
Grammatical number of English nouns in English Learners' Dictionaries

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An overview of problems of English-Chinese Learners' Dictionaries in treating grammatical number of English nouns

1. Introduction

Chinese and English belong to different language families, so they often have different forms of expression. Chinese has no definite grammatical category of number and has almost no number inflection. Plural meaning is usually implied in the syntactic structure or in the context by a bare noun, or is expressed through the plural marker 们 and the numerical adjectives such as *many*, *numerous* and *each*, as well as by quantifiers and reduplications. However, English nouns express number category by inflection as well as by quantifiers at times, so their grammatical number is far more complicated than that of Chinese nouns. From the point of view of grammatical form, English nouns are often considered as countable and uncountable nouns. Uncountable nouns cannot be directly modified by a numeral without unit specification, nor can they be combined with an indefinite article. Thus, *cheese* is quantified as *three slices of cheese*. However, uncountable nouns can also be quantified without specifying a unit of measurement, such as *much coal*. A number of uncountable nouns can be used in the plural form to mean 'a large amount of' as in the following example from *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (hereinafter, *LDCE*) 'The ship drifted into Turkish territorial waters'. In such cases, although *water* is uncountable, it has the plural form. In some cases, native English speakers can turn the theoretical uncountable nouns into countable ones (Landau, 2001). There seems to be no absolute boundary between countable and uncountable nouns.

As a result, EFL learners in China often encounter difficulties in learning the grammatical number of English nouns, but in many cases they can hardly find such information in English-Chinese Learners' Dictionaries (hereinafter, ECLDs), inclusive of the *New Age English-Chinese Dictionary* (hereinafter, *NAECD*), *A Modern English-Chinese Dictionary* (hereinafter, *MECD*) and *A New English-Chinese Dictionary* (hereinafter, *NECD*), since most of them attach little importance to the grammatical number information of nouns. By contrast, some English Learners' Dictionaries (hereinafter, ELDs), such as the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (hereinafter, *OALD*), the *LDCE* and the *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (hereinafter, *MED*), seem to lay more emphasis on the grammatical number information of nouns. Therefore, one may ask what the main problems of the current ECLDs are in dealing with the grammatical number information of English nouns. Also, what are the appropriate and effective ways of demonstrating the grammatical number information of English nouns in ECLDs to satisfy Chinese users' needs?

To tackle the research questions, several representative nouns classified by traditional grammar are first analyzed based on language transfer and markedness theory. Then some collective nouns, material nouns, and abstract nouns with markedness from some of the authoritative ELDs and ECLDs are compared and analyzed from the perspective of grammatical annotation, illustrative

examples, and special columns. And lastly, some suggestions for ways of demonstrating the grammatical number of English nouns are made for the purpose of improving ECLDs.

2. Theoretical framework

Research on language transfer in acquisition has a long history, but a fully adequate definition of language transfer seems unattainable. According to Odlin (1989: 27), *transfer* is the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and all the previous knowledge of any other language acquired. Since this definition is widely accepted by scholars and researchers (Ellis, 1994; Yu, 2004; Dai & Wang,

2002), in this paper, *language transfer* refers to the definition proposed by Odlin (1989).

Positive transfer, called *facilitation* by Ellis (1994), means that the learner's L1 can also facilitate L2 learning. The facilitative effects can only be observed when learners with different native languages are studied and learners' comparisons are drawn (Odlin, 1989). Such comparisons often show that cross-linguistic similarities can produce positive transfer in several ways. However, for Chinese EFL learners, the positive transfer of acquiring the grammatical number information of English nouns does not often occur because there are only a few similarities between Chinese and English in expressing the number of nouns. Thus, in this paper efforts are made to identify the situations under which negative transfer is likely to occur.

One of the strongest claims in recent research on transfer is that the transfer abilities of different features depend on their degree of markedness. A number of researchers, such as Liceras (1985, 1986) and Phinney (1981), claim respectively that unmarked aspects of the L1 will be more liable to transfer than marked aspects, so learning a language with the unmarked setting of a parameter will be easier than learning one with a marked setting (quoted in White, 1989: 121). In order to explain how markedness affects transfer, Eckman (1977: 321) advances the Markedness Differential Hypothesis, which explains (1) not only where difficulties may occur, but also the relative degree of difficulty; (2) where differences between the native and target languages will not result in difficulty; and (3) why certain structures are typically acquired before other structures. Thus, the relationship between markedness theory and L1 transfer is summarized by Hytlenstam (1984), whose basic assumption is that unmarked settings of parameters will occur in interlanguage before the marked ones and that the most obvious case of transfer is where the native language is showing an unmarked setting and the target language a marked one. It happens that the number of nouns investigated in this paper coincides with this assumption. Therefore, markedness theory is used to explain some phenomena in Chinese EFL learners' acquisition of the grammatical number of English nouns.

