

## Meme Theory and Chinese-Writing Teaching in TCFL

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### Abstract

Meme theory is a new theory in the field of pragmatics, which applied to the study of Chinese-Writing Teaching in TCFL. The transmitting of meme has four stages, namely the assimilation, the retention, the expression, the transmission. Because of the different context, Language memes mainly produce memetic genotype and memetic phenotype in the process of reproduction and transmission. This paper takes International students studying Chinese writing teaching as an example, and discusses the relationship between meme theory and Chinese-writing teaching in TCFL. If teachers taught Chinese writing according to the law of reproduction and transmission of the language memes, do help improve the learners' Chinese writing.

**Key words:** Meme theory; Language memes; Chinese writing teaching

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### INTRODUCTION

Writing is an important skill of language learning. Studies have shown that, the international students'

Writing abilities are the worst among four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Having studied Chinese language for many years, foreign students have accumulated a large vocabulary, yet they are so powerless when writing that they can't write at their pleasure. So it is important and arduous to carry out the teaching of Chinese writing and improve the writing ability of foreign students.

In 1980s, linguists and researchers began to explore what should be taught and how to teach in writing lecture. In hence, the development of writing becomes the encumbrance of Chinese level improving for foreign students. Part of scholar have recognized the importance of writing and began to study writing teaching from the method of teaching, learner's psychology and their tactics of learning and made some achievements. The study that uses meme theory of cognitive psychology in the writing teaching and discusses the application of memetics in Chinese-writing teaching in TCFL are breakthroughs of the research of writing teaching.

## 1. MEMETICS

### 1.1 Definition of Memetics

It is the famous zoologist and behavioral ecologist Richard Dawkins at Oxford University that firstly used the term Memetics in his classic work *The Selfish Gene* (1976). He pointed out that meme is a cultural communication unit or a unit of imitation, then took meme as an information unit in the brain, which is a replicator existing in the mind. Just as gene can be copied from one individual to another one through sperm and egg, meme can be imitated and copied from one brain to another one. But it is different between gene and meme. Gene is a kind of unit transferring biological information, its model is the vertical transmission between generations, and it is passed straight. Meme is a kind of unit transferring cultural

information, and its transmission model is both vertical and horizontal. Any information which can be copied and transmitted through imitation, then it can be taken as meme. Meme is the core concept of memetics (Dawkins, 1976). Memetics has aroused great interest of scholars at home and abroad. Blackmore improves the view of Dawkins, and he thinks that the essential basis to judge meme is imitation, and any information can be taken as meme if it can be copied through generalized imitation (Blackmore, 1999). Generally speaking, the core of meme is imitation. The language phenomenon which can be imitated, replicated and transmitted can be taken as meme. The language itself is a kind of meme, and a carrier of memes. From the point of memetics, the process of learning language can be regarded as the process in which language memes are replicated and spread continually.

## **1.2 The Transmission and Types of Linguistic Memes**

### **1.2.1 The Transmission of Language Memes**

Helighen puts forward that memes transmission has four stages, namely, the assimilation, the retention, the expression and the transmission. These four stages are closely related to Chinese language acquisition.

#### **1.2.1.1 Assimilation**

Meme must infect its possible host, and get into his/her memory system in the phase of assimilation. The carrier of meme must extremely outstanding in order to draw host's attention. The host would intentionally filter the memes which are different from the traditional culture and accept the memes which adapt to his cognition system.

#### **1.2.1.2 Retention**

Memes must stay for a period of time in the possible host's retention, if not they can't be called memes. The longer memes stay in the host's brain, the bigger possibility memes may transmit and affect other hosts. That is to say, the memes' transmission probability and sphere of influence are in direct proportion to the time of memes' staying in the retention. This phase has good selectivity so that only few memes can be remained.

#### **1.2.1.3 Expression**

Before memes are transmitted to other individuals, they will be changed to another substance as the time change and the host fuses which are new, systemic and can be perceived. Their expression measures are language, character, image, etc.. Among these measures, language is the most prominent. Hosts are inclined to express the memes which they think are interesting, important and need to be repeated.

