Semantic Opacity and Its Challenge for Teachers of Chinese

Hsin-I Hsieh
University of Hawaii
hhsieh@hawaii.edu

[Abstract]
Semantic Opacity arises when the syntax and semantics of a grammar interact to create a situation where semantic parts carried by syntactic parts fail to compose and compute into an expected sum of meaning carried by the syntactic sum. This lack of semantic transparency is a result of the interplay between the syntax and semantics of a grammar. We discuss several types of semantic opacity in Chinese in the light of a theory of grammatical interaction. We also look at this kind of semantic opacity from the viewpoint of a cognitive grammar. We then pose the question of how teachers of Chinese can best teach this kind of semantic opacity to the students. We conclude that a method which employs idiomatic and literary translation to help the students get through the semantic opacity is only a basic step, and that teachers of Chinese could also attempt to analyze semantic opacity for their students using ideas and techniques from a cognitive grammar.

1. Introduction.
Teaching students to understand simple grammatical patterns is relatively easy as long as these patterns are more or less semantically transparent, such as in (1) 张三买票看电影, 'Zhangsan bought a ticket to see the movie'. We as teachers simply tell our students that this is a so-called serial verbal construction, in which the first event represented by the first clause and the second event represented by the second clause are performed by the same person or the same agent. We then give the students more examples, such as (2) 张三去台北看朋友 'Zangsan went to Taipei to see friends', (3) 张三工作赚钱 'Zhangsan worked to make money'. The grammatical patterns for these sentences is the pattern 'for someone to do A first and then do B (sometimes with A as a means and B as an end)'. And its equivalent pattern in English would be 'for someone to do A in order to do B'. The equivalent pattern is quite helpful. However, when a sentence contains semantic opacity such a simple method of teaching with an equivalent English pattern may become less effective. For example, we have (4) 张三醉得东倒西歪 'Zhangsan was so drunk that he couldn't walk a straight line'. This sentence has some semantic opacity since Zhangsan was disoriented in every direction and not just in the east and west direction. The phrase 東倒西歪 is an idiom, and Chinese idioms rarely have equivalent idioms in English. Teaching by equivalent patterns in a case like this may become impractical and ineffective. In the short run, giving (4) a close translation in English may be time-saving, but in the long run, the Chinese teacher may want to consider employing a cognitive grammar to analyze the event or image behind the expression to bring out the full import of the sentence.
2. Interaction Theory.

In the Theory of Grammatical Interaction which I proposed (Hsieh 1989, 1991) and which I myself (Hsieh 1992, 1996), Her (1997), Chang (1991), M. Hsieh (1992) and others have explored, grammatical rules interact in three major types, based on their inputs and their outputs. Hsieh’s theory is ultimately rooted in Wang’s (1969) theory of lexical diffusion and competing changes.

Let us define these three types of interaction. (Type 1) Rule A and rule B Complement each other if they apply to two different inputs to yield two distinct outputs, that is, \( a \rightarrow c \) and \( b \rightarrow d \); (Type 2) rule A and rule B Conflict with each other if they apply to the same input to yield two different outputs, that is, \( a \rightarrow c \) and \( a \rightarrow d \); (Type 3) rule A and rule B Conspire with each other if they apply to two different inputs, either simultaneously or sequentially, to yield one single output, that is \( a \rightarrow e \) and \( b \rightarrow e \) (simultaneously), or \( a \rightarrow b \) and \( b \rightarrow e \) (sequentially).

Not only rules as individual constraints can interact in these three major ways. Grammatical components as entire sets of rules can also so interact. In particular, the syntax and semantics of a language can interplay in these three major ways.


If syntax and semantics complement each other in a sentence, we have a case of idioms or metaphors or even euphemisms. For example, we have the idiom kick the bucket ‘die’ in (5) *John kicked the bucket*, or the metaphor starstruck in (6) *Andre Malraux was starstruck by Mao in the early seventies*, or the euphemism *niān3 hua1 re3 cáo3* ‘flirt randomly’, or *xiú huā wèn liǔ* ‘seek wanton women’, in (7) *張三喜歡拈花惹草/尋花問柳* ‘Zhangsan likes to flirt around/visit a brothel’. In sentences like these the rules of syntax and the rules of semantics complement each other because they are directed at distinct inputs in distinct domains of the grammar. The syntax somehow manages to express the semantics, because a rich literary and cultural heritage supported by real-world knowledge has made these sentences conventionally express their opaque meanings. It is virtually impossible to systematically teach sentences exhibiting this kind of syntax-semantics complementation to students of Chinese. The students would need to acquire them individually. (see Li 2004 for a cognitive approach to metaphors.)

