

A Study of Characteristics and Translation of Existential Sentences in Chinese and English

ZHANG Li-fang

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

ZHANG Jia-yu

Guangqi Primary School, Xuhui District, Shanghai, China

The syntactic characteristics of existential sentences (ES) in Chinese and English are systematically discussed. Chinese existential sentences have three major components: A, B, and C, i.e., the locative phrase, the existential verb, and the existential noun phrase. English existential sentences consist of the expletive “there”, existential verb, existential noun or noun phrase and locative phrase. In terms of syntactic characteristics, similarities and dissimilarities coexist. When translating ES in Chinese and English, some important skills are needed, such as replacement of locative phrase, addition or deletion of “there”, adjustment of verbs, and the change of determiners before the existential noun.

Keywords: existential sentences in Chinese, existential sentences in English, syntactic characteristics, translation

Introduction

Existential sentence (ES) is a special language construction, which bears a prevailing occurrence in almost all human languages. Because of its various controversial characteristics, ES has been a hot topic investigated by many linguists abroad and at home. Although the academic circle approximately agree that existential sentences always share the meaning of “expressing the existence or location of persons, animals, things, or ideas” (Richards & Plattl, 1985, p. 99), researchers still possess different opinions in the classification and identification of ES concerning such aspects as pragmatics, syntax and scope. Most of the studies on ES so far mainly focus on the characteristics of the construction itself but the practical research carried out from the perspective of translation on the basis of comparison of syntactic characteristics is rather scarce.

Literature Review

Existential sentences are used to describe the ubiquitous fact of existence, emergence, or disappearance of objects or human beings in a space domain or even the existence or emergence of emotions and ideas. So far, scholars have made more and more achievements on the study of ES, with the research focus shifting from the general classification to the nature of ES, from the simple analysis of the sentence structure to other new approaches, such as generative grammar, cognitive grammar, cognitive psychology, etc. The literature over the studies of ES in Chinese and English is reviewed in the following section.

ZHANG Li-fang, M.A., associate professor, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

ZHANG Jia-yu, B.A., senior, Guangqi Primary School, Xuhui District, Shanghai. China.

Literature Review on Chinese Existential Sentence

It is generally agreed that the sentences expressing the existence of things in a certain location, or the sentences describing the appearance or disappearance of things, can be called the existential sentence. Lü Shuxiang (1942) regarded Chinese ES as “a kind of sentences merely express the existence of things” (p. 183).

Fan Fanglian (1963) considered that Chinese existential sentences are composed of three parts: Locative + V + Noun Phrase, who is the first person at home to define Chinese ES structure.

It seems that if we identify an existential sentence only from one aspect, “the meaning of existence” or “the fixed sentence structure”, it would surely arouse different opinions. Therefore, this is not a satisfactory criterion.

Song Yuzhu (1986) associated sentence meaning with sentence structure to define ES as “a sentence which expresses the existence of something at a certain location is called existential sentence. And an existential sentence is usually made up of three parts: Locative + V+ Noun Phrase (simplified as LP+ V+NP)” (p. 122).

Pan Wen (2003) proposed three criteria to define Chinese ES, which include meaning, structure, and combining meaning with structure. Among these criteria, the combination of structure and meaning is regarded as the most accurate one in defining the ES by Pan, which means that ES is a kind of sentence carrying the meaning of “existence”, with the sentence structure of “NP1 + VP + NP2”. Pan’s (2003) view is similar to the idea of Lei Tao (1993), who thought that not only the meaning of existence should be carried but also the restriction on structure should be followed by an existential sentence. In other words, every existential sentence has two requirements including the semantics of existence and the special structure. This definition has become a common one agreed by most scholars who study ES today.

Regarding the classification of Chinese ES, a variety of types have been posited according to different perspectives. Among all these studies, two criteria are frequently mentioned in the classification of Chinese ES: the scope of semantics and sentence structure.

