Iconicity and viewpoint: Antonym order in Chinese four-character patterns

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 18 March 2016
Received in revised form 23 September 2016
Accepted 28 September 2016

Keywords:
Antonym order
Four-character patterns
Iconicity
Viewpoint
Reversibility

ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analysis of co-occurring antonym pairs in Chinese four-character patterns, known as sizige in Chinese. Drawing data from Chinese language dictionaries, this study explores the order of antonyms in four-character patterns. The antonym pairs are found to exhibit a preference for a particular order. The analysis reveals a correlation between the order of the antonyms and iconicity. More precisely, iconicity of closeness (to the prototypical speaker), iconicity of temporal sequence, and iconicity of cultural norms and values conspire in motivating the normal order of antonyms in four-character patterns. The study also examines the issue of departing from the normal antonym order and proposes that the reversibility of antonym pairs can be attributed to the speaker's viewpoint and semantic constraints imposed by the patterns. These findings suggest that the order of co-occurring antonyms is determined by general cognitive principles.

1. Introduction

Antonym co-occurrence in English has drawn considerable attention from researchers in recent years. Systematic studies have shown that English antonym pairs, which were traditionally regarded as paradigmatically related words, tend to co-occur at higher-than-chance rates in discourse (e.g. Justeson and Katz, 1991; Fellbaum, 1995; Willners, 2001; Jones, 2002, 2006). Antonym co-occurrence is also a pervasive phenomenon in Mandarin Chinese. Antonym pairs in Chinese can be juxtaposed to form antonymous compounds without any connecting word, such as daxiao (big-small 'size') and fumu (father-mother 'parents'). They can also co-occur in certain lexico-grammatical patterns, such as xian lai hou dao (early come late arrive 'first come, first served') and ku ye bu shi, xiao ye bu shi (cry also not right, smile also not right 'be at a loss'). This study examines the co-occurrence of antonyms in Chinese constructions as in (1).

(1) a. zhao si mu xiang (morning miss evening think 'yearn day and night')
   b. bu nan bu nü (not man not woman 'neither fish nor fowl')
   c. qing zhong dao zhi (light heavy invert put 'put the cart before the horse')
   d. dian dao hei bai (reverse black white 'mistake black for white')

All these constructions contain four terms, two of which are antonyms. In Chinese these constructions are known as sizige or "four-character patterns" — in their written form they appear as four signs. The antonyms may occur in different slots...
within the patterns. In (1a), the antonyms zhao ‘morning’ and mu ‘evening’ occupy the first and the third slots respectively, while in (1b), the antonym pairs nan ‘man’ and nü ‘woman’ are in the second and fourth positions. In (1c) and (1d), by contrast, the antonym pairs qing/zhong ‘light/heavy’ and hei/bai ‘black/white’ are juxtaposed. Apart from the different syntactic positions, antonym pairs in these patterns tend to occur in a particular order. Their order cannot normally be reversed freely. For instance, in 1(a), zhao ‘morning’ and mu ‘evening’ cannot be reversed. Based on these observations, this study aims to investigate the co-occurrence of antonym pairs in Chinese four-character patterns and the underlying principles governing antonym order.

The term ‘four-character pattern’ was first put forward by Lu Zhiwei, who defined it as “words or expressions which contain four syllables conjoined closely” (Lu, 1956: 401). Four-character patterns are very pervasive in Mandarin Chinese. Many well-known ancient Chinese works contain a large number of four-character patterns. The Classic of Poetry, for instance, contains 7284 lines, 6724 of which are written in four-character patterns (Xia, 1985). Four-character patterns are considered to be a unique feature of Chinese language (Guo, 1979) and an important part of the Chinese lexical system (Lü, 1979).

