



Comparative Analysis on English and Chinese in Multi-Dimensions

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Abstract

As the most widely used and extensively covered languages in the world, Chinese and English constitute the symbolic elements of human information exchange and carry the great thinking and splendid civilization of mankind. Due to their distinct styles and syntax, numerous scholars have written books and devoted themselves to the study of English and Chinese. Based on previous studies, this paper makes a comparative analysis of English and Chinese in phonetic, word, sentence pattern and discourse in order to have a deeper understanding of the essence of the two languages.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Contrast between English and Chinese, Hypotaxis, Parataxis, Linguistics

1. Introduction

The origin and development of language, just as different regional cultures give birth to different philosophies and religious beliefs, is closely related to the cultural background of the nation. Chinese and English come from two completely different cultural systems and have many differences, but the biggest difference between them lies in the emphasis on “parataxis” in Chinese and “hypotaxis” in English. From a philosophical point of view, since ancient times, China has viewed the relationship between individual life and the universe from the perspective of “harmony between man and nature”, emphasizing abstract thinking, grasping the rules in images, and not sticking to the form, which is just a carrier to make invisible images tangible. To a certain extent, this mode of thinking has

had a great impact on the linguistic characteristics of “parataxis” in Chinese language. Western countries have always attached great importance to logical reasoning and scientific metrology, which is reflected in the invention of various accurate experimental instruments, the establishment of legal system and judicial system, etc. Even in the most common daily cooking, the two completely different thinking modes of the East and the West are also reflected. For example, the words “a little” and “appropriate amount” often appear in the recipes of Chinese people. While chefs in Western countries treat the art of food with precision to “gram”.

It is these two nationalities waving the flag of two different language symbols that cover the largest and most extensive language users in the world. Therefore, the comparative study of English and Chinese is of great significance in cross-cultural communication and translation practice.

Although the writing style and language structure of English and Chinese are different, as a communication tool, from the aspect of listening, speaking, reading and writing in the practical sense of a language, the pronunciation of a word, the smallest unit of each sentence are composed of words, and each sentence has different combination ways to form different sentence structure. Furthermore, the sentence formation chapter determines the style of the whole article. Therefore, based on the existing studies on contrastive analysis of English and Chinese, as well as some statistical studies, this paper intends to make a comparative analysis of the differences between English and Chinese from four aspects: phonetics, word, sentence patterns and discourse, in order to promote a deeper understanding of the essence and connotation of the two languages.

Considered that official media reports and propaganda work is formal and authoritative, it determines the standardization of word chosen and writing style. Therefore, when selecting examples, this paper mainly extracts sample sentences and passages from foreign and Chinese mainstream media for comparative analysis, so as to ensure the reliability of word chosen and writing norms of the source articles when comparing the two languages.

2. Differences in Phonetic

Chinese has four tones, and the changes of different tones correspond to different glyphs and meanings. For example, the four Chinese characters “伊、宜、倚、亦” have the same syllable, but because of the different tones, different glyphs, each of them have different meanings. Tone plays an almost decisive role in conveying the meaning of the word in Chinese.

However, in English, the difference in word meaning is not linked with tone. The different meanings of the same word are sometimes related to the determination of the stress position. For example, ‘content and con’tent; ‘desert and de’sert have completely different meanings due to the different position of stress. It can be seen that stress plays a very important role in the English language system [1].

3. Differences in Word

3.1. Difference Point 1—The Use of Preposition

The most striking difference between English and Chinese in word is the use of preposition. What makes this phenomenon? Perhaps the answer can be found in the language structure of English “hypotaxis”, which directly determines that English must use a large number of prepositions to reflect character relationships, action states, the relationship between forces and bearers, influencers and receivers.

The following examples are good illustrations:

Foreign media reports:

Example 1: **With** 20.77 million followers **on** Chinese social media platform Sina Weibo and 7.43 million subscribers **on** YouTube, she has made videos that appeal **to** netizens **around** the world.

Example 2: The local dish was thrust **under** the spotlight **after** Li posted a video **to** show the making process **of** Luoshifen **on** YouTube **in** August **of** 2019.