Fan Fanglian (1963) first preferred capitalized letters “A, B, and C” to represent the three components of Chinese ES. In her study, “A” means the locative/temporal phrase, “B” means the existential verb, and “C” means the existential noun phrase. Lei Tao (1993) divided the Chinese ES into four types according to the sentence structure:

Table 1

Lei Tao’s Classification of Chinese Existential Sentences

	Types	Sub-types	Examples
Chinese existential sentences	A + B + C	you (“有”) sentences	Kongqi zhong youle yishi chuntian de qixi.
		shi (“是”) sentences	Wo shi yige xinzhoukoukuai de ren.
		le (“了”) sentences	Chaji shang fangle yige chabei.
		zhe (“着”) sentences	Qingcao shanguazhe jingying de luzhu. Waimian guazhe feng.
	A + C		Anbian yizhu yangliu.
	B + C	you-sentence	You yizuo qiao.
	C		Dada de boli chuang, houhou de ditan.

Song Yuzhu (1992) divided Chinese ES into static and dynamic existential sentences from the aspect of semantics.

Table 2
Song Yuzhu's Classification of Chinese Existential Sentences

Types		Sub-types	Examples
Chinese existential sentences	Static existential sentences	<i>you</i> (“有”) sentences	Qiang shang you yifu hua.
		<i>shi</i> (“是”) sentences	Malu shang shi yige ren.
		<i>le</i> (“了”) sentences	Fangjian li dianle yizhan deng.
		<i>zhe</i> (“着”) sentences	Menkou zhanzhe yige ren.
		Experiential existential sentences	Chuang shang tieguo jizhang jianzhi.
	Dynamic existential sentences	Attributive-head Predicate Existential Sentences	Di shang yipian xueji.
		NP Predicate Existential Sentences	Mandi laji.
		Progressive Existential Sentences	Heli youzhe yitiao yu.
		Perfective Existential Sentences	Menkou wale yidaogou.

Literature Review on English Existential Sentences

Richards and Platt (1985) described English ES as “a particular type of sentence structure which often expresses the existence or location of persons, animals, things, or ideas” (p. 126). But some researchers think the definition also requires structural filters, besides its semantic requirement. They add that existential sentences usually begin with an unstressed “there” which occupies the formal subject position, next placed a verb (usually “be”) indicating the notion of existence, then following a NP called the real subject (or called notional subject). Finally, there is a locative adverbial or temporal adverbial. Therefore, Zhang Zhenbang (2003, p. 488) described the standard structure of English ES as “There + be + NP + locative expression (+ temporal expression)”.

In this paper, the authors will define English ES as a kind of sentences expressing the existence, emergence, or disappearance of something or somebody at someplace with a typical pattern: There + be/V + NP + locative expression (+ temporal expression).

Two common methods of classification of English ES are provided. Quirk, Greenbaum, and Leech’s (1985) classification emphasized the variants of “be” verb to show specific mood, modality, and voice.

Table 3
Quirk et al.'s Classification of English Existential Sentences

Sub-types		Examples
English existential sentences	There + be	There is no need to go.
	There + modal + be	There can be life after divorce.
	There + marginal modal + be	There ought to be some control somewhere; There ought to be some control somewhere.
	There + semi-auxiliary + be	There happen to be a celebration.
	There + intransitive	There stands a nice woman.

Different from Quirk, Wang Bo (2006) looked into the semantic meaning of the English ES and made classification from the perspective of unaccusative verbs in ES.

Table 4

Wang Bo's Classification of English Existential Sentences

Type	Sub-types	Examples
English existential sentences	Standard form	There +be + indefinite/definite NP + locative phrase (LP) There are three waterfalls and a fountain in the park.
	Variants	There + unaccusative verbs + indefinite NP + LP There appeared a man in front of us.
		There + be/unaccusative verbs + indefinite NP + (LP) There are/ exist problems.
		LP + (there)+be/unaccusative verbs + indefinite NP On the desk is a computer. Behind the building lies a river.
		There + be + (indefinite/definite NP + modifier) NP There are some children sick. There is someone believed to be a liar.

Translation Theory of Functional Equivalence

Eugene Nida (2001) judged the adequacy of translation on the basis of the correspondence in lexicon and grammar between the source and target languages. He introduced a notion of “functional equivalence” as the most equivalent translation that reproduces the surface lexicon and deep cultural information of source language semantically and stylistically. Different from the formal equivalence that keeps literal fidelity by word-for-word translation, functional equivalence explains the meaning of the source text with readability in mind and it usually has changes at lexical, syntactic, and textual levels.

