

# The Transformation of Thought Patterns in English-Chinese Translation

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Translation involves not only formal transformation of two languages concerned, but also conversion of thought patterns. The oriental thought pattern is considered “concrete”, “man-centered”, and “ordinal”; while the western one is believed to be “abstract”, “object-centered”, and “conversed”. These are the decisive factors for the existence of the differences in language expressing. It is of great importance to study these differences and make some adjustments in terms of syntactic structure, semantic focus, and time order so as to achieve a natural rendering.

*Keywords:* transformation of thought patterns, Chinese-English translation, syntactic structure, semantic focus, time order

## Introduction

Thought and language are deeply interrelated. Language is the reflection of thought. The particular structure of a language may reflect to a certain degree the way people think. People’s thought patterns vary a lot because the social surroundings in which they came into existence are different, which to a great extent gives rise to different ways of speaking (LIAN, 2002). Translation therefore concerns not only the formal restructuring but also the transformation of thought patterns between the source language and the target language. It is essential for translators to take thought patterns of speakers into consideration and explore their influence on the way they speak, which is of great importance for natural and idiomatic translation.

Thought is considered to be the process which uses the conceptions, judgment, and reasoning to reflect the objective world (Porter & Samovar, 1995). It is gradually developed under the influence of a nation’s philosophy, culture, and conventions. Chinese believe everything comes from nature and their existence is dependent upon the bestowal of nature, thus nurturing the philosophical idea of “Heaven-Man Oneness” or “Nature-Man Oneness” (YU, 2007). They believe it is an indivisible and interactive whole between men and nature. This kind of integral pattern of thought gives rise to Chinese inclination of general comprehension of the world. They tend to put intuitive description over analytical reasoning. When expressed by means of language, the most prominent feature of Chinese is its emphasis on parataxis. By contrast, Western thought patterns lay stress on scientific experiments and formal argumentation. This analytical pattern of thought is nature-oriented and is developed on the basis of observing and experiments, paying more attention to logical instead of perceptual thinking. When expressed by means of language, English is a hypotaxis language, stressing formal connection among sentences.

### Major Differences Between Chinese and Western Thought Patterns

The world can be geographically divided into the East and the West represented by China, West Europe and North America respectively, who belong to two different systems in terms of culture, with each one having their own specific thought pattern. The Oriental culture lays more stress on humanity, ethics, and morality, whereas the Westerners pay more attention to the nature, science, and techniques; Easterners give higher priority to perceptivity, intuition, and image, while Westerners value rationalism and logic and empirical study; Easterners tend to be quiet and conservative and emphasizes conformity to tradition, yet Westerners are more open and extroverted and prefer mobility; Easterners pursue harmony, stability, and moderation, while Westerners stress diversity, variety, and competition. It is claimed that feminine inclination is characteristic of Chinese patterns of thought, Western thought, on the contrary, is reportedly called the “virile qualities language” with the inclination to masculinity (Jespersen, 1965).

Generally speaking, the Eastern pattern of thought is concrete, human-oriented, and ordinal, while the Western pattern of thought is comparatively abstract, object-oriented, and conversed.

#### Concrete Pattern of Thought and Abstract Pattern of Thought

The different thought patterns manifest themselves in Chinese and English with their characteristics of concreteness and abstractness respectively. On language expressions, it is not common for Chinese to express an abstract concept by using abstract words except for essays on science, philosophy, and politics. By contrast, English is characterized by its extensive use of abstract words. For instance:

*Wisdom prepares for the worst; but folly leaves the worst for the day it comes.*

In this sentence, abstract nouns *wisdom* and *folly* are used as the subjects, referring to wise and foolish figures. This way of expression is pretty natural and accurate lexically and syntactically for Westerners accustomed to abstract thinking. When translated into Chinese, the abstract words need to be concretized in line with Chinese customary concrete pattern of thought. The translation would be: “聪明人未雨绸缪，愚蠢者临渴掘井”. Unlike the abstractness of Western formal analysis, Chinese displays an “informal logic” under the influence of its concrete pattern of thought.

#### Subjective and Objective Pattern of Thought

The Chinese man-centered way of thinking gradually contributes to the subjectiveness primarily found in Chinese. Man is usually viewed as the center or the subject of the cosmos in the process of observation, analysis, inference, and investigation, whereas the objective world is of primary consideration to the Westerners (YU, 2002). The stress on the nature and objects leads to the formation of objective way of thinking extensively accepted by English speakers. Shown in language, Chinese are accustomed to employing nouns or pronouns to refer to persons or creatures as subjects or potential subjects of a sentence, while the Westerners stress on the objective world resulting in the employment of non-personal subject, such as object or abstract concept, as the subject of a sentence. For example: “*His name* escaped me for the moment”. The non-personal words “*his name*” is employed as the subject in the English expression. The natural Chinese translation should use personal pronoun “I” as the subject: “我一时记不起他的名字” (*I* cannot remember his name for the moment). For another instance, “*A strange peace* came over her when she was alone”. The Chinese translation is “她独处时便感到一种特殊的安宁” (She had a strange sense of peace when she was alone). The two English sentences with no doubt conform to the objective pattern of thought and are the common practice in English expression. When translated into Chinese, it is necessary to use the agent as the subject in accordance

with logic and context to cater to the Chinese subjective way of thinking. Otherwise, it may strike Chinese readers as incoherent or non-standard and give rise to ambiguity or even misunderstanding in communication.

