

# The Non-equivalence of Language-Value between Chinese and American Cultures Based on the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

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## Abstract

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis advocates the ontology of language, arguing that language affects and even determines human thinking to some extent. In view of the fact that human thinking is abstract and intangible, and that values are the soul of the way of thinking, this paper compares the three sets of non-equivalent phenomena between Chinese and American languages and values. As a result, it can be exemplified that language cannot determine or influence values to a certain extent, that is, language cannot determine or influence people's thinking to a certain extent, thus revealing the irrationality of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. Through in-depth analysis of the differences between Chinese and American values as well as language characteristics, the cultural concepts behind language can be more deeply understood, which is conducive to improving the awareness of cross-cultural communication and enhancing cross-cultural communication ability; on the other hand, the accuracy and authenticity of language selection can also be improved so as to ensure the reliability in the translation practice.

**Keywords:** Values of America and China, languages, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, cross-culture communication, translation practice.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Regarding the question of whether language structure affects people's view of the world, German linguist Humboldt once proposed that "each language contains a unique world view" (Humboldt, 1997). As the successor of Humboldt's view of language, Sapir and his student Whorf discussed the relationship among language, thinking and culture in more details in their works. Their idea was first called as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis by American linguist Carol. The idea of this Hypothesis, that the language form determines the language users' view of the universe, has been divided into "strong hypothesis" and "weak hypothesis" with the continuous interpretation of linguists. The former believes that language determines or constrains people's thinking while the latter asserts that language affects human thinking to a certain extent.

As Sapir mentioned in his treatise *Language*, "language is the oldest heritage of mankind and no other aspect of culture can be earlier than language. Without language, there is no culture" (Sapir, 1921). This opinion is consistent with the Hypothesis that language affects and even determines people's thinking,

because the way of thinking, which is a relatively fixed metacognitive mode formed in the long-term historical development of a nation, reflects the characteristics of human culture and is a thinking habit that people adopt to process information and perceive the world around them. Therefore, in a sense, the way of thinking reflects the cultural characteristics of a nation and lays the key foundation of a nation's culture. What's more, Michelle Presser once commented that values are the deepest culture, and Zhou Wenzhang, PhD of Renmin University of China, also pointed out that values are one of the core elements of the way of thinking: "Values are the soul of the way of thinking, which determines the direction of people's thinking". In this way, the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis believes that language indeed has an influence on the way of thinking, and what distinguishes its strong version and weak version is just the degree of the influence. Since language affects the way of thinking, and values and ways of thinking belong to the unified set of "culture", then language can also affect the values of the language users to some extent. However, through the comparison of the languages and values of China and America, it is

found that the language and its users' values are not necessarily consistent with each other.

This article will demonstrate the non-equivalence between the characteristics of the language used by native speakers and their value orientations in China and the United States, so as to prove that the use of language cannot determine or even affect the value orientations of the nation to a certain extent. Given the common sense that the value is the soul of the way of thinking, the conclusion can be drawn that language, to a certain extent, cannot affect the way of thinking of the nation, thus revealing the irrationality of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis to some extent.

## 2. Analysis of the non-equivalence between Chinese and American languages and values

### 2.1 Comparison of Chinese and American Value Orientations

The Value Orientation Theory of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) is based on the following three basic assumptions:

1. Any nation in any era must provide solutions to certain common problems of mankind.
2. The solutions to these problems are not infinite or arbitrary, but vary in a series of choices or value orientations.
3. Value orientation exists in all societies and individuals, but each society and individual has different preferences for value orientations.

Based on those three assumptions, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck propose five basic problems that each society must solve, and the methods favored by a society to solve these problems reflect the values of that society.

This article will discuss three value orientations of them. The first is the orientation of human activities, including Being, Being-in-becoming and Doing; the second is the time orientation, including Past, Present and Future; and the third is the relationship between man and nature, including Mastery, Submission and Harmony.

Kohls (1988) discussed in the article *The Values Americans Live By* that Americans' activity orientation is "Doing"; their time orientation is "Future"; and their relationship orientation between man and nature is "Mastery". In contrast, Chinese people's activity orientation is "Being"; their time orientation is "Past"; and their relationship between man and nature is "Harmony" (Kohls, 1988). The value orientations in a nation influence each other and then develop into a harmonious unity.

