Cognitive Study of the Linear Order of the English Construction “X and Y”

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Abstract—The English construction “X and Y” refers to the coordination of two words with and as conjunction, X and Y being of the same part of speech and parallel meanings. This paper is a cognitive study of the linear order of the English construction “X and Y” from the perspectives of cognitive salience, cognitive iconicity, and cognition of formal rules. The linear characteristics of “X and Y” are revealed as follows: 1) salience-downgrading order; 2) chronological iconicity; 3) cognition of alphabetic order and prosodic order.

Index Terms—Cognition, coordinate construction, linguistic iconicity, linguistic linearity, linguistic salience, “X and Y” construction.

1. Introduction

Saussure points out that the signifier is of linearity[1], and this principle serves as the foundation of linguistic structuralism. With the progress in linguistic studies, linearity as a linguistic principle is challenged when the encoding and decoding processes are considered[29][30]. Given the fact that any linguistic activity is eventually presented linearly, the linearity being meaningful to both the producer and receiver, linguists’ contributions in this respect are abundant in typological study[6][7], thematic progression at discursive level[8][13], syntactic iconicity at syntactic level[14][21], and other angles[22]. Linearity at phrasal level, however, is seldom explored at home and abroad, and few scholars have comprehensively approached “X and Y” construction in English—the coordination of two words with and as conjunction, X and Y—occasionally with definite or indefinite article—being of the same part of speech and parallel meanings[23][28], with almost no effort on the cognitive illustration of the linearity of “X and Y”. This paper, therefore, is intended to analyze how the linearity of “X and Y” is cognitively constructed, firstly from the semantic perspective—salience cognition, secondly from the syntactic perspective—chronological iconicity, and thirdly from prosodic cognition.

2. Salience Cognition and Temporal Iconicity in “X and Y” Construction

A great number of examples strongly support the idea that cognitive salience is very interpretative in the analysis of the linearity of “X and Y” construction.

2.1 Salience Order

Salience in cognition means the likelihood of being perceived or noticed. When something is more salient, it is more likely to be first processed[6][8]. Shen holds that the whole is more salient than a part of the whole, the container more salient than what is in the container—because the visible is more salient than the invisible, the animate more salient than the inanimate—because the mobile is more salient than the immobile, what is close to the observer more salient than what is in a farther distance, and the specific more salient than the abstract[29].

Many examples have proved that the principle of cognitive salience works in the linear presentation of X and Y in “X and Y” construction; namely X is more salient than Y, which implies a salience-downgrading order in “X and Y” construction.

1) The animate is more salient than the inanimate. In some cases, “X and Y” indicates the linear order of “the animate+the inanimate”, e.g., horse and buggy, fish and chips, a chicken and egg question; the quick and the dead, the living and the dead. Sentence examples are as follows.

They devised a signaling method to unravel traffic “tangles” and “blockades”, both terms from the horse and buggy days[60].

If I found anything problematic in her discussion, it was a sometimes confusing vacillation between a kind of firm dualism, whereby the realms of the living and the dead, and those of good and evil, were separated (according to the demonologists) by a firm boundary, and an ambiguous shamanism, in which a middle zone or membrane exists and may be accessed from the human side through alteration of consciousness[31].

2) Man is prior to other animals. In some cases, “X and Y” indicates the linear order of “man+other animals”, e.g., Androcles and the lion, fisherman and the snake, Peter and the wolf, man and beast, beauty and the beast.
3) The exterior of a container is more salient than its interior. In some cases, “X and Y” indicates the linear order of “the exterior+the interior”, e.g., flesh and blood, heart and soul, skin and bones, body and soul. Sentence examples are as follows:

“Listen to the cries was more than flesh and blood could stand.”[32]

“They threw themselves heart and soul into the project.”[31]

“The study of developmental pathways and epithelial-mesenchymal interactions in the skin and bone have revealed some striking parallels, which are reprinted in both organs in the adult.”[34]

“They barely have enough money to keep body and soul together.”[36]

4) The concrete is more salient than the abstract. Hence, in some cases, “X and Y” indicates the linear order of “the concrete+the abstract”, e.g., dances and delight, eye and envy, words and deceits, death and honor, weigh and consider, bright and early, hale and hearty, stuff and nonsense; there and then, here and now (Time is more abstract than space). More examples are as follows.