### **The Ordinal and Conversed Thought Patterns**

The difference between Chinese and Western thought patterns also lies in their ordinal and conversed way of thinking. When offering privilege out of courtesy, Chinese would say “您先请!” (you go first), while the English expression is “After you”. In English, *back* is used to indicate the past and *forward* the future. For instance, *to look back on*, *far back in the Middle Ages*, *to put/turn the clock back*, *a back issue magazine* and so on. Chinese way of thinking is quite the opposite regarding this, “前” (forward) by Chinese indicating the past, while “后” (back) suggesting the future. For example, “前所未有” means unprecedented in the past; “后继有人” refers to qualified successors who will surely emerge in the future; “好戏还在后面” suggests the really interesting part of the show is yet to come (you have not seen anything yet).

On top of that, the difference between the ordinal and conversed thought patterns also exists in noun combinations referring to two objects or directions. For example: “左右” (left and right) — right and left; “东北” (eastnorth) — northeast; “西南” (westsouth) — southwest; “衣食” (clothing and food) — food and clothing; “钢铁” (steel and iron) — iron and steel; “水火” (water and fire) — fire and water; “迟早” (later or sooner) — sooner or later; “得失” (gain and loss) — loss and gain; “异同” (differences and similarities) — similarities and differences, etc.

Westerners also differentiate from the Easterners in terms of the perspectives from which the world is observed. In other words, the two races perceive the same thing from different angles. For instance, “打了八折” in Chinese means a consumer would have to pay 80% of the full price, while the same notion would be 20% *discount* or 20% *off* in English. Also, “寒衣” (cold clothes) in Chinese is equivalent to *warm clothes* in English, seen from the perspective of keeping out the cold and keeping warm respectively. Similarly, examples like “油漆未干” (the paint is not dry) — wet paint, “乘客止步” (passengers not allowed) — crew only, “太平门” (safty exit) — emergency exit, can be found in many other cases. Attention to those distinctions is required to avoid inappropriate or even ridiculous expression in intercultural communication.

## **The Transformation of Thinking Patterns in Translation**

Translation is more than a linguistic practice, but also a mental creation using another language. Although mental work is a universal activity common to all races, people tend to perceive the same content from different perspectives. Those differences will definitely give rise to different way of expressions linguistically. Therefore, in most cases, the transformation of thinking patterns is inevitable in translation so as to conform to the receptors’ linguistic needs and cultural expectations (PENG & HE, 2016).

Specifically speaking, adaptations in syntactic structure, semantic stress, and time orders are absolutely necessary in the process of transformation to achieve complete naturalness of expression.

### **Adaptation in Syntactic Structures**

Chinese and English speakers have different alignments of information, which contributes to their different syntactic structures. The structural transformation between Chinese and English boils down to the conversion from parataxis to hypotaxis (Nida, 1975). As a non-inflected language, Chinese is a kind of mobile and flexible language. Its formal mechanism is not strong; the subject, predicate, and object have not been demarcated; the structure of subject-predicate is not compact and its object has no fixed position. These

formally loose clauses need to be rearranged on the syntactic level in accordance with the subject-predicate framework when translated into English. It is preferable for the translators to conduct logical analysis to the Chinese source text and determine the subject as well as predicate accordingly in its corresponding English sentence to seek the closest natural equivalent to the source language message. The clearly defined formal structure can be reconstructed flexibly on condition of adhering to the general subject-predicate framework. As a subject-prominent language, English seems comparatively compact or even rigorous with its subject-predicate fixture and other adjunct components. Except for elliptical sentences, subject is indispensable in English. The hypotaxis characteristic of English demands explicit relationship among its constructional components to avoid semantic ambiguity or errors caused by syntactic problems. Take the following sentence as an example:

(1) 盛有半杯水的杯子(a half-glass of water), 你是否只考虑它有水的一半, 而不管那没水的一半? 空心的面包圈 (a hollow doughnut), 你是否只盯着那圈面包, 而不去理会那个空心?