As Figure 1 shows, the three value orientations of Americans are in a triangular cycle which is sharp with angles and extendable through lines. Americans put their action into the conquest of nature. The sense of

achievement in conquering nature makes them feel invincible. In this way, Americans tend to pay more attention to the future they can create, and their longing for the future requires them to take powerful actions. On the other hand, as shown in Figure 2, the three value orientations of Chinese people are in a circular loop without edges and angles, which is smooth along the string. This is because Chinese people who take self-cultivation seriously advocate harmonious coexistence with nature, emphasize the idea of "doing nothing", and pay more attention to the gifts that nature has given them. As a result, they often look back on the past and never forget their original purpose in order to reach the bright end, and the lessons learned from the history require Chinese people to behave themselves for better development.

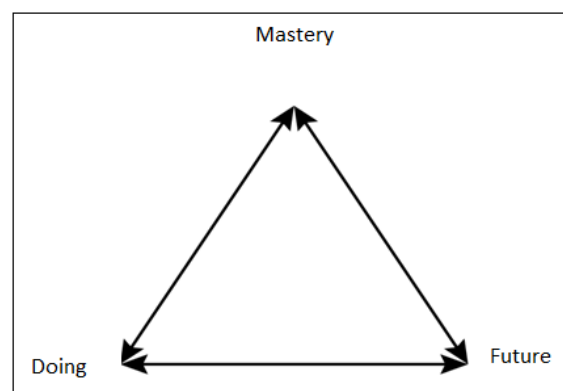


Figure 1: Value Orientations of the American

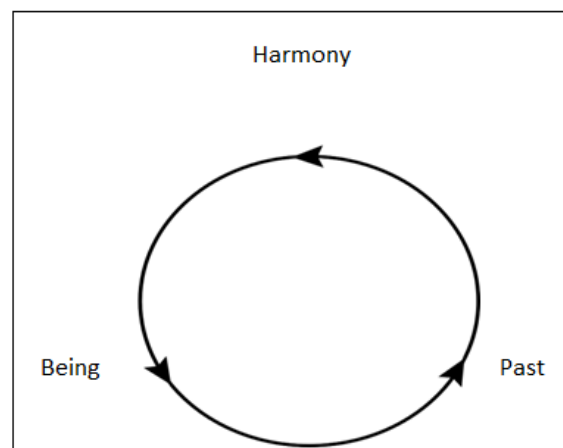


Figure 2: Value Orientations of the Chinese

### 2.2 Doing VS nominal prominence & Being VS verbal prominence

#### 2.2.1 The Americans stress Doing while the Chinese stress Being

The United States is a society that emphasizes the value orientation of Doing, and Americans believe that everything can be obtained through their own efforts and everyone can create their own value and achieve wonderful success through hard work, which is exactly what the American Dream advocates. Guided by the American Dream, generations of Americans

have believed that the ideal of a better life in America can be achieved only through hard work, courage, creativity, and determination. When it comes to Chinese value orientation, influenced by Confucianism, Chinese society stresses the doctrine of the mean, moral cultivation and the idea of "Being". Different from the American Dream, the Chinese Dream cannot be realized without the overall interests of the Party, of the country and of the people because the essence of the Chinese Dream is the prosperity of the country, the rejuvenation of the nation and the happiness of the people. And the core values of socialism require their people to be "patriotic", "dedicated", "honest" and "friendly", which mostly emphasize the moral cultivation of the individual.

