

English and Chinese Thought Patterns and Their Impact on Translation Teaching

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Abstract

Translation is widely accepted not only as a transformation of linguistic forms, but also as a particular activity of cross-cultural communication. As one of the most important aspects of culture, thought pattern will exert great influence upon translation. Totally four pairs of English and Chinese patterns are discussed, such as abstract thought vs. image thought, analytical thought vs. synthetical thought, object-centered thought vs. subject-centered thought, and linear thought vs. spiral thought. Based on the discussion, four translation techniques are put forward which will be quite essential in translation teaching. The techniques are such as transformation between animate subjects and inanimate subjects, transformation between nouns and verbs, transformation between prepositions and verbs, transformation between the end-weight sentences and the beginning-weight sentences.

Key words: Thought patterns; Chinglish; Translation teaching; Translation techniques

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays there are an increasing number of English learners in China. Especially in large cities, almost every

person can speak a little English, if not much. However, they are accustomed to think with their own Chinese thought pattern so that the English they speak sounds strange and abnormal, which is called Chinglish, a kind of unidiomatic English. Not only they speak Chinglish, but also write. When writing a composition or translating a passage, Chinese students tend to first think with Chinese thought pattern, and then express out meanings. Obviously the sentences or texts they have produced are fairly difficult to understand so that they cannot meet their communicative needs. As everybody knows, translation teaching, one of the essential parts in EFL (English as a foreign language) teaching, involves both English and Chinese, and therefore the discussion of thought patterns will be very useful for the translation teaching.

1. THOUGHT, LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION

What is thought? There are many kinds of definitions about it in dictionaries. From the perspective of philosophy and linguistics, thought is a kind of activity in which human brains record the objective world. Thinking is a process, first from concept to judgment, and then from judgment to inference. Specifically speaking, firstly, concepts are formed on the basis of perceptual knowledge, and then are used to make judgments, which are used to ratiocinate finally. However, it is only the first step or cycle, and it is still necessary for us to have another one. Only by repeated cycles like that, can we really revise and deepen our understanding toward the objective world (Zhou, 2003, p.1).

As for the relation between language and thought, the viewpoints of different linguists and philosophers vary greatly. Traditionally, language is only a tool used to exchange messages and express ideas. It is a system of signs used in personal communications. Language is

the carrier of thought, and thought is the backbone of language. Without language, thought cannot be shaped; without thought, language cannot deliver rich meanings. Translation, a transform process from one language to another, is both linguistic and thinking activity. Different thinking patterns have great impact on translation. The commonness of different thinking patterns is the basis on which translation can be carried on, while the individuality of those shows unique expressions of every language. Chinese people and American people are quite different, mainly reflected on cultural backgrounds, traditions, values, etc. As a result, it is undoubtedly that there exist lots of dissimilarities between these two thinking patterns, and thereby their language expressions should be adopted quite differently.

2. CHINGLISH AND THOUGHT PATTERNS

When Chinese people speak or write English, due to the influence and disturbance of Chinese thought pattern and culture, they will undoubtedly create a kind of distorted English, which is abnormal or not in accordance with expressive conventions of authentic English. This kind of English is generally called Chinglish (Chang, 2013). It usually appears when Chinese people learn English. Although it may exist temporarily in one's learning process, it is an inevitable language phenomenon. Sometimes, although Chinglish sounds abnormal to native speakers, if they take into consideration social context and pragmatic purpose, it is still acceptable. However, sometimes Chinglish will make listeners quite puzzled, even strongly offend them or make stupid mistakes, hence leading to communication breakdown.

For Chinese learners Chinglish is quite a common phenomenon, and at the same time it is such a difficult problem that it is usually put aside. Even if graduation is drawing near, most students still cannot break away from restrictions of Chinese thought pattern. The English they speak is still far away from authentic one.

Now in order to have a clear understanding, the author would like to show some examples selected from the book *Detailed Expounding of Typical Mistakes in CET-4 Test* (Chen & Cheng, 2001, pp.278-279).

a) Chinglish: Music has many kinds.

Authentic English: There are many kinds of music.

b) Chinglish: They think that doing housework will lower themselves.

Authentic English: They think it will be a shame if they do housework.

c) Chinglish: We don't leave from books in our lives.

Authentic English: Our life would be flat and dull without books.

Causes leading to Chinglish include many aspects such as thought pattern of mother tongue, learning strategy,

communicative strategy, culture and etc., among which the disturbance of thought pattern of mother tongue is one of the most important factors. As for causes like learning strategy, communicative strategy and culture, they will not be discussed in detail, and only thought pattern of mother tongue will be stressed.

3. A CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF ENGLISH AND CHINESE THOUGHT PATTERNS

In the previous sections, we have discussed the relation among thought, language, and translation. It is clear that studying thought patterns is necessary for English learners, and we should know more about dissimilarities between English and Chinese thought patterns. This section will make a contrastive study about them mainly from four aspects, including abstract thought vs. image thought, analytical thought vs. synthetical thought, object-centered thought vs. subject-centered thought, and linear thought vs. spiral thought.

