

A Study on the Subordinating Conjunctions “when” and “while”

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1. Introduction

The two subordinating conjunctions “when” and “while” hold similar meanings in Chinese and have similar function in marking the temporal relations between two actions and events. As a result, they are often put into comparison together for students to distinguish the usages between them.

The materials for analysis in this study include journal articles from mainland China, junior high school textbooks and exercise books. The focus of the journal articles from mainland China is on item analysis and summary notes about “when” and “while”. In junior high school textbooks, the usages of “when” and “while” are introduced along with past progressive and are followed by sentence pattern and mechanical drills. “When” and “while” are seldom introduced in senior high school textbooks since they are regarded as “basic” vocabulary that should have been taught in junior high. That’s the reason why only junior high textbooks are examined here.

After the examination of journal articles from mainland China, some problems are detected. First of all, the usages of “when” and “while” are divided into many categories by providing the learners with Chinese equivalents or English synonymous phrases. In addition, the explanations involve many professional and complex terms and thus they are difficult for students to understand. Furthermore, collocations and over-generalized rules are provided for students to memorize and to apply in tests. In spite of the problems found, some journal articles are useful in

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providing feasible explanations about “when” and “while” from the perspective of sequentiality and semantic features about verbs.

Problems are also discovered in junior high textbooks and exercise books. The explanations are over-generalized or even unacceptable. Most of the exercises are mechanical drills, asking students to arrange sentence orders by putting “when” or “while” as initials or in the middle of the sentence. Some exercises actually don’t correspond to pragmatic functions in the way that they require students to combine sentences with the limitation that only “when” or “while” could be chosen. Translation exercises tend to have the word “當” in every sentence and sound awkward.

2. Material Analysis

2.1 Examination of Journal Articles from Mainland China

The usages of subordinating conjunctions “when” and “while” are divided into many types with Chinese equivalents and English synonymous phrases for learners to understand the meanings and memorize other phrases at the same time. Following the categories, decontextualized sentences are listed to demonstrate the usages that are previously stated. For example, “when” and “while” as subordinating conjunctions are used to express the following meanings:

When 用作從屬連詞，可表示下列意義：

- (1)表示時間，意為“當...的時候”“一...就...”(=as soon as 或 the moment)
“在...之後”(=after)

It was snowing when he arrived at the construction site. (他到達建築工地時正在下雪)

We will start when the team leader comes. (隊長一來，我們就出發)

The machine ran better when it had been given oil. (上油之後，機器運轉得比較好了)

- (2)表示條件，含“如果”的意思，相當於從屬連詞“if”

When you demand his presence, call him in advance. (如果你要他來，就事先打電話給他)

- (3)表示讓步，含“雖然”“儘管”之意，相當於從屬連詞 although。

He usually walks when he might ride. (雖然有車可乘，但他通常步行)

(4)表示原因，有“既然”“考慮到”之意，相當於從屬連詞 now that , considering that

Why use metal when you can use plastic? (既然能用塑膠，你為什麼要用金屬呢?)

(From 喻安民 (2006)，談談 when 和 while 的用法，*中學英語園地*)

While 當從屬連詞的用法則是：

(1)引導時間狀語從句，譯作“趁...時”“當...時”“和...同時”

While she was listening to the radio, she fell asleep. (她在聽收音機時睡著了)

(2)引導讓步狀語從句，常放在句首，譯作“儘管”“雖然”，比 *although* 或 *though* 語氣要輕

While I admit his good points, I can see his shortcomings. (儘管我承認他的優點，但我還是能看到他的缺點)

(3)引導條件狀語從句，相當於 *as long as*，譯作“只要”

We will surely overcome these difficulties while we are closely united. (只要我們緊密團結一致，一定能克服這些困難)

(From 譚曉燕 (2006)，*while* 的用法簡析，高中生)

As it can be seen from the above examples, the usages of the two conjunctions are categorized in a very detailed way. The explanations involve many grammatical terms which are difficult for learners to process, like 時間/讓步狀語從句. Actually the usages are only explained by providing imprecise Chinese equivalents and English synonyms. Knowing these synonyms can't really enhance learners' understanding and help them learn to use the conjunctions appropriately since there are no absolute synonyms in English. The detailed categories seem to be very complicated and they are likely to “scare” learners away because they would have to spend long time memorizing the various meanings. However, these seemingly complex categories are not so necessary. Semantically speaking, these usages of “when” or “while” (except for the meaning of contrasting) can be understood as “當...的時候” though they have different translations in Chinese, e.g., 儘管, 如果, 只要.... The main difference between “when” and “while” lies not in the Chinese meaning but in the temporal relations between the two actions and the semantic feature of the verbs. The categories based on Chinese translations are

not so essential and necessary in the usages of “when” and “while” because learners can still understand most of sentences through the basic meaning “當...的時候”.