In order to reproduce the culture of source language accurately and eliminate cultural differences, three principles should be borne in mind in the process of translating: First, the translator should fully display the cultural connotation of the original contexts. Second, the translator should always put the semantic and cultural purposes of the original text first. Third, the translation technique of “rewriting”, if necessary, can be used to solve cultural differences and make the source and target languages equal in meaning.

A Comparison of Characteristics Concerning Existential Sentences in Chinese and English

In this section, the particular characteristics of both Chinese and English ES will be analyzed and compared from the perspective of syntactic components.

The Syntactic Characteristics of Chinese Existential Sentences

According to Fan Fanglian's (1963) view, capitalized letters “A, B, and C” are adopted to represent the three components of Chinese ES. The syntactic characteristics are unfolding in three aspects: “A” implies the locative/temporal phrase, “B” implies the existential verb, and “C” implies the existential noun phrase.

Component A in Chinese existential sentences is a locative or temporal phrase, which is always located at the beginning of the sentence, occupying the place of subject. Since both the location and time are related to the mode of existence, they are suitable to be the subject of the Chinese existential sentences. At the same time, this subject is always definite, which follows the fact that every ES sentence is semantically started with known information, which leads to new knowledge. For example:

(1) Liangongfang li you jige tiaowu de xuesheng. (练功房里有几个跳舞的学生。)(definite LP)

(2) Zhahuodian li baizhe gezhonggeyang de huowu. (杂货店里摆着各种各样的货物。)(definite LP)

Component B in Chinese existential sentences is an existential verb. All predicate verbs in Chinese existential sentences express the state meaning instead of a behavioral meaning. There are a lot of existential verbs, which are usually classified from two basic perspectives into dynamic and static verbs or transitive and intransitive verbs. Dynamic verbs in Chinese existential sentences mostly appear in the form of “V + zhe (着)”,

expressing a continuous action rather than an instantaneous action. For example:

(3) Tiankong feizhe yizhi dayan. (天空飞着一只大雁。) (continuous action)

(4) Yizhi dayan feizhou le. (一只大雁飞走了。) (instantaneous action)

Static verbs, however, have higher frequency in Chinese existential sentences, including several categories as “chui lei” (垂类), “zuo lei” (坐类), “fang lei” (放类), “xiu lei” (绣类), etc. These verbs are intransitive and instantaneous.

As for transitive and intransitive verbs, three categories can be drawn according to ES definition: “existence”, “appearance”, and “disappearance” categories. From these three categories, the intransitive verbs in Chinese ES are listed as follows: “fei” (飞), “piao” (飘), “zhan” (站), “li” (立), “gui” (跪), “wo” (卧), etc., which are used to express existential meaning; “jin” (进), “lai” (来), “chuxian” (出现), “luchu” (露出), “chengxianchu” (呈现出), etc., which are employed to express appearing meaning; and “diu” (丢), “pao” (跑), “tao” (逃), “diao” (掉), “shi” (死), etc., which are used to express disappearing meaning.

The transitive verbs can also be found in Chinese ES in these three senses, which are listed as follows: “fang” (放), “xie” (写), “diao” (雕), “ke” (刻), “hua” (画), “gua” (挂), “xiu” (绣), etc., which are used to express the sense of existence; “genggai” (更改), “genghuan” (更换), etc., which are used to express the sense of appearance; “quxiao” (取消), “jiechu” (解除), “chexiao” (撤销), etc., which are used to express the sense of disappearance. What is more, “zhe” (着) and “le” (了) are placed behind the verb playing an important role in further explaining the state and tense of the action, “zhe” (着) is a marker of progressive action, “le” (了) is a marker of perfective action.

Component C in Chinese existential sentences is an existential noun phrase. The existential noun phrase in Chinese ES is mostly indefinite, since it is the new information of the whole sentence, for instance, “jike wutongshu” (几棵梧桐树), “yichuan liangshanshan de xianglian” (一串亮闪闪的项链). Even if a specific proper noun is needed in the context, it will be added quantifiers, such as “yige” (一个) and “yizuo” (一座) to change it into an indefinite concept. Noun and noun phrase are both available in Chinese ES, but personal pronouns cannot be used as Component C.

