

The “Zi-Centered” Theory and Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

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Abstract. Chinese linguistic studies have always been limited by the framework of Indo-European. The “Zi-centered” theory aims to get rid of it. “Zi” (Chinese character) is regarded as the basic unit of Chinese language. One Chinese character corresponds to a syllable and a concept at the same time. “Zi-centered” theory can fully focus on the characteristics of Chinese. The great potential of the “Zi-centered” theory for promoting the development of the Chinese ontology is proved. The “Zi-centered” theory is also combined with Chinese teaching practice. It reveals great value through the textbooks, teaching modes and teaching skills.

1. Introduction

Due to the influence of Western linguistics, Chinese studies are mostly constructed in the theoretical framework of Indo-European. But they belong to different language families and have their own characteristics and laws. The current “word-centered” theory overemphasizes the commonality between languages, leading to the neglect of language individuality. At the same time, the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language based on the “word-centered” theory has also revealed defects. The “Zi-centered” theory has finally rethought the Indo-European vision and can fully pay attention to the characteristics of Chinese. Therefore, some scholars have further elaborated and improved the “Zi-centered” theory.

2. The Meaning and Origin of the “Zi-Centered” Theory

2.1 The Proposition and Significance of “Basic Unit” Theory

The “basic unit” is the basic structural unit of language, which is the theoretical core of language study. Differences in the judgment of basic structural units can lead to different direction of language research. As a pioneering work of modern Chinese linguistics, the book of “Ma Shi Wen Tong” established the grammatical system of “word-centered”. After this, Mr. Li Jinxi elaborated on the concept of “sentence-centered” theory and put forward “Words can distinguish parts of speech according to the sentence, leaving sentences without parts of speech.” In the 1990s, another “basic unit” theory triggered a heated discussion in the linguistics. It was the “Zi-centered” theory proposed by Mr. Xu Tongqiang. The research significance of “Zi-centered” not only stays at the theoretical level, but also relates to the judgment of the basic unit of language. It involves practical application, and it is related to the selection of teaching methods.

2.2 The Brief Introduction of “Zi-Centered” Theory

The “Zi-centered” theory is the language research idea which regards “Zi” as the basic structural unit of Chinese. The basis for determining the basic structural unit should meet the following three criteria “existing; available for use; discrete and closed; psychological realization in the language community.” According to this, he judged “words” as the basic structural unit of the Indo-European language. The basic structural unit of Chinese should be the “Zi”. The basic pattern of Chinese characters is that a Chinese character corresponds to a syllable and a concept at the same time.

The word “Zi” should not be simply regarded as the writing unit of the text, or simply understood as the “symbol of the symbol.” The accurate definition of the “Zi” should be the unit of Chinese. From the perspective of the form, it is the writing unit. When it has the function of ideology, it is the structural unit. When it is connected with the the sound, it represents the auditory unit. At the same time, the “Zi” as the basic structural unit is different from the morpheme and the word.

Although some scholars have proposed that “Zi” are similar to morpheme, this view is not overall. Even without the knowledge of linguistics, people can accurately identify the number of “Zi” in a sentence. However, the morphemes and words cannot satisfy these conditions.

In addition, the biggest feature that determines the difference between Chinese and other languages is that Chinese characters have motivation. As an ideogram, Chinese characters are different from the alphabetic writings which follow the path of “concept-voice-text”. “Zi” emphasize the combination of “form, sound and meaning”, which means the concept can directly correspond to “Zi”, such as pictographs and indicative character in Chinese. At the same time, “Zi” is not isolated from each other. The centripetal groups formed by similar and related relationships can best reflect their motivation. This is also an important part of Mr. Xu Tongqiang's “Zi-centered” theory. According to the position of the core “Zi” in “Zi” groups and the relationship between two “Zi”, we could figure out the structure of the word. Mr. Bai Le Sang strongly advocates the “Zi-centered” theory, and calls for “teaching the original Chinese.” He pointed out that “Zi” is the basic structural units of Chinese. And this view is coincide with Mr. Xu Tongqiang's. More importantly, he emphasized that “Zi” should be the starting point for Chinese teaching and run through the teaching activities. In this way, he distinguishes his teaching materials from the current “word-centered” textbooks

