On Foreground-Background and Transitivity in Chinese *Shiwu* (事物) Expository Discourse

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Foreground-background and transitivity are very important in discourse linguistics, the features of which vary from types of discourse. Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse has its own semantic features about foreground-background; and this type of discourse is characterized by low transitivity, especially in foreground.

Keywords: Chinese shiwu expository discourse, Explanatory object, Foreground, Background, Low transitivity

Introduction

Robert E. Longacre (1983) divides discourses into four types by two parameters: *agent orientation* and *contingent succession*. The four types of discourse are narrative discourse, procedural discourse, behavior discourse, and expository discourse, among which, the expository discourse is shown as [- agent orientation - contingent succession], and the narrative discourse is shown as [+ agent orientation + contingent succession]. Those two types of discourses are opposite in the given two parameters. As for Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse, it can also be represented as [- agent orientation - contingent succession], but the two features are too vague to recognize Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse. We can consider Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse as a subtype of expository discourse, here we further refines Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse as [- agent orientation - contingent succession + objectivity + description + substantiality]. What interests us is the feature of foreground-background and transitivity of Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse.

Foreground directly serves the speaker's intention, while the background is supportive information, which does not directly serve the speaker's intention. Hopper (1979) summed up features of the foreground and background of narrative discourse; we list them in matrix form as follows:

Table 1
Features of Foreground-Background in Narrative Discourse

	Foreground	Background
Time sequence	+	-
Event integrity	+	-
Subject consistency	+	-
Focus unmarked	+	+/-
Human topic	+	+/-
Activity	+	-
Dependence on narration	+	-
Realistic voice	+	-

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Non-narrative types of discourse also have foreground and background; the specific can refer to Hopper and Thompson (1979; 1980), John Myhill (1992), Kawai Chui (2003), Chen Manhua (2008), Liu Yun and Li Jinxia (2017). Zhang BoJiang (2018) often emphasized that the foreground and background vary from types of discourse in classes; he put that the foreground and background in non-narrative discourse should be regarded as a metaphor and he provided a judgment method of the foreground and background in non-narrative discourse: to translate the characteristics of the foreground and background in narrative discourse into that of the target discourse. The transitivity of one discourse usually related to foreground and background; for details, we can refer to Hopper and Thompson (1980), Robert E. Longacre (1996), Kawai Chui (2003), Liu Yun and Li Jinxia (2017), and so on.

Semantic Features of Foreground-Background of Chinese Expository Discourse

The research of foreground-background is mainly about narrative discourse. Expository discourse and narrative discourse are opposite in many features; so compared with narrative discourse, we can get the main features of foreground-background of Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse. We will discuss this topic from three aspects as follows.

The Subjectivity and Foreground-Background

As for the relationship between subjects' consistency and foreground-background, we need to be clear that, narrative discourse is directly related to human beings, while Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse is directly related to substantive objects but not men. Therefore, Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse can be expressed as: foreground [+ subject consistency - human subjects], background [- subject consistency +/- human subjects]. The status of the explanatory objects in the narrative discourse is equivalent to that of the human agents in the narrative discourse, so Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse can be adjusted as: foreground [+ subject consistency + explanatory object], background [- subject consistency - explanatory object]:

(1) Sōngshǔ bù xiàng shānshǔ nàyàng yí dào dōngtiān jiù zhéfú bùdòng. Tāmen shì shífēn jǐngjué de, zhǐyào yǒurén shāowei zài shùgēn shàng chùdòng yíxià, tāmen jiù cóng wōli pǎo chūlai, duǒzài shùzhī dǐxia, huòzhě táo dào bié de shùshàng qù. (Sōngshǔ)

—The squirrels do not lie in the winter like a mountain rat. They are very alert, as long as someone touches the roots a little, they will run out of the nest, and hide under the branches, or flee to other trees. (The squirrels)

In (1), except one clause's subject is *rén* (human), other clauses' subjects are the explanatory object—*sōngshǔ* (squirrel). The clauses whose subjects are *sōngshǔ* (including different reference forms) are foreground, and the clause whose subject is human is background.

In Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse, explanatory objects do not usually appear in the full name. Whether explanatory objects appear as full name or as other related forms, they are all in the same system, so they are foreground information; other information which outside the explanatory objects' system is background information. Thus Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse can be described as: foreground [+ systematic content], background [- systematic content]:

(2) Jīng gé yídìng de shíjiān bìxū hūxī yícì. Bùtóng zhǒnglèi de jīng, pēnchū de qì xíngchéng de shuǐzhù yě bù yíyàng: Xūjīng de shuǐzhù shì chuízhí de, yòu xì yòu gāo; chǐjīng de shuǐzhù shì qīngxié de, yòu cū yòu ǎi. Yǒu jīngyàn de yúmín gēnjù shuǐzhù de xíngzhuàng, jiù kěyǐ pànduàn jīng de zhǒnglèi hé dàxiǎo. (Jīng)

—The whale must breathe every once in a while. The water column formed by the ejected gas from different whales is different: the water column ejected by the baleen whale is vertical, thin and high; and the water column ejected by the toothed whale is inclined, thick and short. According to the shape of the water column, experienced fishermen can judge the type and size of the whale. (The whale)

The explanatory object of (2) is *jīng* (whale). Although *jīng* (whale), *Xūjīng de shuǐzhù* (water column of baleen whale), and *chǐjīng de shuǐzhù* (water column of toothed whale) are not the same, they belong to the same system, and the relevant descriptions are foreground. *Yǒu jīngyàn de yúmín* (experienced fishermen) does not belong to the explanatory object's system, so the relevant description is background information.

The Expression and Foreground-Background

The way of introduction of the explanatory objects is mainly description or explanation in Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse, which is different from that of narrative discourse. Therefore, Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse can be described as: foreground [+ dependence on description/explanation], background [- dependence on description/explanation]:

(3) Pútao zhòng zài shānpō de tītián shàng. Màomì de zhīyè xiàng sìmiàn zhǎnkāi, jiù xiàng dāqǐ le yígègè lǜsè de liángpéng. Dào qiūjì, pútao yídàchuàn yídàchuàn guàzài lǜyè dǐxia, yǒu hóngde, báide, zǐde, ànhóngde, dànlǜde, wǔguāngshísè, měilì jíle. Yàoshi zhèshíhòu nǐ dào pútaogōu qù, rèqínghàokè de wéiwú'ěrzú lǎoxiāng, zhǔn huì zhāixià zuì tián de pútao, ràng nǐ chī ge gòu. (Pútao gōu)

—Grapes are planted on the terraces of the hillside. The dense branches and leaves spread out on all sides, as if that there is a green pergola. In the autumn, a large bunch of grapes hang under the green leaves, red, white, purple, dark red, light green, very beautiful. If you go to the Grape Valley at this time, the hospitable Uighur fellows will pick up the sweetest grapes and treat you warmly. (The Grape Valley)

The description of *pútao* (grapes) in (3), such as *tītián* (terraces), *zhīyè* (leaves), and *pútao* (grapes) are all closely related to explanatory object—*pútaogōu* (Grape Valley), which are foreground. *Nǐ* (You) and *wéiwú'ěrzú lǎoxiāng* (Uygur fellows) are independent of the explanatory object, and the related contents of the narrative words are background.

