

Original Research Article

A brief analysis of word order bias among Spanish native Chinese learners

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Abstract: This paper takes Chinese learners whose mother tongue is Spanish as the research object, aiming to study the word order errors in their Chinese learning. This paper will analyze the differences in word order between Spanish and Chinese from the perspective of the differences in word order between the two languages, and analyze the causes of the errors based on the common word order errors in the corpus. This paper predicts the errors of native Spanish learners and summarizes the relevant teaching.

Keywords: Chinese word order; Spanish word order; Comparative analysis; Word order bias

1. Introduction

Nowadays, there are relatively few systematic studies on the differences between Spanish and Chinese, especially the biased studies focusing on the process of learning Chinese as a second language for Spanish native speakers. In view of this, this paper attempts to make an in-depth analysis of the linguistic errors caused by the difference in word order between the two languages from the perspective of the Chinese-Spanish word order errors.

2. An analysis of the characteristics of Chinese and Spanish word order

Chinese and Spanish belong to the Sino-Tibetan language family and Indo-European language family, while Spanish belongs to the Indo-European Latin language family. It is an inflected language with complex grammatical changes, that is, the changes of person, form, tense and voice.^[1]

2.1. The characteristics of Spanish word order

The Spanish word order is very flexible, there is no strict regulation of the order of the sentence subject, predicate, object, etc., the position of the sentence components is flexible, and sometimes the reverse order expression can make the sentence more appealing.

There are subjects and predicates in Spanish, but it is not a particularly complex classification, and the sentence components other than the subject and predicate can be collectively referred to as complements. In addition, the conjugation of verbs in Spanish is very complicated, and the meaning of a sentence largely depends on how the verb is conjugated. Its actual sentence meaning depends more on the verb than on the word order, so the change of word order does not constitute a decisive meaning in understanding the meaning of Spanish sentences. There are four ways to say “she’s Korean” in Spanish^[2]:

However, although word order changes have a relatively low weight in the Spanish grammatical system, this does not mean that Spanish completely ignores the importance of word order. Take the example sentence “She is Korean”. Although the different variants of this sentence are usually not confusing at the understanding level, they do not all conform to the conventional word order conventions of Spanish. In Spanish idioms, the subject “ella” is omitted, and it is often said “es coreana”. In Spanish, whenever the subject appears above, the subject below is often omitted, so to speak, the regular word order in Spanish is “V+O”.

2.2. The characteristics of Chinese word order

In Chinese, verbs cannot be conjugated, and nouns, pronouns, etc., do not have the common changes of sex, number and case of Indo-European languages. In the sentence, the position of each word is relatively fixed. From the perspective of grammatical means, word order and function words are important ways to express different meanings in Chinese. The adjustment of word order will change the grammatical function of words in sentences and also lead to the change of sentence meaning.

For example, “读死书”、“死读书” and “读书死”, “读死书” focuses on the nature of the book being read, “死读书” is an individual’s way of reading, and “读书死” reveals the possible consequences of reading. In these three sentences, the word “death” plays the role of attributive, adverbial and predicate respectively, and its grammatical functions are different^[2].

The word order of modern Chinese basically follows the format of “(attributive) subject +[adverbial] predicate < complement >+ (attributive) object”.

In the actual use of language, in order to accurately convey diversified meanings, the word order will change accordingly. This fully shows that in Chinese, word order plays a vital role, which is directly related to the specific meaning of the whole sentence. At the same time, Chinese word order shows great flexibility and can be adjusted according to the object that the speaker subjectively wishes to emphasize.

3. Common mistakes of Spanish learners

In the syntactic structure of both Spanish and Chinese, there are two basic components: subject and predicate. As the subject is a significant element of the sentence structure, learners can usually accurately grasp it, so errors in this level are rare. In contrast, the errors focus more on the predicate part and other additional elements in Chinese. Therefore, the following analysis of common errors will mainly focus on subject-predicate structure sentence patterns and attributive, adverbial word order errors.

3.1. Subject-predicate Structure

Eg: 他哭了 ——estaba llorando

In Chinese, where the subject “他” must be placed before the verb “哭了”, a beginner learner of Spanish may drop the subject “他” or put the “哭了” position at the beginning of the sentence, becoming “哭了他”.

3.2. Subject-verb-object Structure

Eg: 我爱你 ——yo amo a ti

In Chinese, the object usually comes after the verb, but in Spanish, the object comes after the verb only if the verb is in the impersonal form and has an object. There are three kinds of common impersonal forms: archetypal verb, subverb and past participle. In this case, it is consistent with the Chinese word order, and generally there will be no errors. There is also a special “unstressed personal pronoun” in Spanish, and the repetition of words will appear redundant in any language. Therefore, in the grammatical rules of Spanish, when a noun is a direct or indirect complement of a verb, it can be replaced by an unstressed personal pronoun when there is a background. In “yo amo a ti”, “ti” is the complement of the sentence, but the presence of the unstressed personal pronoun makes the sentence “te amo”, and “te” is the unstressed personal pronoun.

