



On Laotsu's "Ming and Yan" and the Language in English

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Abstract

Just like we couldn't figure out the order of egg and chicken philosophically, the sequence of the thinking and language also can't be distinguished. They are in the state of mutual interdependence. It can be affirmed that without thinking, there would exist no language, and vice versa. Thinking is the nature of language, while the language is the expression of thinking. The way of thinking in Laotsu's "Ming and Yan" is dialectical thinking, and its language expression is implicit and euphemistic, while in Western Language it is logical thinking with the brief and clear expression. If we only pay attention to the expression of language, not to its essential thinking, it's really difficult to find where the true content of the expression. This thesis will try to discuss the innerlink of Laotsu's dialectical thinking "Ming and Yan" and western logical language.

Keywords: Laotsu's "Ming and Yan", western language, language expression, mode of thinking

1. Introduction

Language is a self-sufficient and organized creative symbol system (Ding, 2009), it's an important way to express man's feelings, hopes and to exchange man's ideas, and it's the most initial tool in the communication and interaction between human beings. Also it is a major tool of thinking and the culture carrier. No matter the language is as tools of thinking or ways to exchange ideas, its significance lies in the meaning expression. Under different thinking modes, man's emphasis and focus on the expression of ideas are different, so does its direction. Therefore, their language forms would also present the differences. If language, as the culture carrier, cannot be expressed, the culture inheritance would not be possible. Then all that our great ancestors left for us should be a mystery nowadays. We don't know where we came from, what we have experienced, and how we survived from the civilization. We still have many mysteries to discover today. Besides, language is also a kind of action (J.L. Austin). All words are said to state an action. And the action is controlled by thinking, which is the reaction of brain to the objective reality, and the indirect presentation of nature (He, 2008). The relationship between thought and language is an everlasting topic in the field of linguistics. In China, the philosophy of language focuses on the discussion on language and its meaning, and whether language can express man's thoughts well and how to express. In western countries, the researches are mainly about the philosophy of analysis. English philosopher Bertrand Russell, Austria oriented philosopher Wittgenstein and other philosophers all made researches on some related fields.

2. The Relationship between Thinking and Language

Language and thinking are closely connected to each other. 'Language is the outer casing of thinking' (Marx) and thought is realized and expressed by language. They are dialectically united with each other. Thinking relies on language expression. Without language, thinking could not fix its shape, restrict its style and prove its existence. At the same time, thinking controls our language. Without thinking, language cannot achieve its functionality and its richness

2.1 *Thinking is the Essence of Language and the Language is the Presentation of Thinking*

Just like language is the most important communication tool in man's intercourse with others, thinking is its basis. Generally speaking, thinking is expressed via the use of language. People often express their feelings from inner heart through communication with others. The feelings are those thoughts that have already took the shape and existed in their inner world. Animals have thinking but they don't have language for language is unique to human beings. Therefore their thought can only be expressed via their body actions. Thinking is the core thing of



language, while language is the presentation of thinking. Thinking helps to reorganize the language which is going to be expressed. At the same time itself is been reflected. Now we can compare two essays, one is just write down according to the topics and the other is the one revised from the former. The result is what we thought about the topic has been expressed in both essays, while the language form in the later reflects more efforts of thinking. Thinking and language are both vacant for some time at the early stage of each other's emergence from their developing course respectively. When they are crossed, their connection then is hard to despair, just like two twisted strings. If you want to separate them from each other, it takes great time and energy. Since we have got used to the language with thinking now, to separate thinking with language means to isolate us from the society. It would be a disaster to human beings.

2.2 Thinking and Language Depends on and Promote Each Other

Though there existed the time when both thinking and language are vacant in each other's formation course, nowadays language would not obtain its development without thinking while thinking would not get continued without language. They cannot be separated, they are dialectically united. Language cannot leave thinking and vice versa. They depend on each other and promote each other to achieve the mutual benefit to the most in the common development. In the course of the culture delivering, thinking form gets its continuity by language expression while language gets its improvement by its reorganization with thinking. They rely on and help each other with the development. If there was no language, many thousands of master pieces would not be headed down to us, and it would be a great loss to the richness of our traditional culture. Likewise, if there was no thinking, the language couldn't be fixed and then those marvelous pieces would not be created, let alone to be headed down to enrich our culture inheritances. With language and thinking, during thousands of years' time, there emerged uncountable literal men in the history of China.