Activity is very prominent in narrative discourse, while static state usually prominent in Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse. The explanatory object in Chinese s*hiwu* expository discourse can be either animate (such as animals) or inanimate (such as buildings). The animate explanatory object owns the active ability; in fact the behavior of the animate explanatory is usually regular. The regular action can also be regarded as a description of state to some extent. So Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse still does not highlight the active or punctual nature in foreground, while the background may present the active nature. Therefore, Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse usually manifests as: foreground [- active/punctual], background [+/- active/punctual]:

(4) Xún língmén hòu shíjiē jí zhì bēitíng, zhè shì yízuò píngmiàn fāngxíng de tíngshì jiànzhù. Tíng nèi zài guīfū shàng lì 8 mǐ gāo de shíbēi yízuò, shàng kè qiànjīn kǎishū: "Zhōngguó guómíndǎng zàng zǒnglǐ sūnxiānshēng yú cǐ, zhōnghuámínguó shíbā nián liùyuè yīrì." (Wēiwēi zhōngshānlíng)

—Along the stone steps behind the mausoleum, you can reach the tablet pavilion. The pavilion is a flat square pavilion-style building. There is a stone monument of 8 meters high on the turtle in the table pavilion. Engraved gold inscriptions on the stone tablet: "Chinese Nationalist prime Minister Mr. Sun buried here, June 1, the 18th year of Republic of China." (Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum)

There are one judgment clause and two existential clauses in (4), both of which are static expressions, and they are directly related to the explanatory object—*zhōngshānlíng* (Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum), so they are foreground. *Xún* (along) and *zhì* (reach) are the behaviors of visitors, which are active and not directly related to the explanatory object, so the clause belongs to background.

The Spatiotemporal and Foreground-Background

Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse does not highlight contingent succession, so the foreground of the discourse usually repels information related to time sequence, while there are no special restrictions on the background. Therefore, the discourse is characterized by: foreground [- time sequence], background [+/- time sequence]:

(5) Wǒ yuèguò guǎngchǎng, tàzhe júhuángsè huāgāngshí shídào, xúxú zǒudào jìniànbēi táijiē qián, cóng jìnchù zǐxì zhānyǎng jìniànbēi……zhè shì zhōngguó zìgǔyǐlái zuìdà de yízuò jìniànbēi, cóng dìmiàn dào bēidǐng gāo dá 37.94 mǐ, yǒu 10 céng lóu nàme gāo. (Rénmínyīngxióng yǒngchuíbùxiǔ—zhānyǎng shǒudū rénmínyīngxióngjìniànbēi)

—I crossed the square, stepped on the orange granite stone road, and slowly walked to the monument stairs, and look carefully at the monument with reverence from a close... This is the largest monument in China since ancient times, from the ground to the top of the monument, it is 37.94 meters high, which as high as 10 floors. (The People's Heroes Are Immortal—to look at the Monument to the People's Heroes of the Capital with reverence)

Yuèguò (go through), *tàzhe* (stepping), *zǒudào* (arrive), and *zhānyǎng* (to look at with reverence) are the actions that are done in chronological order. Those actions are outside the explanatory object, and those information belongs to background. The introduction about the explanatory object—*Rénmínyīngxióngjìniànbēi* (Monument to the People's Heroes) is the foreground, and there is no chronological order here.

The main work of Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse is to introduce the given objective entities that are explanatory object. The given objective entities are usually spatial and objective, so the discourse can be described as: foreground [+ objective existence + spatiality], background [+/- objective existence +/- spatiality]:

(6) Chángláng de yímiàn shì 17 shàn cháo huāyuán kāi de jùdà de gǒngxíng chuāngmén, lìngyímiàn xiāngqiàn zhe yǔ gǒngxíngchuāng duìchèn de shíqī miàn jìngzi, zhèxiē jìngzi yóu 400 duō kuài jìngpiàn zǔchéng……mànbù zài jìngláng nèi……fǎngfú zhìshēn zài fāngcǎorúyīn, jiāmùcōnglóng de yuánlín zhōng. (Fán'ěrsàigōng)

—On one side of the promenade are 17 large arched windows and doors that open towards the garden, and the other side is a seventeen mirrors that are symmetrical with arched windows. These mirrors are made up of more than 400 lenses...walking in the mirror gallery... It seems to be in the garden full of grass and good wood. (The Versailles Palace)

Fán'ěrsàigōng (Versailles Palace) described in (6) is a real entity. The *gǒngxíng chuāngmén* (arched windows and doors), *shíqī miàn jìngzi* (seventeen mirrors), etc., that belong to *Fán'ěrsàigōng* are also real existing entities, and they all occupy a certain space. The related descriptions of those entities are all foreground. Someone's actions such as *mànbù* (walking), is subjective information, which is not controlled by the explanatory object; this information belongs to background.