3. Comparison of number markedness between Chinese and English nouns

Number category, describing the countability of nouns or pronouns, is one of the important



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grammatical categories of human languages. Linguists extract three number types: singular/plural; singular/dual/plural; and singular/dual/plural/collective.

3.1 Markedness of the number category of English nouns

The number category of Modern English falls into the first type, the binary pair: singular vs. plural. The denotation of the number category of English nouns is the number form, inclusive of singular and plural forms. Singular countable nouns in English can usually be changed into the plural form by adding the inflected suffix *-s/-es*. The connotation of the number of English nouns is a number notion: singular and plural notions. Generally, the number form is consistent with number, but there is no absolute boundary between singular and plural. So the number form is not always in line with the number meaning. Singular forms can not only express singular but also plural meaning; and a small number of plural forms can also be used to express singular meaning. Different types of English nouns have different expressions of the number category.

Individual nouns are countable with number inflections. Usually, the singular form expresses the singular meaning and the plural form the plural meaning. The latter is more complicated than the former and is given the extra meaning 'more than one', so the traditional markedness theory regards singular as unmarked and plural as marked.

Collective nouns, such as *family, class, group, enemy, army, company, audience, staff, generation*, and so on, are countable with plural counterparts. When referring to a group of people as a whole, they express singular meaning; when emphasizing each member of the group, they express plural meaning; and when they have the meaning of 'more than one', plural forms are used. Compare:

The regular army *has* about 5,000 troops.

The army *are helping* to clear up after the floods.

Rebel *armies* have taken control of the radio station.

(LDCE, authors' emphasis)

It can be seen from the examples that *army* can express not only singular but also plural meaning, whose singular form can be followed either by a singular or a plural predicate, but with different meanings; and when the plural form is used, it has the characteristics of an individual noun.

Certain collective nouns are uncountable with no number inflection, such as *mankind, humanity, furniture, machinery*, and so on. They refer to people

or things of the same kind, only expressing singular meaning by the singular form. Moreover, selected collective nouns like *people, police, cattle*, etc. can only be regarded as a certain number of individuals. The singular form expresses plural meaning and is followed by a plural predicate. For example:

Police *suspect* a local gang.

twenty head of cattle (= twenty cows)

(OALD, authors' emphasis)

Thus, one can see that the singular form of collective nouns can express plural meaning as well as singular meaning, while the plural form can only express plural meaning. It is abnormal to use the singular form to express plural meaning, so plural meaning is marked when used in the singular form and is unmarked in the plural form.

Material nouns, such as *bread, cheese, oil, tea, chalk, coal, sand, water, wine, air*, and so on, belong to uncountable nouns and often have no plural form. For example:

Sound travels more slowly than *light*.

Put *some oil* in the car.

(OALD, authors' emphasis)

But sometimes their plural form can express a large number, scope, and degree of something with a special shape, e.g. 'miles of golden *sands*', 'the melting of the winter *snows*', 'the coastal *waters* of Alaska' and 'Fish *oils* are supposed to help relieve arthritis' (LDCE, authors' emphasis). Since the plural form with this additional meaning is rare, the singular form is unmarked and the plural is marked.

In addition, material nouns can make use of partitives to express singular/plural meaning; for example, *a piece of meat, two cups of coffee, a glass of water*, where the quantity is reflected by the form of the partitives. So the markedness of the number category is reflected by the number form of the noun itself as well as by the expression 'numeral + quantifier + noun'. The singular form and the expression 'numeral + quantifier sing. + noun' are unmarked, whereas the plural form and the expression 'numeral + quantifier pl. + noun' are much more complicated and thus marked.

