*) so as to take into consideration all possible factors. In interpersonal communication, the role of an individual is to a large extent played down. Meanwhile, the role of group or team is greatly enhanced (*collectivist*). The reason for doing so is due to the belief that every individual is closely tied and confined to the group; it is always the group that determines how each individual's role is played. So, by focusing on the holistic view, we can easily and naturally understand other subordinate thinking patterns.

Then for speakers of English as their first language, or Westerners more widely, the analytic way of thinking is closely tied to or even determines other subordinate thinking patterns. *Abstract* thinking is a cognitive process and mental strategy that an individual uses to engage with concepts that came from generalization or categorization of sensory experiences or specific, concrete objects; what seems to be abstract must be dependent on real-life or concrete things. *Linear* thinking and logic are interconnected in that linear thinking often follows logical structures. Logical reasoning is a tool used within linear thinking to ensure that the sequence of thoughts is coherent and valid. So, linear thinking can be seen as a practical application of logical principles, where one idea logically leads to the next in a clear and orderly progression. To ensure the validity of linear thinking, every factor, every step, and every relation in the process must be clear and definite. Any uncertainty or ambiguity must be eliminated. In the case of *direct* thinking, all related contextual factors have to be suspended to ensure there exists a clear and definite route of thinking. Finally, the *individualist* feature can only be achieved by focusing on one particular entity, the individual, and neglecting other people and things. In some sense, the practice of individualism is a way of avoiding getting involved in troublesome uncertain personal relations and contextual factors.

Based on the above analyses, we can conclude that all the different terms for the Chinese thinking modes have the same holistic nature, while for the English thinking modes, it is of the analytic nature. For holistic thinking, people have to deal with various uncertainties, such as subtle interpersonal relations, countless possible influencing factors, the unsteady status of things, or situations as time passes. When one has to consider everything (unfortunately, a mission impossible), one can firmly grasp nothing; what one can get in this situation is a rough, general idea about the matter concerned. In the holistic worldview, abundant uncertainties entail large areas of void represented in the form of loss of specific logical connections, loss of some factors or contexts that are related to the matter concerned, or even loss of words or concepts that may contribute to effective communication. The reason why the loss of various important elements may not substantially undermine communication is that three factors, i.e., *context*, *addressee*, and

tolerance, play a crucial role, which might be regarded as striking features that distinguish Chinese from English speakers.

With regard to *context*, the most-cited relevant research is arguably the view of high-context and low-context culture proposed by anthropologist Edward T. Hall in *The Silent Language* (1959). According to this view, China, Japan, Arab countries, and many Latin American countries are high-context cultures because a large portion of the information is transmitted through non-verbal cues, body language, and the context in which the communication occurs. Verbal communication is often brief and relies on shared understanding. By contrast, most Western countries like the United States, Canada, Germany, and Northern European countries are often considered low-context cultures, in which most of the information is transmitted through explicit verbal communication. The message is contained in the words themselves, and less is left to free interpretation. So, considering the ways different types of culture deal with context, we can see the contrast between void and concreteness represented by the extent of the explicit linguistic cues used.

The second key word is *addressee*, the definition of which is closely related to the understanding of high-context/low-context cultures. In high-context cultures, by relying so much on context for information transmission, the addresser has to cooperate with the addressee by means of using shared context. If the addressee does not cooperate in meaning transmission, the void or meaning potential left in the addresser's verbal message has no way of being turned into a meaningful message. It is precisely for this reason that Chinese is regarded as a language in which the addressee takes more responsibility, in contrast to English and other Western languages, where the addresser takes on the most responsibility (Nisbett 2003: 60; Shen 2015: 37).

The last point is about *tolerance*. In this context, *tolerance* means the extent to which the speakers of a particular language may tolerate uncertain and vague linguistic expressions. As Chinese is full of "unstructured," vague expressions, it is quite natural that speakers of Chinese as their first language have a higher tolerance for uncertainties and vagueness of language, or, in other words, they are often comfortable with uncertain and vague expressions in cases, for example, where gender, case, number, etc., are not explicitly or accurately expressed.

Holistic and analytic modes of thinking are directly reflected in how people deal with the structural construction of language and the role of communicators, contexts, and attitudes toward what counts as comfortable communication. In the final analysis, it is about the extent to which the void and concreteness in language are distributed and employed in regular or habitual ways.

5 Concluding remarks

Language is jointly composed of concrete signs and blank signs, or, to use more general terms, void and concreteness. Any language must rely on concrete signs for expression, but it must also leave enough room for blank signs to survive. In the game between linguistic concrete signs and blank signs, if people favor relying on concrete signs or the explicitly expressed linguistic forms, with less emphasis on blank signs, it leads to the development of language in the direction of hypotaxis and rigidity, and the morphological features of language will be more developed. In the other case, although people still mainly rely on concrete signs for expression, they leave more room for the development of blank signs, and the language develops in the direction of parataxis and flexibility. The weight of blank signs in opposition to concrete signs in linguistic structure is a sign for distinguishing one kind of language from another. What is more, this distinction represented by concrete and blank signs is not simply a matter of language, but also a matter of thinking modes.

Although the true nature of language and thought has long been debatable, an undeniable fact is that there seems to be a mapping or analogical relationship between language and thought. That is, when in language we favor the use of explicit linguistic forms and downplay the role of void, we tend to think and act more precisely and logically, because precision and logic must be established on "concrete facts," while uncertainties and vagueness are their natural enemies. The language that favors more use of blank signs tends to emphasize relations that exist in linguistic elements themselves, the interaction of language, context, and people, and the communication of addresser and addressee. With this kind of language, people do not care whether a certain message can be transmitted precisely and logically from addresser to addressee. The important thing is that the message has been transmitted, and both addresser and addressee are satisfied with the quality of the message.

The same is true for thinking and acting. According to Foucault (1972), language, or more specifically discourses, are more than just linguistic or textual representations. They are systems of knowledge that shape how individuals perceive the world in the formation of social institutions, norms, and individual identities. They determine what can be spoken about, how it can be said, who can speak, and the positions from which they can speak. Against the background of a void-rich language or a void-poor language, speakers of Chinese or English as their first language have developed quite different thinking modes and consequently engage in distinct social activities. Take medicine and therapy as an example. The Chinese people have a unique traditional medical practice, including Chinese medicine and Chinese therapy, both of which play a therapeutic role in the form of holistic treatment. As we can

see, every remedy contains many kinds of medicines that come directly from nature, the effects of which are directed toward the treatment of a particular disease by affecting the whole body. Western medicines, however, tend to target a specific disease and try to avoid other effects on the body. According to Chinese therapy, the human body is believed to have many meridians and acupoints, and it is through the activation and opening of these meridians and acupoints that the normal functions of the body are restored and diseases are eliminated. But where are the meridians and acupoints? Can they be identified and located with clear-cut borderline precisely on the body? The answer is no. They are just "believed" to be there, but you can never see them; they are represented as void, a blank space or area composed of other recognizable body parts. Chinese medicine and therapy have proved to be very successful and effective throughout history, and quite a large number of Chinese people still prefer to take Chinese medical treatment. They have a firm belief in that. This makes it clearly evident that both void and holistic thinking have become an integral part of Chinese people's everyday life. As such, language, thought, and action all reveal the distinct features of void and concreteness in the two cultures.

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