“Dances and Delight”[30]

“You’re up bright and early today!”[37]

“The Politics of Mourning: Death and Honor in Arlington National Cemetery”[38]

“Her grandfather was hale and hearty, walking five miles each day before breakfast.”[39]

“The report names and shames companies that are not doing enough to fight industrial pollution.”[40]

5) The important is more salient than the less important in cognitive framework. In some cases, “X and Y” indicates the linear order of “the important/primary+the less important”.

e.g., Jack is a linguist and philosopher.

Josh Sharp is a web developer who makes his bread and butter creating websites for clients.

Another cart has sticky rice and chicken wrapped in fragrant lotus leaves.

“The government set out to destroy the organization root and branch.”[41]

In the four examples, Jack’s researches mainly fall into the category of linguistics; bread is the staple food, and butter the subsidiary food; rice is the staple food, and chicken the subsidiary food; the root is more important than branches.

6) The whole is more salient than a part of the whole. In some cases, “X and Y” indicates the linear order of “the whole+a part” e.g., fingers and thumbs, nice and warm.

“I’m all fingers and thumbs today. That’s the second plate I’ve dropped this morning.”[42]

“Solo can’t wait to get back home where the sun is always nice and warm (Nice implies the overall feeling, and warm just highlights the comfort of temperature).”

7) The strong is more salient than the weak. In some cases, “X and Y” indicates the linear order of “the strong+the weak”, e.g., cat and mouse, great and small, tiger and sheep. More examples are as follows:

“The 32-year-old singer spent a large proportion of the week playing cat and mouse with the press.”[43]

“He was respected by great and small.”[44]

8) Solids are more salient than liquids. In some cases, “X and Y” indicates the linear order of “solid+liquid”, e.g., one’s own flesh and blood, to be meat and drink to somebody, land and sea, food and drink, cakes and ale, mountains and rivers, land and water. Google search results (access on June 20, 2016) show that there are 50200000 English pages exactly containing land and water, whereas there are 21400000 English pages with water and land.

9) What is in vicinity is more salient than what is in the farther distance. In some cases, “X and Y” indicates the linear order of “the near+the far”, e.g., here and there, this and that, hither and thither, hither and yon, home and abroad, Chinese and foreign.

“Papers were scattered here and there on the floor.”[45]

“What did you talk about?” “Oh, this and that.”[46]

“He was famous, both at home and abroad.”[47]

10) Basic material desire is more salient than spiritual or sexual need. In some cases, “X and Y” indicates the linear order of “basic material desire+spiritual/sexual need”, e.g., beer and skittles, using booze and breasts to get voters.

“It would be foolish to entertain thoughts that it has been a season of beer and skittles.”[48]

11) The tall and the long are more salient than the short, the upper more salient than the lower. In some cases, “X and Y” indicates the linear order of “the tall/long+the short” or “the upper+the lower”, e.g., hand and foot, knees and toes, tooth and nail, an arm and a leg, cap and gown, heaven and earth, cup and saucer, the long and the short, high and low.

“They waited on him hand and foot.”[49]

“We fought tooth and nail to get the route of the new road changed.”[50]

“He’d only just bought it when we met—it had cost him an arm and a leg.”[51]

“Pleased that she was allowed to keep her own yellow and white velvet hood—not the cap and gown, thank God—what to do with that later?”[52]

“The long and the short of it is that they are willing to start the work in January.”[53]

“I’ve searched high and low for my purse.”[54]

12) The positive is more salient than the negative. In some cases, “X and Y” indicates the linear order of “the positive+the negative”, e.g., thick and thin, hot and cold, the rights and wrongs, rich and poor, most and least, love and hate, friend and foe, pros and cons, good and evil, good and hard, good and tired, good and angry, nice and ill, the tree of good and evil, to share the weal and woe, ups and downs, goods and evils, great and small, profit and loss, great and fail. Here are more examples.
“The judge made up his mind quickly, saying that it was an open and shut case.”

