

IMPARTIALITY OF OPPOSITES IN DEGREE QUESTIONS OF CHINESE

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Resum. **Imparcialitat dels contraris en preguntes de grau del xinès.** Aquest article tracta de la imparcialitat dels adjectius contraris utilitzats en preguntes de grau basant-nos en l'anàlisi de textos en xinès. L'anàlisi se centra en la qüestió de si la imparcialitat es manté o bé presenta variacions o graus diferents segons el context en què es troben els adjectius. Els resultats indiquen que alguns possibles termes imparcials ho són més que d'altres, mesurats en una escala d'imparcialitat. Alguns termes més imparcials gaudeixen de més llibertat segons el context i poden usar-se més lliurement quan s'usen en preguntes de grau, mentre que alguns termes més imparcials tenen més limitacions contextuais. A diferència dels antònims anglesos, els antònims en xinès poden classificar-se en tres sub-classes depenent del seu comportament d'imparcialitat: *imparcials: compromesos*, *pseudo-imparcials: compromesos* i *compromesos: compromesos*.

Paraules clau: imparcialitat, compromís, contraris, preguntes de grau, xinès

Abstract. This paper concerns the impartiality of opposite adjectives used in degree questions based on the analysis of language texts in Chinese. The analysis is focused on the question of whether impartiality remains uniformly the same or presents variations or degrees in different contexts. The results indicate that some impartial possible terms are more impartial than others on the impartiality scale. More impartial terms enjoy more freedom in choice of contexts and can be more freely used in degree questions while less impartial terms give more contextual limitations. Unlike English antonyms, antonyms in Chinese can be classified into three sub-classes in virtue of their impartiality behavior: *true impartial: committed*, *pseudo impartial: committed* and *committed: committed*.

Key words: impartiality, committedness, opposites, degree questions, Chinese

Opposites are grouped in pairs for discussion in linguistics because of the existence of a contrast between the meanings of two members in a pair.

Impartiality concerns the disappearance of the contrast. Impartiality is a universal characteristic of natural languages and is derived from the concept of markedness, whose connection with lexical structures has three senses: formal markedness, distributional markedness, and semantic markedness. (Lyons 1997) Formal markedness refers to the phenomenon in which one member in a pair of opposites is formally marked, that is to say, a mark is prefixed or suffixed to one member, but not the other. For example, in *visible*: *invisible*, *invisible* is formally marked. Distributional markedness refers to the phenomenon in which a marked member is more restricted in its distribution than the other. For example, the question “How *long* is it?” is applicable to the three truth conditions: “it is long”, “it is short” and “its length is unknown”, but “How *short* is it?” is only applicable to the second case if it is true. Thus *short* is distributionally marked. A semantically marked term tends to have more specific meanings than its opposite, a semantically unmarked term. For example, in *dog* : *bitch*, *dog* refers to both male and female dogs, but *bitch* only refers to female dog and then *bitch* is defined as semantically marked or restricted. Formal marking and semantic marking concern with opposites as independent individuals. Distributional markedness relates opposites with contexts in which the opposites occur and the notion of impartiality applied in the paper is more closely related to this markedness but is slightly restricted. But if the concept of a semantically unmarked term is broadened to a term whose semantic contrast is neutralized under a given circumstance, impartiality is seen more closely related to semantic markedness, since impartiality refers to the disappearance of a semantic contrast, too.

Degree question is a form of expression in which the asymmetrical behavior of impartiality between two members of a pair of opposites is obviously presented. This phenomenon is true to both English and Chinese. In English, the *deep* in *How deep is the swimming pool?* is impartial because it does not have the meanings of “being deep” or “having great depth” as its basic meanings. But the *shallow* in *How shallow is the swimming pool?* still keeps its basic meaning of “being shallow” or “having a small depth”. In Chinese, one of the basic forms of a degree question in which adjectives are used is:

... shi/you duo x?

‘... be how x’

How x be ...? (X is a member of opposite adjectives)

For instance,

- (1) Youyongchi shi duo shen?
 ‘Swimming pool is how deep’
 How deep is the swimming pool?

In question (1), *shen* (deep), carrying no primitive sense of “being deep” or “having great depth”, is used impartially and the depth of the swimming pool may still be unknown. But when its opposite *qian* (shallow) is used in a degree question, it is partial in all possible contexts.

- (2) Youyongchi you duo qian?
 ‘Swimming pool be how shallow’
 How shallow is the swimming pool?

Therefore, the question is applicable if the swimming pool is known to be shallow and in other words, the swimming pool has a small depth. The terms like *shen* are taken as impartial possible terms, which include terms like: *chang* (long), *kuai* (fast), *hou* (thick for depth), *da* (large), *gao* (tall/high), *yuan* (far), *da* (old), *nun* (thick for density), *cu* (thick for diameter), *gui* (expensive), to name only a few. But their opposites can not be used impartially and, in another term, are committed.

