How Thinking Differences Appear in Texts: The Cultural Logic Behind English-Chinese Syntactic Divergences and Their Translation

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Abstract

From the perspective of hypotaxis and parataxis, this paper explores the fundamental differences between English and Chinese syntactic structures. These linguistic distinctions are rooted in the divergent natural and humanistic traditions, national characteristics, and modes of thinking of Eastern and Western cultures. In the West, analytical thinking based on the subject-object dichotomy gives rise to the hypotactic nature of English. This hypotaxis relies on explicit grammatical markers and is characterized by tree-like, multi-layered structures, front-loaded focus, and the frequent use of impersonal subjects, passive constructions, and nominalization. In contrast, Chinese, influenced by the intuitive and dialectical thinking stemming from the concept of the unity of heaven and humanity, exhibits a paratactic character. This parataxis emphasizes semantic coherence, arranges sentences according to logical and temporal sequences of events, and tends to employ the active voice, personal subjects, and verbs, with the focus typically placed at the end. Building on this foundation, the paper incorporates translation examples to delineate conversion strategies adapted to the features of the two languages. These strategies encompass techniques such as word order adjustment, voice conversion, restructuring of attributives and adverbials, clause splitting, part-of-speech conversion, and addition or omission. The study demonstrates that various translation methods are not isolated techniques but are essentially conversion pathways that bridge the gap between hypotaxis and parataxis. Grasping this core categorical pair assists translators in producing renderings that conform to the expressive conventions of the target language while remaining faithful to the meaning of the source text.

Keywords

Cultural logic, English-Chinese differences, Translation strategies, Hypotaxis and parataxis

Introduction

Any discussion of the differences between English and Chinese sentence structures must necessarily account for the fundamental distinction between the two languages: The English system of syntactic subordination (hypotaxis) and the Chinese system of semantic coordination (parataxis). This contrast stems from a more fundamental principle: When studying thought and its embodiment in language, one should not regard language and thought as isolated from each other from the outset but rather treat them as an inseparable unity [1]. In other words, the syntactic distinctions between English and Chinese stem from underlying differences in cognitive patterns. English thinking is characteristically analytical, employing explicit hypotactic structures for expression. Conversely, Chinese thinking is typically holistic, relying on implicit paratactic connections for manifestation. Recent contrastive scholarship has reaffirmed this distinction. For example, Wang considered the distinction between hypotaxis and parataxis to be a well-established claim regarding the fundamental differences between English and Chinese. He argued that English, as a language of concrete signs, depends on explicit formal markers to establish logical relationships. In contrast, Chinese, as a language of blank signs, achieves coherence through contextual inference and implicit semantic connections [2]. In short, English places greater emphasis on linguistic form, while Chinese emphasizes the intrinsic logic or meaning of language. This constitutes the fundamental difference in sentence structure between English and Chinese.

The roots of the "hypotactic" vs. "paratactic" difference: Cultural logic

The fundamental distinction between "form-based cohesion" and "meaning-based cohesion" stems from the differing cultural logics of the East and the West. In other words, the formal (hypotactic) characteristics of English and the semantic (paratactic) characteristics of Chinese are not arbitrary linguistic accidents. Rather, they are shaped by the deeper cultural assumptions each speech community holds regarding the relationship between language, thought, and the world. This section will focus on exploring the causes of these differences from three perspectives: The natural and cultural environments, national character, and ways of thinking in the East and West. These three dimensions are not treated in isolation; instead, they are interwoven, with the natural environment shaping ways of living, which in turn shape national character and modes of thought. Collectively, these factors imprint themselves upon language structure.

It should be noted, however, that previous contrastive studies of English and Chinese syntax, despite several breakthroughs, remain incomplete, often presenting only a partial picture. One possible reason may be that the parataxis - hypotaxis distinction has frequently been treated as a fixed typological property rather than a context-sensitive choice, leaving its underlying cultural logic underexplored [3]. This gap likewise calls for a more systematic account of the cultural logic in question. Concurrently, this section will summarize the views and research of previous scholars.