3. The Advantages and Limitations of the “Zi-Centered” Theory

The “Zi-centered” theory has great significance, which helps us get rid of the Indo-European framework and find out the characteristics of Chinese. At the same time, this theory gives us new enlightenment in the field of teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

3.1 The Advantages in the Study of Chinese Ontology

In the past, Chinese language research has adopted the concept of “word-based”. The over-emphasis on the syntactic structure often leads to the ambiguity of part-of-speech and multifunctional word. Such as “leader, work” in Chinese are both nouns and verbs, and “common, automatic” are both adjectives and adverbs. Because word and phrase are difficult to distinguish, the detachable words are difficult in grammar analysis.

In contrast, the “Zi-centered” theory opposes the Indo-European framework and object to apply Western linguistic theories mechanically. It advocates a traditional method of studying Chinese. Its focus shifts from the structure to the semantic and systemic functions of language. The “Zi”, language unit of Chinese, is more natural than the “word”. As Mr. Zhao Yuanren said, “Zi” is the central theme which has taken root in the concept of Chinese-speaking people. People always say “Zi” not words in daily conversations and written message.

3.2 The Advantages in Teaching Practice

The “Zi-centered” theory makes up for the lack of “word-centered” in ontology research. At the same time, it also promotes the development of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. It provides new ideas and new methods for solving the problems of Chinese character teaching, correcting the deviation of traditional vocabulary teaching, and breaking through the limitations of grammar teaching.

The “Zi-Centered” Theory can Reduce the Burden of Remembering Chinese Characters. For students who are non-native Chinese speakers, there is a huge difficulty in both Chinese reading and writing. The alphabetic writhing is simple in structure. However, Chinese characters are in a three-dimensional structure. The basic positions such as left and right, inside and outside are arranged and combined. Teaching words makes the order of Chinese characters uncontrollably. Teachers can't teach in the order of “strokes –radicals– single words”, which is in cognitive rules. They often teach the Chinese characters according to words in textbook. However, if the “Zi-centered” teaching method is adopted, the above problems can be completely avoided. Although the number of Chinese vocabulary is huge, the number of core “Zi” which is used to construct words is limited. If the teacher uses “Zi” as the starting point for teaching, it also reduces

the repeated memory and improves the utilization of Chinese characters.

It Breaks through the Limitations of Syntactic Component Analysis in Grammar Teaching. Chinese is different from Indo-European. It has a rich morphological change and does not have grammatical explicitness. Chinese is a kind of parataxis language, and its composition is based on semantics. The “word-centered” teaching method pays too much attention to the analysis of syntactic components, ignoring the characteristics of Chinese. So special sentence patterns become an obstacle in the teaching process. Because of the theoretical framework of Indo-European language, the “word-centered” teaching method usually divides a sentence into three parts: “subject”, “predicate” and “object”. It is expressed as “SOV” by formula. But for some grammatical phenomena, it is not applicable.

It can Stimulate Students' Interest in Learning and Promote the Development of Cultural Teaching. The current “word-centered” teaching method is used to teach Chinese characters. Chinese characters are always placed in subordinate status, and the teaching process is often trivial and boring. In fact, each Chinese character is a wonderful picture. Instead of remembering a strange font, it is better to visualize it in the mind. The teaching practice of “Zi-centered” can start from the origin of Chinese characters and introduce the evolution of character pattern in different periods. As a unity of “form, sound and meaning”, Chinese characters can be taught differently.

3.3 The Limitation of the “Zi-Centered” Theory

First of all, from the perspective of ontology, the demarcations of “Zi-centered” theory from different linguists are not consistently expressed. Especially the definition of “Zi” is not clear enough. Secondly, the study of “Zi-centered” focuses on the theoretical system. The research on the specific language phenomenon is relatively lacking. As for the problems existing in the “Zi-centered” teaching method, some scholars have questioned. The application of this theory focuses on the interpretation of semantic constructs, but it does not explain clearly how these “Zi” generate a sentence. Moreover, modern Chinese is mainly based on two-syllable words. When “Zi” is used as morpheme, it can be taught separately. However, as a non-morpheme, it is often necessary to explain clearly in the word.

