

A Corpus-driven Analysis of the Uses of English Polarity Expressions between Native Speakers and Chinese Learners

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Abstract

This paper briefly introduces the Open Choice Principle, the Idiom Principle and the Affective-polarity Theory to suggest that language use is not as random as it is assumed to be, and many words and phrases can only occur in certain contexts. Meanwhile, it discusses the uses of three English polarity expressions: *care a damn*, *lift a finger*, and *have ever done* by using the four corpora LOB, BROWN, BNC online, and CLEC and finds out that *care a damn*, *lift a finger* are used in affective contexts by native speakers but are not acquired by most Chinese learners; *have ever done* is also used in affective contexts by native speakers but is often used in the wrong contexts by Chinese learners. Thus, the paper concludes that Chinese learners need to understand the underlying constraints of sentence construction so as to better grasp English.

Keywords: Affective context, Polarity expression, Corpus

1. Introduction

How to express a meaning appropriately is the key issue in the process of second language acquisition. Second language learners tend to believe that when they know the semantic meanings of a word or a phrase, they can express the corresponding meaning of the word or the phrase correctly. However, based on the modern corpus data evidence collected from LOB, BROWN, BNC, and CLEC, this proves to be a wrong belief. Using corpus for language research is becoming mainstream (M. Halliday, 1991; G. Leech, 1993), because corpus-based approach can be efficiently applied to empirical investigations in almost any area of linguistics from a use perspective. Further, corpus-based methods can also be used to study a variety of topics within linguistics (Biber, Conrad and Reppen, 2000). Many corpus-based analyses have been made to deepen the understanding of languages in this world and those analyses have consequently been of great help in facilitating language learning as well as language teaching.

In the light of the comparative data of the above-mentioned corpus evidence, this paper aims to demonstrate that every word and phrase should be used in the right structure and right context so that they can be appropriately expressed. Sinclair (2004) states that the basic unit of meaning in a text is the lexical item, and grammar plays a role in the management of meaning, the assembly of constituents, and the componence of lexical items, which means when a certain meaning is conveyed or realized, lexical item and grammar are working integrally and simultaneously. But Sinclair also claims that grammar does not directly assist creation of meaning by grammatical choice, though it is vital for efficient communication, and the main role in meaning creation is in the lexical item.

2. The Open Choice Principle and the Idiom Principle

As to explaining how meaning arises from language text, Sinclair (1991) puts forwards two modes of interpretation: the Open Choice Principle and the Idiom Principle. Sinclair holds that no single principle is satisfactory enough and they complement each other.

1) The Open Choice Principle:

This is a way of seeing language text as the result of a very large number of complex choices. At each point where a unit is completed (a word or a phrase or a clause), a large range of choice opens up, and the only restraint is grammaticality.

This principle describes language as a “slot-and-filler” mode by envisaging text as a series of slots which have to be filled from a lexicon that satisfies local restraints. The tree structure can illustrate this mode intuitively and clearly, that is, the nodes on the tree are choice points, and items from certain word class may appear as leaves of each node.

However, it is found in practice that possible slot (or node) choices are massively reduced. In fact, native speakers of a certain language do not exercise the potential creativity of their syntactic rules. In other words, the sentences they produce are not so multifarious as they are expected according to the Open Choice Principle. Indeed, if they do so they would not be accepted as exhibiting native-like control of the language. Therefore, here comes the second principle:

2) The Idiom Principle:

It is clear that words do not occur at random in a text, and that the Open Choice Principle does not provide substantial enough restraints. We would not produce normal text simply by operating the Open Choice Principle.

This principle states that along the process of sentence construction, the openness of choice is not available to the same extent at every node (in tree structure) or in every slot, and the language user has available to him a large number of pre-constructed or semi-constructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they appear to be analyzable into segments. The existence of the Idiom Principle, to some extent, is because the world around us is not totally full of random things and this unrandomness is reflected in our organization of language. The Idiom Principle is far more persuasive and elusive than we have allowed and expected so far. Some examples are as follows:

- (a) Many phrases have an indeterminate extent.
- (b) Many phrases allow internal lexical variation.
- (c) Many phrases allow internal syntactic variation.
- (d) Many phrases allow some variation in word order.
- (e) Many uses of words and phrases attract other words in strong collocation.
- (f) Many uses of words and phrases show a tendency to co-occur with certain grammatical choices.
- (g) Many uses of words and phrases show a tendency to occur in a certain semantic environment.