Another problem is that a set of collocations and over-generalized rules is given to students to memorize and employed as a test skill. Collocations or chunks of “when” and “while” are listed to help students “save time” in tests. For example, “hardly/scarcely...when” and “be about to do sth, when...” are summarized to remind students that on seeing “hardly” they have to choose “when” instead of “while”. Phrases of “while” such as “once in a while” and “for a while” are also pointed out to help students distinguish from “when”. However, the function of “while” in the two phrases are totally different from that of subordinating conjunction. The “while” in “for a while” is a noun, far from a conjunction mentioned before. Such a reminding for test skill and for the sake of convenience might be perplexing for students. This is kind of like stimulus-response training in which students relying on this technique are like “test machine” who only know how to pick the correct answer but have no idea of the reasons behind.

Like collocations, a grammatical pattern provided to students also has contributed to some problems:

When/while + doing sth. (n./adj. 介詞短語，句子)

When + V-ed/ 不定式 (while 不能用於該結構)

(From 朱廣春(2007) when 和 while 的熱門考點透視，考試(高考英語版))

The rule is easy for students to memorize but it is too simplistic and over-generalized. The verb conjugation and clause tense should depend on the semantic features of the verb, e.g., duration, and temporal relations of the actions, e.g., sequentiality and simultaneity. Such a simple rule can not really explain fully the usages of “when” and “while”.

In spite of the problems mentioned, some reasonable and feasible explanations are found in the journal articles. For the semantic feature of the verb, “while” is used to express “a period of time” in which the verb has to be durative and thus it is reasonable for the action to “last for a period of time”. As a result, it is not always the case that the verb must be a gerund. “While” is compatible with any verb that is durative semantically but not always with gerunds. “When” can be employed both in expressing “a period of time” or “at a time point” and therefore the verb in the

clause can be a durative verb or a compact verb. Take the following sentences for example, the verb conjugations are not as the previous rule stated.

(1) We played chess while they slept.

(2) Could you look after her for me while we are away?

(3) *My pen dropped on the ground while I walked in the park.

Sentence (1) and (2) are demonstrative of the semantic features of the verbs. “Sleep” and the copula “be” are durative so they are compatible with “while” though they are not gerunds. Sentence (3) is ungrammatical because “walk” is not durative but an instant action and thus is not acceptable to connect with “while”, which is used to indicate a period of time. Sentence (3) shall be acceptable if “while” is replaced by “when”.

For the temporal relations between the two actions, “while” is used when the action in main clause and the action in subordinating clause are simultaneous; “when” can be employed when the actions happen either simultaneously or sequentially. As the following sentences indicate:

(1) Mom had finished cooking when I got home.

(2) When/While she was typing, someone knocked at the door.

In sentence (1) it is likely that the event of “cooking” happens prior to the action of “got home” rather than “cooking” and “got home” happen at the same time. Therefore it is more reasonable to use “when” instead of “while” when the actions happen sequentially. In sentence (2) the actions of “typing” and “knocking” happen simultaneously and thus it is possible to use “when” or “while”.

The explanations of temporal relations and verb features in these journal articles are feasible and clear. When teachers are teaching students how to distinguish the two conjunctions, the following explanations could be of some help but teachers may have to explain more on the concept of duration by giving students more examples.

(1) While 的意思是“在...期間”後接時間“段”，不接時間“點”，因此句中動詞必須是延續性動詞，而 when 的意思是“在...時刻”或“在...期間”，其後可接時間點也可接時間段，因此句中的動詞可以用瞬間性動詞，也可以用延續性動詞。

(2) 由 while 引導從句時，主句與從句的動作一般為同時發生。用 when 引導從句時，主句與從句中的動作可同時發生，也可先後發生。

(From 李建高 (2003) while 與 when 在用法上的差別, 少年天地(初中))

2.2 Examination of Junior High Textbooks

The usages of subordinating conjunctions “when” and “while” are introduced along with past progressive in junior high textbooks and most of the focus is put on tense and verb conjugations. Only some sentences about “when” and “while” are presented in the reading and dialogue sections. Following the dialogue and reading sections, a table of comparison between “when” and “while” is provided but without any further explanations about how to use the two conjunctions. See the following table:

Frank was thin	when	he was nine years old.
He went mountain climbing		the typhoon was coming
I was watching TV		you called.
Betty studies	while	Nancy is listening to music
I ate a cake		Mom was cooking dinner.
I'm surfing the Internet		you were reading.

(From 何嘉仁 English Focus 8 下第六課)

Such a table is easy for students to memorize but the clear-cut division between “when” and “while” might be problematic. The subordinating clauses in the “while” table are all progressive and the subordinating clauses in “when” table include simple past and past progressive. This may lead to students’ misconception that while-clauses always involve progressive and when-clauses are compatible with both. Besides, there is no explanation about temporal relations between the two actions and the verb features, which are the essential differences between “when” and “while”. Students might get confused with sentence like “We played chess while they slept.”

Below the table are the mechanical drills asking students to complete sentences with “when” or “while” given as a clue. The drills are as follows:

(1) You were in Japan. The typhoon was there.

→ The typhoon was there when you were in Japan.

(2) Connie was worried. Connie saw George dancing.

→ Connie was worried when she saw George dancing.

(3) Simon studied hard. Simon's mother came home.

→ Simon studied hard when his mother came home.