Therefore, when junior students learn Chinese, the Chinese object word order will be biased and confused with the complement in Spanish, and the direct object of Chinese will be placed before the predicate verb, and

the sentence “我你爱” will be said.

Eg: 这是什么? ——¿Qué es esto ?

In this sentence, question words are used as the complement, which is generally the predicate before the subject after, that is, “que”, “quien”, “donde”, “cuando” and other question words should be placed at the beginning of the sentence. This is very similar to English grammar, such as “What is that?” “, “What time is it?” “, “How old are you? But in Chinese, you would use “What time is it?” “, “Where are you going”, “What is this?” The question word is at the end of the sentence. Therefore, when learning general questions, Spanish students are not easy to grasp the position of the question word, and will make the mistake of “哪儿去您”.

3.3. Joint predicate structure

Eg: 这件事想起来心烦 ——Estaba molesto pensar en

In Chinese, a connective-predicate sentence refers to a structure in which a single subject is followed by multiple predicate elements. These predicates do not constitute a finite relationship, but are independent of each other, but are connected by logical relations (such as purpose, mode, cause and effect, chronological order, etc.). The characteristic of a connected sentence is that the position of its two predicates is fixed, and the order cannot be changed at will.

For native Spanish speakers, the lack of characteristic marks or linking symbols between two verbs in a connective-predicate sentence may make it more difficult for them to remember. In addition, the order of the two verbs is fixed, and once the word order changes, the meaning of the whole sentence will also change, so this is the type of mistake they often encounter in the learning process.

3.4. Attributive bias

Eg: 我有一件蓝色的衣服 ——Tengo un vestido azul

In Spanish, the position of the center language and the attributive adjective is not fixed, the adjective is sometimes before the center language and can also be after the center language, but generally speaking, it is customary to place the adjective component modifying the center language after the center language, for example, the blue color of “azul” in this sentence is after the clothes “vestido”.

However, in Chinese, the attributive components of the central language used to modify sentences or phrases are put before the central language, and the adjectives are put before the central language unless the nature of things is deliberately emphasized. Although there are cases in Chinese where verbs change into adjectives, such as “喝完的水” and “读完的书”, the verbs are still put before the central language when they are treated as adjectives. This is different from the way Spanish is arranged, where the beginner learner is affected by the negative transfer of the first language, and is accustomed to translating the main language first, and then adding adjectives, thus making a sentence like “我有一件衣服蓝色的”.

Eg: 星期四的演讲 ——Presentación del jueves

When nouns are used as attributive, they are used to express the possessive or restrictive relationship in Chinese. The nouns used here are generally time nouns, place nouns and character nouns, and the middle is connected with “.” The opposite of “de” is the Spanish word for “de”, which is also used to express ownership. However, the order of the Spanish sentence and the Chinese sentence is reversed, and the Spanish sentence is “center language +de+ noun”. Under the influence of the Spanish mind-set, this sentence becomes “演讲的星期四”.

3.5. Multiple attributes

Multinomial attributes are composed of two or more attributes, which are also used to modify the central language. The arrangement of complex multinomial attributes in Chinese is regular, which can be roughly summarized as “possession + quantity + verb + adjective + noun + central language”. The relationship between the multiple attributives and the central language is inseparable, and within the multiple attributives, each attribute also has a meaningful priority.

Eg: 他是帅气、善良、受欢迎的男孩子。

“帅气”“善良”“受欢迎” are juxtaposed, and do not affect the emphasis and subemphasis of the meaning of the sentence. However, in the Spanish expression, the first is that the multiple attributives and the order of the central words are different from that of Chinese, and the second is that the conjunction “y” is used in Spanish. When the Spanish “y” connects the sentence, it can also indicate the relationship of juxtaposition, and can also indicate the logical relationship such as progression, transition, and result^[3]. Here, it is necessary to pay attention to the relationship between multiple attributes when “y” is used in Spanish.

Eg: 这是一位有十余年教学经验的杰出的语文老师。

This sentence shows the very typical structure of multiple attributes in Chinese, in which the status of each attribute component in the sentence is not equal, but there is a distinction between key and secondary points, and their order follows the established grammatical rules, that is, the order of “attributive + quantitative phrase + verbal phrase + adjectival phrase + nominal phrase + central phrase”. In contrast, in Spanish, which is similar to English, when the attributive is too long, it is not mandatory to place it before the main language, but can flexibly use the form of descriptive clause at the end of the sentence to avoid the sentence structure appearing “top-heavy”. When Spanish-speaking students try to construct Chinese sentences using descriptive clauses, they are prone to errors in word order.

3.6. Adverbial bias

In Chinese, when prepositions such as “在”, “跟” and “于” are used to form a prepositional structure and use it as adverbial, the structure is in front of the predicate. In Spanish, prepositions usually come after predicates.