These examples are a very concise description of the evidence that supports the idea of the Idiom Principle because it points out that the organization of language is not out of the totally open choices, but there are also some constraints derived from the nature of the world, the rules of the language, the history of the language and the corresponding culture.

3. The Affective-polarity Theory

Apart from the evidence mentioned above, there is another piece of evidence which is also in support of the idea of the Idiom Principle. It is called the Affective-polarity Theory.

Edward Klima (1964, quoted in Radford, 2001) conjectures that negative words like *nobody*, interrogatives like *whether*, conditionals like *if* and degree expressions like *too* share “a common grammatico-semantic feature to be referred to as *affective*: in his terms, *nobody/whether/if too* are affective constituents. Also, there are numerous other expressions (e.g. *ever*, *care a damn*, *lift a finger*, *at all*, *any*, etc.) being restricted to occurring in affective contexts (the asterisk indicates ungrammatical):

- (1) (a) I didn't think I would *ever* pass syntax
- (b) *I thought I would *ever* pass syntax
- (2) (a) He's too selfish to *care a damn* about what happens to you
- (b) *I know that he *cares a damn* about what happens to you
- (3) (a) I doubt whether he would *lift a finger* to help you
- (b) *He would *lift a finger* to help you

Expressions, which are restricted in this way, are referred to as polarity expressions, because they seem to have an inherent affective polarity (in the sense that they are restricted to occurring in affective contexts). In short, the Affective-polarity Theory states that there is a pre-constructed context for the occurrence of polarity expressions, namely, the affective expressions. Therefore, this is a good support for the idea of the Idiom Principle.

4. Corpus evidence

In this paper, four corpora (LOB, BROWN, and BNC online, and CLEC) are employed to make a comparative study of native speakers' uses of three polarity expressions (*care a damn*, *lift a finger*, *have ever done*) in affective contexts and those uses by the Chinese learners.

4.1 The phrase: *care a damn*

In the phrase *care a damn*, *a damn* is uttered as a curse which intensifies the mood and indicates an extent, and basic meaning of this phrase is in accordance with the word *care*, which means to be concerned about, and it is a colloquial expression.

In LOB corpus, no entry containing the phrase *care a damn* is found.

In BROWN corpus, no entry containing the phrase *care a damn* is found.

In BNC corpus, there are total 19 entries containing the phrase *care a damn*. They are as follows:

- 1). market did not **care a damn** for the long term, or strategic thinking into
- 2). ne minute they **care a damn** about you?
- 3). You don't **care a damn** about anybody but yourself.
- 4). I don't **care a damn**.
- 5). it don't seem to **care a damn**
- 6). ree of us didn't **care a damn** for the editor of The Sunday Times .
- 7). People don't **care a damn** about any of the arts.
- 8). You don't **care a damn**
- 9). don't even really **care a damn** any more, anyway.
- 10). She did not **care a damn** whether the information was protected or not
- 11). "Personally I don't **care a damn** whether you're here or not.
- 12). wasn't as if she ... **care a damn** for his opinion of her!
- 13). it so plain he didn't **care a damn** for her as a person?
- 14). I don't **care a damn** where you're going or how long you'll be;
- 15). n the road couldn't **care a damn** for anyone."
- 16). then you couldn't **care a damn** about it cos you couldn't do anything about it because your
- 17). know you don't **care a damn** about money.
- 18). don't **care a damn** about this place, or you, or what you own.
- 19). obviously doesn't **care a damn** for him!

Among the 19 entries, one entry (2) is in interrogative context; the others are all in negative contexts. The affective context of *care a damn* can be seen as interrogative and negative, and the negative context is dominating.

In CLEC corpus, there is no entry containing the phrase *care a damn*.

A comparison between native speakers' uses of *care a damn* and those of Chinese learners' is illustrated in Table 1.

4.2 The phrase: *lift a finger*

The phrase *lift a finger*, which is usually used in negative context, means not to help to do something, because she/he is usually lazy.