The Syntactic Characteristics of English Existential Sentences

According to the basic syntactic structure of English existential sentences, the characteristics can be discussed from the perspective of structural components, including the expletive “there”, the predicate verb, the indefinite NP, and the locative phrase.

Presently, linguists have reached an agreement that the expletive “there” in English existential sentence is the formal subject (or empty subject), while the post-verbal NP is the real subject. The word “there” is the distinguishable syntactic marker of English existential sentences, which has no specific semantic meaning.

As shown in the standard sentence pattern, “be” is the most typical and usually used as a predicate verb in English ES. There are variations of predicate verbs in English ES to show different tenses, voices, moods, and numbers. In addition to the singular third person form of verbs, there are other forms available as adding “will” before the original verb, as well as infinitive verbs, such as “v + ing” and “v + ed”. These verbs can be classified from two basic perspectives into dynamic and static verbs or transitive and intransitive verbs.

Static verbs in English ES express a static state of the thing, that is, the location of the subject is not changing and there is no displacement of this object, such as: “be”, “exist”, “remain”, “seem”, “sit”, “stand”, “lie”, “live”, “hang”, “hide”, “reign”, “rest”, “emerge”, “happen”, “chance”, “arise”, “take place”, “begin”,

“rise”, “grow”, “develop”, “result”, “survive”, “follow”, “evolve”, etc. For example:

(5) There hang posters of exotic places on the wall.

While dynamic verbs in English ES indicate the thing to be existing in a way of continuous movement, which include verbs, like “come”, “walk”, “float”, “arrive”, “flash”, “go”, “rush”, “flow”, “enter”, “return”, “blow”, “shine”, “prevail”, “sound”, “linger”, “shoulder”, “burn”, “beam”, etc. For example:

(6) There is a shy girl lingering at the corner.

As for transitive and intransitive verbs, Gu Yang (1997) held that the existential verb cannot be followed by an object, which means that they are all intransitive verbs expressing a sense of “existence” and “location”, “displacement of the location”, and “occurrence and development”. Such verbs as “lie”, “stand”, “live”, “exist”, “remain”, etc. are used to express the meaning of existence and location. For example:

(7) There lies an injured man in the front of the building.

The other verbs, like “happen”, “arise”, “emerge”, “develop”, “occur”, etc. are used to express the meaning of occurrence and development. For example:

(8) There arose a discussion.

The third group of verbs, like “go”, “arrive”, “come”, “run”, “walk”, “depart”, “pass”, “enter”, etc. are used to express the meaning of displacement of location. For example:

(9) There ran an old man along the beach of the sea.

The indefinite noun phrase in English ES remains the real subject, which always comes after the verb phrase. It has a communicative function in the ES by eliciting new information. Therefore, the NP usually carries indefinite specific reference and deliveries the reader unknown information. The determiners that can appear here cover the zero article, the indefinite articles, and other indefinite determiners, like “some”, “any”, “a lot of”, “enough”, and “a number of”. For example:

(10) There is water in the bottle. (zero article)

(11) There is something he does not know. (indefinite pronoun)

The real subject of an English ES sometimes has modifiers acted by infinitive phrases, attributive clauses, or participle phrases. For example:

(12) There is a superintendent to show you around the building. (infinitive phrase)

(13) There is a fly that keeps annoying him. (attributive clause)

The last component in English ES is the locative expression. According to the sub-types of English ES, the different places of the locative expression (LP), sometimes plus temporal expression (TP), only indicate different semantic focuses. The LP (+ TP) may function as adverbials or attributives acted by adverbs or prepositional phrases. For example:

(14) There are two soldiers outside. (indicating place)

(15) There will be unexpected visitors the day after tomorrow. (indicating time)

(16) There are some magazines on the bookshelf. (specific location phrase)

(17) There are many outstanding experts in this area. (abstract location phrase)

(18) There happened a traffic accident last month. (temporal phrase)

It is obvious that LP (+ TP) in English ES is abundant and varies from specific to abstract in sense.

To sum up, besides the similar existential concept, the ESs in Chinese and English also share the characteristics of the sequence of “verb + NP”, the indefinite property of existential things, and the intransitive meaning shown by the existential verbs, while they have differences in the sentence pattern, the habitual

expression of the LP, the variations of the existential verbs, and the ways of expressing the indefinite existential things.