Chinese is known for emphasizing parataxis and covert coherence while English stresses hypotaxis and overt cohesion (JIA, ZHANG, & SHI, 2014). In this sentence, it is hard to spot the subject in the Chinese text. We need to add a subject in its English equivalent:

*Do you see the glass as half full rather than half empty? Do you keep your eye upon the doughnut, not upon the hollow?*

This receptor-oriented approach considers adaptation of grammar and thought patterns to be essential in hope of achieving naturalness and meeting the expectations of English readers.

Take another sentence as an example:

(2) 因为距离远, 又缺乏交通工具, 使农村社会与外界隔绝, 而这种隔绝, 又由于交通工具不足而变得更加严重。

An unqualified translator would most probably put the sentence in this way:

*Because there is a great distance and there are not enough transport facilities, the rural world is isolated. This isolation has become more serious because there are not enough information media.*

The word-by-word translation would strike English speakers as awkward and redundant. A more appropriate translation would be:

*The isolation of the rural world, because of distance and the lack of transport facilities, is compounded by the paucity of the information media.*

In this translation, there are only one subject and one predicate with other components connected by adverbial clause.

Last but not least, it is rare for Chinese to use time and place as subjects, which however is a common practice in English. For example, “八点钟, 汤姆起床穿衣” (At eight o'clock, Tom gets up to get dressed). Its restructured English equivalent is “Eight o'clock found Tom up and dressed”. This distinction is reflective of Western open and cognitive way of thinking. As an island country, Britain is no stranger to the fierceness and changeability of nature and is compelled to conquer the nature by exploring it and engage in overseas trade for existence. They are therefore skilled in extracting axioms from experience and cultivate the abstract, analytical, and logical way of thinking. Nature, for Westerners, is given equal priority with man, which illustrates the application of natural objective things as subjects in English.

To sum up, English long sentence is often formed by conjunction, preposition, participial phrase, and all kinds of clauses introduced by relative pronoun or relative adverb, while Chinese often use a series of short and concise sentences to express a complex meaning according to the sequence of time and logic. English sentence

looks like a mighty tree with wide spreading branches and luxuriant foliage, while Chinese sentence structure is more like a wide river with each wave pushing at the one ahead.

### Adjustment in Semantic Focus

Chinese and English have different or even opposite semantic stress of sentences. English speakers tend to declare his intention right at the outset and then add all the less important information or adjuncts slowly as supportive description. As opposed to that, Chinese semantic focus is not displayed by means of its language external forms, but implicated through its internal logical connections. The Western analytical pattern of thought produces a particular-general order in English language, while the Chinese integral pattern of thought produces a general-particular order in Chinese language. Therefore, in Chinese-English translation, it is advisable to identify information in terms of importance and restructure them in accordance with English syntactic rules. For instance:

(3) 许多农民因为生产资料不足仍然处于贫困地位, 有些人欠了债, 有些人出卖土地, 或者出租土地。

Many poor peasants are still living in poverty for shortage of the means of production, with some getting into debt and others selling or renting out their land.

(4) 这一带我不熟悉, 天黑以后继续进行调查, 取得结果的希望不大。

There was little hope of continuing my inquiries after dark in a neighborhood that was strange to me.

In the two examples above, “many poor peasants are still living in poverty” and “there was little hope” are taken as the semantic core, with others used as illustrative descriptions to support the primary information.

Also when there is more than one modifier occurring in a sentence, the order of these words will follow the general-particular order in Chinese, i.e., from the larger scope to the smaller one, from the more important to the less important, and from the farther information to the nearer one. The order for English is in reverse. For example:

(5) 许多科学家认为, 只有社会实践才是人们对外界认识的真理性的标准。

Many scientists hold that man’s social practice alone is the criterion of the truth of his knowledge of the external world.

(6) 上海是世界上最大的城市之一。

Shanghai is one of the biggest cities in the world.

### Adjustment in Time Order

Generally speaking, time is usually the major consideration in context construction. In the physical world, things take place in order of time and can not be reversed. When reflected in language, English tends to begin from the prologue and then replenishes it in an anti-clockwise order, while Chinese description corresponds with the order of time, from the farther distance to the nearer one. For example:

(7) It was a keen disappointment when I had to postpone the visit which I intended to pay to China in May.

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②

③

我原来打算在今年五月访问中国, 后来不得不推迟, 这使我非常失望。

③

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①

(8) I went out for a walk after I had my dinner.

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②

我晚饭后出去散了步。

②

①

### Conclusion

Success of translation depends above all on getting equivalent responses among SL (Source Language) users and TL (Target Language) users, which cannot be achieved without transformation of thought patterns (Mark Shuttleworth, 1997). In order to get the text which receptors correctly understand and appreciate, it is desirable that the thought patterns of the target language users be given primary consideration, which is a pre-condition for producing a natural rendering with formal fidelity and securing successful inter-language communication.

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