3. The Mode of Thinking and Language Expressions of Laotsu's "Ming and Yan"

Tao is the core concept of Laotsu's *Tao Te Ching*, and his whole philosophical system begins with his preset *Tao* (Liu, 2008). *Tao* is the body which formed the world, and it is also the primitive power which created the universe (Yang, 2009). From the whole book of *Tao Te Ching*, we can find that, Laotsu's attitudes toward nature or society, politics or life and others all alight with his dialectical thinking (Liu, 2008). Laotsu's language is reserved and euphemistic which leaves great space for others to think. 'The way that can be told of is not an unvarying way; The names of the things that can be named are not unvarying names (Waley, 1998).' Thousands of years' time, many brilliant scholars devote their lifetime to the study of what is the exact meaning it expresses. Just like what we have been told that there are a thousand hamlets in a thousand persons' minds, opinions on this subject are widely divided. Everyone has his or her own unique ideas.

The Way (it refers to *Tao*) can be entitled and described, if it is the way of eternally unchanging nature which is objectively universal existed, then the way been described is no longer what it used to be. Because there already emerged much unavoidable deviation in the comprehension of the Way (it refers to *Tao*), from the objectively and naturally existed way to the described, well-recognized and subjectively reflected way. Just like man's knowledge is subjectively limited to the relative truth or nearly absolute truth, while the absolute truth is objective, permanent and constant, therefore they can never master the absolute truth overall and to the end. The world can be named, but the universe named by language is no longer objective and natural any more. It has already emerged much deviation in the comprehension (Huang, 1998). The kernel of Laotsu's *Tao Te Ching* and its dialectical thinking mainly reflects on the point below.

3.1 Unity

Laotsu's dialectical mode of thinking doesn't regard the man and the nature, and their internal relations as dead and irrelevant, but a united while contrary integrate organism instead. It doesn't judge people alone, nor the nature, but regard the thought that "man is an integral part of nature" as the basis of thinking which embodies Laotsu's natural, spontaneous and nonaction value orientation. '*Tao* never does; Yet through it all things are done', this kind of dynamic movement shows the non-action of *Tao*. The heaven has its ways; likewise, man also has its ways. Man's ways cannot interfere the ways of the heaven. The ways of heaven is the rules for the heaven and the whole world, and the basis for the ways of human beings as well (Guo, 2010). Laotsu always considered that the relationships between the heaven and human beings are syncretic, and this 'syncretism' is to accord man's ways with the ways of heaven (Cai & Liu, 2005).

Tao is not a specific object that to be realized, 'for the Way is a thing Impalpable, Incommensurable (Waley, 1998)' and its essence is being spontaneously natural. Like the '*Tao*', the sage's non-action activity is without



contention. 'He does not contend, and for that very reason no one under heaven can contend with him. (Waley, 1998)' 'Tao never does; Yet through it all things are done', therefore the sage under the regulations of *Tao* can obtain everything with their nonaction activities, while some others can obtain nothing with their intentionally activities.

'Heaven is eternal, the Earth everlasting.

How come they to be so? Is it because they do not

foster their own lives;

That is why they live so long. (Waley, 1998)'

Likewise, the sages don't care much about their own gaining, so they get everything. Regulated by *Tao*, with the nonaction in their minds, the sages also can be good leaders, for in Laotsu's mind good leaders should behave in a gentle or soft manner instead of a forceful or hard one (Wen & Kevin P, 2008). Man should be modest and awe to the nature. Any ego inflation and self-expanding will disturb us from hearing the sounds of nature modestly and peacefully and we should be obedient to the change of nature (Guo, 2010). *Tao* obeys the nature of the whole world, and 'the ways of *Tao* are conditioned by the Self-so' which means *Tao* doesn't violate the nature, but adhere to various presentation of the nature (Wang, 2010). Laotsu settled the inner tensions of the relationship between heaven and human beings with the natural and nonaction thinking which is the basic ways human beings should truly take after and where the true meaning of 'man is an integral part of the nature' lies (Guo, 2010).