#### **1.2.1.4 Transmission**

The expression of memes need a stable carrier or medium, in case of information missing and deformation. Carriers of memes mainly include books, photos, artifacts, CD etc.. In the transmission phase, memes are transmitted to

one or more potential host. These processes are also called the duplication of meme. Language meme has two forms of duplication, which are replication and analogy. The repetition is to directly use original language, which is the reappearance of retention. Another similar language can be got by analogizing the original language. The above four phases are continuous and circulating and become a complete cycle. In the process of choice in each phase, mighty memes would be retained and the weak one would be eliminated. Because the language itself is a meme, Chinese language writing has four periods too, which are assimilation, retention, expression, transmission.

### **1.2.2 The Types of Language Memes**

Blackmore divided the type and transmission mode of the Memes into the copy of results and leading information (Blackmore, 1998). He Ziran divided the duplication and transmission mode of Memes into genotype and phenotype according to biological terminology. Therefore, because of different context, language Memes always generate variations in the process of replicating and spreading, which generate two variations. One variation named genotype which has same content and different forms, another one named phenotype, which is contrary to the phenotype.

#### **1.2.2.1 Genotype Memes**

Genotype Memes refer to these memes which the information stored in the brain, and the content of these memes remains unchanged but was copied and transferred in different forms. In other words, they refer to the Memes that completely copy the pattern of specific information and the structure of the natural language, including two type of performance forms, one of which is the direct transmission of the same information, another of which is the same information transfer in different way.

#### **1.2.2.2 Phenotype Memes**

Phenotype of language memes include three duplicating forms, namely, transplanting of homophones, creating by associating the same forms and creating by homogenous transplantation according to the need of communication. This mode of transmission of the linguistic memes is called "new wine in old bottles" or "graft and transplant".

## **1.3 Memetics and Chinese-Writing Teaching in TCFL**

Learning Chinese is actually a process of Meme replication and transmission. Meme has a great influence on language learning. Some scholars began to apply Meme to the study of Chinese writing. It can be found that the process of Chinese acquisition by foreign students is actually a complete lifespan of the spread of Chinese memes. The process of language acquisition consists of input, memory, output and interaction. This four acquisition process is closely related to the development of four stages of Meme. The process of language input goes along with the assimilation of memes. Nevertheless,

the process of language output is that language learners expressed the memes internalized in mind, which refers to language input & genotype and phenotype spread & language output. In Chinese writing, when foreign students get enough Chinese input materials, and the materials are assimilated by students, these potential input will be exported in writing under the effect of meme through the memes genotype spread or memes performance spread. 12.3.1 Genotype language meme and Chinese writing teaching.

The transmission features of the Genotype language memes is the information directly applied or self-replicating, namely the same information content with different transmission forms. Genotype language memes include two different forms that are both the same information transferred directly and the same message transferred differently.

### **1.3.1 The Same Information Transferred Directly**

This kind of information can be directly copied and transmitted in the appropriate context by language users, which are manifested as quotes, catchphrases, idioms, proverbs, etc. in Chinese writing. These language phenomena are vivid and philosophical, which make the finishing point in the course of writing and impress the readers. The foreign students should accumulate a certain amount of classical language memes in order that they can copy by direct reference to the same or similar context in writing.

### **1.3.2 The Same Information Transmitted in Different Way, Which Is Also the Memes Mainly Copied Information Content and Transmitted in the Longitudinal Progressive Way**

The mutation of information or the transplantation of memes appeared in the process of the replication, however, these changes did not affect the original information and the contents copied just like the former contents (He, 2005) Teachers should encourage students to use synonyms, near-synonymy phrases and different sentences to show the same information in Chinese writing.