Differences in the natural and cultural environments of the east and west

The thinking habits of the Chinese people have been influenced by the ancient philosophical concept of "the unity of Heaven and Man", which places great emphasis on the holistic nature of development. Consequently, this mode of thinking is reflected in the Chinese language through an emphasis on "many converging into one", achieved via connections between words and sentences. In terms of expression, it also stresses a progression from the specific to the general, forming characteristic features of Chinese discourse: Ideas are typically presented in chronological order - from cause to effect, from earlier to later, and from the general to the specific [4]. This thinking has given rise to the "structural coherence" of Chinese, whereby semantic relationships link words and sentences to realize the language's intrinsic logical connections. Although the structure may appear scattered, the meaning remains cohesive.

In contrast, the formation and development of English were influenced by the ancient Greek concept of "separation between heaven and humanity". English employs grammatical rules to highlight logical relationships within sentences and emphasizes a progression "from the one to the many". This represents a mode of thinking that moves from the general to the specific, with the subject and predicate serving as the central elements of sentence construction [5]. For example, by using subordinate clauses - with the core subject-predicate structure at the center - and employing words such as participles, prepositions, and conjunctions to highlight formal relationships within the sentence, English achieves its "form-semantic integration".

Differences in eastern and western national character

Western culture tends to be more forthright and expressive - a trait with deep historical roots in Greco-Roman rhetoric, Judeo-Christian explicative traditions, and the subsequent development of analytic philosophy, all of which privilege direct verbal articulation and explicit argumentation. This cultural predisposition lays a solid foundation for the form-based cohesion mechanism of the English language, as speakers are inclined to make logical relations overt through connectives, syntactic subordination, and other formal devices. In contrast, the national character of Eastern peoples is more reserved and subdued, shaped by Confucian norms of modesty, indirectness, and situational propriety, as well as by Daoist and Buddhist sensibilities that value silence, intuition, and the unsaid over explicit statement. This leads Chinese speakers to often convey implicit meanings and to place greater emphasis on the internal logic of language, relying on context, parallel structure, and reader inference rather than explicit markers, thus laying the foundation for Chinese's meaning-based cohesion mechanism.

Differences in eastern and western ways of thinking

Recent research within the Thinking-for-Speaking framework provides empirical support for this view. Chen finds that Chinese English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' first-language conceptualization patterns influence their choice of vocabulary and sentence structure in second-language production. This indicates

that structural discrepancies between native and target languages are rooted in divergences in conceptual structures and thought patterns [6]. Jung et al. demonstrate that first language (L1) thinking-for-speaking patterns influence the formation of second language (L2) grammar among Korean learners of Russian, confirming that L1-based conceptual patterns systematically shape L2 acquisition [7].

First, English typically employs rational thinking, while Chinese typically employs intuitive thinking [8]. English syntax is strict, requiring adherence to grammatical agreement, semantic agreement, and the principle of proximity, and it must follow a subject-predicate structure - a reflection of the "subject-object dichotomy" in object-oriented thinking. The explicit nature of syntax also leads to explicit logic. Chinese, on the other hand, is typically based on intuitive thinking grounded in dialectical logic. Chinese syntax is "flexible", with no strict grammatical rules, and the subject can be omitted. This makes Chinese syntax extremely flexible; indeed, some Chinese sentences can be read from left to right or right to left while retaining the same meaning. For example, "Shanghai's tap water comes from the sea." Furthermore, since Chinese consists mostly of monosyllabic characters with many homophones, this has given rise to rhetorical devices such as alliteration and proverbs, fostering intuitive thinking.

Second, English tends toward adversarial thinking, while Chinese tends toward harmonious thinking. Western medicine typically adopts an approach of "eradication" when combating disease. Influenced by the concept of "the struggle between Heaven and Man", English sentences expand outward, leading to a mindset in which the cognitive subject seeks to conquer the world. English sentences often use objects as subjects, reflecting English's "object-oriented thinking", which places observing the world at the center of analysis, reasoning, and research. In treating illness, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) typically employs a "harmonizing" approach. Influenced by the concept of "unity between Heaven and Man", Chinese sentences expand inward, reflecting the notions of "equality" and "harmony". Chinese emphasizes that "things are within human control", and therefore often uses personal pronouns as subjects.

