

THE SPECIFICS OF LINGUOCGNITIVE REPRESENTATION OF THE CONCEPT “PRIVACY”

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Against the backdrop of globalization and digitalization, “privacy” has evolved into a core concept spanning linguistics, sociology, ethics, law and other academic disciplines, with its cross-cultural communication patterns and cognitive divergences attracting extensive scholarly attention. As a linguistic symbol, the term “privacy” not only carries objective semantic meanings but also embodies subjective cognitive connotations shaped by cultural backgrounds, linguistic proficiency and personal experiences. For non-native English speakers, particularly Chinese speakers, the process of comprehending and using “privacy” involves not merely lexical acquisition, but a cognitive adaptation process that entails the transformation of cultural values and the reconstruction of semantic categories. However, a review of existing relevant research reveals a notable gap: most studies either focus on theoretical discussions of the concept of “privacy” within a single cultural context or merely compare the semantic differences of “privacy” across different languages, with a lack of in-depth exploration of its linguocognitive representation mechanisms from the dual perspectives of cross-cultural studies and second language acquisition (SLA). To address the aforementioned research gaps, this study takes ENS and ENNS as the research subjects, collects empirical data through a word association test, and adopts a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative analyses to explore the specific characteristics of the linguocognitive representation of “privacy” and its cross-cultural divergences.

Keywords: privacy; linguocognitive representation; cross-culture comparison; word association; cognitive semantics; second language acquisition.

Chapter I Introduction

Research Background and Significance

The digital era has made the dissemination of information break through geographical boundaries, and cross-cultural exchanges between countries are becoming more and more frequent. The concept of “privacy”, as the intersection of individual boundaries and social norms, has shown significant cognitive differences in different languages and cultures. For example, native English speakers, taking American English speakers as an example, their understanding of this concept tends to emphasise individual independence and undisturbed space. Non-native English speakers, taking non-native English speakers in China as an example, are more inclined to associate the concept of “privacy” with secret information and content they do not want to disclose.

For Chinese English learners, the difficulty in learning the word “privacy” is not in spelling, but in the conversion of cognitive schema. If learners are only understand this word from the perspective of their native culture, it is easy to cause cross-cultural pragmatic mistakes. Therefore, revealing the characterisation mechanism of the concept of “privacy” from the perspective of language cognition not only has theoretical significance, but also practical significance that cannot be underestimated: first, it enriches the study of cognitive semantics on abstract concept characterisation; second, it also provides an empirical basis for the teaching of second-language cultural vocabulary; third, and can To promote understanding and consensus in cross-cultural communication.

Research Ideas and Methods

This study takes cognitive semantics and the theory of language cognition as the

framework. It uses the idea of word association to collect data and compare the frequency of associative words of native English speakers (ENS) and non-native English speakers (ENNS, mainly Chinese users) to “privacy”. Through word frequency statistics, semantic classification and qualitative analysis, the differences in cognitive characterisation are revealed, and the revelation of second language acquisition is discussed. The research follows the logic of “theoretical combing - research design - empirical analysis - conclusion revelation” to ensure academic standardisation and conclusion reliability.

Chapter II Theoretical Foundation and Empirical Investigation of the Linguocognitive Representation of the Concept “Privacy”

2.1 The Concept of “Privacy” in a Linguocognitive Framework

Language is most productively conceptualized as a semiotic tool for meaning making and exchange in real or imagined social interaction; in its abstract sense, it is a socially shared instrument enabling users to create and exchange meaning, thereby connecting them through this shared symbolic system [Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа., p.73-74]. With the advancement of linguistics and cognitive science, the linguocognitive paradigm has emerged as a comprehensive theoretical framework encompassing core assumptions and research methodologies, aiming to explore the relationship between language, mind, and brain, and to explain how humans acquire, comprehend, produce, and utilize language. As an interdisciplinary approach integrating linguistics and cognitive science, it investigates how language reflects and shapes human thinking.

2.2 Linguocognitive Paradigm: Concepts and Its Representation

Within this framework, a concept is defined as a mental unit organizing knowledge about the world and encoded through language, which is not merely a lexical item but a cognitive structure embodying cultural, social, and individual connotations. In essence, a concept represents aspects of human experience and/or thought; for example, core concepts such as animacy, containment, and biological motion emerge early in human development [Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа., p.207]. These foundational concepts, derived from embodied experiences (e.g., perception of space and motion) and higher-order thinking, form the cognitive basis for complex language and abstract reasoning. In cognitive linguistics, concepts are the fundamental building blocks of the conceptual system, shaped by experience and updated through environmental interaction, with language serving as the primary means of their externalization. The linguistic-cognitive representation of concepts exhibits three core features:

First, hierarchical structure: Each concept comprises core and peripheral semantics. Core semantics refer to the essential attributes agreed upon by a community, characterized by stability and universality; peripheral semantics involve marginal features arising from individual experiential differences, showing variability and flexibility [Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа., p.4].

