A Study on Switch Strategies From Topic-Prominence to Subject-Prominence in C-E Translation

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Knowing the differences between Chinese and English will help improve the quality of translation. Chinese belongs to the subject-prominent language, while English belongs to the topic-prominent language. This paper discusses the switch from topic-prominent to subject-prominent language in Chinese-English (C-E) translation from the perspective of topic and subject. This paper selects cases from China Accreditation Test for Translators and Interpreters (CATTI), and summarizes some strategies for subject conversion in C-E translation.

Keywords: topic-prominence, subject-prominence, Chinese-English translation, translation strategies

Introduction

Each language has characteristics due to cultural, historical, and thinking differences. There are many differences between Chinese and English in terms of language use. For example, Chinese emphasizes parataxis and is an analytic language, while English focuses on hypotaxis and is a synthetic language (Lian, 1994). There are also many differences between Chinese and English subjects. The China Accreditation Test for Translators and Interpreters (CATTI) test is a professional translation qualification test, so it is carefully selected and of a certain level. And CATTI covers politics, economics, literature, and so on. In this paper, from the perspective of the differences between Chinese and English subjects, the author selects Chinese to English translation examples in CATTI that are biased toward politics and economics for analysis, to summarize some strategies for subject conversion in C-E translation.

Topic and Subject

The basic structure of a sentence consists of the subject and the predicate, but in different languages, this composition has various forms of expression. Zhao Yuanren (1979, p. 69) pointed out that “The grammatical meaning of the subject and predicate in Chinese sentences is topic and comment, not actor and action”. Subsequently, C. N. Li and S. A. Thompson analyzed different languages and proposed four basic types of language: (1) subject-prominent languages; (2) topic-prominent languages; (3) both subject-prominent and topic-prominent languages; and (4) neither subject-prominent nor topic-prominent languages. Subject-prominent languages emphasize the grammatical relationship between the subject and the predicate, where the subject is the state of the action or the subject of the state of nature, whereas topic-prominent languages do not emphasize...
the grammatical relationship with the predicate, where the subject is not dependent on any sentence component. Chinese belongs to subject-prominent languages, while English belongs to subject-prominent languages. One of the difficulties for translators is the difference between English and Chinese in language conversion, and studying the conversion of topic sentences to subject-predicate sentences can help translators escape from the constraints of sentence structure.

Li and Thompson propose seven types of criteria for defining topic and subject.

1. Definite and indefinite: The thing referred to by the topic must be definite; the subject does not have to be. Take English and Chinese as examples.
   (1) 这个人我认识。
   (2) A glass of milk is on the table.
   “这个人” is definite; if the subject of the original sentence is changed to “一个人”, it is obviously not in line with the Chinese expression. In the second sentence, “a glass of milk” is indefinite.

2. Selectional relations: The topic does not need to maintain a semantic choice relationship with the verb in the sentence, but the subject always has a choice relationship with the predicate in the sentence. The topic does not have to be an element of the predicate. The element is used to indicate the participant of the action or event.
   (3) 那场火幸亏消防队来得快。
   The topic “那场火” is not selective with the predicate verb “来”. “消防队” is the argument of the sentence.

3. The verb determines the subject, but not the topic.

4. Function role: The function role of the topic is to set a framework. The subject indicates the direction or point of view of the action, experience, state, etc. that the verb represents.

5. Agreement with the verb: The verb in the sentence shows an obligatory agreement with the subject, while the agreement of the topic with the predicate is extremely rare.

6. Sentence-initial position: The topic is usually located at the beginning of the sentence, but the subject is not limited to the beginning of the sentence. Because the topic is the “focus of attention”, it should be the first to be stated when the sentence conveys information.

7. Grammatical structure: The topic is syntactically independent, and it is the subject rather than the topic that functions in the syntactic process.

The subject-predicate clause also exists in Chinese. Mr. Zhao Yuanren (1979, p. 45) said: “In Chinese, the proportion of such sentences is small, perhaps not much larger than 50%. Thus, in Chinese, it is more appropriate to treat subjects and predicates as topics and comments”. This point is also in line with Li and Thompson’s view. It is because of the difference between Chinese and English in the aspect of topic and subject that English to Chinese translation would require determining the topic first, while Chinese to English translation would require determining the subject first.