“They have been working on it, on and off, since the late 1980s.”

“Wittingly or unwittingly, their findings all converged on a single point.”

“Young people are heavily influenced consciously or unconsciously by their peers.”

“The gap in incomes between the haves and the have-nots continues to grow wider.”

“And if you loved somebody it was through thick and thin, for better or for worse.”[53]

“The orchestra’s playing brought out the light and shade in the music.”[56]

“When the phone rang I just went hot and cold.”[57]

“I don’t care about the rights and wrongs of the matter—I just want you both to stop arguing.”[58]

13) The senior is more salient than the junior. In some cases, “X and Y” indicates the linear order of “the senior+the junior”, e.g., bench and bar, officers and soldiers, mother and daughter, father and son. Google search (access on June 20, 2016) shows that there are 20900000 English pages exactly containing father and son, whereas there are only 428000 English pages with the exact phrase son and father, and that there are 21500000 English pages containing mother and daughter, whereas there are only 469000 English pages with daughter and mother.

“Rich and poor, white and black, free and slave. The social history of Cuba’s tobacco farmers, 1763-1817.”[59]

2.2 Chronological Iconicity of “X and Y” Construction

Chronological iconicity of language indicates that what happens first goes before what happens later. Hence, in some cases, the linear order of “X and Y” construction presents the chronological order of events, action or happenings, e.g., deaf and dumb, cut and dried, forgive and forget, divide and rule, rise and shine, past and present, hit and run, Q&A, first and last, ancient and modern, past and present, sooner and later, twos and threes, five and ten, sixes and sevens, one and all, wash and wear, life and death, toil and moil, signed and sealed.

3. Cognition of Formal Rules in the Linear Order of “X and Y” Construction

Besides salience-downgrading order and chronological iconicity order, the linear order in “X and Y” construction is to some extent in accordance with spelling and phonetic rules.

3.1 Alphabetic Order in “X and Y” Construction

The twenty six letters in English are sequentially ordered from A to Z. It is believed that English speakers in some cases subconsciously follow the alphabetic order when they construct “X and Y” phrases, e.g., alpha and omega, act and deed, aches and pains, ball and chain, men and women, old and young, far and near, confidential and private, iron and steel, back and forth, backwards and forwards, ebb and flow, cats and dogs, bits and pieces, really and truly, old and trial, odds and sods, affordable and kind.

In the examples above, the first letters in the first words of the paired phrases are prior in the alphabetic order to the first letters in the second words. More examples—safe and sound, hale and hearty, first and foremost, short and sweet shed light on fact that the alphabetic order applies to the occasions where the first letters of the two words are the same, the second letters different.

3.2 Prosodic Order of “X and Y” Construction

From the perspective of prosodic characteristics, lots of “X and Y” constructions feature the use of such rhyme devices like alliteration (e.g., thick and thin, weal and woe, fair and foul, bench and bar, time and tide, kith and kin), internal rhyme (e.g., vice and crime, rise and shine), end rhyme (e.g., near and dear, hustle and bustle, really and truly, toil and moil, town and gown, mover and shaker, wine and dine), repetition (e.g., on and on, hot and hot, worse and worse, lots and lots, over and over, again and again through and through, neck and neck), and iambus (e.g., unless and until, forgive and forget, again and again, betwixt and between), which contribute to the fluency, smoothness, and melodious beauty of oral utterance.

Examples like hot and heavy, part and parcel, wild and woolly, slow and steady, fur and feather, flirt and flutter, bread and butter, bed and breakfast, pen and paper, guns and butter, tears and tatters, bear and forbear, fair and square, act and deed, ball and chain, weal and woe, black and blue, back and forth, ebb and flow, iron and steel, backwards and forwards, ebb and flow, cats and dogs, bits and pieces, really and truly, old and trial, odds and sods, affordable and kind.

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4. Conclusions

It can be concluded from the above discussion that the linear order of “X and Y” construction follows the cognitive rules of salience, chronological iconicity, and cognition of linguistic forms. In the linguistic processing of concepts, however, the factors determining the linguistic linearity are much more complicated. In addition, various factors may
References


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