The similarities are operational to the process of translating ES in Chinese and English, for they help the translator find more correspondences in the target language in terms of keeping the meaning of the source vocabulary, sentence pattern, or the literary style, while the dissimilarities are important in providing ideas of changing the source text correspondingly in translation.

The Translation of Existential Sentences in Chinese and English

Translation skills are discussed in this section when translating Chinese ES into English or English ES into Chinese based on the similarities and differences of syntactic characteristics.

The Translation of Chinese Existential Sentences Into English

Because of the extensive use in daily life, existential sentences have received careful considerations in many ways. As far as their translation is concerned, the English or Chinese translation of ES is significant, since Chinese is the language with the largest population of speakers, and English is the real international language in the world. There is the largest number of English learners in China. Existential sentences are very basic and widely used in both Chinese and English. Many English learners tend to make mistakes when they translate ES from Chinese into English or vice versa.

In this section, the translation of various sub-types of Chinese ES into English are analyzed separately to get an overall idea on how to make a functional and semantical equivalence to the original language.

First, convert the five types of existential sentences in Chinese into “there be” pattern. According to the translation theory of functional equivalence by Eugene Nida (2001), Deng Wei (2006) emphasized that every language has its own way of expression, in order to keep faithfulness and expressiveness to the original language, translators tend to emphasize the correct and clear expression, rather than sticking to the form correspondence. Since the existential sentences in Chinese and English have similar definition and constructional meaning, the common sub-types of ES can come across a semantically corresponding ES in the target language, which means, translating “LP + V + NP” into “There + be/V+ NP + LP/TP”. As is mentioned before that the word “there” is the distinguishable syntactic marker of English ES, which has no specific semantic meaning and cannot be found in Chinese ES. Therefore, “there be” should be firstly placed at the beginning of the English version in translating Chinese ES. Five common sub-types of sentence structures in Chinese ES are usually involved. They are “you” (有) sentences, “shi” (是) sentences, “le” (了) sentences, “zhe” (着) sentences, and attributive-head predicate existential sentences. Detailed example of each sentence is to be discussed.

“You” (有) sentences are assumed to be the typical structure of static ES in Chinese, which indicates a thing existing in the same location over time. “You” sentences share the same semantic function in the context as the English ES. For example:

(19) Xiaoyuan li you henduo shu. (校园里有很多树。)

There are many trees in the campus.

“Shi” (是) sentences of Chinese ES are also static ES indicating the existence of the things and sometimes emphasize on the existential thing’s occupation of a particular space. For example:

(20) Chuangwai shi yige zuqiuchang. (窗外是一个足球场。)

There is a football court outside the window.

“Le” (了) sentences in Chinese ES can also be translated into “there be” sentences. It is known that Chinese existential sentences express the tense and state of the motion by adding Chinese characters, like “zhe” (着), “le” (了), and “man” (满) as a complement, while English ES can have a clause and other verb variations. Since “le” sentences show a continuance started before, past tense is required to embody the past action of the source text. For example:

(21) Taiqian jiman le guanzhong. (台前挤满了观众。)

There were mountains of audience in front of the stage.

“Zhe” (着) sentences in dynamic ES are called experiential existential sentences as well. They show that the motion is in progress or the state is presently continuing. By applying the participles in English ES, the sentence pattern of “There be + NP + V-ing + LP” can be an expressive correspondence to the origin. For example:

(22) Xiaolu shang benpaozhe yitiao xiaogou. (小路上奔跑着一条小狗。)

There is a puppy running on the lane.

As for the “zhe” sentences in static ES, they indicate the static and persistent state of existence with no displacement of location, where more emphasis is put on the location and existential noun phrases. “Be” is usually adopted as the English existential verb here. For example:

(23) Shujia shang fangzhe yige xiangkuang. (书架上放着一个相框。)

There is a photo frame on the bookshelf.

The attributive-head predicate ES has a rather low frequency of occurrence in literature than other types of Chinese ES; however, it is commonly used in oral Chinese for its characteristic of parataxis. Since the verb in this case is omitted, the translator may add a verb in view of the designed meaning of the original text.

How to choose the suitable verb? The attributive-head predicate ES is classified as static ES, so usually the verb “be” will satisfy the requirement of expression. Sometimes, words like “stand” and “lie” can better indicate the state of existence vividly. For example:

(24) Chunli yikuai xiao fengbei. (村里一块小丰碑。)

There is a small monument in the village.

