

DEC project 1: English Puzzle

Group Number: _____4_____

Group Members: AN Xiaohui / ZHANG Huiting / Dong Zhiling / LYU Yue / ZONG Peng

• The Puzzling Question(s):

Question 1: When dealing with verb agreement problems, we are told to follow the principle of proximity in ‘there be’ sentences and sentences whose subject contains conjunction structure like ‘either...or,’ ‘not only...but also...’ etc. It is confusing that sometimes even if the whole subject is predictably plural, we have to use the third person singular form only because the single noun is nearer to the main verb. How can we explain this rule?

Question 2: We have a tough time learning relative clause in English because of its complicated structure and various relative pronouns. There are different subordinators used to connect different kinds of head nouns and the relative clause, such as ‘that’, ‘who’ and ‘which’. ‘That’ shares similar grammar potentials with ‘who’ and ‘which’ respectively (Zhang, 2009), which means that they can substitute each other under some situations. So here are the questions. What similarities do they share? When to use ‘that’ instead of ‘who’ or ‘which’?

Question 3: The present progressive tense in English has low frequency of usage in the process of personal language application. According to the mastery of grammar in the past, the present progressive tense indicates that the action happens at a present time point. It seems that there are quite demanding requirements for expressing this tense, however, in some English writings, the utilization rate of this tense is high. What on earth can the present progressive tense express? Besides the meaning of currently in progress, what other semantic features can we find in this tense?

Question 4: As a commonly used linguistic structure, double negation has long attracted the attention of scholars from all over the world. In English, double negation is being used frequently. (LI, 2010) But English native speakers as well as English

learners always make mistakes in picking the negative words, especially in words like "no one/anyone", "nothing/anything". In an American movie, an actor said "I don't do nothing" to show that he doesn't do anything. But if we want to show that we don't know anything, and we say "We don't know nothing", it is breaking the grammatical rule. Therefore, "no one/anyone", "nothing/anything", which of them is correctly used in double negation or both of them are right?

• **Potential Answer(s) to the Proposed Question(s):**

Answer 1:

Principle of proximity means that instead of agreeing with the real subject, the predicate verb agrees with the first noun / noun phrase ahead of it (in sentence with normal word order) or with the first noun / noun phrase following it (in inverted sentences) (Wang,1991). Although it sometimes seems unreasonable in using singular verb, the principle of proximity actually conforms with people's cognition and the economy principle of language. (Dong,2011)

Firstly, there is cognitive reason. According to Dong (2011), in forming or understanding sentences, our brain uses the attentional view and the prominence view automatically. In this sense, not all parts of the sentence are focused on simultaneously, attention changes with eyes watching at the same time. Compare 'In the small classroom, there is a teacher and fifty students.' with 'In the small classroom, there are fifty students and a teacher.' In the first sentence, only after we finish the whole sentence, we realize that the classroom is crowded, while in the second, as soon as we see 'fifty students', the room in mind has already been crowded. Nouns in 'there be' sentences are not equally important; the most important one is often the first we see or the most prominent one. So, when analyzing and choosing the 'proper' verb form in extremely short time, the brain won't notice the whole subject as a plural form, instead, it automatically choose to agree with the most prominent and nearest part, which is the first noun or noun phrase.

secondly, expressions always follow the economic principle. Think about the sentence 'Either my brothers or my father is coming.' If we consider the meaning, it will be 'My father is coming.' or 'My brothers are coming.' Thus, technically, there would be different correct BE form respectively according to the fact of who comes. For economic reason, we just choose the noun nearer to BE. In this way, the speaker both disambiguate the choices between different facts and follow the cognitive principle

above (In this situation, when facing the choice of BE form, our attention is on ‘brothers’ first and then switch ‘father’, and when deciding the BE form, ‘brothers’ may no longer be in our mind.) The advantage of this economic rule is more obvious when considering the fact that if conjunctions are allowed in the subject, the length of the whole subject can be infinite, only if the verb form agrees with the nearest one allows the brain not to store and analyze too much information simultaneously. The same explanation can also apply to ‘not only... but also’.

In conclusion, the principle of proximity comes mainly from two aspects. For the cognitive reason, according to attentional view and the prominence view, our focus on language changes from time to time, and the verb form choosing always agrees with the currently most prominent information automatically in this specific sentence type; and to agree with the noun nearer to the verb is the most economical way for both disambiguation and message storage.

Answer 2:

In restrictive relative clause, ‘that’ is commonly used because it is not effected by whether the antecedent is personal or not and the grammar function of the relative pronoun in an attributive clause. (Ding, 1982) It means, compared with ‘who’ and ‘which’, ‘that’ is more flexible, which can modify a personal or an impersonal antecedent, and act as a subject or object. ‘That’ also shares some similarities with ‘who’ and ‘which’, under some situation, we can use either of them. The following parts will analysis the use of ‘that’ in relative clause.

We all know ‘that’ can be used to modify a personal antecedent, which can also complete by the relative pronoun ‘who’. When the modified part is general, such as someone, everybody, we can use either ‘who’ or ‘that’. If the antecedent acts as a subject in the relative clause, we use ‘who’ to modify it; if the antecedent acts as an object, we prefer to ‘that’ or just omit the relative pronoun. However, in some instance, we can use ‘that’ only:

(1) When the sentence is a wh-question sentence beginning with ‘who’, we use ‘that’ to avoid repeat.

eg. Who is it that asked to see you?

(2) When the relative pronoun acts as a predicative in the attributive clause

eg. John is not the man

(3) When there is a superlative adjective to modify the head noun

eg. Shakespeare was the greatest poet that England has ever had

(4) When the antecedent is pronoun 'they' or 'other'

eg. They that live longest see most. (proverb)

(5) When the modified parts include both person and impersonal object, and we cannot use 'who' or 'which'

eg. He talked brilliantly of the man and his book that interested him.