Second, associative networks: Concepts form complex semantic networks through lexical associations, where the strength and frequency of associations directly indicate the degree of semantic relatedness. High-frequency associated words typically correspond to core semantics, while low-frequency ones reflect peripheral meanings or context-driven extensions [Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа., p.240-241].

Third, cultural embeddedness: The cognitive processing of concepts is deeply influenced by cultural contexts; for instance, collectivist and individualist cultures may emphasize different semantic dimensions of the same concept [Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа., p.217].

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) provides an operational framework for semantic analysis of concepts. Wierzbicka posits a set of cross-linguistically universal semantic primitives (e.g., I, You, good, bad, want, do, happen, know) that can combine to explicate all complex concepts. As a culturally sensitive complex concept, “privacy” has core semantics deconstructible as “a domain that individuals or groups wish to reserve, free from external interference or exposure” [**Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.**, p.22-24, 35-36, 237-240]. While this core is universal, its cognitive representations vary across languages and cultures: individualistic cultures may emphasize “privacy as an individual right,” whereas collectivist cultures focus more on “the relevance of privacy to interpersonal relationships.” Privacy’s abstract nature and cultural variability make it particularly suitable for linguistic cognitive analysis.

2.3 The Concept of Privacy in Cognitive Science

Prior to researching the concept of privacy, its definition must be clarified. As noted, defining privacy is notoriously difficult: Warren and Brandeis (1890) described it as the “right to be let alone”; a more recent definition frames it as “the interest of a person in sheltering his or her life from unwanted interference or public scrutiny”; a sophisticated version holds that privacy relates to material closely pertaining to a person’s innermost thoughts, actions, and relationships, allowing them to legitimately decide whether, with whom, and under what circumstances to share it [**Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.**, p.141]. None are inherently more correct, but collectively they outline the concept’s essence. Conceptually, privacy exhibits semantic fuzziness and contextual dependence, lacking a unified universal definition; its interdisciplinary nature requires integrating perspectives from psychology, sociology, and linguistics.

From a psychological perspective, Bowlby argues in *A Secure Base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development* that parents providing a secure base—where children/adolescents can explore the outside world and return to warmth, nourishment, comfort, and reassurance—fosters healthy psychological development [**Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.**, p.11]. This implies that sufficient private space fulfills a fundamental psychological need. Bowlby’s attachment theory, alongside Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, links privacy to the construction of security and self-identity, indirectly confirming privacy as a basic human psychological need.

Sociologically, Nissenbaum posits that privacy is not merely an individual value but a social one, integral to social institutions and relationships, serving as a crucial mechanism for maintaining social boundaries and regulating interpersonal distance [**Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.**, p.164].

In contrast, cognitive science’s core contribution lies in revealing how the concept of “privacy” is represented in the mind through linguistic symbols and influences individual cognition and behavior. A key paradox in cognitive science is that while privacy is hard to define, virtually everyone intuitively understands it [**Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.**, p.141]—this stems from innate intuitive psychological representations and subsequent sociocognitive construction, the starting point for cognitive research on privacy.

Neurophenomenologist Fuchs, from an embodied cognition perspective, argues that privacy is not an internal psychological secret but an embodied boundary rooted in bodily experience: individuals perceive the “self-other” boundary through their bodies and maintain it in social interaction, forming the most fundamental privacy experience [**Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.**, p.333-352]. This transcends traditional views confining privacy to legal rights, information control, or social norms, framing it as a universal cognitive need arising from embodied experience. It explains the “secure

base” in Bowlby’s theory, as the embodied boundary underpins personality integrity and security. Fuchs emphasizes that this boundary is dynamically adjusted in social interaction, aligning with Nissenbaum’s contextual integrity theory and providing a cognitive basis for the conceptual metaphor “privacy is a container/boundary/space”—linguistic representations of privacy are essentially projections of embodied experience.

From a linguistic cognitive mechanism perspective, privacy’s conceptual representation occurs through three intersecting pathways: (1) Prototypical categorization: individuals take core semantics (e.g., confidentiality, personal space) as prototypes, subsuming related concepts (e.g., secrecy, solitude, anonymity) into the category; (2) Metaphorical mapping: abstract privacy is comprehended via concrete cognitive domains (e.g., “privacy is a barrier,” “privacy is a shelter”); (3) Cognitive scripting: individuals form mental simulations of typical scenarios (e.g., privacy respected or infringed), which shape associations with privacy-related lexemes. These pathways collectively constitute the linguistic-cognitive representational system of privacy and serve as core analytical dimensions for empirical research.