Second, adjust the order of existential noun phrase and locative phrase. Both Chinese and English ES have the same sequence of the predicate and existential NP, but the locative phrase in Chinese ES is generally fixed at the beginning while it is flexibly placed in English ES usually at the end of the English version. Thus, in the process of translating, adjusting the order of the locative phrase from the beginning of Chinese ES to the end of the English version is a necessary step. Typical Examples are (19), (20), (21), and so on.

Third, convert numeral classifier phrases into indefinite phrases. It is considered by Li and Thompson (1981) and Chen Pin (1987) that the judging criteria of an indefinite phrase lies in whether the receiver can distinguish the thing from other things of the same kind. Though, the existential NP in both Chinese and English ES is demonstrated by indefinite expressions, these two languages have complex characteristics and means in expressing the indefinite concept. In Chinese, numeral classifier phrases (数量结构) are attributed to be the typical form of existential noun phrases with a phrase like “number + classifier + nouns” (数 + 量 + 名). However, in English, indefinite article and indefinite pronouns are required. Accordingly, the step of converting the numeral classifier phrases into indefinite phrases is needed.

Numeral classifier phrases, like “yige” (一个), “yitiao” (一条), “yizhang” (一张), and “yikuai” (一块) are translated into indefinite article “a/an” in English ES, for example:

(25) Wuzhi zhongjian you yizhang yuanzuo. (屋子中间有一张圆桌。)

There is a round table in the center of the room.

Some numeral classifier phrases in Chinese ES that express plural concept, like “yishuang” (一双), “yiqun” (一群), and “jiduo” (几朵) sometimes can find a correspondence in English like “a pair of”, “a group of”, “several”, etc. For example:

(26) Fanzhuo shang you yishuang wankuai. (饭桌上有一双碗筷。)

There is a pair of chopsticks and a bowl on the table.

Foreignization is adopted in translating Chinese existential verbs. Chinese ES can adopt a variety of verbs, but English existential verbs are limited. If the translator keeps on finding a corresponding verb in English, it may cause incomprehension of the original text. Therefore, the choice of a proper existential verb used in the English version is an essential step. In general, the single existential verb “be” is preferred in English version, although it may give rise to a sense of monotony. The translation strategy of foreignization can be applied here because the translator always has to translate various Chinese verbs into the English verb “be”. Here comes the need of adjusting the translation of existential verb to the target language when the verb of source language is different but both share the same constructional meaning. For example:

(27) Songxin guochengzhong you yanchi xianxiang. (送信过程中有延迟现象。)

There is a delay in sending the letters out.

(28) Menwai chuanlai yizhen qiaomen sheng. (门外传来一阵敲门声。)

There was a knock at the door.

(29) Cheli gongjing di zuozhe yige nanren. (车里恭敬地坐着一个男人。)

There is a man sitting respectably in a car.

The Chinese existential verb “you” in Example 27, “chuanlai” in Example 28, and “zuozhe” in Example 29 are all translated into “be” with a proper change of tense.

The Translation of English Existential Sentences Into Chinese

Upon translating English ES into Chinese, three steps are taken. First, the locative phrase should be employed as the subject. Second, the expletive “there” should be omitted. Third, the English existential verb “be” should be diversified according to different contexts. In the following section, the three steps are illustrated.

Because of the different locations of the LP in Chinese and English ES, moving forward the LP into the position of the subject is a necessary step. For example:

(30) There was a laugh outside the door.

Menwai chuanlai yizhen xiaosheng. (门外传来一阵笑声。)

(31) There is a teacher sitting in the classroom.

Jiaoshili zuozhe yige laoshi. (教室里坐着一个老师。)

The locative phrases above include “outside the door” and “in the classroom”, which are translated into the subject of the Chinese ES with the same meaning.

It has been explained that the subject position in English ES is taken by an expletive “there” that lacks semantic meaning and cannot be found correspondingly in Chinese ES. Therefore, in the process of translating

the English ES into Chinese ES, “there” should be deleted, as illustrated by the above Examples 30 and 31.