**Conversion of Chinese Topic and English Subject**

Based on the above criteria, Li and Thompson also put forward eight features of topic-prominent languages. In this paper, the author only combines the three points involved to analyze the conversion of Chinese topics and English subjects.
Restrictions on Subject Components

Because the subject of Chinese is "topic", the topic is not necessarily the argument of the predicate, while the subject needs to be the argument of the predicate. Ma Yueke (2010, p. 73) said that the variety of topics in Chinese is infinite, and any word, any phrase, any sentence can be a topic. Hu Qingqiu (1999, p. 26) indicated that the lexical nature of Chinese subjects has strong compatibility. Chinese topics are more inclusive and can be filled with any word class. This is not the case in English. English subjects must have a noun nature. Pan Wenguo (1997, p. 211) indicated that in terms of the condition of the subject, English has only one requirement—nominative. To be a subject, words of other lexical categories must be changed into nouns. It can be seen that Chinese topics are compatible, while English subjects are not. Zhao Yuanren (1979, pp. 51-53) divided Chinese subject types into six categories: noun subjects; verb subjects; subjects of time, place, and condition; prepositions introducing actors as subjects; other prepositional phrases; and subject-predicate subjects. These six kinds of subjects are six kinds of topics, and only two of them are listed below.

Example 1: 经过多年坚持不懈的努力, 中国产品的质量控制和食品安全监管水平有很大提高。
Translation 1: Thanks to its effort over the years, China has come a long way in strengthening product quality and food safety control and supervision.
Translation 2: Relentless regulatory efforts over the years have resulted in notable improvements in product quality and food safety.

The topic of Example 1 is “经过多年坚持不懈的努力”, which is usually treated as a adverbial modifier in topics that indicate time, place, and condition. For example, Translation 1 chooses to translate the Chinese topic into an adverbial modifier, and then selects “China” as the subject of the translation. There are also other treatments, such as Translation 2, where the topic is directly converted into subject. Both of these methods are feasible.

Example 2: 与世界相比, 中国煤炭资源地质开采条件较差, 大部分储量需要井工开采, 极少量可供露天开采。  
Translation 1: Compared with the world, the geological mining conditions of coal resources in China are poor, most of the reserves need to be mined by Wells, and very little can be mined by open pit.  
Translation 2: Compared with other parts of the world, China faces severe geological difficulties in tapping its coal resources, and has to get most of its coal by underground mining, as only a small amount can be mined by open pit methods.

There is no restriction on the constituents of the Chinese topic, but the English subject must be a noun. Translation 1 directly converts it into the English subject “the geological mining conditions of coal resources in China”, but the whole sentence seems too fragmented and illogical. Translation 2 chooses the Chinese subject “中国” as the subject of the translation, so that the sentence has integrity and is more coherent. When converting, it is necessary to consider not only the limitation of the subject component, but also the integrity and coherence of the whole sentence.

“Dummy” Subjects

The function of the subject, its agreement with the verb, etc., dictate that the subject must be present, whether or not it has a semantic role. Li and Thompson (1984, p. 467) showed that subject-prominent languages can have “empty” or “dummy” subjects, such as “it” and “there” in English. In topic-prominent languages, there can be no subject at all if it is not needed. In English, except for special usage and imperative sentences, all sentences must have a subject, while in Chinese, there are often no subjects. Chinese subjects can be omitted, while English subjects cannot.
Example 3: 过去十年里发生了翻天覆地的变化。
Translation: Great changes have taken place in the past decade.

Sun Libing and Zhao Jing (2014, p. 47) indicated that the independent and strong position of the predicate verb in Chinese weakens the syntactic position of the subject and makes the omission of the subject possible. The subject in Chinese is weakened both from the perspective of the predicate and the subject. One treatment of subject less sentences mentioned in Shujian Zhang and Ling Li (2010, p. 43) is the conversion of the verb-object structure into a subject-predicate structure. Example 3 is a very common example; we usually choose to treat “change” as the subject, converting the verb-object structure of the original text “发生……变化” into the subject-predicate structure “变化发生”.

Example 4: 于是，在亘古不变的贺兰山上，写就了一部史前人类的“天书”。
Translation: Thankfully, their painstaking efforts have resulted in impressive pre-historic “book from heaven” carved on the eternally immutable Helan Mountain.

According to the strategy above, the phrase “写就……天书” can be converted to “天书写就”. However, here it is said above that these petroglyphs were recorded with great difficulty before the invention of writing. Another way to deal with non-subject sentences is to add a subject. For example, in the translation of Example 4, “their painstaking efforts” is added as the subject, which can better reflect the hardships of the people and make the connection with the original text more coherent. The translator needs to add a suitable subject in the context of the original text.

Example 5: 应减少贸易保护, 加强对最不发达国家农业技术、资金等支持，提高全球农业生产水平和粮食安全保障水平。
Translation 1: Efforts should be made to curb trade protectionism and increase the technical and financial assistance to the agriculture sector of the LDCs so as to raise the global agricultural productivity and increase food security.
Translation 2: That means we must reduce protectionist practices in foreign trade and provide more agro-technological and financial support for the LDCs if we are to raise global agricultural productivity and improve global food security.