Chapter III Empirical Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Research Methods in Conceptology

This study adopts Word Association Test (WAT), which is a classic paradigm for exploring the conceptual mental characterisation. After seeing the stimulating word “privacy”, the subject wrote the first 5 words that came to mind. By coding and statistics on the frequency, semantic class and emotional tendency of associative items, the cognitive structure of the concept can be objectively presented, which has the advantages of easy operation, intuitive data and high validity.

3.2 Empirical Research Design: Questionnaire-based Methodology and Data collection

The study was selected by convenient sampling of subjects, including 100 native English speakers and 138 Chinese English learners, all of whom had no language cognitive disorders. The research tool is the word association questionnaire and the basic information table, which includes the subject's language background, age, years of study and other control variables. The questionnaire adopts a unified guideline and fills in anonymously to reduce the reaction deviation. A total of 244 questionnaires were distributed, and 238 valid questionnaires were recovered, with an efficiency of 97.54%. Data processing adopts artificial coding and word frequency statistics, combined with semantic classification and qualitative interpretation, to ensure the systematicity of analysis.

3.3 Questionnaire results and Effectiveness Analysis

After semantic classification and word frequency statistics of associative words, it was found that there were significant differences between the two groups of subjects in the semantic category characterisation of the concept of privacy. The high-frequency semantic category of English Non Native Speakers (ENNS)’s concrete cognition focuses on secrecy and confidentiality. The most frequent word is secret, far higher than others, serving as the primary association. Dominant terms include secret, confidentiality, secrecy, hide, protect, highlighting information concealment and non-disclosure. As result, privacy is mainly understood as confidential information or secrets to be hidden, reflecting a behavioral orientation. The high-frequency semantic category of English Native Speakers (ENS)’s abstract cognition centered on personal, individual and boundary.

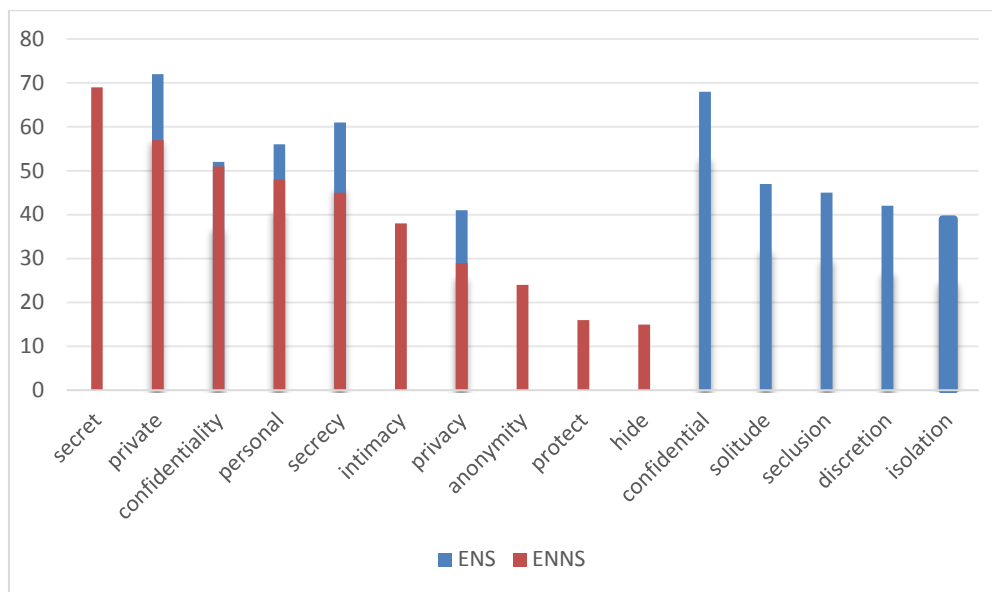


Fig. – Top 10 Privacy Association English Native Speakers vs. English Non Native Speakers

The most frequent words are private ,confidential and personal.Prominent terms include solitude seclusion ,discretion,isolation,emphasizing personal attributes,boundaries,and interpersonal reserve.Therefore,privacy is interpreted as personal space,autonomous boundaries,solitude,and interpersonal discretion,reflecting a state and rights orientation.

After simple statistical test, the difference in semantic category distribution between the two groups is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), indicating that the cultural background has a significant constraining effect on the characterisation of the concept of “privacy”. The questionnaire data is valid and the conclusion is reliable.