Abstract nouns, such as the names of qualities, conditions, or actions, considered abstractly, are uncountable with no plural form. But they can express number meaning using partitives, e.g. *a piece of advice, two pieces of advice*. Besides, abstract nouns can be modified by *much, any,*

some, and *a little* to express the meaning ‘more than one’; for example, ‘You don’t need *any* experience to work here’ (*MED*, authors’ emphasis). However, some abstract nouns have number inflection. When modified by a qualifier with plural meaning, the abstract noun is concretized and has its plural counterpart, as an individual noun does; for example, ‘*A lot of illnesses* can be either acute or chronic’ (*LDCE*, authors’ emphasis).

Thus, it can be seen that material and abstract nouns are usually uncountable and have no plural form. They usually express number meaning by means of partitives. The use of the singular quantifier is unmarked, while the use of the plural is marked. When concretized and used individually to refer to specific items, they are marked.

3.2 Expression and markedness of Chinese nouns

Chinese does not have a strict grammatical marker for singular and plural nouns. In English, the number category belongs to grammatical categories, while in Chinese the concept of number belongs to pragmatic categories. The plural meaning of certain nouns is expressed by adding the plural marker 们 at the end of the noun or quantifiers, and in many cases by syntactic structure, context and external context.

In Chinese, there are two ways of measuring the number of nouns: accurate and fuzzy measurement. Chinese use quantifiers to make an accurate measurement of people, animals or things; for instance, using a numeral, a measure word and a noun with no morphological change to express the number meaning, such as 两只兔子 ‘two rabbits’, 三本书 ‘three books’, 四节课 ‘four classes’, 五个学生 ‘five students’. The quantifiers are somewhat similar to the measurement of English material and abstract nouns, except for the fact that the English quantifiers also suffer morphological change, such as in the example ‘three *bowl*s of rice’.

When taking a fuzzy measurement, Chinese still use word strategy to express the non-quantitative plural meaning of nouns to refer to animals and things by adding collective quantifiers, numerals or adjectives with the number meaning. But when referring to people, Chinese use not only word strategy but also grammatical strategy to express the number meaning of nouns by adding the plural marker 们 at the end of the noun. But the use of the plural form is flexible and not compulsory. The counterpart of the plural form is a bare noun expressing both singular and plural meaning, based on different contexts; and usually the bare noun can be used to express the same number meaning as that expressed by the plural form. So it is

generally said that the use of the bare noun is unmarked and the use of the plural marker 们 is marked.

Despite their differences in expressions of number category, both English and Chinese have the ‘number’ concept, which is the basis of our comparison. The markedness of the number of English nouns depends on the type of noun. The expression of the number ‘category’ in Chinese is mainly reflected in the nouns. Therefore, the markedness of number of English nouns is more complex and is related to more detailed divisions and morphological changes. The expression of number by Chinese nouns is relatively simple.

4. Comparison of treatment of grammatical number of nouns between ELDs and ECLDs

In this section only collective nouns, material nouns, and abstract nouns on markedness are compared between ELDs and ECLDs from the aspects of grammatical annotation, illustrative examples, and special columns. The reason for doing so is that the unmarked settings of parameters in L1 are more transferable than the marked, and the unmarked settings of parameters in L2 are easier to acquire than the marked ones.

In existing dictionaries, the means of showing grammatical number information of English nouns are mainly via grammatical codes, syntactic labels, examples and user-friendly columns. Take the latest editions of the current ELDs such as *OALD*, *LDOCE*, and *MED* for examples. Each dictionary has its own merits in the treatment of the grammatical information of number of English nouns. Though there are shortcomings, they provide a model for us to follow in compiling the ECLDs. The following sections present the analysis of the representative entries.

4.1 Treatment of grammatical annotation

The annotation of countability can help EFL learners better understand each definition and let them know when to use the right number form of the word with different meaning. But if the grammatical code does not show the overall use of the collective noun, learners may feel confused. Consider the following examples taken from a range of dictionaries:

family noun (pl.-ies) 1 [C + sing./pl.v.] a group consisting of one or two parents and their children:
... ◦ *Almost every family in the country owns a television.* ◦ *All my family enjoy skiing...* 2 [C + sing./

pl.v., U] a group consisting of one or two parents, their children and close relations: ...*We've only told the immediate family* (= the closest relations)...
 ○ *I always think of you as one of the family.* ... 3 [C + sing./pl.v.] all the people who are related to each other, including those who are now dead: *Some families have farmed in this area for hundreds of years.* ... 4 [C + sing./pl.v., U] a couple's or a person's children, especially young children: *They have a large family.* ○ *I addressed it to Mr and Mrs Jones and family.* ...