### **1.4 Phenotype Language Memes and Chinese Writing Teaching**

Phenotype language memes are memes that the form is the same, but contents are different which are characterized by different information delivered in the same form. Phenotype language memes have three modes of transmission: Firstly, the homophony grafted breadthwise, which means the language memes change harmonic words of the idioms, poems, proverbs and so on by using homophones, synonyms in the original basis. Secondly, the homograph grafted associately, which means there will be no change in the linguistic forms if the same information graft in different contexts that may lead to different associative meanings. Thirdly, the different meanings of the homogeneous grafted breadthwise, which

means the structures and forms of language memes are the same, but contents are different which are replaced by other words. The manifestation of Phenotype memes in Chinese writing is to teach the foreign students how to build the new meme-complex by adding different content in the same language forms according to different context.

## **2. MEMETICS TO CHINESE-WRITING TEACHING IN TCFL**

Memetics provides a new point of view for Chinese-writing teaching in TCFL. From the perspective of memetics, the process of meme copy and recombination is the process of mastering a language. Chinese is one of the most important cultural memes in the world, and the spread of Chinese is closely related to imitation and spreading of the foreign students constantly. Under Memetics' influence, we should reevaluate and advocate the traditional teaching model such as reciting and imitation which are regarded as unreasonable or inadvisable in the past.

### **2.1 Implement the Output Chinese Writing by Reciting Input**

For a foreign language learner, reading is the most important way of language input. According to the characteristics of the lifecycle of memes, the longer memes stay in the host, the more opportunities memes influence receptors, which benefit the integration of memes and hosts. Foreign students input language materials into the mind by way of recitation and then put the language materials into long-term memory by repeated reciting in order that language materials and learners integrate each other. The purpose of recitation is that foreign students can acquire standard Chinese by a large number of Chinese material being fully familiar with, a great deal of language information being input and exercises being done repeatedly. Chinese teachers should help foreign students choose interesting and moderately difficult language materials in order to stimulate their interest and enthusiasm, and then enhance the teaching efficiency in the real progress of TCSL. The teaching practice in classroom has shown that students are fairly easy to grasp the contents such as vocabulary, phrases and basic sentence patterns that the teacher asked his students to recite. In addition, teachers can also explain the status and role of China in modern society in accordance with the needs of the development of the times, so as to stimulate students to study hard.

Foreign students can not only write in Chinese effectively, they can also get the exhilaration of victory which contribute to the exaltation of writing skills by reciting. In order to ensure that students can finish their reciting tasks, teachers can Organize morning reading

activities and choose some students who have advanced level of language abilities to be teaching assistants. In order to reach a better teaching effect, teachers should focus on the key points and let the students memorize what they have learned according to their understanding. Thus teachers may firstly teach the teaching assistant (selected from the students) those classic words which occur in the model text. Then in the morning reading time the teaching assistant leads then to read the model text. After all, only accepted by the audiences, can memes further replicate themselves in communication, and thus survive.

## 2.2 Imitate the Model Essays

Recitation is one step of assimilation and memorization. The following part is imitation writing, which is called “put theory into practice”. American Behaviorist Skinner thinks that there are three points affecting behaviors, that is, imitation, reinforcement and extension. Learners continually imitate what they get in touch with, until they can do them axiomatically. In fact, imitation and reinforcement of language is understanding of that. When the behaviors that learners imitate standard pronunciation, tone and sentence structure are strengthened, they can put their imitated language materials into extension use (Zhang, 2008). According to Memetics, meme is the product of imitation. Meme is based on imitation, which is also the starting point for innovation. Imitation writing is a kind of writing method that learners imitate consciously and creatively others’ sentences or passages in the writing process. It is an effective method to improve learners’ Chinese writing abilities based on imitation standard of Memetics. Imitation writing is not the total copy of memes replication process, but the recombination of language memes.

