

Cultural markedness: Proposal of a semiotic model

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What is Markedness?

- “Markedness” refers to the asymmetry of the two opposite items, of which the “marked item” is used infrequently while the “unmarked item” is used relatively frequently. This phenomenon is quite common in linguistics, with many in-depth discussions made.
- The idea was originally raised in linguistics, and remained as such for almost 80 years. For instance, the asymmetry between a voiced consonant and its voiceless counterpart is universal in almost all languages. The voiced is always less used, due mainly, as argued in linguistics, to the additional morphological feature of the vibration of the vocal chord.

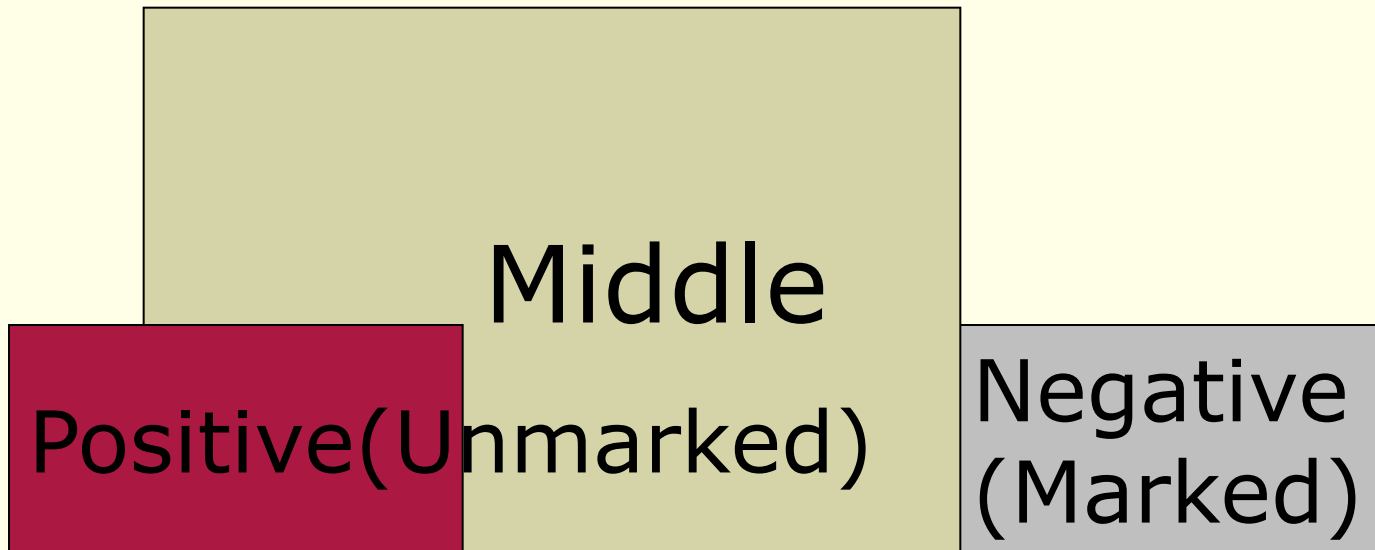
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- E.g. How old is he? 他年纪多大了?
 - (old-unmarked, young-marked)
 - How much do you weigh? How heavy are you?
 - 你有多重?
 - (heavy-unmarked, light-marked)
 - In today's society we no longer take being "old" or "heavy" as a merit, however, we keep using language in this way while unaware of the change of markedness in culture.

Cultural Markedness

- The dynamic relation amongst “the positive — the middle — the negative” has been relatively clearly described in Markedness in Cultural Semiotics. For the convenience of discussion, a simple introduction of this theory is given here: among the opposite items of cultures, the positive item and the alien are asymmetric. The reason is that there’ s a hidden middle item in the relational opposite, which tends to identify with the positive item so as not to be marked. However, such deviation is not constant; instead, they’ re subjected to changes. Therefore, the identification of the middle item is decisive for the positions of the positive item and the alien in cultures. Pressure is unavoidable from both ends on the middle item due to the competition for the identification. And the pressure direction and degree of cultural tolerance have some relationship with the trends of changes in cultures. .

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- This theory is initially raised by Zhao Yiheng, leader of Sichuan School of Semiotics in China, and then embraced by Chinese semioticians and scholars.
 - All cultures have their own “mainstream” or “center” . To maintain its position,, the positive item will exert certain pressures on the middle item to force the identification. If the pressure is too small, the positive item will lose its control over cultures; on the contrary, if the pressure is too heavy, cultures tend to lose flexibility and vigor and go into deadlock of development.

The Model of Cultural Markedness



- Generally, the positive item exerts its pressure in two ways. One is demonstrative. By means of advocating certain life styles, publicity and artistic works of a specific population, the social members will be influenced by what they constantly see and hear and naturally reach the identity on the positive item. For example, the over-elaborate formalities for nobilities in ancient times, ritualization of clergies, and official artistic works about current cultures and systems all fall into this category. Such measures are of great importance from the aspect of rites. They can motivate the positive sensations such as reverence, homage and sensations among social members to have them consciously follow the current cultural norms.

- In modern society, importance attached to rites is gradually being dissolved. Therefore, such demonstrative representation is mainly achieved by means of mass communication. TV programs are made to provoke the sense of participation of the mass and establish recognition among them on the positive item in common emotional cognition . The other is compelling by means of exerting pressures. Compulsory measures such as institutional regulations, rules, laws and taboos are used to maintain the position of the positive item. Generally, in cultures with greater tolerances, the positive item adopts more demonstrative measures to exert pressures on the middle item while in cultures with relatively strict cultural mechanisms, compelling measures are more often used.