Specific differences in sentence structure between English and Chinese and their translation strategies

This section will explore the specific differences in sentence structure between English and Chinese, based on the fundamental distinction between English as a form-based system and Chinese as a meaning-based system. This distinction rests on the premise that the structural characteristics of a language constitute its essence, and that we should therefore rely on form to discover and explain meaning [9]. Accordingly, the essential difference between one language and another lies not in meaning, but in the form that expresses meaning - which is precisely why the formal (hypotactic) features of English and the semantic (paratactic) features of Chinese must be examined in their own right. More fundamentally, from the perspective of thought, English is characterized by a strong temporal orientation, whereas Chinese is characterized by a strong spatial orientation. This genetic difference is the root of the various surface differences between the two languages [10]. For each structural difference, the section will provide translation strategies, techniques, and examples to facilitate learning, summarization, and generalization.

Adjusting word order

English typically places the main point at the beginning, whereas Chinese tends to place it at the end. This contrast reflects a broader difference in information structure: English favors a "front-loaded" or "end-focus" pattern, where the nucleus of the message comes first and supporting details follow. In contrast, Chinese often adopts a "back-loaded" or "end-weight" pattern, where background information, causes, or conditions precede the conclusion. The English sentence "He failed the exam as he didn't study hard" exemplifies this front-loaded tendency by stating the result before the cause. A more idiomatic Chinese rendering would reverse the order: "Because he didn't study hard, he failed the exam." This places the cause first and the result last, aligning with Chinese conventions. Therefore, when translating between these languages, word order can be appropriately adjusted to align with their respective expressive conventions. For instance, "He failed the exam as he didn't study hard" can be translated as "Because he didn't study hard, he failed the exam."

Voice conversion

English often employs the passive voice, while Chinese

typically favors the active voice. This divergence is not merely stylistic but reflects a deeper typological difference. English, as a subject-prominent language, readily utilizes the passive construction to foreground the patient or to maintain thematic continuity. In contrast, Chinese, as a topic-prominent language, tends to retain the patient as the topic while leaving the agent implicit or recasting the clause in an active form. Consequently, the Chinese passive marker *bei* carries a strong adversative connotation (as in *beihai*, "to be victimized", and *beipiping*, "to be criticized") and is far less frequent than its English counterpart. Therefore, in translation, translators often convert the passive voice to the active voice or omit the particle *bei*, reserving its use for very rare cases. For example, in the sentence "The ancient castle was destroyed by a severe earthquake in 1906," the passive voice can be converted to the active voice, and the adverbial phrase can be moved to the front, resulting in the translation: "A severe earthquake in 1906 destroyed the ancient castle." Alternatively, the patient may be kept in the subject position with an implicit agent, as in "The ancient castle was destroyed in a severe earthquake in 1906." Here, *bei* is retained primarily because the verb denotes an unfortunate event, illustrating the affective constraint on the Chinese passive. In many other cases, however, an English passive is best rendered by a Chinese active construction or by an unmarked passive (a notional passive), as in "The problem has been solved."

Order of modifiers

Whether translating from Chinese to English or from English to Chinese, attention must be paid to the translation of modifiers. When translating sentences or phrases containing multiple preposed modifiers, minimal changes are generally required because the basic order of multiple modifiers is similar in both Chinese and English. Restrict modifiers (e.g., quantity, possession) come first, followed by descriptive modifiers (e.g., quality, shape, color), and finally classificatory modifiers (e.g., country of origin, material). For example, "this pretty royal botanic garden" can be translated as *zhege piaoliang de huangjia shengwuyuan* ("this pretty royal botanic garden"). In Chinese, modifiers are typically placed before the head noun, whereas in English, modifiers may precede, follow, or even surround the head noun. Therefore, when translating English sentences with multiple modifiers into Chinese, the order can be arranged according to the modifiers' proximity to the head noun. Conversely, when translating from Chinese to English, one should first determine the position of the modifiers according to English conventions and then sequence them in the order of restrictive, descriptive, and classificatory modifiers. For example, "It was a small, old, wooden bridge over the quiet river behind the ancient village" can be translated as *na shi yizuo weiyu gulao cunzhuang houmian, hengkua jingmi xiaohe zhi shang de chenjiu xiaomu qiao* ("that is an old small wooden bridge located behind the ancient village and spanning the quiet little river"). In contrast, when translating from Chinese to English, *ta mai le yitiao cong Shanghai dai hui lai de, piaoliang de, shougong zhizuo de, sichou weijin* can be rendered as "She bought a beautiful handmade silk scarf brought back from Shanghai."