'That', as same as 'which', can also represents some inanimate and impersonal object even abstract concept. When the modified parts have substantial contents, or the antecedent is complex so that the relative pronoun is far from the antecedent, we prefer to use 'which'. However, in some instance, we can use 'that' only;

(1) When the antecedent is a pronoun, such as all, much, little, something, everything, anything, none, one and so on

eg. Everything that we saw was interest.

(2) When modifiers such as only, any, few, little, one of exist before the antecedent

eg. I mean the one that has got a handle on it.

(3) When the antecedent modified by an ordinal number or it is an ordinal number itself

eg. It is the first book of this kind that I' ve ever come across.

(4) When the antecedent is modified by a superlative adjective or it is a superlative adjective itself

eg. He eats the finest food that is available.

(5) When the main clause begins with 'there be'

eg. There is a table in the corner that folded away.

(6) When the antecedent is a numeral

eg. I' ve got one that you might find useful

Answer 3:

Our understanding of the present progressive tense only stays at the present level.

Based on our previous knowledge about this tense, we count it and the habitual tense

both as the present tense, because we have few opportunities in applying it into the expression in our daily lives. Therefore, we only regard the present progressive tense as a tool of describing actions happened at the present time or in a big time period currently. Besides the meaning of currently in progress, we merely pay attention to the function of expressing the ongoing action at speech time without any concept about time zone.

Answer 4:

In those sentences mentioned above, sentences that use “anything/anyone” are widely accepted.

First, for “anyone, anything…” :

In English, for example, it is common to observe that some is used in positive sentences and any, in negative sentences. According to some analyses (Klima 1964, McCawley 1988), some is converted to any when it stands in a certain structural relation to not. (LI,1992)

- a. I need some reference books.
- b. I don’ t need any reference books.
- ② a. I think we have some wine left.
- b. I don’ t think we have any wine left.

Second, for “no one /nothing…” :

Double negation sometimes means unsure. It is usually used as informal English or oral English, such as “Don’ t tell nobody.” means do not tell anybody. In modern English, especially some classical English grammar books, those use double negation structure to express negative meaning is regarded as non-standard English, and we should avoid to use them. (Sun, 1992) Besides, according to Liu Jingyi, most of the grammarians hold the view that double negation express positive idea is lacking of standardization. It is used by uneducated person, or some people even think it is rude. For example, we should say “He didn’t go anywhere”, but not “He didn’t go nowhere.” In conclusion, it is better to use sentence like “We don’ t know anything” than “We don’ t know nothing.”

• **What have we discovered?**

1. When dealing with the first question, we discovered three other facts/linguistic

knowledge.

Firstly, as language evolving continuously, it is currently more free to use either the plural form or singular form in the above mentioned structures. According to a survey of Li (2010), native speakers do not strictly follow the principle of proximity. People tend to apply the principle to some sentence using ‘either...or...’, while in ‘neither...nor...’ there is hardly any inclination, instead, they just follow the principle of notional concord or grammatical concord as most sentences do. From this aspect, we think despite a ‘correct form’ needed in examinations, English teaching should pay more attention to the practical use, or at least present more possible explanations for students to form a critical thinking habit.

Secondly, there are other opinions acceptable on this problem. As Chang (2003) points out, the principle of proximity can be considered a special form of notional concord, it is formed in the need of fixed word order. Take ‘Either my brothers or my father is coming.’ as an example, we can also explain this by considering ‘either my brothers or my father’ means ‘although it is uncertain, there must be someone’, so ‘someone’ definitely ‘is coming’. So what’s important here is the notion of the whole but not the form.

Finally, the principle of proximity in language actually has other important aspect, including spacial proximity and mental proximity. The most practical use of spacial proximity is quite similar to what we have learned in class as time-to-space conversion, and the mental proximity is important in context analyze. As in Lu’s paper(2004), the news title ‘以国停售预警机 中国索 7 亿’ actually means different amount of money printed on Mingpao Weekly(meaning 7 hundred million HKD) or on China Daily(meaning 7 hundred million RMB).

2. The rules of choosing appropriate relative is not so strict like other grammar rules, they can be substituent under some situations. These rules are also changing with the development of Modern English. For example, ‘that’ was commonly used in non-restrictive relative clauses in Middle English and the early period of Modern English, especially in literary. However, it is rarely used in non-restrictive relative clause. ‘That’ is often used in informal and oral language based on the economic rule, because the speaker does not need to decide the relative pronoun according to the characteristics of the antecedent. ‘That’ can also be employed to avoid repetition when

there already exists a relative clause which have the same relative pronoun as the second one. As a result, there is a tendency in choosing relative pronouns.

3. Firstly, the present progressive tense can express the ongoing feature of an action, which is relative to the concept of termination as well as closure. In other words, present progressive tense emphasizes that the action is happening at the speech time, and the process is continuing without any termination and closure. This feature is called the ongoing.

Secondly, the present progressive tense provides us with a perspective of zooming in. The speaker takes the approach of zooming in when describing the process of an action. With a closed perspective in observation, the ongoing action is enlarged. This feature is called the zooming in.

Thirdly, the present progressive tense also highlights the feature of proceeding simultaneously. This means the action is happening simultaneously with the background events, and they are overlapping each other. This is called simultaneousness.

4. According to the China Youth Network, double negation is one of the top ten mistakes that American students would make.

①? Barely no one noticed that the pop star lip-synched during the whole performance.
• Barely anyone noticed that the pop star lip-synched during the whole performance.
Therefore, for our English learners, we should also pay more attention to these differences in picking suitable words

• **References**

Question 1

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