Change of Cultural Markedness



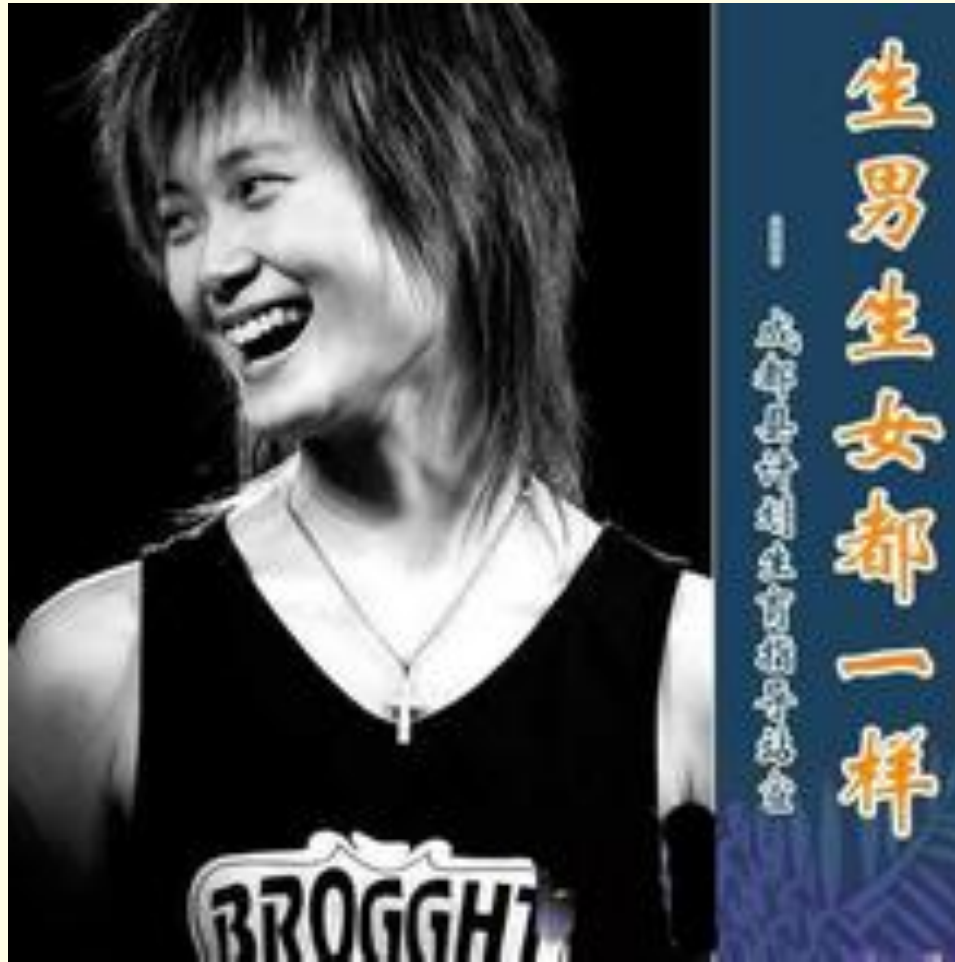
■ Markenss of gender



Yugang,Li A Chinese Pop-singer



Li Yuchun, A Chinese woman singer



Markedness of Marriage



Change of Markedness in Chinese people's dressing style



- Clothing of Gonglongbing(workers, peasants, and soldiers)



Subculture (Self-marked in form/ signifier)



Counter-culture (Self-marked in values/signified)



- The positive items of traditional Chinese culture have been exerting moderate pressures on the middle items for quite a long time. The cultural orders and patterns of “Rites do not extend to the common people” have been controlling the scope of positive items to relatively small scope all the time. The nobilities and scholar-bureaucrats have to obey rites while the lower classes have the right to accommodate rites to circumstances. The Chinese cultures also represented relatively great tolerance to impacts from external cultures. In the introduction of Buddhism and cultures of northern barbarian tribes in ancient China, the upper classes in rights and cultures basically allowed their natural tendencies. Though this surely has something to do with Chinese cultures featured by “upholding harmony and golden mean”, it is radically attributed to the moderate pressure relation between the positive item and the middle item in Chinese cultures. The alien cultures were only “differentiated”, with their differences marked, and the existence of marked item were not cancelled forcedly. As a result, after being filtered by the positive item, some subcultures (Buddhism for example) enriched and supplemented the positive item cultures. And the culture itself also showed its strong assimilation and slow developmental trend. From this aspect, it seems to be a rational explanation for the super-stability of Chinese cultures for a long period.

- In this connection, it is suggested to compare Chinese culture with the mediaeval Christian culture in the Western world. The Christian culture made oversized strikes against the alien with its positive item. Other religions were marked as “paganism” .
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- Even scientific researches and artistic creations were regarded as idolatry and devil mischief. The scope of marked item was enlarged to an excessive degree. In addition, from the aspect of pressure exerting, the upper class of rights applied compulsory methods to eliminate the alien, resulting in the losses of flexibility and diversification of cultural development. Cultural development presented a trend of stagnancy, and strong fierce bounce was triggered from the alien. Fierce attack was made on religion by literature, arts, and critics in the period of Renaissance. Obviously, the exceeding pressure from the positive item will lead to dramatic changes in the relation of the three items. And cultures will present a development in a vibrating and disconnected manner.

- Thank You!

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