ABSTRACT

Nouns and verbs are the most essential grammatical categories in both Chinese and English. They are crucial because they are the basic components for building simple and complex language structures.

The work of the prescriptive grammar has focused on how these two parts of speech should be used, while the descriptive grammar has headed for what they are by means of analyzing their similar grammatical behaviour. In a descriptive analysis by Dr. James H-Y. Tai entitled “Category Shift and Word Formation Redundancy Rules in Chinese”, he quoted two generalizations from Hopper and Thompson (1984), stating that: (i) Language tends to have special nominalizing morphology, but no special verbalizing morphology; (ii) A nominalization interprets an event as an entity but there is no corresponding Verbalization which interprets an object as an event.

These generalizations trigger for the logical conclusion that nominalization is more prominent than verbalization in most languages. In order to test the stability of such a claim, there is a need for a statistical analysis on the category shift between nouns and verbs in various languages.

In view of constraint over time, length and language known by author, this thesis has limited its scope of analysis to non-derivational category shift in nouns and verbs of Chinese and English. Besides testing the validity of the abovementioned claim, this thesis aims to provide explanations for such category shift with relation to human cognition and conceptualization.

Through results obtained from the statistical analysis, it is obvious that the prominence of nominalizing verbs than verbalizing nouns have substantiated the claim. In the course of analyzing, a particular kind of verbs, namely the “nominalized verbs”, has occupied a large share in the total number of verbs analyzed. This group of verbs has demonstrate d semantic similarities by means of being “abstract verbs”, i.e. verbs representing emotions and psychological processes. This group of verbs shows a prototypical origin of vagueness and uncertainty in meaning. The process of category shifting does not alter their original meaning, but merely attempts to “objectize” their meaning. This process has a function similar to that of a quantifier for mass nouns, mainly aiming to increase the concreteness of such verbs, so as to ease understanding. This process of nominalization, on the other hand, suits the human conception habit which accepts more specific entity with preference to abstract senses. Hence, it is justifiable that category shift in languages is not a pure diversion of syntactic function, but an innate requirement for human cognition.