3.2 Perception

Perception is to choose, not to be given. Everyone has Perception. Perception is a kind of ability, the ability to comprehend the whole world. Each person's perception has its dominance and recessiveness, the point is how to comprehend, without the limitation of time and place. What's more, perception can be developed, with the help of experience accumulation or the right chance. From the point of view of the Taoists, Perception is called 'inner comprehension' that proposes the 'vision of the Mystery' (Waley, 1998) which means standing highly to overview the whole world, and it opposes to comprehend by observing and experiencing the outer world, it excludes any perceptual experience, language conceptions and any lust and distracting thoughts, and it requires the heart to keep peace and quiet to get to the condition 'only he that rids himself forever of desire can see the Secret Essences' (Lian, 2006). With the thought that man should 'Without leaving his door, He knows everything under heaven. Without looking out his window, He knows all the ways of heaven.' and 'Push far enough towards the void, hold fast enough to quietness,' Laotsu proposed to comprehend from the inner world, to find the true meanings of the outer world. Perception stresses on the expression of the meaning. And for this reason, the obscurity of the language comes into being. It doesn't confine to the sentence structure, as long as the sentence can convey what we want to express. Chinese sentences express their meanings by the natural relationships between the semantemes with the help of the context and the logical relations the words or the phrases have, not with the help of the language form. At the same time, the listener or the reader make the judgments according to their comprehensions. Generally speaking, there would not have problems in the communications, but if the conversation object is used to another kind of thinking mode, there would need another explanation. Just like what is said, do as the Romans do. But whether one side or both sides change the thinking mode, it depends on the actual situation.

3.3 Obscurity

Obscurity is the common feature of the ancient thinking mode of Chinese, and it is one of the essential characteristics of the natural language (Yang, 2009). It not only comes from the language itself, but also lies in the mutual actions on the language user and the language reflections. By obscurity, man knows the thinking object vaguely and has a general idea of its overall feature (Lian, 2002).

The greatest feature of the Chinese is the parataxis on the choice of words to form sentences and texts, and it is this light type of parataxis determined the obscurity of Chinese. Parataxis refers to the realization of the connection of the words or phrases without help of the language form but their logic meaning and it focus on the significance of the continuous coherence. Try to compare these two sentences: "ta zai biye zhihou jiu qu meiguo shenzao, xuedaole xuduo xianjinde guanli jingyan, zuotian cai zuofeiji huilai." and "Yesterday she flew from the USA where she had learned lots experience of advanced managements after she finished her school." We can see that the Chinese sentence is organized by the logical relations of the words or phrases, while the English one is arranged according to the language forms.



Laotsu gave many statements to the naming of Tao, but he also said that 'the names that can be told are not unvarying names' and '*Tao* is eternal, but has no fame (name)'. What's more, the names that Laotsu gave to Tao were all out of his comprehensions toward Tao. We can feel *Tao* everywhere while we cannot find it anywhere, 'Because the eye gazes but can catch no glimpse of it... Because the ear listens but cannot hear it... Because the hand feels for it but cannot find it (Waley, 1998).' Crossed with such an uncertain and abstract concept, the common ways to analysis cannot help, therefore the obscure thinking becomes the indispensable choice in analyzing and discussion. In *Tao* the only motion is returning; The only useful quality, weakness. For through all creatures under heaven are the products of Being which itself is the product of Not-Being (Waley, 1998).

'Returning' as the cause and power that change the motion of all the creatures under heaven is the core thought of Laotsu's natural, non-action and dialectical thinking, which is the overall regulations that objectively beyond the reach of human power (Cai & Liu, 2005). 'Weakness', the only useful quality, contains the great attack power and reserves the full vigor and vitality of all the creatures under heaven, and it spreads and stretches out Laotsu's natural and nonaction thinking. Everything has its two sides, and both sides existed for each other. 'The world and all its creatures arise from what is there and what is there arise from what is not there', they are dynamically balanced (Sherman, 2005). Things always reverse themselves after reaching an extreme, and their positive and negative sides contrary to and united with each other to-and-for to the infinite.

4. The Mode of Thinking and Language Expressions of Western Language

Compared to the oriental culture affected thinking, western thinking, from the whole part, tends to be the logical thinking, for the reason that it is influenced by the culture of Greece, the culture of Jews and the modern industrialism. Because of the logic in their thinking, westerners achieved many monumental successes. As for the logic, it means the thinking subjects think and act according to certain rules, and the experience from comprehension are made logical to take as the rules for us to think and act. Logical thinking stresses on the clearness of its expression, and it can use the already existed thinking rules and given thinking mode to analogize, one for two, two for four and four for eight, etc. to-and-for to get the new logic.