The subject can be indefinite, but the topic must be definite. In Translation 1, the abstract noun “exports” is added as the subject, while in Translation 2, the subject is “that”, which is more closely and coherently connected with the above.

“It” and “there”.

Example 6: 进入21世纪，面对复苏乏力的全球经济形势，纷繁复杂的国际和地区局面，传承和弘扬丝绸之路的精神更显重要。
Translation: In the 21st century, it is all the more important for us to carry on the Silk Road Spirit in face of the weak recovery of the global economy, and complex international and regional situations.

Example 7: 因此，抢救和保护那些处于濒危和生存困境中的非物质文化遗产，已成为时代赋予我们的非常紧迫的历史任务。
Translation: As such, it has become a pressing historical mission for us to salvage and conserve those intangible cultural heritages that are struggling to survive.

The above two examples are verbal topics, which can be transformed into noun subjects using “doing/to do”. However, translation is not only about “faith” but also about “elegance” based on “faith”. Therefore, if a
similar sentence pattern appears several times in a text, the translator should pay attention to the change of sentence pattern in the translation. For Example 7, the use of “doing/to do” as the subject is too long. In Sun Libing and Zhao Jing (2014, p. 49), it is said that Chinese is a language that does not pay attention to the latter of the sentence, while English is a language that pays attention to it. In other words, Chinese sentences are “head-heavy”, while English sentences are “head-light”. A common way of conversion is to use the “pseudo” subject “it” or “there”. The above two examples both use “it” as the formal subject and put the real subject after it, avoiding top-heaviness and making the translation more in line with English usage habits.

Example 8: 从北非，到中东，再到乌克兰，一些国家出现了动荡。
Translation: There are upheavals in North Africa, in the Middle East and in Ukraine.

The translation of Example 8 uses “there be”, where “there” is the pseudo subject.

**Passive structure.** In Li and Thompson (1984, p. 467), the passive structure is not commonly used in topic-prominent languages, but it is common in subject-prominent languages. The passive voice is very common in English, while there are far fewer passive sentences in Chinese than in English. A corpus-based study by Xiao, Mcenery, and Qian (2006, pp. 141-142) had confirmed that the frequency of passive sentences in English is almost 10 times higher than that in Chinese. Wu Qun (2002, p. 84) indicated that the active voice is more “subjective” and the passive voice is usually more “objective”. This is also consistent with Chinese and English thinking.

Example 9: 四川从今年开始将新建三个大熊猫自然保护区，使全省的大熊猫自然保护区达到40个，以确保50%左右的大熊猫栖息地和60%左右的野生大熊猫个体分布在保护区内。
Translation: Three new nature reserves for giant pandas are to be added to the existing protection network in Sichuan starting from this year.

Example 10: 全球农业发展取得了长足的进步，但饥饿和贫困依然是一种“无声的危机”，困扰着全人类。
Translation: Great progress has been made in the global agricultural development. Yet hunger and poverty have remained a “silent crisis”, troubling all human beings.

Example 11: 2016年，美国销售了1700万辆汽车，同年中国则销售了2400万辆，其中在中国的美国合资公司销售的汽车占比很大。
Translation: In 2016, 17 million cars were sold in the US, compared to 24 million sold in China, with much of the sales attributable to US-China joint ventures.

According to Li and Thompson, the subject-prominent language is subject-oriented, and if the subject is not a noun assigned by a verb, the verb needs to be “marked” to indicate that the choice of subject is “abnormal”. In contrast, the topic-prominent language is topic-oriented, and the relationship between the topic and the verb is not as close as the subject, so there is no need to mark the verb. In the above three cases, the topics are “四川”, “全球农业发展”, and “美国”, but according to the meaning of the original text, it is clear that these topics are not the real actor. The nouns assigned to “新建”, “取得”, and “销售” are “people”, so the passive voice is used in all three cases.

**Summary.** According to the characteristics of the topic-prominent language and the subject-prominent language, this paper summarizes the following five strategies of topic and subject conversion in Chinese to English translation: Chinese topics are more compatible than English subjects; the Chinese topics should be converted into sentence thesis elements—event participants; Chinese topics can be omitted and the object in the non-subject sentences can be chosen as the subject or the subject can be added; use pseudo subjects “it” or
“there” to avoid head-heavy English sentences; when translating from Chinese to English, the subject of “abnormal” needs to be marked and converted to a passive structure.

Language is very complex, and the strategies mentioned above are only some of them. There are many translation strategies, but they should not be referred to mechanically. Everyone’s understanding of translation is also different, and the translation is full of diversity. As translators, we need to grasp the differences in language, reduce the shackles of the original language habits in the translation, and achieve flexible conversion.

References