### 2.2.1 Memes of Vocabulary Memes and Sentence

The basic element of writing is vocabulary, and the learning of morphology structure is the key factor of mastering the vocabulary. The teacher should firstly instruct students to remember homonyms and synonyms by memes way to enlarge their vocabulary and improve their expression level. Secondly, the teacher should encourage students to extract and recite some classic sentence patterns to enhance their ability of wording and phrasing and then the writing ability of various kinds of sentences.

### 2.2.2 Memes of Paragraph and Essay

After a large amount of words and phrases training, the teacher can lead the students into the training of paragraph and essay. Students have already learned the model essay of one literary form and they can fill the materials related to the topics into its basic framework, and this kind of practice help students to express their own thoughts and ideas briefly and correctly and it can enhance their positivity of writing.

Students will use two kinds of methods during the process of imitation writing: One is gene replication, which means “various forms with the same content”, and the other one is phenotype replication, which means “various contents with the same form”. The former can be used in the beginning and ending of a passage by the use of some simple and easy but profound idioms, proverbs, sayings, aphorisms, and so on, making the composition more persuasive. With the help of the characters of phenotype meme, students can write down different contents through imitating famous aphorisms based on actual demand. Imitation writing is now a necessary stage for overseas students learning Chinese writing. Therefore, teachers should guide students to use different expressions to state their points. Firstly, teachers should analyze the structure of model compositions, and explain different kinds of writing styles and their language characteristics to students, so that students can understand a text is constructed by such factors as linguistic and contextual elements, writing communicative purposes. Then, imitation training is gravely needed besides all the things above. And the goal to improve the ability of Chinese writing would be achieved through these ways.

## 2.3 Cultivate the Chinese Thinking Ability of the Students and Help Spread Chinese Culture Effectively

There are over 6,000 languages in the world. Because of different ways of thinking there eventually developed the different linguistic memes, the differences among which lead to foreign language learners to difficulties (Zhang, 2009). Thought and language are closely related, being mainly manifested in two aspects, that is, the representation of human thought is inseparable from language and the language is dominated by thinking. For those who share the same language, the preference in thinking shows their psychological inclination in the language, which was a result of evolution in thousands of years. Therefore each language reveals the speaker’s thinking characteristics (Qi, 2009). Influenced by their mother tongues and homeland cultures, international students carry their thinking stigmas when using Chinese. So, in writing teaching the ability of Chinese visualization should be emphasized, to let them know traditional Chinese lifestyle, the values, codes of conduct, etc., so as to stimulate the replication and transmission of linguistic memes. Teachers are advised to lead the students to do more extracting and imitative writing practice to overcome bad effects from their mother tongues and to cultivate the Chinese intuition

## 2.4 Improve Students’ Writing Skills in Chinese by Mutual Meme

Mutual meme refers to learning from each other in some sense. Students will assess each other’s composition, learning from other’s strong points, and avoiding similar problems in the future. Appraisalment of students’

compositions is a great learning opportunity. After completing the first draft, the student should find faults themselves according to the teacher's "self correcting" principles, then subject the composition to the group "circulating comment", and then hand it in to the teacher. The last step is the class critiques, in which the major work is that teachers identify students' typical errors in writing and ask them to correct groups, and carry out comparison and assessing. Purposeful, targeted and representative should be put into first place, and it's also necessary taking the good, fair, poor into consideration. The aim of all the works above, in one word, is to allow students to compare and modify an article into a good one ultimately. In addition, excellent writing will be uploaded into class forum to allow students study and imitate. From beginning to end, all activities are carried on with students' participation. In other words, it's a continuation of the writing course.

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## CONCLUSION

Writing is a dynamic process, which every link reflected the strength of the Chinese language teaching and students' comprehensive use of Chinese language. The language memes theory provided a new perspective for Chinese-Writing teaching in TCFL. Linguistic memes can be copied and spread correctly if Chinese Language Learners

often recite and imitate authentic Chinese according to the copy and the spread of the law of language memes. As a Chinese teacher, we should help students to improve their writing skills and express fluently by imitation. Chinese language learners can make bold innovation and improve their writing abilities by imitation.

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