3.1 Abstract Thought and Image Thought

After western modern experimental science came into being, the thought pattern of English and American people gradually laid more stress on analysis and generalization. They began to become adept in illustrating concrete things with abstract concepts, and paid much attention to the application and improvement of abstract thinking ability. The thought pattern is clearly reflected in language. For instance, abstract nouns are frequently used to explain complex concepts.

Chinese people are inclined to use the image thought pattern when they are acting, thinking or speaking. They prefer to explain abstract concepts with concrete and vivid images. Consequently, there are comparatively more concrete words in Chinese. Furthermore, there is no means of adding affixes like English, and therefore, morphological changes are much less. This unique feature of Chinese thought pattern determines that there will be lots of dissimilarities in language usage and sentence patterns of Chinese and English. In Chinese cultural images are mostly favored. Chinese people have been accustomed to combine the depiction of images with delivering meanings so as to express their specific emotions, which is also called a unique writing technique "blending emotions with scenes". In particular, this kind of writing technique is widely adopted in ancient poetry.

To sum up, English people are centered on abstract thought, and therefore, abstract nouns are comparatively more frequently used. Chinese people, however, pay more attention to the image thought, so a large number of concrete images are used to illustrate abstract concepts.

3.2 Analytical Thought and Synthetical Thought

When analyzing a problem or a social phenomenon, English and American people usually disintegrate a

whole into several parts, and then gradually come to a conclusion by expounding every part in details. Therefore, the thought pattern of English and American people belongs to the individual and analytical type. In comparison, the thought pattern of Chinese people belongs to the holistic and synthetic type. Accordingly, Chinese people prefer to take a comprehensive view of the general situation first, and then consider specific details. The two different thought patterns also have an obvious reflection upon language. That is to say, in English, almost all the language components are linked together by means of hypotaxis, while in Chinese, by means of parataxis. Hypotaxis is a kind of writing techniques, which is frequently used in English. Consequently, in an English text, almost all sorts of phrases, clauses and sentences are orderly and coherently organized together with prepositions, relatives, and conjunctions. However, parataxis is widely used in Chinese. It also mainly refers to a kind of principle organizing sentences or texts. In accordance with it, meanings are put in the first place while forms in the second place. Therefore, in a Chinese text, phrases, clauses and sentences are seldom organized by relatives or conjunctions. However, the sequence of them must be strictly arranged so as to make their meanings clearly understood.

3.3 Object-Centered Thought and Subject-Centered Thought

English and American people usually lay much stress on object-centered thought. They tend to use objective and experimental methods to consider inherent relation among things. To some degree, they separate objects from human beings, and think that human beings live only to know and then to change the objective world. As for Chinese people, they usually lay stress on subject-centered thought and believe that nothing else is able to do things consciously. What is more, since the ancient time, they have been pursuing harmony between human being and nature, so in their minds, the subjective world and the objective world are closely unified together.

Different thought patterns are sure to have different reflections upon languages. Chinese thought emphasizes unity of subject and object, and especially stresses the conscious dynamic role of human beings. Therefore, in Chinese sentences, subjects are usually acted as by animated nouns, and active voice is also frequently adopted. In contrast, English thought emphasizes opposition of subject and object, and in particular lay stress on reaction of the objective world toward human beings. Accordingly, in English sentences, sometimes subjects are also acted as by inanimate or abstract nouns, and active and passive voices are entirely different.

3.4 Linear Thought and Spiral Thought

For a long time, English and American people have been taking “separation of human beings from heaven” as

their view about the universe. They think that things in the world are not necessarily keeping a close connection with each other, and that is to say, they are almost not dependent on others. Consequently, when analyzing problems or phenomena, usually they do not take into consideration things that are not relevant enough to the topics. They prefer to come to the point directly other than beat about the bush, and dislike to conceal true viewpoints with irrelevant information, as if a person is walking in a straight line without any deviation. Based on what have been mentioned above, it is generally considered that English and American people are pursuing a linear type of thought.

In contrast, the traditional view about the universe of Chinese people is “unity between heaven and human being”. They think that the world is a united one, and everything is more or less connected with others. Furthermore, they insist that if you ignore or separate the correlations among things in the world, you will be seriously punished. Consequently, when discussing problems, usually Chinese people first talk about irrelevant things, such as persons, incidents, current situation, and international events and so on, and then come to the central topic. Therefore, it is considered very important for a Chinese speaker to present a good opening speech, especially on a formal occasion. Sometimes, they are habitually deviated from the topic under the discussion unconsciously. However, they will quickly come back to the topic, because they are still keeping a clear train of thought. This kind of thinking mode sounds different, as if a person is walking in a spiral way. Accordingly, Chinese people are considered to pursue the spiral type of thought.