If syntax and semantics conspire with each other, then their effects converge. Hence the meaning of the sentence can be accurately computed from the meanings of its parts, and semantic transparency results. For example, when Tai’s (1985) Principle of Temporal Sequence applies, transparency is largely ensured, as in sentence (1) *張三買票看電影/Zhangsan bought a ticket to see a movie*, where the event of buying a ticket and the event of seeing a movie are temporally sequenced, and where semantic parts sum up into a semantic whole at the same time as corresponding syntactic parts sum up into a syntactic whole. For sentence patterns which exhibit semantic transparency in Chinese, the teacher can easily match them up with equivalent patterns in English, such as illustrated by the shared pattern for sentences (1), (2), and (3). Another relatively straightforward equation between Chinese and English ways of expression has to do with the ‘be’, ‘exist’, and ‘have’ notions in Chinese, which have fairly close equivalents in English, as Li (1972) has observed. A third set of equations between Chinese and English, observed by Cheng (2001), has to do with the bi-directional translation between English *some, none, and all* and their
counterparts in Chinese. In cases like these, since the equations are quite precise, both the method of pattern matching and the method of pattern drill would be effective in teaching and learning.

It is apparent that systematically teaching sentences affected by the complementation of syntax and semantics may be too much challenge for teachers of Chinese. Opacity seems to be total in this type of sentences. It is also apparent that systematically teaching sentences affected by the conspiracy of syntax and semantics may present too little challenge to them. Transparency seems to be full in this type of sentences.

The right amount of challenge seems to reside precisely in those sentences that are affected by the conflict of syntax and semantics. These sentences are half-transparent and half-opaque. In these sentences, even though the meaning of the whole may not be accurately computed from the meanings of the parts, yet using a cognitive grammar, one can restore a missing meaning or correct a distorted meaning in the sentence. Full meaning can then be revealed. We are therefore primarily concerned with Type 2 interaction, conflict. Conflict produces partial semantic opacity, which can be eliminated to restore the sentence to its full or virtual transparency. The following sentences illustrate assorted patterns of partial semantic opacity:

(8) 他沒結婚以前 ‘before he got married’ (not ‘before he did not get married’) (due to Bill Wang)

(9) 他跑得快 ‘he runs fast’ (not ‘he runs to become fast’)

(10a) 他買錯了書。 ‘The book he bought was not the book he intended to buy’ (not ‘he mistakenly bought a book.’)

(10b) He bought the wrong book. ‘The book he bought was not the book he intended to buy’ (not ‘he bought a mistaken book’)

(11) 他看了兩個小時的電影。 ‘he watched a movie for two hours’ (not ‘he watched a two-hour long movie.’)

(12) 張三沒把李四推倒 (張三沒力氣)。 ‘Zhangsan didn’t successfully push Lisi down.’ (not ‘Zhangsan didn’t take control of Lisi but pushed him down anyway.’)

Each sentence here illustrates a general pattern. In (8), the 沒 is superfluous as a negation word. (see Teng 1973 for negation and aspect in Chinese). In (9) someone is fast while he runs rather than becomes fast as a result of his running. In (10a) and (10b) the mismatch between the book that someone intended to buy and the book that he ended up buying is not expressed neutrally as a simple mismatch. It is culture-specifically expressed as a mistake on the part of the person buying the book in the Chinese sentence (10a) but as a mistake on the part of the book bought by the person in the English sentence (10b). Even though it may be convenient to equate a ‘verb 錯’ pattern in Chinese with a ‘the wrong noun’ pattern in English, to do merely that would be missing a great opportunity to teach the students about the intimate relation between language and culture. The teacher can take the opportunity to point out that although both (10a) and (10b) denote a mismatch, Chinese speakers blame the agent of the action for it, but English speakers blame the patient of the action for it. In (11), two hours is a predication on the action
of watching a movie but is distorted as a description of the length of the movie. In (12), 沒 is gratuitously placed in front of 把 to modify it when in actuality 沒 modifies 推倒 or more precisely just 倒. Because 張三 is powerless, he didn’t succeed in making 李四 fall down, even though he has tried.


We are able to detect a distortion or semi-opacity in sentence (12), because we are able to use a cognitive grammar to divide the entire event represented by a single sentence into its composing events represented by the parts of the sentence. This compositional technique is put to its powerful and revealing use in the theory of Compositional Cognitive Grammar (CCG), which I proposed (Hsieh 2000) and which I myself (Hsieh 2004), Chang (1998), Gammon (1998), Hayden (1997), and Wang (1998, 2002) have explored. CCG postulates a level of Semantic Structure representations (SSrr), which is meaning-motivated and a level of Constituent Structure representations (CSrr), which is form-motivated. Specifically, sentence (12) has an SSr, which is a complex event consisting of several simple events, and it also has a CSr, which is a complex sentence having several parts. Thus CCG provides a useful method for describing the syntax and semantics of a grammar as two separate and interacting components.

4. Conclusion.

Partial semantic opacity is generated in sentences where the syntax and the semantics have interacted to create a conflict between sentence meaning and sentence form. There are two ways to teach these conflict-infested sentences. The basic way would be to teach them intuitively as patterns having their rough equivalents in English. But this is not enough. A more advanced way is to teach these sentences analytically by applying a cognitive grammar such as CCG. The teacher and the students together can employ ideas and techniques in a cognitive grammar to analyze semantically opaque sentences to bring out their full and precise meanings.

References


Workshop on Chinese Linguistics, POLA, University of California, Berkeley, California, March 20-21.


Li, Ying-che. 1972. Sentences with *be*, *exist*, and *have* in Chinese. Language 48.3.573-583.