4. The Enlightenment of “Zi-Centered” Theory on Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

4.1 The “Zi-Centered” Theory Applied in Textbooks

The “word-centered” textbooks regard words as the starting point of teaching, and use the word frequency as a reference. However, the utilization rate of Chinese characters is very low. Almost every Chinese character in a new word need to be taught. Teachers expect students to improve their language skills quickly, and at the same time need to reduce the burden of Chinese learning. The “Zi-centered” textbook written by Mr. Bai Lesang has been in use for more than 20 years. The annual sales volume has exceeded 25,000. All this should be attributed to the “Zi-centered” theory. Starting from the cognitive law of “Zi”, teachers should strictly control the number and try to expand the “Zi” into words. There are two tables in this book that best reflect the “Zi-centered” theory: One is the “Chinese character radical table”, which has selected 92 representative radicals and introduces its semantic categories in French. The other one is the “four hundred Zi table”, every one has a pinyin. All the “Zi” that appear in the textbook is limited to the 400-character table, which combines to generate more than 1,500 words.

In terms of “Zi” expansion, Mr. Bai Lesang’s “snowball” technique of teaching is to cultivate students’ abilities to expand words on the basis of limited Chinese characters. In the textbook, teachers can use Chinese characters as the starting point of teaching. After introducing the combination of “Zi” and the aggregation of semantics, they will inspire students to recognize words in different language environments. In short, the “Zi-centered” textbooks can fully draw on the above theoretical results. The existing textbooks should increase the reasonable components. For example, we should control the order of “Zi” which appear in textbook strictly; the learning materials should be taught step by step; the recurrence rate of “Zi” can’t be ignored.

4.2 The “Zi-Centered” Theory Applied in Teaching Mode

The “word-centered” theory mostly teaches spoken Chinese and character simultaneously. The shortcoming is that there will be mutual interference between spoken language and Chinese characters in the early teaching. This will also cause obstacles for students' learning. Chinese character teaching is attached to vocabulary teaching. Chinese characters as a language element do not get much attention. Teachers often say “what to say, what to teach”. So the order of Chinese characters appears chaotically. Teachers can not organize teaching process according to the step-by-step method. The complex Chinese characters' teaching usually follows the basic strokes teaching closely. In this regard, scholars who advocate the “Zi-centered” theory call for the separation of spoken Chinese and Chinese characters. The school can set up oral Chinese course and character course, and related textbooks are written. In the early stage, we will arrange the pure oral teaching with the help of Chinese Pinyin. We will not make any requirements for Chinese characters and prevent the learning of Chinese characters from becoming a burden. After students have certain oral communication skills, their teacher should appropriately introduce representative Chinese characters to help students familiar with basic strokes and order rules. The “Zi-centered” theory can strengthen students' perception of Chinese characters.

4.3 The “Zi-Centered” Theory Applied in Teaching Skills

The teaching of Chinese characters should make full use of the form and sound. The pictographs, indicative character and associative character are pure ideograms. There are 87% of the phonogram characters in modern Chinese. The forms and sounds should be focused. If student can use the ideographic function of the form to infer the lexical meaning of the character, they can achieve twice the result with half the effort. Similarly, by means of the phonetic features, students can be taught to infer the pronunciation of some Chinese characters. The teaching of the “Zi” group should focus on the “Zi” with high productivity. We can learn from the “combination and expansion” method. When giving a core “Zi”, teachers let the students guess the whole word. Through this discovery learning, students can improve the efficiency of learning.

5. Conclusion

How to follow the characteristics of Chinese will be a long-term issue for language ontology research and teaching Chinese as a foreign language. The “Zi-centered” theory has undoubtedly provided new ideas and new methods for this. At the same time, the theory is of great significance to make up for the shortcomings and defects of the language ontology research and teaching practice caused by “word-centered” theory. Similarly, in the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language, we also advocate the preparation of corresponding textbooks under the guidance of the “Zi-centered” theory. Teachers should cultivate students' literacy skills and change the teaching mode. Alleviating students' burden and innovating teaching techniques are also necessary. So the teaching of Chinese characters, phrases, and grammar can get twice the result with half the effort. For the future research of “Zi-centered”, we should focus on building a more complete theoretical system.

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