The confusion of subject and adverbial order is a common problem. The conjugation of verbs in Spanish can directly reflect the characteristics of the subject, and in the case of personal pronouns as the subject, the subject is often omitted according to language custom. In Chinese, however, the subject is usually indispensable. Therefore, when Spanish native speakers construct Chinese sentences, they need to complete subjects that were originally omitted in Spanish, resulting in subject placement errors.

The adverbial word order in Spanish is relatively flexible and free, while in Chinese it has strict rules and requirements. This difference makes it difficult for native Spanish learners to fully conquer adverbial order, even in the middle and advanced stages of learning.

4. Teaching suggestions

Word order is a core issue in linguistic research, especially in the face of paratactic language such as Chinese, there is a close binding relationship between word order and meaning. In the Chinese system, the function of word order is self-evident, which is not only the cornerstone of expressing lexical meaning and syntactic relations, but also an important way to realize rhetorical means. In addition, word order can also convey rich information in context, style and even culture^[4]. Therefore, Chinese teachers should realize the importance of

word order teaching and pay attention to syntax, semantics and pragmatics in teaching practice.

4.1. Suggestions for teachers

4.1.1. Familiar with Spanish language features.

For Chinese learners with different native language backgrounds, teachers should have certain language accumulation ability. For example, when the students mainly use Spanish, the teacher should learn and master some common Spanish vocabulary, and at the same time conduct in-depth research on the Spanish language in advance in order to accurately analyze the characteristics of the language. At present, nationalized teaching is the trend of The Times. In second language learning, negative transfer of mother tongue has always been an important factor affecting learners. Therefore, as a professional teacher, understanding Spanish can better analyze the causes of students' errors, remedy the symptoms, and improve learning efficiency.

4.1.2. Strengthen the contrast between Chinese and Spanish in teaching.

Much of the difficulty that Spanish students face in learning Chinese stems from the significant differences between Chinese and their native language, Spanish. Although there are significant differences between Sino-Tibetan and Indo-European languages, these differences are not random. Teachers need to distinguish and memorize the rules of word order in different language families to help students reduce the possibility of mistakes.

4.1.3. Use a Variety of teaching methods.

In grammar teaching, students are often in a passive learning state, grammar knowledge is boring and students have low interest in learning. Therefore, teachers must give full play to the main role of students in grammar classroom teaching activities, and adopt a variety of teaching methods combined with teaching strategies. In the study of second language teaching method, various methods emerge endlessly, each has its advantages and disadvantages, and teachers need to learn from each other and serve teaching. Second language acquisition refers to the different characteristics and learning objectives of students, so as to determine the teaching methods.

4.2. Suggestions on teaching materials

4.2.1. Strengthen the study of country-specific teaching materials

At present, the market distribution of teaching materials for teaching Chinese as a foreign language shows obvious characteristics of single countries, mainly focusing on English, Japanese, Russian and other countries with close contacts with China, while paying less attention to the group of learners whose mother tongue is Spanish. Given that Spanish is the third most spoken language in the world, its large number of speakers, and the number of people learning Chinese continues to grow, the issue of teaching materials has become a key issue that needs to be addressed^[5]. Although there are several textbooks available for Spanish learners, there are very few books that specifically compare the grammar and practice of the two languages. The research on country-specific teaching materials in domestic academic circles is also developing continuously. Although there are fluctuations in the research process, overall, the depth and breadth of research are constantly improving, and the number of relevant papers is also increasing year by year. This trend indicates that the study of country-specific teaching materials has become a breakthrough point in the education of Chinese as a second language, and is of great significance to the further development of Chinese international education.

4.2.2. Strengthen the study of spoken and written grammar.

The research in this area, especially the study of written grammar, is still very weak, and whether it is for the special relationship between Chinese characters and characters, or in the face of the unsatisfactory grammar teaching in the middle and advanced stages, it is necessary to distinguish and strengthen the study of these two types of grammar. This research will not only promote the teaching of spoken and written Chinese as a foreign language, but also enrich the results of Chinese ontology research.

4.2.3. Strengthen the exploration of subtle grammatical features.

Subtle grammatical features include the in-depth study of Chinese function words, content words with special usage, certain fixed phrases, and various syntactic structures beyond the basic sentence pattern category. This kind of research seems to be complicated and detailed on the surface, but it contains crucial academic and practical value. Such “subtle and trivial” grammatical differences between Chinese and Spanish are extremely significant and have a profound impact on actual language communication. Although many achievements have been made in the field of comparative study of Chinese and Spanish, the current research results are still insufficient, and there is still a big gap to be filled, compared with meeting the urgent needs of teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

5. Conclusion

Understanding and acquiring word order is not only helpful for mastering the language itself, but also for in-depth exploration of national character and culture, so full attention must be paid to it in teaching. Although Spanish and Chinese belong to different language families and have different word order rules, these difficulties are not insurmountable. This paper makes a superficial comparison of the word order systems of the two languages and puts forward some teaching strategies, hoping to help the practice of word order teaching.

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