From the above, the features of foreground and background of Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse are mainly as follows:

Table 2

Features of Foreground-Background in Chinese Shiwu Expository Discourse

	Foreground	Background
Time sequence	-	+/-
Systematic content	+	-
Subject consistency	+	-
Explanatory object's topicality	+	-
Active/punctual	-	+/-
Dependence of description/explanation	+	+/-
Objective existence	+	+/-
Spatiality	+	+/-

Transitivity Characteristics of Chinese *Shiwu* Expository Discourse

Transitivity here is a continuum; Hopper and Thompson (1980) summed up 10 factors that affect transitivity, which are: Participants, Kinesis, Aspect, Punctuality, Volitionality, Addirmation, Mood, Agency, Affectedness of O, and Individuation of O. In fact, the importance of the 10 features is different in practice. We will analyze the transitivity characteristics of Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse from the perspective of the subject, predicate, and object of the sentences.

Subjects and the Transitivity

The explanatory objects are the main topics of Chinese *shiwu* expository, and they usually act as subjects of sentences. Most of the explanatory objects are inanimate; and some explanatory objects are plants and animals, which are low animate. The non animacy and low animacy of the explanatory objects make the subjects' affectedness and volotionality present weak characteristics:

> (7) Chóngqìng shì yízuò gǔchéng. (Cóng yíbīn dào chóngqìng)
> —Chongqing is an ancient city. (From Yibin to Chongqing)

In (7), the subject—*Chóngqìng* (Chongqing) is an inanimate entity, which determines that it does not have the ability or autonomy of doing things, and the transitivity of the subject also makes the sentence low transitivity as a whole.

Although plants are animate, they hardly own the volitionality and the agency. Even if the explanatory objects are living animals, when they act as subjects of sentences, they seldom act as the executor of the action:

> (8) Sōngshǔ shì yìzhǒng piàoliang de xiǎo dòngwù. (Sōngshǔ)
> —The squirrel is a beautiful little animal. (The squirrel)

In (8), the subject—sōngshǔ (squirre) is animate; in this sentence it does not present the kinesis and agency.

We examined all the 4,581 sentences in 49 Chinese *shiwu* explanatory discourses, and found that in 86.3% (3,957/4,581) of the sentences the subject is non-human. Therefore, in terms of the subjects of sentences in the discourse, the transitivity of Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse tends to be low.

Predicate and Transitivity

Here we discuss the transitive sentences and intransitive sentences respectively.

Of the 2,716 transitive sentences with non-human subjects above, 58.8% (1,597/2,716) are non-action verb

predicates; and 34.4% (934/2,716) are action verb predicates; and the remaining 6.8% (185/2,716) are pivotal sentences, ditransitive sentence, Ba sentences, and Bei sentences. For the perspective of predicate's feature, the transitivity of non-verb predicate sentence is lower than that of verb predicate sentence; the transitivity of simple verb predicate sentences is lower than that of pivotal sentences and ditransitive sentences; Zhang Bojiang (2001) inspected the transitivity of Chinese BA sentences and Bei sentences, and concluded that both types of sentences are strong transitive:

A. (9) Yōnghégōng shì yízuò lǎma miào. (Yōnghégōng)
—Yōnghégōng is a Lama Temple. (The Lama Temple)

B. (10) a. Ér qítā lù de jiǎo jiān dōu zhǐxiàng qiánfāng. (Mílù)
—The tips of the other deer's horn point to the front. (The Elk)

b. Dàole chūntiān huànshàng xià máo. (Shuǐdiāo)
—In the spring, its hair becomes summer hair. (Mink)