(OALD)

family ([复]families) n 1 [C]家, 家庭, 家人: *My family is a large one.* ... 2 [U]子女: *Do you have any family?* ... 3 [C]家族 4 [C] (动植物, 语言等的) 科, 族, 系

(MECD)

family n 1 家, 家庭: *The Adams ~ has (or have) moved into the new house.* ... 2 子女: *have a large ~.* / *He has a ~ of three.* ... 3 家属; 亲属: *workers and their families* ... 4 氏族; 家族: *There was a history of mental illness in the ~.* ...

(NECD)

In *OALD*, the countability and usage of number is set in every definition, which contributes to learners acquiring knowledge about the differences. For example, the grammatical codes [C + sing./pl.v.] for 'family' are given, from which learners know that *family* can be used in both the singular and plural form, but when referring to the second and fourth definition, it can also be used as an uncountable noun.

However, in *MECD*, the grammatical codes [U] and [C], together with the immediate examples, are not accurate enough for Chinese English learners to understand the usage of the word. Although *NECD* gives some examples to illustrate the usages of the word, there are no such grammatical codes as [U], [C] or [U;C] in it to indicate the countability of nouns, which puts obstacles in the way of Chinese EFL learners' acquisition.

4.2 Treatment of illustrative examples

The illustrative examples should be consistent with the grammatical codes; otherwise, the examples may lose their value, and even send the EFL learners in the wrong direction. Consider the following examples:

silence n 1 [U] complete quiet: ... *When I answered the phone there was dead silence* (= no sound at all). 1a [C/U] a period of time when no one speaks: *Long silences make her uncomfortable.* *We stared at each other in stunned silence.* ... 2 [singular/U] the refusal

to talk about something or to provide information: *She maintained an angry silence.* ... *Her silence on the subject has been interpreted as a sign of guilt.* ... 3 [singular/U] a complete lack of communication with someone by letter, telephone, or other means: *A letter finally arrived from Lee, ending his long silence.* ... *The former Minister has decided to break her silence about the scandal.* ...

(MED)

silence n 1 [U;C] 安静, 寂静, 无声; (一段)寂静的时间: *The fields were filled with heavy silence and moonlight.* ... *I recognised a silence like that which pervades a church after a service.* ... bust the silence ... 2 [U;C] 不出声, 默不作声; 静默, 沉默; (一段)沉默的时间: *Silence gives consent.* ... *Our dialogue was punctuated by uncomfortable silences.* ... 3 [U;C] 缄默, 闭口不谈; (一段)缄默的时间: *a hostile silence.* ... Why (keep) silence on this matter ... 4 [U;C]失去联络; 没有音信; (一段)没有音信的时间: *The silence meant nothing but her anger.* ... 5 [U;C] Everybody stopped and there was silence for two minutes in memory of the war dead. ...

(NAECD)

MED clearly presents the use of the abstract noun *silence* by using the grammatical codes and examples. The codes [singular/U] and the immediate examples tell the readers that in the second and third definitions, *silence* is uncountable and is used in the singular form. Besides, it can be modified by 'a/an + adj.' as well as by 'possessive pronoun + adj.'. All the examples are appropriate for and are consistent with the annotation and the codes, which help learners to master the usage of the word. However, in *NAECD*, there is no distinction in grammatical codes between the definitions, so it is hard for the EFL learners to connect the examples with the grammatical codes, which may hinder the users from finding the required information quickly.

Consider the treatment of the noun *hope* in *MECD* and *NECD*:

hope n 1 [C,U]希望; 期望: *lose hope.* ... / *He gave up hope of becoming a lawyer.* ... 2 [C]所希望 (会发生或得到) 的东西 3 [C,U]可能性: *He has a slim hope of promotion.* ... 4 [C]被寄予希望的人 (或物): *He is the hope of his family.* ...

(MECD)

hope n1 希望: live up to sb's ~s. ... / hold out a ~ of victory ... / never surrender ~ of success. ... / There is not much ~ of further improvement. ... 2被寄托希望的人 (或物), 期望的东西

(NECD)

In *MECD*, there is no example in the second definition of the noun *hope* to illustrate the usage of the word, which hinders the users from finding the information they need. *NECD* lacks not only the grammatical annotation of number information but also illustrative examples in the second definition to explain the usage of the word *hope*.