### 2.2.2 Nominal prominence of English VS verbal prominence of Chinese

As analyzed above, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis holds that language has an impact on the way of thinking while values are the soul of the way of thinking. Therefore, values should also be affected by language and have correspondence with language features. In this way, the American culture, which emphasizes Doing, should prefer dynamic verb usage, while the Chinese culture, which emphasizes Being, should prefer static noun usage. However, a significant difference in expression between English and Chinese is the prominence of English nouns and the prominence of Chinese verbs, which is exactly the opposite of the tendency in American and Chinese values. In the book *Contrastive Linguistics Between Chinese and English* edited by Professor Chen Dezhang, it is mentioned that "In expressing or reflecting the world, English shows a clear tendency of being stative or static, while Chinese tends to be very dynamic." (2011). And Professor Lian Shuneng is more specific by pointing out that "English tends to use more nouns and thus the narration assumes a stative state, while Chinese tends to use verbs more often, thus appearing dynamic" (Chen Dezhang, 2011). Moreover, the principle of English that there must be only one predicate verb to take the responsibility of the action in a complete sentence while other verbs in the sentence, if necessary, must take the form as non-finite verb also violates the philosophy of Doing. And the gerund even grants the property of the noun to a verb. Nevertheless, there is not such limitation for verbs in the sentence of Chinese, and the co-existence of verbs is not orientated by the value of Being neither.

## 2.3 Future with grammatical markers on the past VS Past with grammatical markers on the future

### 2.3.1 The American emphasize Future while the Chinese emphasize Past

A future-oriented society emphasizes long-term development and change while a past-oriented society emphasizes tradition and respect for history. The United States is a typical future-oriented society. The elderly in the United States do not admit to being old. Offering one's seat to the elderly is seemed as a

form of discrimination against their age, while in China this behavior is quite necessary because China is a society that attaches great importance to tradition, and "respecting the old" is a traditional virtue of the Chinese nation. In American classrooms, students can call teachers by their first names, and teachers will not feel offended, but in Chinese classrooms, calling a teacher's name is regarded as a disrespectful deed which is not allowed because teachers are the elder to whom we should be humble. What's more, the elderly in the United States will choose to spend their later years in nursing homes relying on their own pension, which largely eases the burden of their next generation to support them, and in this way their children can continue to work hard for their own lives. However, as an old Chinese saying goes, "The aged people is like a treasure to the family", the elderly in China generally live at home supported by their children so as to spend their remaining years with family. Sometimes, they can help take care of their grandchildren if necessary. This kind of inter-dependent relationship cultivates the atmosphere in Chinese society that no matter how heavy the burden is put on the next generation, they are always willing to take good care of their aging parents.

### 2.3.2 Grammatical markers on the past VS grammatical markers on the future

In addition to vocabulary, grammatical structure can also reveal the preferences of the language user. English is an inflectional language, that is, the grammatical function of words is mainly expressed by the changes of affixes, such as the number of nouns, the case of nouns, the tense of verbs, etc. (Ye Zinan, 2013). As Whorf said: "Due to different language structures, people's views on the world are very different" (Liu Runqing, 2016). For example, Eskimos' various expressions describing snow in different situations are related to its snowy weather. So there should be more inflectional expressions about the future in the language repertoire of the American whose value orientation is Future. However, the opposite is the case, although there are three tenses of verbs expressing the past and the future in English, namely, simple tense, progressive tense and perfect tense, the division of English grammar into the past is more detailed and complete. Take the simple tense as example, the simple past tense is achieved just by adding the suffix -ed after the predict verb in most case, reflecting the characteristics of inflectional language, while there is not such specific suffix for simple future tense which is marked by the lexical means of adding "will". Sometimes, the expressions of simple present and present progressive can be adopted to imply the location of future while there is not alternative expression for the past which is exclusive to the inflectional changes of the predicate. As for Chinese, it doesn't have inflectional changes, and its core verbs, the number of which is not exclusive to only one, always keep consistent whether the meaning of the sentence refers to the past tense or to the future tense. In other words, there is no superiority of

the expression of the past tense to other tenses, such as the present and the future. Although there indeed are a few grammatical markers signifying the past, including“了”(already)、“过”(had done)、“着”(done), the quantity is very small. However, the quantity of another set of grammatical markers which aim at the future are even larger, namely “立刻”(immediately)、“马上”(right now)、“即将”(soon)、“将要”(will) and so on.