C. (11) a. Shǐ tǐngbá de bēishēn xiǎndé gèngjiā zhuāngyán, xióngwěi. (Rénmínyīngxióng yǒngchuíbùxiǔ—zhānyǎng shǒudū rénmínyīngxióngjìniànbēi)
—Make the tall and straight body look more solemn and majestic. (The People's Heroes Are Immortal—to look at the Monument to the People's Heroes of the Capital with reverence)

b. Gěi rén yìzhǒng xióngwěi diǎnyǎ de gǎnjué. (Xióngwěi de rénmíndàhuìtáng)
—Give people a sense of grandeur and elegance. (The majestic Great Hall of the People)

c. Bǎ xiǎoyú xiǎoxiā tūn jìn dùzi lǐ. (Jīng)
—The whale swallowed the small fish and shrimp into the stomach. (The whale)

d. Búxìng de chán bèi huóhuó yǎo shāng. (Lǜsè guōguo)
—Unlucky cockroaches are bitten. (Green Grasshopper)

The above sentences are divided into three groups according to the predicate. Group A is the non-action verb predicate sentence; among the above sentences, the transitivity of sentences in this group is lowest. Group B is the action verb predicate sentence; the transitivity of sentences in this group is higher than that of group A. In group B, not all verbs that act as predicates are real actions; for example, the verb *zhǐxiàng* (point to) in (10)a indicates an attribute without highlighting the dynamic nature, while, the verb *huànshàng* (become) in (9)b has dynamic properties. The transitivity of (10)b is higher than that of (10)a. Group C contains pivotal sentence ((11)a), ditransitive sentence ((11)b), Ba sentence ((11)c), and Bei sentence ((11)d). In this group, the transitivity of sentences is higher than that of group A and B.

It is found that the number of sentences decreases with the improvement of transitivity. In addition, the verbs in some transitive sentences do not represent the actual actions in the discourse, which also indicates that the sentences in the discourse are of low transitivity.

To a certain extent, the naming of the intransitive sentence itself indicates the low transitivity of the sentences.

Among the intransitive sentences, there are 1,241 sentences' subjects which are non-person, among which 56.6% (702/1,241) are non verb predicates and 43.3% (539/1,241) are verb predicate sentences:

A. (12)a. Círuǐqún yuánzhùxíng. (Cháng ruǐ mùlán)
—Pistil group is Cylindrical. (Long Mulan)

b. Qìgǔyú de yǎnjīng yuánliūliū de. (Fùráo de xīshāqúndǎo)
—The eyes of the Gas drum fish are round. (The rich Xisha Islands)

B. (13) Hòuzhī wánquán tuìhuà le. (Jīng)
—The hind limbs are completely degraded. (The whale)

In (12)a, the predicate *yuánzhùxíng* (cylinder) is a noun, and the sentence is a nominal predicate sentence; in (11)b, the predicate *yuánliūliū* (round) is an adjective, and the sentence is an adjective predicate sentence; in (13) the predicate *tuìhuà* (degenerate) is a verb, and the sentence is a verb predicate sentence. The number of non-verb predicate sentences is higher than that of verb predicate sentences, while the transitivity of non-verb predicate sentences is significantly lower than that of verb predicate sentences, which shows that the predicate with low transitivity is dominant in intransitive sentences.

It is found that most of predicates in both transitive and intransitive sentences are non dynamic or weakly dynamic. When a predicate does not represent an action, it has nothing to do with aspect and punctuality. And usually, the effect of addirmation on transitivity varies little from types of discourse. So, from the perspective of predicate, sentences also present low transitivity.

Objects and Transitivity

Speaking of the relation between object and transitivity, we will examine the influence of participants, affectedness of O, and individuation of O on transitivity.