The impartiality of the opposites discussed exemplifies one characteristic of many human languages. For example, “How x ...?” is normal in Korean and Arabic. But the characterization is not applicable to languages like Russian. When one wants to know the length, he only has one way in Russian to get the information he wants:

e.g. Какая ширина у этой улицы?
 ‘how wide this street’
 What is the width of this street?

And both of the following questions are abnormal in Russian:

e.g. ? Как широка эта улица?
 ‘how wide this street’
 How wide is this street?

e.g. ? Как узка эта улица?

‘how narrow this street’
How narrow is this street?

In Chinese, there are other pairs of opposites, which show different impartial features when used in degree questions. One of the two members is committed as the one in the pair of opposites of the group discussed. The following members are committed: *rongyi* (easy), *ruan* (soft), *ruo* (weak), *wan* (late), *jiu* (old), *jiandan* (simple), *qiongkun* (poor), *qingxian* (idle), *shou* (thin), *ben* (dull), *danxiao* (timed). For instance,

- (3) Kaoshi you duo *rongyi*?
‘Exam is how easy’
How easy is the exam?

The question is acceptable only when the “*kaoshi*” (exam) is known to be easy and, that is to say, the exam is put on a scale of EASINESS; otherwise, it violates the conversational principle of consistency, as I would name it. The implicature in the speaker’s utterance in a conversation must be consistent with the context and with the listener’s knowledge, including his own knowledge of the context where the communication is taking place.

The opposites of the committed terms show impartiality to some extent when they occur in degree questions. In the following conversation, *ying* (hard) is used impartially.

- (4) a. Nei zhong mutou you duo *ying*?
‘that type wood be how hard’
How hard is the wood?
- b. Tong songmu chabuduo.
‘PART pine almost alike’
It is more or less the same as pine.

To a native speaker of Chinese, b’s answer does not sound like an appropriate reply to a’s question and it seems a transitional bridge is necessary.

- (5) Bu *ying*, tong songmu chabuduo.
‘not hard, PART pine almost alike’
Not hard, it more or less the same as pine.

What is the function of the “bridge” and why is it necessary? To answer these questions, it is important to analyse the impartiality of the *ying* in (4a). To determine if the *ying* in (4a) is impartially used, 34 native speakers were interviewed and all interviewees except one confirmed that *ying* could be impartial in the question. In other words, (4a) is fully acceptable even if the utterance is uttered in a context where *a* has not acquired any information about the quality of *nei zhong mutou* (that type of wood). Since *a* has no idea about whether the wood is hard or soft, *ying* is used as a neutralized term to express the scale covering both concepts of HARDNESS and SOFTNESS. But in the same case, if its ever committed opposite *ruan* (soft) is used, the question does not sound appropriate.

- (6) ? Nei mutou you duo ruan?
 ‘that wood be how soft’
 How soft is that wood?

It is reasonable to argue that the function of *Bu ying* in (5) is not to negate *ying* in (4a) but rather to serve as a necessary conjunctive link between the question and the answer to bring the attention of the addressee to the scale of SOFTNESS by uttering *Bu ying* (not hard) before the answer to the question is given. It is a pre-implementation statement of the “exact” degree of *yingdu* (hardness) and is not an obligatory section either syntactically or semantically. This *ying* in (4a) is different from the *ying* in (7):

- (7) a. Zhei mutou *ying* ma?
 ‘this wood hard PART’
 Is this wood hard?
- b. Bu *ying*, tong songmu chabuduo.
 ‘not hard, PART pine almost alike’
 No, it is not hard. It is more or less the same as pine in hardness.

Both *yings* in (7) are obviously committed by the *ying* in (4a). But the analysis above indicates that *ying* in (4a) is neither committed nor so impartial as *shen* in (1). Even so the answer to question (1) could be as follows at the proposition that the swimming pool is:

- (8) Bu shen, zhi you yi mi shen.
 ‘not deep, only be one meter deep’
 Not deep, only one meter deep.

or

- (9) Zhi you yi mi shen. Bu shen.
 ‘only be one meter deep. not deep’
 Only one meter. Not deep.

The negation components in the two possible answers are not semantically required and they have the mere function, if any, of complements whether they occur at the beginning or at the end of the utterance since the answers are perfectly acceptable without these complementary components. To some speakers, the utterance sounds clumsy with the added section and removing it would result in a terser reply. This fact implies that *ying* in (4a) is less impartial than *shen* in (1) and the conclusion may be further extended to a statement that some impartial possible terms like *ying* show less impartiality when applied to degree questions than others. The former are termed as pseudo-impartial terms and the latter true-impartial terms.