## 2.4 Mastery VS passive voice & Harmony VS active voice

### 2.4.1 The American prefer Mastery while the Chinese prefer Harmony

Influenced by Western humanism, American society emphasizes the role of human reasoning, advocates the use of reasoning and wills to transform the environment in life, and encourages people to conquer nature and enjoy the material life of this world. This value orientation holds the view that all natural resources can and should be conquered and exploited, just like their ancestors who went aboard the "Mayflower", survived the first severe winter and developed the desolate North American continent into the world's most powerful country. However, Americans will achieve development at the expense of the environment. During such developing process, resources such as forests, land, and minerals have been exploited predatorily, many wild animals have been slaughtered, and the ecological environment has been severely damaged. However, Chinese culture respects Confucius and emphasizes Confucianism. The Confucian view of human nature interprets the relationship between man and nature from the perspective of the unity of nature and man, and holds that the unity of man and nature is not only the inevitability of human nature, but also the ultimate goal that man should pursue. According this idea, the Chinese affectionately refer to the Yellow River as the mother river. In the face of the flood disaster caused by the sedimentation of the Yellow River, they firmly adhere to the philosophy that blocking is worse than dredging in the process of water damage control. What's more, China has always advocated the protection of the environment and biodiversity, emphasizing that gold and silver mountains are not as good as lucid waters and lush mountains, and that animals are our close friends all the time.

### 2.4.2 Passive voice of English VS active voice of Chinese

The previous section has analyzed the non-equivalence between language and value orientation from the lexical level and the grammatical level. Next, we will do a deeper analysis from the sentence level. Both English and Chinese have passive voice. If the American tendency to conquer nature is considered, then the use of English sentences should try to highlight the role of people and avoid the use of passive voice.

On the other hand, the Chinese who tend to conform to nature should use the passive voice as much as possible in the process of communication to reduce the influence of human beings. However, the English grammar is so strict that a sentence is not complete without a subject. Even in an imperative sentence, such as “Don't do that!”, there is an invisible subject “you” at the beginning of the sentence. In contrast, it is common for Chinese to omit subject. The grammatical rule that English must have a subject sets a lot of restrictions on English, while the language characteristics that Chinese language has a passive structure and does not necessarily use the subject make the use of passive sentences a choice (Ye Zinan, 2013). Especially in scientific articles where there is necessity to reduce the subjective color, given that the introduction of subjects will increase the subjective color, the passive voice is the best choice (Ye Zinan, 2013). Professor Li Changshuan also pointed out in his book *Non-literary Translation Theory and Practice* that “Active voice is often used in Chinese while passive voice is seldom used”(Li Changshuan, 2012).

## 3. The conflict between language and culture

Through the above three examples of the non-equivalence between language and value orientations, it can be exemplified that, firstly, the Chinese and Americans, who have completely different value orientations, have the exact opposite characteristics of their language use which are not correspond to their values, that is, American's value orientation "Doing" should be reflected in the prominence of verbs in their language, and Chinese people should be more inclined to use nouns rather than verbs under the guidance of the value of "Being". In fact, English is a noun-prominent language, while Chinese is a verb-prominent language (Table 1). Secondly, "future-oriented" Americans should use more expressions about the future, while "past-oriented" Chinese should find it easier to use language to talk about the past. However, as an inflectional language, English has suffix changes in the expression of the past but none in the future, while Chinese language mostly depends on the context to tell whether the things discussed happen in the past, present or future, without showing any preference for the past (Table 2). Thirdly, Americans, who want to conquer nature and master the destiny, are good at using passive sentences in their language, which reduces the subjective initiative of the actors. However, the Chinese, who advocate adaptation to nature and harmonious coexistence between man and nature, use more active structures when speaking, putting man in the first place to highlight the status of mankind (Table 3). These three pairs of language-values contradictions show, to a certain extent, that language and values are not in a one-to-one correspondence, that is, to a certain extent, language cannot determine or influence value orientations. Therefore, it can be concluded that, to a certain extent, the language does not determine or influence the nation's culture or the way of thinking,

which provides a counterexample to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, thus exemplifying its irrationality.