4.1 Precision

Precision is one of the characteristics of the modern western thinking. Modern western experimental science lays emphasis on the classification, analysis and anatomy of materials, and it attaches importance to the quantitative analysis and precise calculation, which make the western thinking have the feature of precision. Precise thinking is built on the basis of two-value logic, using the precise concept and proposition 'one or the other' to think. Precise thinking requires all the concepts and propositions to be judged 'one or the other' or 'true or false'. Moreover, precise thinking doesn't allow the existence of the third value or more, and its fundamental principles are law of identity, law of contradiction and law of excluded middle (Lian, 2002).

In mathematics, we can usually see some assessing theories, which will tell you some clear information about in what condition we can get the results wanted. For example, what kind of triangles can be called regular triangles? How to assess that the given triangles are similar triangles? In chemistry, the precision on the experiment material's amount is also an everlasting topic in the field of chemistry. When having a chemistry experiment, the amount of chemistry material determines whether the experiment is a success. As for English, its precision always reflects on the words chosen. In order to achieve satisfying result in conversation, how to choose the right words is an important part. Although sometimes the given words are interlinked with each other in their general meanings, only one can be chosen, because different language contexts require us to choose the fittest words with regard to their meanings and their part of speech as well. For example, the word 'record' in the sentence 'Jack broke the record of the marathon last year.' and the sentence 'Jack recorded the data of the marathon last year.' In both sentences, the word 'record' means "记录" in Chinese, however, the former is a noun while the latter is a verb, and they are pronounced in different ways. Therefore the grammar relations to other elements also changed to give us another image. With the development of the society, Chinese thinking also absorbs the precision of western thinking on its way of modernism while at the same time it maintains the ancient obscurity in its thinking which can be found nearly everywhere. Precise thinking, for its precision, is headed down from generations to generations.

4.2 Rationality

Everything has its objective reasons of being existed, however, people's understanding towards these things emerges the difference in the definition that whether this kind of thinking mode is perceptual or rational. The westerners, influenced by the ancient Greek culture, are used to think rationally. It doesn't mean they don't have



rational thinking. They also have perceptual knowledge about the real life sometimes, they only inclines to be more rational. For the rationality in their thinking, westerners tend to pursue the meaning and weight the value while the oriental tend to seek for the fame and consider the benefit when doing things. Along with the development of the society, man's way of thinking is also changing, and there emerges more and more blending between the western and the oriental thinking. Human beings are no longer confined to think with the thinking mode that the society gives them anymore. They can choose to accept new thoughts and new concepts of things gradually. There is an example often used to compare the different commercial concepts between the westerners and the Orientals. Two old women, one the Chinese and one the American, both go to the heaven. At the heaven, the old Chinese woman said, 'Thanks to the Heaven and Earth, I have saved enough money to buy a house finally. And my sons can live in the new house now.' while the old American lady said that 'God blessed me! I have lived in the comfortable house all my life, and now I have paid all my loans.' Both women had the opportunity to decide whether to buy the house by saving money first for the uncertainty of the society, however, one saved money to buy a house for her sons and the other borrowed money to buy a house for her or her family and lived in it happily. The two women have absolutely different ideas about consuming. Why? It is still the effects of the different mode of thinking. Influenced by different culture, the two women's starting points of considering things are generally different.

4.3 Analyticity

The tradition of analytic thinking in western philosophy can be dated back to ancient Greek. In the dialogue of Socrates and Plato and the discussion and analysis of Aristotle, they both involve the philosophical analyticity for some degree. The philosophy of analyticity embodies the seeking and pumping of meanings. (Yang G.R, 2009).

English, as one kind of the western language, lay emphasis on the entire analysis of the relations between words and sentences. What is called meaningful means valuable, the meaningless valueless. Therefore the analysis of the sentence structure becomes an indispensable part in the learning of English. Only if you get clear understanding of the sentence structure, can you carry on the analysis and know which style the sentence belongs. Whether it is an attributive sentence, an adverbial sentence or just a common statement; whether it is a complex sentence, a compound sentence or an easily tell simple sentence; whether it exists the ambiguity. To settle these questions, we usually use the tree structure to represent the constituents of a grammatical unit to help us analyze. For example, 'they need more well-trained teachers than last year.' Through the analysis with the tree structure, we can tell this sentence is a simple sentence with ambiguity. And the ambiguity lies in the place whether 'more' modifies 'well-trained' or 'well-trained teachers'. Since there are differences in the emphasis on the thinking object according to each person's special mode of thinking, the sentence above can be comprehended as two sentences. They are 'They need teachers who are more well-trained than last year.' or 'they need more teachers who are well-trained than last year.' Therefore we can know the general sentence meaning clearly by analyzing the relations between words and phrases.