Adjustment of adverbial phrases

In translation, adverbial phrases in English are sometimes separated into independent clauses. This technique proves particularly useful when the adverbial element - often a comment adverb, a parenthetical phrase, or a condensed participial construction - carries significant semantic weight that would sound awkward or overloaded if kept within a single Chinese sentence. This not only makes the sentence flow more smoothly but also better aligns with Chinese expression conventions, since Chinese tends to favor shorter, paratactic clauses linked by meaning rather than long, hypotactic sentences held together by formal markers. For example, "Those Chinese scientists in Silicon Valley are understandably proud of their achievements" can be translated as "These Chinese scientists working in Silicon Valley are very proud of their achievements. This is understandable" - here the adverb "understandably" is detached and rendered as an independent comment clause, "This is understandable," which reads more naturally in Chinese than forcing it into a single adverbial modifier.

Clause transformation

English is a subject-verb-object language that typically employs clauses to express logical relationships, whereas Chinese structures are generally simpler. Consequently, when encountering clauses in translation, it is necessary to analyze their structure to find an appropriate rendering.

When translating relative clauses, one can decide whether to position the clause before or after the main clause based on its length. Occasionally, relative clauses may also be translated as various types of adverbial phrases, converted into other clause types, or even rendered as independent sentences. For example, "He wrote a book which quickly became a bestseller and inspired a generation" can be translated as *ta xie le yi ben shu, zhe ben shu xunsu chengwei changxiaoshu, bing jili le yi dai ren* ("he wrote a book; this book quickly became a bestseller and inspired a generation"). English adverbial clauses can similarly be rendered using separate clauses, combined clauses, or through reordering. For instance, "He stole, not because he wanted the money but because he liked stealing" can be translated as "He didn't steal for the money; he just liked stealing."

Other translation techniques

In addition to the aforementioned translation approaches, one may employ addition, omission, or ellipsis to render the source text's meaning more concrete or abstract, ensuring that the translation better aligns with the target language's context. For example, when translating from English to Chinese, it is appropriate to add subject elements where necessary. One can also apply the translation technique of part-of-speech conversion. English tends to use nouns more frequently, while Chinese tends to favor verbs. Therefore, when translating from English to Chinese, nouns can be converted into verbs, and in some cases, even prepositions may be converted into verbs. When translating, one should also select different techniques based on the content and context of the text. For example, economic texts and advertising texts require distinct translation approaches.

Conclusion

In summary, differences in the natural and cultural environments, national character, and ways of thinking between the East and the West have led to divergences in the sentence structures of English and Chinese. Specifically, English relies on hypotactic formal cohesion, while Chinese relies on paratactic semantic cohesion. Cross-linguistic structural disparities of this kind can be understood as stemming from divergences in conceptual structures and thought patterns. From this perspective, three key observations can be drawn: First, English, like Chinese, exhibits space-time isomorphism. Second, space-time isomorphism does not preclude subjective spatio-temporal divergences between English and Chinese, and sustained inquiry into cross-linguistic contrasts helps to foreground the unique properties of each language. Third, the "present in one but absent in the other" contrasts between the two languages reveal that Chinese is characterized by a distinctive, strong spatiality compared with English. Building on this observation, we have further identified additional syntactic distinctions. Chinese tends to favor the active voice, multiple subjects, and serial verb constructions. It typically places focal information at the sentence end and adopts pre-modification. In contrast, English prefers the passive voice, embedded clauses, and nominalization. It usually positions the main point at the start of a sentence. Drawing on these syntactic differences, we have distilled practical translation strategies, including reordering, clause splitting, clause merging, conversion of parts of speech, and voice shift.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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