**Table 1**

Nation	Value	Vocabulary
America	Doing	Nominal prominence
China	Being	Verbal prominence

**Table 2**

Nation	Orientation	Emphasis of grammatical marks
America	Future	Past
China	Past	Future

**Table 3**

Nation	Value	Expression
America	Mastery	Passive voice
China	Harmony	Active voice

## 4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

### 4.1 Conclusion from the perspective of cross-culture communication and translation practice

Given that the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis emphasizes the ontological status of language, this article aims to illustrate the unreasonableness of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis through three contradictory language-value correspondence phenomena. It is hoped that language learners don't regard language as a tool, and at the same time don't exaggerate the ontological status of language by believing that language can affect or even determine people's thinking. In any case, language, values and the way of thinking will be affected by culture which is too complex to be illustrated by language only.

Concerning the aspect of conveying national and ethnic culture, non-verbal means, such as facial expressions, gestures, clothing, personal space, location arrangement, time arrangement, and even silence itself, can convey sufficient information up to 70%, much higher than language means (Hu Wenzhong, 1999). To truly understand the culture of a nation, it is better to place oneself in a real cultural environment to see, to listen, to experience and to feel. The higher cultural sensitivity of second language learners comes from their supplementary cultural background knowledge inside and outside the classroom, rather than just through book learning. Grammar and vocabulary instruction and memory are not contributed to comprehending the cultural connotation and characteristics represented by the language. Especially in translation practice, we cannot take one's own cultural background for granted in the choice of word, but should restore the characteristics of the target language itself, for example:

Eg. 1. His classmates all raised their eager hands, but he sat in *indecision*.

In example 1, the static state expressed by the noun "indecision" tends to be translated into Chinese language by means of action for localization. Thus, the latter sentence in Example 1 will have two predicate verbs “坐” (sit) and “拿不定主意”(can't make decision) in Chinese version.

Eg. 2. The job began to grow sour on him.

There is an obvious past tense "began" signed by its inflectional change in the English expression of example 2, which means that the feeling of "grow sour" has been there before. Nevertheless, due to the fact that there is no inflectional marker to refer to the tense of verbs in Chinese, when out of context, the translated expression of “开始” (begin) is correct in the three tenses of "past", "present" and "future" which can be understood respectively as "He (already) began to get bored with this work"; "He (now) begins to get bored with this work"; or "He will (soon) get bored with this work". Therefore, in translating the sentence into Chinese, it is better to add a lexical marker“已经” (already) to modify the verb in order to match the original meaning of the English sentence.

Eg. 3. It is widely believed that the killer will kill more people.

As for example 3, "It is believed that..." is a typical passive structure in English. However, when translated into Chinese, a potential subject “许多人” (many people) is usually added to conform to the conventional expression of Chinese language, which means that the passive voice in such English sentences is usually translated into Chinese by using active voice with the subject of people as the actor.

In conclusion, based on the previous analysis of the values and languages, when doing translation between Chinese language and English, we should pay attention to the following three principles in order to make the translation more authentic, Firstly, it is suggested to transform noun expressions in English into verb expressions in Chinese language as much as possible, and vice versa. Secondly, the implied information of Chinese text, such as the number of the subjects, the aspect and the tense of the action, should be expressed explicitly in English through inflectional means, concerning the fact that Chinese language belongs to high context culture while English belongs to low context culture. Thirdly, when it comes to the narrative voice, passive voice is preferred by English expression while active voice is the first choice for Chinese language.

### 4.2 Implication

Although this article aims to refute the general principle of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis through three non-equivalent phenomena of language-value between Chinese culture and American culture, it is not a complete denial of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis which

shows us a new perspective to think about language, and makes a huge contribution to avoid language researchers using their native language as a standard to measure the languages of other nations. The humanistic thoughts contained in Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis are worthy of our admiration. In addition, the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis does not merely represent the thoughts of Sapir or Whorf himself, but involves the understanding and extension of other scholars. It is important and necessary to read the original works of Sapir and Whorf closely if we want to understand linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity more deeply and accurately. Finally, this article indeed has certain limitation in the comparison of Chinese language and English as well as Chinese and American values because language is constantly innovating with the development of society, and new connotations are added into the value system in the advancement of the times. And the development of the global village along with the collision and fusion of cultures put forward new demands on language learners and researchers, that is, it is not wise to rest on our laurels, but should explore language, culture and the relationship between them with a vision of development, an open mind, and an inclusive attitude.

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