5. Innerlink of Laotsu's "Ming and Yan" and Western Language

Laotsu's "Name and Yan", from his preset 'Tao', regard the 'comprehension of Tao' as the core of his whole demonstration, while western language, for its exploration towards the unknown world, take the 'seeking of knowledge' as its goal to find a new world. The ways of heaven, the ways of human beings, the ways of being leaders, they are theoretically the same and stress on obtaining everything with natural and nonaction activities.

'When the man of highest capacities hears Tao,

He does his best to put it into practice.

When the man of middling capacity hears Tao,

He is in two minds about it.

When the man of low capacity hears Tao,

He laughs loudly about it. (Waley, 1998)'

It shows that man's comprehension towards the thousands creatures and things are different since man's ability is high or low relatively. And we can also find another example in the world of western language. About the 16th century, man's conception towards the relationship between the sun and the earth in the whole solar system is universally divided. At that time, most people are told that the earth is the center of the solar system, smaller amount of people are in two minds about it, while the smallest amount of people insist on that the sun is the



center of the solar system. Since there were not much convincing evidences to prove its validity, it took great effort of its followings to get it universally accepted with the help of the precise apparatus.

Laotsu's "*Ming and Yan*" lays its emphasis on comprehending the world dialectically and holds the idea that everything has its meaning to be existed. While western language pays attention to realize the world logically and makes every effort to find the exact meaning of the existence of things are. Laotsu regard the relationship between the heaven and human beings as dialectically united. 'Man is an integral part of nature' and 'the ways of *Tao* (are conditioned) by its Self-so' (Waley, 1998). Man, as an integral part of nature, obeys the nature. However, in western philosophy, it uses the relationship between the subject and object to describe the relationship between the heaven and human beings, that is to say the heaven and human beings are separated from each other. Moreover, it stresses too much importance on the initiatives of human beings without regards to the condition of nature. Now they are suffering from the counterattack of nature, since they made great changes to their surroundings and they used quite many irreproducible natural resources, the oil or the coal, to help with their economic development without long-term views towards the future.

Though Laotsu's "*Ming and Yan*" and western language come from different language systems, the mode of thinking they have both played important roles in the development of the society. They have influenced the whole society for centuries respectively. They set examples and leave great space for others to think, thus inspiring many brilliant persons such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell who studies the philosophy of western language, and Wang Zhongjiang who studies the philosophy of Laotsu's "*Ming and Yan*", all achieved great success in their fields. What's more, in Laotsu's *Tao Te Ching* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* both display a deep practical concern for human well-being as that is exemplified in the figure of the good person and the goodness of the person's action, though there are obvious and fundamental differences in their intellectual world-views (Sherman, 2005). They both were doubted by before, but they didn't vanish from history for their values cannot be neglected. Just like what we usually say 'truth fears no flames of slander or injustice.' Laotsu's "*Ming and Yan*" and western language, both testified by time, are enjoying their own special prosperity now.

6. Conclusion

Both the western and the oriental have their special mode of thinking, but it doesn't mean they don't have blending. The modes of thinking are almost the same, just like the reflections of each culture on its individuals, their behaviors and abilities are similar to great extend (Ding, 2009). The difference of thinking comes from the tradition and accumulation of different knowledge system (Ding, 2009), and it reflects on the focus of thinking. Oriental thinking, for its discrimination, emphasizes on the dialectical thinking; while western, for its analyticity, stresses on the logical thinking. All the modes of thinking has its characteristics, the key point is how to use it properly to get the use of thinking mode do as the Romans do. With the progressing the whole world and the developing of the society, intercourse between the western and the oriental are more and more frequent. Both sides set to think deeply on each other's mode of thinking to achieve the most satisfying effects from the dialogues between two sides. As language learner and studier, the ability to transform the multiple language thinking is required. And the ability can be improved with the help of the analysis on the relationships between the thinking and the language. And in this way, we can grasp the essence of the language and achieve the ability of our language learning to a new height.

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