The previous studies on Chinese four-character patterns have mainly focused on their formal properties, syntactic functions and semantic meaning (e.g. Liu and Xing, 2000, 2003; Han, 2008). Few studies have been conducted on the patterns with co-occurring antonym pairs. Moreover, existing research on antonym order (e.g. Jones, 2002; Kostić, 2015a; Hsu, 2015) suggests that many factors contribute to the preferred order of antonyms, including markedness, information-processing constraints, morphology, positivity, phonology and so on. However, what remains poorly understood is how antonym order is cognitively motivated and what the cognitive factors governing antonym order are. The goal of this study is to examine the cognitive principles underlying antonym order based on a case study of Chinese four-character patterns.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents previous studies on antonym co-occurrence and antonym order. Section 3 examines the preferred order of antonym pairs in the patterns based on data from Chinese language dictionaries. Section 4 provides a detailed analysis of the cognitive principles governing antonym order. Section 5 explores the reversibility of antonym pairs in four-character patterns. The last section summarizes the findings of this study.

2. Antonym co-occurrence and antonym order

Antonymy has been found on both the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic axes of language (Murphy, 2006; Panther and Thornburg, 2012). As a syntagmatic relation, antonym co-occurrence has been one of the major preoccupations of antonymy research in recent decades. The first study devoted to antonym co-occurrence was conducted by Charles and Miller (1989), who used the 1,000,000-word Brown Corpus and tested the hypothesis that antonymous adjectives tend to occur in the same sentence far more frequently than expected by chance. Justeson and Katz (1991) extended Charles and Miller’s study by investigating more antonym pairs and verified their conclusion. Subsequent work has dealt with different aspects of antonym co-occurrence: frequencies of antonym co-occurrence (e.g. Fellbaum, 1995; Willners, 2001; Jones, 2002); lexicogrammatical patterns in which antonyms co-occur (e.g. Mettinger, 1994; Willners, 2001; Jeffries, 2010; Lobanova et al., 2010; Davies, 2013); discourse functions of co-occurring antonym pairs in different genres, registers and languages (e.g. Jones, 2002, 2006, 2007; Murphy and Jones, 2008; Murphy et al., 2009; Muehleisen and Isono, 2009; Lobanova et al., 2010; Hsu, 2015); interpretation of antonym co-occurrence constructions (e.g. Murphy, 2006; Panther and Thornburg, 2012; Wu, 2014), and semantic profiles of antonyms in discourse (e.g. Kostić, 2015b; Paradis et al., 2015). All these studies on antonym co-occurrence have caused a revival of interest in antonymy in recent years.

Despite this abundance of previous research on antonym co-occurrence, relatively few studies have been devoted to the order of antonyms. Jones (2002) made the first attempt to address antonym order. After examining all the 56 pairs in the 3000 sentence database, he found that most antonym pairs favor one order over the reverse order. He identified eight factors affecting the order of antonym pairs. The most important factors are morphology (the tendency of the root word to precede its derivation) and positivity (the tendency for the antonym with positive connotations to precede the one with negative connotations). The other factors include magnitude (the tendency for the antonym denoting more quantity to precede the one denoting less), chronology (the tendency of antonym order in the syntax to observe the temporal sequence of antonyms in the real world), gender (the tendency for male antonyms to precede female antonyms), phonology (the tendency for the shorter antonym to precede the longer one), idiomaticity (the preferred antonym order is attributed to the semi-idiomatic status of some phrases), frequency (the tendency of more frequently used antonyms to precede those used less frequently) and markedness (the tendency for the unmarked antonym to precede marked one). Jones also discussed the reverse order of antonym pairs and ascribed it to the syntactic distance (the closer together antonym pairs are in a given context, the greater the likelihood that they will conform to their typical order) and collocational factors (the order of antonyms is determined by the words which are collocated with them). He concludes that the rules of sequencing, unlike grammatical rules, are “there to be broken as well as obeyed” (Jones, 2002: 136).

Murphy (2006) and Jones et al. (2012) have suggested that we should be cautious about specifying antonym order, but they also point out that it is necessary to account for the cases which exhibit strong preferences for a particular order. They argue that the preferred antonym sequence is the result of a number of conspiring factors. Semantic, morphological, phonological and prosodic properties of antonym pairs, frequency, markedness, information structure and conventionalization all affect our preference for antonym ordering in predictable ways.

Kostić (2015a) provided a detailed account of antonym sequence in Serbian written discourse. Based on corpus data, her study suggests that the most basic factors governing antonym sequence are frequency (the antonyms with higher frequency...