In the British National Corpus, the English existential sentences with “be” as an existential verb account for roughly 99.8%. So, we can imagine that if the translator always prefers “shi” (是) and “you” (有) to translate the verb “be”, this translation would be a little monotonous. Therefore, the translator should keep close to the target language and choose the most proper verb in his Chinese version. For example:

(32) There is a man seated on the right hand of God the Father.

Shenfu youbian zuozhe yige nanren. (神父右边坐着一个男人。)

Shenfu youbian shi yige zuozhe de nanren. (神父右边是一个坐着的男人。)

It is sure that the first version is better than the second one because it prefers a more proper verb “zuo” (坐) rather than “shi” (是).

Apart from translating common English ES into Chinese, there are some conventionalized usages of “there be” as ES in English. It is difficult for the translator to render such special existential patterns in English. As for each of these special patterns there are some important points to note in translating them into Chinese.

The first special existential sentence pattern “there comes a time + clause” uses an ES to elicit a clause which expresses the main meaning of the whole sentence. In this case, the translator can just translate “there comes a time” into an adverbial “zongyou yitian” (总有一天) placed at the beginning, then plus the meaning of the attributive clause. For example:

(33) There comes a time when you have to do what you feel most comfortable.

Zongyou yitian ni kaishi zuo ziji jue de shushi de shiqing.

(总有一天你会开始做自己觉得舒适的事情。)

This existential sentence modified by its attributive clause usually indicates the arrival of a specific time.

The second special existential sentence pattern “there is + no + abstract noun + in doing something” enjoys a high frequency in English literature. As shown below, “there is no” is a commonly used sentence pattern, which expresses a strong negative meaning of the whole sentence. Instead of simply translating it into “meiyou” (没有) and “haowu” (毫无) can show the force better and convey the meaning more accurately. With the end of the sentence as the semantic focus in the original text, “in doing something” will become the start of the translation. For example:

(34) There is no good in arguing with him.

Yu ta zhenglun haowu yongchu. (与他争论毫无用处。)

The third special existential sentence pattern “there is nothing (no/none) like + NP”, the same degree comparison is used in English ES, but its Chinese version needs a comparative degree pattern. The translator can render it into “meiyou bi...genghaode” (没有比……更好的). For example:

(35) There is nothing like swimming as a means of keeping fit.

Meiyou bi youyong geng youyi jiankang de le. (没有比游泳更有益健康的了。)

The fourth special existential sentence pattern “there is nothing to do but + V/VP” is actually an English idiom, which has a large proportion in English ES. This pattern expresses that somebody can only do something without any other options. So, it can be rendered into “zhineng...meiyou” (只能……没有) pattern in Chinese. For example:

(36) There is nothing to do but repeat the experiment.

Zhineng chongfu shiyan, meiyou qita banfa. (只能重复试验，没有其他办法。)

Concluding Remarks

When translating Chinese ES into English or vice versa, in most cases, the translator can easily find a correspondence in the counterpart language. In this process, the translator needs make several adjustments including the order of existential NP and LP, the foreignization and diversification of existential verbs, and the addition or deletion of the word “there”. In the translation of Chinese ES into English, the first step is to add “there” at the beginning, the second step is to locate the locative phrase flexibly, the third step is to adjust the indefinite expressions, and finally translate the verb properly, which is usually translated into “be” with proper tense. While in the translation of English ES into Chinese, the first step is to put the locative phrase as the subject, the second step is to omit the word “there”, and finally diversify the Chinese existential verb accordingly.

There are four special types of English ES that cannot be directly translated into Chinese ES, where specific Chinese sentence patterns or phrases are needed to complete the translation. They are the translation of “there comes a time + clause” (zongyou yitian...), “there is + no + abstract noun + in doing something” (...haowu), “there is nothing (no/none) like + NP.” (meiyoubi...genghaode), and “there is nothing to do but + V/VP” (zhineng...meiyou...).

Also, it is important to keep in mind that the form of the verb in English ES is determined by the number of the first existential noun phrase after the verb, which is a special characteristic only belonging to “There be/V” sentences, so checking the agreement of the verb and existential noun is another crucial step in rendering Chinese ES into English. What is more, Chinese ES can also express the disappearance of things, while English ES cannot. Therefore, no correspondence can be found in English when translating the Chinese ES with the meaning of disappearance.

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