In LOB corpus, only one entry is found:

1). nor did the Soviet Government **lift a finger** to succor them.

In BROWN corpus, no entry containing the phrase *lift a finger* is found.

In BNC corpus, 15 entries are found. They are as follows:

- 2). Now you're not to **lift a finger**, my dear, is she, Lilian?
- 3). before a man can **lift a finger** (if you'll forgive the phrase).
- 4). Doesn't **lift a finger**, does David Never a handsturn from him, believe me.
- 5). But Mum didn't **lift a finger** to help and gave as good as she got.
- 6). no one is going to **lift a finger** of complaint even, until the case is watertight.
- 7). -in-law I wouldn't **lift a finger** to help him.
- 8). weren't prepared to **lift a finger** to help.
- 9). I wasn't to let you **lift a finger** about the house.
- 10). Pickles never has to **lift a finger**
- 11). She'd not **lift a finger** in this house, she wouldn't.
- 12). is not prepared to **lift a finger** to help secure a future for steel production in Scotland?
- 13). niele is too busy to **lift a finger**, like the rest of you.
- 14). I'm not allowed to **lift a finger**.
- 15). Didn't **lift a finger** Dave to put it out
- 16). didn't even have to **lift a finger** because the man or her servants would do all this for her.

Among the 15 entries, almost all the other entries, *lift a finger* is used with negative affective expressions except the second one.

In CLEC, no entry containing *lift a finger* is found.

The comparison between native speakers' uses of the phrase *lift a finger* and Chinese learners' uses of it is illustrated in Table 2.

4.3 The structure: *have ever done*

According to *Collins (Cobuild) English Language Dictionary* (1995), the word *ever* in the structure *have ever done* can have two meanings. One is *at any time* and the other is *all the time*. When *ever* means *at any time*, *have ever done* should be used in the affective context, that is, in negatives, in questions, in conditional structures, with words expressing uncertainty such as "doubt", with superlatives and in comparisons. When *ever* means *all the time*, *have ever done* is used straightforwardly. The following are the examples.

First, when *ever* means *at any time*, *have ever done* should be used with affective expressions (all the examples are selected from BROWN, LOB and BNC online corpus).

In negatives:

- 1). mple reason that such appeals **have hardly ever** been made. Diocesan authorities generally ha
- 2). rites or comets. No meteorites **have ever** been recovered from paleoexplosion craters,
- 3). would not, he said ... once, **have ever** come about if Mrs. Meeker had only seen fit
- 4). I cannot say that I **have ever** known of a young lady dying of
- 5). robably a fact that few people **have ever** thought about, but a fact nonetheless, that nights are
- 6). scatters of flints, and very few **have ever** been scientifically examined.
- 7). Few women artists **have ever** become household names.
- 8). ld not have been possible ...to **have ever** occurred at all, if it were encumbered by the constr
- 9). ity, perhaps --; so few people **have ever** met me, so many seem anxious to do so
- 10). hough none of these methods **have ever** proved completely successful, the idea of having win

In questions:

- 1). How many of these girls ... **have ever** heard of the Incas of Peru?

- 2). d, "I was at Ryusenji today. **Have you ever** been to Ryusenji"? No one had. "Well, it's a
- 3). dess of death, is worshiped. **Have you ever** heard of thuggee? Nuf sed.... But it is the
- 4). the colors of it, didn't you? **Have you ever** seen anything like it around here"? "Snak
- 5). her a lewd, winking effect. "**Have you ever** tried to reason with an Eskimo"? she asked,
- 6). aps you couldn't do that but **have you ever** tried to see what you could do with a hunk
- 7). brought into being. **Have you ever** heard talk concerning three men who N
- 8). he said sombrely: **Have you ever** heard of a punishment called the cord
- 9). reply to the question, "**Have you ever** had crying attacks?" was

In conditional structures:

- 1). If you **have ever** considered setting up a photographic studio then you will know that there is
- 2). If you **have ever** stood on a sheep farmer's hillside, as I have done many times in the Western
- 3). If you **have ever** stood on a sheep farmer's hillside, as I have done many times in the Western

Expressing uncertainty:

- 1). They have asked if Jewish women **have ever** really been included in the Jewish covenant.
- 2). r I don't know whether any of you **have ever** been into the little private chapel, St William's
- 3). ell the doctor if any close relatives **have ever** had similar problems
- 4). I doubt if Bob Kernohan and I **have ever** agreed on anything except personal integrity
- 5). rs would tell B16 158 us if they **have ever** suffered injury or damage from a defe

With superlatives and comparisons:

- 1). leans was one of the hardest courses I **have ever** played.
- 2). The best organisation that we **have ever** experienced was the Great Ormond Street Hospi
- 3). ced: He is more agreeable than I **have ever** seen him.
- 4). hich is quite simply the best that I **have ever** seen and which appeals at many levels: intellec
- 5). nd toughest question young lovers **have ever** asked: How can you be sure? "Aren't you
- 6). series is incomparably the finest I **have ever** had the pleasure of witnessing.
- 7). finest "classical" ballet company I **have ever** seen, and the production of the Petipa-Tscha
- 8). ces were as beautiful as anything I **have ever** seen- they rival the New York Rockettes for
- 9). five of the longest days I **have ever** lived through. We expect
- 10). most striking-looking men that I **have ever** seen. He was you j

Second, when the phrase *have ever done* is not used in affective context, the word *ever* means *all the time*, and this kind of use is very rare according to native speakers' intuition. Some examples are as follows:

- 1). Those who hold, and those who are without property, **have ever** formed distinct interests in society."
- 2). In 12 years, all the Government **have ever** done, and all they are doing now, is hope that the increase in consumer demand will eventually refloat the economy
- 3). even modern socialism, as they exist or **have ever** existed in theory or in practice. Consider t

Among the 82 sentences selected from BROWN, LOB, and BNC corpora, they contain native speakers' uses of the structure *have ever done*, and most of them are constructed in the context of comparison, as is shown in Table 3.

However, Chinese learners' uses of the structure *have ever done* seems to differ greatly from native speakers'. The most obvious mistake they make is that they don't use *have ever done* in affective context, that is, they use it straightforwardly. But the meaning they want to convey is *have done something at any time*, instead of *have done something all the time*. This kind of expression confuses native speakers very much.

In order to illustrate the difference more clearly, the variances (*has ever done/had ever done*) of the structure *have ever done* are also selected to make a comparison. The phrase *have ever done* is the basic form of the variances, and the basic form and variances differ only in syntactic features such as tense and number, which do

not affect the semantic meanings of the structure. The entries searched in CLEC are as follows:

In negatives:

- 1). Time goes on. Yet no changes **have ever** taken place. The situation is always the same,
- 2). then none of the states that **has ever** existed is civilized, including US, UK, Japan and many o

In questions:

- 1). **Have** you **ever** brought clothes made ø from synthesis fiber while marked
- 2). **Have** you **ever** experienced that in the
- 3). **Have** you **ever** heard a saying in Buddhist Scripture: Better save one life than build up a seve f
- 4). **Have** you **ever** seen sunflowers? I'm sure you have. They are growing here ø and there, before
- 5). **Have** you **ever** seen the film --Lion King. I have seen on the Spring Festival. This film is ve
- 6). **Have** you **ever** seen the film--Aladdin. But I have never seen it. Because ø it's too late when I h

In conditional structures:

- 1). good, and evil with evil. If one **has ever** commit certain crime and escape by chance.
- 2). and able to anybody if only he **has ever** watch any program either sadism or
- 3). he knife. They said if the boy **had ever** used a switch knife, he would never stabbed

Expressing uncertainty: no entry has been found.