As for the participants, the transitivity of a sentence with two objects is higher than that of a sentence with one object, and the transitivity of an object with one sentence is higher than that without an object:

(14) Gěi rén yìzhǒng xióngwěi diǎnyǎ de gǎnjué. (Xióngwěi de rénmíndàhuìtáng)
—It makes people feel grand and elegant. (The majestic Great Hall of the People)

(15) Yōnghégōng shì yízuò lǎmamiào. (Yōnghé gōng)
—Yōnghégōng is a Lama Temple. (The Lama Temple)

(16) Hòuzhī wánquán tuìhuà le. (Jīng)
—The hind limbs are completely degraded. (The whale)

In (14), the sentence owns two objects—*rén* (people) and *gǎnjué* (feeling); in (15), the sentence owns one object—*lǎmamiào* (the Lama Temple); in (16), there is no object.

Statistics indicate that among 3,277 transitive sentences which own more than one object only account for 0.1% (4/3,277) of the total transitive sentences; 99.9% (3,273/3,277) of the sentences own only one object. And there are 1,304 intransitive sentences. In a word, sentences present low transitivity in the factor of participants.

As for the affectedness of O, which is closely related with predicates of sentences:

(17) Shuǐdiāo shǔ bǔrǔgāng shíròulèi de yìzhǒng zhēnguì de máopíshòu. (Shuǐdiāo)
—Mink is a precious fur beast that belongs to the carviores of the mammalia. (Mink)

In (17), the predicate *shǔ* (belong to) is a non-action verb, and the object *máopíshòu* (furbeast) is not affected by the predicate. So in this way, the factors of affectedness of O lose their due effect in judging transitivity.

We analyzed 2,716 sentences with non-human subjects in transitive sentences, among which 58.8% (1,597/2,716) are predicates with non-action verbs, which indicates that in a large number of sentences the factor

of the affectedness of O is meaningless in determining sentence transitivity.

As for individuation of O, this factor also related with predicates of sentences. When the predicate is non-active verb, the individuation of O is a little meaning:

(18) Dōngxī liǎngcè gè yǒu yígè miàn kuò sānjiān de xiǎowū. (Wēiwēi zhōngshānlíng)
—There is a three room sized cottage on each side of the east and west. (Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum)

(19) Fùjìn dàduō shì chōngjīpíngyuán hé xiǎo qiūlíng. (Wēiwēi zhōngshānlíng)
—Most of the surrounding areas are alluvial plains and small hills. (Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum)

In (18), there exist a quantifier *yígè* (one) to command the object, so we realize that the object is individual, while in (19), there is not quantifier to command the object. Compared with the two sentences, we cannot say that the transitivity of sentence (18) is higher than that of sentence (19). The fact that a large number of non-active verb predicate sentences indicates that the factor of the individual of O is meaningless in determining sentences' transitivity.

From the perspective of subject, predicate, and object of sentences, it indicates that Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse is of low transitivity.

There are some differences in transitivity between the foreground and background of the discourse. Chinese *shiwu* explanatory discourse's main work is to introduce the given entity objectively, which makes the discourse always be static but not dynamic, especially in foreground. Since the topics in background often change, most of the information related to person's activity belongs to background. Persons are high animate; they own obvious characteristics in volitionality and agency, so there are more opportunities for background to own higher transitivity than foreground.

Conclusion

The distinction between foreground and background usually depends on the attribute of the discourse itself. As far as Chinese *shiwu* expository discourse is concerned, the distinction between foreground and background mainly depends on the following factors: whether the explanatory objects' topicality, whether the systematic content, whether the subject consistency, whether objective existence, whether spatiality, whether dependence of explanation, and so on. Restricted by the theme of the discourse, the low transitivity of the discourse is very prominent. And we can also find that the transitivity of foreground is obviously lower than that of background.

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