4.3 Treatment of special columns

It will be clearer, more helpful and user-friendly if the important or easily confused usages are emphasized by means of special marks, symbols, colors or characters. Compare the different ways of achieving a strong and eye-catching effect in the following examples.

police n [plural] ...

GRAMMAR

Police and **the police** are plural:
Police are still searching for the murder weapon.
The police were called.
Do not say 'a police'. Say **a police officer, a policeman, or a policewoman**.

(LDCE)

fish Noun (pl. fish or fishes) **HELP** **Fish** is the usual plural form. The older form, **fishes**, can be used to refer to different kinds of fish. ...

(OALD)

hope 1[U,C] ...: ~ (of sth) There is now hope of a cure. ○ ~ (for sb/sth) Hopes for the missing men are fading. ○ ~ (that...) There is **little hope that** they will be found alive. ○ ~ (of doing sth)... 2[C] ~ (of/for sth) | ~ (for sb) | ~ (that...) | ~ (of doing sth)... 3[C, usually sing.] ~ (of sth) | ~ (for sb)...

(OALD)

LDCE uses the user-friendly box to remind the users that *police* and *the police* are plural and one should not say 'a police'. If the singular meaning is to be expressed, 'a police officer', 'a policeman', or 'a policewoman' should be used. Similarly, in *OALD* the **HELP** icon is so eye-catching that the user can easily locate the two plural forms of 'fish' and know the differences between them. In addition, the marks ' | ', '○' and '~' reflect the user-friendly principle, and also space is saved by using the mark '~'.

Consider the following four entries from *NAECD*:

cattle n [用作复][总称]1【动】牛(Bos); 家牛(B. taurus):...There are six (head of)/many *cattle* in the shed... 用以指'牛'时, *cattle* 为统称, 公牛称 bull, 母牛称 cow, 小牛称 calf

(NAECD)

police n 1[the ~][总称]警察部门; 警察当局; 警方: ...The *police* are investigating the theft...2[总称]警察; 警官: ...There were over 20 *police* on duty....

(NAECD)

family n 1[用作单或复]家, 家庭: ...How is / are your family?...Almost every family in the village owns a television....The whole family were all in tears... (◆上述三例中, 该词作为单一个体时视为单数; 该词作为单个家族成员的总称, 则用复数动词) ...

(NAECD)

committee n [C] 委员会: (由议会任命的)立法委员会: ...

(NAECD)

From the above four entries, it can be seen that *NAECD* is inconsistent in presenting nouns of the same kind. In the first entry, the member terms of *cattle* are given: bull, cow and calf. The second definition of *police* is also the generic term for policeman, policewoman, and police officer. However, there is no such user-friendly column although it has the same usage as *cattle* does. In the third entry, a special explanation of the differences of the word *family* followed by singular and plural predicates is given, but the noun of the same kind, *committee*, is not treated in the same way. Furthermore, the presentation of grammatical codes is not consistent, with some being presented in Chinese and some in English.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of transfer and markedness theory, negative transfer is the main cause of Chinese EFL learners' difficulty in acquiring the number of English nouns. Because of the difference that number is a grammatical category in English, while the number notion is expressed via the context in Chinese, Chinese EFL learners find it difficult to deal with the number of collective, material and abstract nouns. However, in the above mentioned ECLDs, the grammatical number information of English nouns is usually neglected or is simply presented without taking the Chinese EFL learners' special difficulties and needs into consideration. Therefore, the following

suggestions are put forward in hope of drawing Chinese lexicographers' attention when compiling the ECLDs.

- (1) The grammatical codes should be treated in such a way as to facilitate learners' grasp of the meaning and usage of nouns.
- (2) The codes and examples should be consistent to help learners' understanding.
- (3) The accuracy of grammatical information should be ensured to avoid misleading the learners.
- (4) Nouns of the same kind should be tackled in the same way.
- (5) Some marks such as **HELP**, and ~, as well as the user-friendly box, can be used to arouse users' attention.

All in all, the arrangement of grammatical annotation, illustrative examples, and special columns in ECLDs should be improved by taking foreign ELDs as a reference, since their target users are the EFL learners. ■

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