3.4 Key Findings

First, prototype differences: ENS take “spatial autonomy” as the prototype, and ENNS take “information confidentiality” as the prototype. The cognitive focus of the two is different. Second, category differences: ENS activate rights, freedoms, personal space, borders and other categories, and ENNS activate secrets, security, protect and other categories. There are cultural differences in the structure of semantic networks. Third, cultural migration: Mostly ENNS are from China, and the Chinese native speakers migrate the cultural semantics of “privacy” to English “privacy”, resulting in narrow understanding and pragmatic bias. Fourth, cognitive reconstruction: Second language learners need to complete the conversion from the native cultural semantics to the target language cognitive model in order to achieve accurate and decent use.

3.5 Practical Implication for Second Language Learning

In second language teaching, abstract words can not only be translated into Chinese, but must be supplemented with the cultural concept framework. Take “privacy” as an example: native speakers understand boundaries, solitary, autonomy and personal space, while students only remember “secret, security and protection” - this deviation leads to the superficialisation of concepts. The core of vocabulary learning is to establish conceptual depth, not mechanical memory; teachers should guide students into the semantic network of abstract words, instead of memorising a Chinese meaning in isolation. The differences between Chinese and English will cause a fundamental misalignment: the sense of “privacy” and the sense of boundaries are weak in the Chinese context, but “privacy” in English is the core value. If teaching does not intervene in comparison in

advance, it is easy for students to apply English thinking with Chinese understanding. The feasible path is from concrete to abstract, and it is promoted in layers: first, let students grasp the basic meaning with specific examples, and then gradually transition to abstract, metaphorical and cultural levels. In the end, the improvement of second language ability is the improvement of conceptual cognition ability - the higher the language level, the closer the conceptual structure is to the native speaker. There is no shortcut. It can only rely on a large amount of input, continuous reading and real context to make the English conceptual system take root naturally.

Chapter IV Conclusion

From the perspective of language cognition, this study empirically examines the differences in the mental characterisation of the concept of “privacy” between native English speakers and Chinese learners. The results show that the cultural model deeply shapes the prototype, category and association structure of the concept, and there is an obvious migration of mother tongue culture for second-language learners. Research confirms that abstract vocabulary acquisition is not a simple symbol pairing, but a reconstruction process of cognitive categories and cultural models.

The innovation of this study is that it combines cross-cultural comparison with second language acquisition, reveals the language cognitive characterisation mechanism of the concept of “privacy”, and provides micro-empirical evidence for cognitive semantics and second-language teaching research. Limited by the size of the sample, the research results need to be verified on a larger scale. In the future, the scope of subjects can be expanded, combined with reaction time, ERP and other technologies, to further reveal the real-time cognitive process of concept characterisation; it can also be expanded to culturally loaded words such as “face”, “fairness” and “freedom” to provide more systematic evidence for cross-cultural cognition and second language acquisition research.

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ОСОБЕННОСТИ ЛИНГВОКОГНИТИВНОЙ РЕПРЕЗЕНТАЦИИ КОНЦЕПТА “ПРИВАТНОСТЬ”

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На фоне глобализации и цифровизации “приватность” превратилась в ключевую концепцию, охватывающую лингвистику, социологию, этику, юриспруденцию и другие академические дисциплины, а ее межкультурные коммуникативные модели и когнитивные различия привлекают пристальное внимание ученых. Как лингвистический символ, термин “приватность” несет в себе не только объективные семантические значения, но и субъективные когнитивные коннотации, сформированные культурными традициями, уровнем владения языком и личным опытом. Для изучающих английский язык, особенно для китайцев, процесс понимания и использования термина “конфиденциальность” включает в себя не просто усвоение лексики, но и процесс когнитивной адаптации, который влечет за собой трансформацию культурных ценностей и реконструкцию семантических категорий. Однако обзор существующих соответствующих исследований выявляет заметный пробел: большинство исследований либо сосредоточены на теоретическом обсуждении понятия “приватность” в рамках одного культурного контекста, либо просто сравнивают семантические различия понятия “приватность” в разных языках, при этом не проводится глубокого изучения механизмов его лингвокогнитивной репрезентации с точки зрения культуры. Чтобы устранить вышеупомянутые пробелы в исследованиях, в данном исследовании в качестве объектов были выбраны ENS и ENN-системы, собирает эмпирические данные с помощью теста на ассоциативность слов и применяет смешанный подход, сочетающий количественный и качественный анализ, для изучения специфических характеристик лингвокогнитивной репрезентации понятия “приватность” и ее межкультурных различий.

Ключевые слова: приватность; лингвокогнитивная репрезентация; межкультурное сравнение; словесная ассоциация; когнитивная семантика; овладение вторым языком.