4. E-C AND C-E TRANSLATION TECHNIQUES

In the previous section, a comparative study of English and Chinese thought patterns has been made in a macro way. It is clear that thought is closely connected with translation of different languages, and therefore it is quite natural and necessary to explore the translation teaching techniques. This section will discuss the point from the following aspects.

4.1 Transformation Between Animate Subject and Inanimate Subject

Objective thought is stressed in English, so English and American people pay much attention to the reaction of the objective world upon human beings. However, subjective thought is stressed in Chinese, so Chinese people usually focus on the role of human beings, and think that conscious behaviors can be taken only by human beings. Consequently, inanimate subjects, including material objects, abstract concepts and nouns derived

from verbs or adjectives, are usually applied in English. On the contrary, the animate subjects are frequently used in Chinese. If the difference is ignored in translation, the articles of target language will be crude, incomprehensible and awkward. Therefore, in translation teaching, teachers should illustrate clearly to students two kinds of English structures. One is English Subject of Abstract Nouns. In English, abstract nouns and inanimate objects are naturally used as subjects, and verbs or verb phrases indicating human behaviors are used as predicates, which is characterized by rhetorical color of personification. The other is formal subject “it” and “there be” structures. The structures are quite unique to English language, and therefore deserving great attention.

4.2 Transformation Between Nouns and Verbs

As mentioned before, English belongs to the hypotaxis-stressed language, in which grammatical rules are strictly abided by in sentence building. First, in English, the subject must be in consistent with the predicate in persons and numbers, and generally only one definite verb is allowed to use in one simple sentence. Furthermore, in the previous section we say that English is characterized by predominance of nouns, so indefinite verbs and nouns are usually used to depict actions or behaviors. Also it is true that there are plenty of nouns derived from their adjective or verb forms. They are mainly created by one word-formation method called affixation, namely the method of adding prefixes or suffixes to roots, such as “improvement, eagerness, swimmer, characterization and etc.”.

However, Chinese belongs to the parataxis-stressed language, so sentence structure is not strictly restricted to grammar but depends much upon meaning. Consequently, in Chinese, in order to make a vivid and detailed description, many verbs are usually used to depict plots in sentences. It is just like what I mentioned before that Chinese is characterized by predominance of verbs.

In a word, we should pay attention to the different characteristics of English and Chinese. To be more specific, in E-C translation we should try to change some English nouns into Chinese verbs if possible, while in C-E translation, we should try to change some Chinese verbs into English nouns if possible. However, it doesn't mean that in all the sentence translations, and just make us have such kind of consciousness.

4.3 Transformation Between Prepositions and Verbs

In English that is considered the hypotaxis-stressed language, sentences are mainly made up by means of inflections and conjunctions. What's more, since there are many kinds of indefinite verbs and nouns used in sentences, it is essential to use lots of prepositions, kind of linking words, to express grammatical relations. Therefore, prepositions are far more frequently used in English than those in Chinese. According to the famous

linguist Crum, there are totally 286 English prepositions, including simple prepositions (such as “in, at, to, on, by, from, between and etc.”), compound prepositions (such as “into, outside, without, upon, throughout and etc.”), double prepositions (such as “from behind, until after and etc.”) and idiomatic prepositions (in front of, in addition to, according to, on behalf of and etc.), among which the simple prepositions are most frequently used (Wang, 2003, p.84). In a word, preposition is regarded as an important linking between sentence components, and it is justifiable to say that having a good command of English prepositions is considered one important standard to evaluate whether the English language is really mastered or not.

However, in Chinese, there are only about 30 prepositions, which are far less than those in English. On the contrary, as we mentioned before, verbs are widely used in Chinese. Therefore, we should make a flexible transform in translation. In other words, if possible we can change prepositions into verbs in E-C translation, or verbs into prepositions in C-E translation, so as to make versions fitted for the usual use and expressions in target languages.

4.4 Transformation Between the End-Weight Sentence and the Beginning-Weight Sentence

As mentioned before, linear thought is stressed in English, while spiral thought in Chinese. It turns out that there are more end-weight sentences in English and more beginning-weight ones in Chinese. As we know, in end-weight sentences conclusions or central topics are put forward in the first, and then comes other conditions or reasons, while in beginning-weight sentences, the sequence is just the opposite. Therefore, if possible, in translation we should try to make a change between English end-weight sentences and Chinese beginning-weight ones.

CONCLUSION

Different people in different nations have different thought patterns. Language and thought are interacted with each other. Without language, thought cannot be shaped; without thought, language cannot deliver rich meanings. The expressive ways of language will vary widely from each other due to different thought patterns. Different thinking patterns have great impact on translation. The commonness of different thinking patterns is the basis on which translation can be carried on, while the individuality of those is showing unique expressions of every language. In translation teaching, learners should have a good command of translation techniques in order to avoid Chinglish and irregular Chinese and improve translation quality. It is certain that the techniques discussed is not necessarily suitable for all the situations, and it is suggested that we should take differences of

English and Chinese thoughts into a good consideration, and try to make versions more faithful, expressive and elegant.

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