With superlatives and comparisons:

- 1). which is the most beautiful country you **have ever** seen? they are always surprised if
- 2). h two lashes. It's said that people who **have ever** got lashes, never commit any
- 3). the mental area is that the person who **had ever** been crime will lose all standing and
- 4). ho's taller than you are. And one who **has ever** had any experience with switch kni
- 5). got used to knife fight and anyone who **has ever** used a switch knife would use it
- 6). using knife. However, anyone who's **ever** used a switch knife will use it
- 7). than you are. Furthermore, anyone who's **ever** used a switch knife would never
- 8). is hand above his shoulder. Anyone who's **ever** used a switch knife would never ha

The other 20 sentences searched from CLEC are all bad sentences, in which the structure *have ever done* is constructed straightforwardly, but the meaning that the learners want to convey is *have done something all the time*. The following are some examples:

- 1) We often hear about fake commodities, and perhaps you **have ever** bought some fake commodities.
- 2) As a student, I often use recharge battery. But I **have ever** bought a fake one, it can't be recharged.
- 3) I will take the active part in the activities to know the society. I **have ever** cleaned the streets near our school with many students, and I **have ever** visited some factories
- 4) Through these paths, we can contact various of people and something that we **have ever** contact before.
- 5) I **have ever** heard something interesting about two presidents (I don't remember if this is their position)
- 6) I **have ever** received shorthand training. I can type 40 words per minute. I am familiar with a

Table 4 illustrates Chinese learners' uses of the structure discussed above.

According to Table 3 and Table 4, it can be clearly seen that there is a sharp contrast between native speakers' uses of the structure *have ever done* and those of Chinese learners'. It seems that Chinese learners don't know the structure *have ever done* should be put into affective context to mean *have done something at any time* nor do they know *have ever done* can mean *have done something always or all the time* when it is used straightforwardly. However, according to native speakers' uses, only 3.7% of the entries searched in this study convey the meaning *have done something all the time*, and the other 96.3% mean *have done something at any time*. Therefore there is an overwhelming impression for learners that *ever* means *at any time* in the structure *have ever done*, and with the help of the grammar-translation teaching methodology, *ever* is often translated as *cengjing* in Chinese, which means *at any time*, so it is natural for Chinese learners to overlook the affective

context.

5. Conclusion

In this comparative study, it can be seen that there is a significant contrast between native speakers uses of the three polarity expressions: *care a damn*, *lift a finger* and *have ever done* and those of the Chinese learners'. For the first two phrases, no entry can be searched in CLEC, which indicates that they are not acquired by most Chinese learners, and there are also very few entries found in BROWN and LOB, which shows that the two often appear in colloquial expressions. As for the structure *have ever done*, Chinese learners misuse it a lot.

The inspiration of this study is that Chinese learners should realize that language form and language meaning are closely connected and interact with each other. For the Chinese learners who try to have a good command of English language, it is far from enough for them to know the semantic meanings of the words or phrases only. More importantly, the Chinese learners need to understand the underlying constraints of sentence construction. In the meantime, corpora can provide substantive and concrete examples of the language output of native speakers, which is very important and helpful in language teaching and learning.

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Table 1. A comparison of the use of the phrase *care a damn* in different corpora

Node	Native speakers' uses			Chinese learners' uses
<i>Care a damn</i>	LOB	BROWN	BNC	CLEC
	occurrences	Occurrences	occurrences	occurrences
	0	0	19	0
Total	19			0

Table 2. A comparison of the use of the phrase *lift a finger* in different corpora

Node	Native speakers' uses			Chinese learners' uses
<i>Lift a finger</i>	LOB	BROWN	BNC	CLEC
	occurrences	occurrences	occurrences	occurrences
	0	0	15	0
Total	15			0

Table 3. Native speakers' uses of the phrase *have ever done*

Meanings	<i>ever means at any time</i>					<i>ever means all the time</i>
Affective context	In negatives	In questions	In conditional structures	Expressing uncertainty	With superlatives and comparisons	Used straightforwardly
BROWN	4	8	0	1	18	1
LOB	1	3	0	1	7	0
BNC	6	1	2	4	23	2
Total	11	12	2	6	48	3
percentage	13.4%	14.6%	2.4%	7.3%	58.5%	3.7%

Table 4. Chinese learners' uses of the phrase *have ever done*

Meanings	<i>ever means at any time</i>					<i>ever means all the time</i>
Affective context	In negatives	In questions	In conditional structures	Expressing uncertainty	With superlatives and comparisons	Used straightforwardly
CLEC	2	6	3	0	8	0
percentage	5.1%	15.4%	7.7%	0	20.5%	0

Among the above entries searched in CLEC, 20 of them contain a wrong usage of the phrase *have ever done*, which account for 51.3%.