(From 何嘉仁 English Focus 8 下第六課)

The drills are limited and meaningless in the way that students do not create sentences by themselves but combine sentences in a very restricted way. Drill (1) is like a blank-filling exercise. Students could fill in the other sentence without thinking about the cohesion. This drill even does not require students to use “when” or “while” since the conjunction has been provided in the stem. Drill (2) and (3) are sentence combination exercises, asking students to decide which sentence should precede the conjunction and which should follow. Such drills are very restricted since the conjunctions are decided and sentence (3) is hard to decide the sentence order partly due to the ambiguity involved. Sentence (2) is not so ambiguous since the two actions are sequential and only “when” can be employed to express the temporal order here. Connie was worried “after” she saw George dancing and thus the dancing action would follow the conjunction “when”. However, sentence (3) is ambiguous because the two actions are simultaneous and compatible with “when” and “while”. It seems that the sentence “Simon’s mother came home when he studied hard.” is also grammatical and acceptable but with different information focus. If Simon’s mother came home when he studied hard, the action of his mother’s coming home was considered to be an intervening action during the process of Simon’s studying. While the sentence “Simon studied hard when his mother came home” is the opposite situation and thus the two sentences differ in the information focus and the action that intervenes in the middle. Pragmatically speaking, the order reflects speakers’ intention of placing his/her information focus and thus is dependent on contexts. As a result, such a drill that asks students to arrange the order is ambiguous and confusing to students, especially when there is a limitation on the conjunction provided.

In addition to the textbooks, the supplemental exercise books provide explanations about “when” and “while” but some of them are incomplete and even problematic.

表時間的從屬連接詞 when while 的用法

When (當...時)用於表示連接的兩個子句動作同時發生

句型: 主要子句+when+從屬子句 When+從屬子句, 主要子句

1. 兩子句中的動詞皆用簡單式

2. 主要子句動作發生時, 強調從屬子句之動作也正在發生

此時主要子句用進行式, 從屬子句用簡單式

While (正當...的時候 和...同時)表示動作持續一段時間

句型: 主要子句+while+從屬子句 While+從屬子句, 主要子句

1. 表示主要子句及從屬子句之兩動作同時持續進行 動詞皆用進行式
2. 表示一動作持續, 另一動作瞬間發生時, 主要子句用簡單式, 從屬子句用進行式

比較: when while 用法之不同—while 所指時間範圍較廣, 以強調動作延續時間

- a. I was singing when he came in.
- b. He came in while I was singing.

(From 何嘉仁題庫 8 下 第六課)

The explanations above are not complete in the way that temporal relations and verb features are not introduced. About the usages of “when,” only the concept of simultaneity in temporal relations are discussed with the other concept of sequentiality ignored. In addition, only duration features of verbs are mentioned in the usages of “while”. The unique feature that “while” can be used to express simultaneity is not mentioned. The explanation here is thus incomplete and might affect students’ knowledge about the tense and aspect of the subordinating clause. As it can be seen from the explanations, it is possible for students to conclude that while-clause should use progressive and when-clause should be compatible with simple or progressive. This misconception results from the over-generalized statements that “when 兩子句中的動詞皆用簡單式” and “while 表示主要子句及從屬子句之兩動作同時持續進行, 動詞皆用進行式”. Students should be provided with more specific and essential explanations to help them know how to use “when” and “while”.

In addition, the contrast between “when” and “while” is not so accurate and complete. By stating “while 所指時間範圍較廣, 以強調動作延續時間” does not indicate the differences specifically. As discussed before, the main difference does not only lie in sequentiality and simultaneity but also the features of verb duration. Bearing the understanding in mind, students could know sentence (b) actually can also become “He came in when I was singing”.

Another problem found in exercise book is that almost all translation exercises involve the word “當” and sound awkward. For example:

- a. 當我下午走路回家時, 開始下雨了

b. 當看到她出現在電視上時，大家都非常驚訝

c. 當我正在做功課時，我聽音樂

(From 何嘉仁挑戰講義 8 下)

If all the “當” are removed from the stems, it will sound more natural. Students should still be able to use “when” or “while” as conjunctions if they understand the sentences semantically. Providing “當” in these translation exercises might lead students to translate verbatim without knowing how to use the conjunctions appropriately.

3. Reflections

After investigating the problems found in journal articles from mainland China, I found the problems are not so serious but only improper and difficult for students to process. For example, the detailed categories made by teachers from mainland China are complicated, but they are not wrong essentially. Perhaps it is because most of the articles are item-analysis and they are produced to help students deal with entrance exams. Some feasible and clear explanations like temporal relations and verb features are also significantly helpful in clarifying the tangled usages of “when” and “while”.

The over-generalized rules and incomplete explanations also have their own reasons though they have very limited help for students. The over-generalized rules are limited and partial because they only present the most frequent occurrences. The incomplete explanations may be due to students’ proficiency level (junior high students) so the books tend to provide simple explanations as much as they can. Most of the explanations put emphasis on tense and aspect of the subordinating clause and students also pay their attention to these parts. If students can be aware of the underlying differences of the two conjunctions as early as possible, it is possible that they can have a better understanding of the language and apply the concept to other grammatical features.

4. References

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