To support the argument, a test is formulated. The testing frame consists of two sections. The second section is a “How X ...?” degree question in which X is an impartial term, and the first section is a contextual proposition contradictory to the basic sense of X when X is committedly used. Two contextual cases are designed, in the form of a statement: case one contains an opposite of X, directly contradicting the primitive sense of X; case two implies a proposition contradictory to the sense of X without the occurrence of the lexical term of its opposite. The impartiality performance opposites *shen* (deep): *qian* (shallow) are tested in the module.

- (10) a. Ni shuo *yiyang neng kandao jingdi*, na jiujiing you duo *shen*?
 ‘you say one glance can see well bottom then exactly be how deep’
 You say the bottom of the well can be easily seen, and then how deep is it exactly?
- b. Ni shuo jing hen *qian*, na jiujiing you duo *shen*?
 ‘you say well very shallow then exactly be how deep’
 You say the well is very shallow, and then how deep is it exactly?
- (11) a. Neizhong *neng zuo jiuping sai* de mutou jijing you duo *ying*?
 ‘that type capable serve as bottle cork’s wood exactly be how hard’
 How hard is the wood which can be used for producing corks for bottles?

- b. * Ni shuo neizhong mutou hen *ruan*, na jiuqing you duo *ying*?
 ‘you say that wood very soft then exactly be how hard’
 You say that wood is very soft, and then how hard is it exactly?

In (10a) the expression of *yiyuan neng kandao jingdi* (the well bottom can be seen at a glance) implies that the well is not deep but shallow, and hence the degree question following is acceptable. In (10b) the lexicalized opposite of *shen* occurs in the statement preceding the degree question functioning as background information and the degree question is still acceptable. A possible explanation for this is that *shen* is a true impartial term since it can occur not only in the question whose contextual background contains an implied proposition contradicting the basic meaning of *shen* but also in the question with the presence of its opposite *qian*. However, the performance of *ying* in impartiality in (11) is found different. If we substitute *shen* for *qian* in both (10a) and (10b), the questions are normal and *qian* is committed in both cases. In (11a) the expression *neng zuo jiuping sai* (can be used for producing corks) implies that the wood is soft and *ying* can be used impartially in the question following. But when the lexical term of its opposite *qian* (shallow) occurs in the preceding background of the question, the application of *ying* as an impartial term in the degree question is abnormal. The abnormal occurrence of *ying* in (11b) indicates that the terms like *ying* are less impartial than those like *shen*. But if we replace *ying* (hard) with *ruan* (soft), both (11a) and (11b) are normal and *ruan* (soft) is committed in both cases. Thus it is found that both of the pairs of opposites have one impartial member and one committed member when used in degree questions. The difference is the varied degrees of impartiality of both impartial members.

There are some pairs of opposites termed as overlapping antonyms by Cruse which have more complicated behavior in the “How X ...” question. (Cruse 1986) Cruse claims that linguistically positive members of overlapping antonyms in English are uncommitted in degree questions and their partners are committed with no exceptions. (Cruse 1986) Antonyms of this kind in Chinese have different features. Almost all the members in Chinese overlapping antonyms are committed when used in degree questions.

- (12) a. Ta you duo *hao*? How good is he? (He is good.)
 Ta you duo *huai*? How bad is he? (He is bad.)
- b. Ta you duo *congming*? How intelligent is he? (He is intelligent.)
 Ta you duo *ben*? How dull is he? (He is dull.)

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|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| c. Ta you duo <i>kangkai</i> ? | How generous is he? (He is generous.) |
| Ta you duo <i>linse</i> ? | How stingy is he? (He is stingy.) |

Thus all the above members of the pairs of opposites are committed in the questions.

The analysis of the impartiality of adjective opposites in the paper establishes the following conclusions.

1. The adjectives which are possible for impartial use in degree questions show different degrees of impartiality. Some terms are true impartial terms and others are pseudo impartial terms. The true impartial terms present more impartiality while the pseudo impartial terms present less. More specific degrees of impartiality may be possible to identify if more appropriate tests are formulated and employed and more samples are investigated. The discovery of the degree of impartiality helps speakers apply impartial words correctly to avoid uncooperativeness in communication.
2. The terms with higher impartiality degree are usually quantitative measurement terms, such as *shen* (deep), *chang* (long), *kuan* (wide) and most of the terms with lower impartial degree are subjective measurement terms such as *nan* (difficult), *qiang* (strong), *mang* (busy). The former are able to represent concepts with specific scale marks. But the latter represent concepts of very opaque value.
3. The more impartial terms are able to be applied in more contexts while those with lower impartial degree have less flexibility in the choice of linguistic contexts. Therefore committed terms have more limitation in language application and impartial terms enjoy more freedom and opportunity of being used in language.
4. It is possible to classify the discussed antonyms, which Cruse names as polar antonyms, into three subclasses on the basis of their impartial performance in “How X?” questions. They are: true impartial and committed, as *shen* : *qian*; pseudo impartial : committed, as *ying* : *ruan* and committed : committed, as *hao* : *huai*. This classification will specify the sense relations between the sets of opposites in Chinese.

References

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