Example 3: **From** food **to** furniture and cosmetics, Li has amazed netizens **with** what she can do and how she does it.

Example 4: The beauty **of** Li’s videos is rooted **in** the revival **of** the ancient relationship **between** humans and nature.

As can be seen from the above report on Chinese cultural communicator Li Ziqi from Global Times, in addition to the common use of connectives, prepositions play a key role in the connection of the entire English sentence. Different prepositions reflect the subordination, time order and relations of state of things between nouns, and play the role of “sewing needle” between words, stringing together the whole sentence pattern.

Based on a large corpus, Scholars Wu Yongjin and Deng Yunhua compared and analyzed the occurrence frequency of the top 30 high-frequency words in English and Chinese, and reached the following conclusion: in Chinese, the use frequency of pronouns “I” and “he” (or “she”) is higher than that of prepositions, conjunctions and verbs; In English, by contrast, prepositions and conjunctions are used more frequently than pronouns “I” and “he” (or “she”). The results further explains the high use of prepositions and conjunctions in English [2].

3.2. Difference Point 2—English Focuses on Possessive Pronoun, while Chinese Emphasizes Personal Pronoun

After conducting more in-depth comparative studies and data analysis, they also concluded that English focuses on possessive pronoun, while Chinese emphasizes personal pronoun [2]. According to Cheng Fengping’s explanation of the comparison between English and Chinese possessive and personal pronoun, “Chinese emphasizes the subjective thinking mode, with the belief that ‘all things are within me.’ It often describes objective things from the perspective of the self or tends to describe people and their behaviors or states. Therefore, it is inclined to use

personal pronoun [3]. English, on the other hand, has a strong focus on possessive pronoun, which is commonly seen in formal written English, such as official documents, news articles, scientific essays, and literary works such as essays and novels [4]. This expression style is actually closely related to Westerners' logical reasoning and rational thinking way, because expression style of possessive pronoun are often more objective and impartial than that of personal pronoun, and can help the narrative appear more objective and unbiased without subjective emotions. We can see this in the following examples:

Foreign media reports:

Example 1: **Data** shows that sales of Luoshifen in China reached nearly 5 billion yuan (\$722 million) in the first half of 2020, while **the total export value** during that same period **saw** a 700 percent increase year-on-year.

Example 2: **The cultural labels** tagged to Li can be better understood through her videos. (通过她的视频, 人们可以更好地理解她身上的文化标签。)

Example 3: **Time** seems to stand still so that Li can spend several months or even longer to brew a bottle of wine, make herself an outfit and prepare to cook a dish.

Chinese media reports:

Example 4: 近年来, 螺蛳粉三个字频频出现在社交媒体的热搜榜上, 一碗汤底浓厚、风味独特的螺蛳粉引得无数年轻人为之折腰, “以臭扬名”的它成为了无数人的香饽饽。

Example 5: 作为柳州最具特色的名小吃, 螺蛳粉是无数柳州人离家在外最思念的味道。

In the above examples, we can see that the subjects in Example 1, Example 2, and Example 3 are “data”, “the cultural labels”, and “time” respectively, which are non-personal subject pronouns. In Example 2, when translated into Chinese, the subject “人们” (people) is usually added to make it more in line with Chinese expression habits. Example 4 and Example 5 also focus on the subjective feelings of people, as Chinese writing tends to start from the individual's subjective perspective and describe people's behaviors and states. In contrast, English tends to use such object nouns as subjects and even prefers them for describing emotions, events, etc., regardless of whether they are objective or subjective.

4. Differences in Sentence Patterns

The sentence structure of Chinese does not emphasize the integrity of spatial arrangement, but rather flows linearly and turns, pursuing the rhythm and pace of flowing, not being bound by form, and unifying form with meaning. From top to bottom, it is a system of loose form and harmonious meaning. Therefore, the basic sentence structure of Chinese is composed of small short sentences. In addition, the pursuit of rhythm and pace in Chinese also makes Chinese rich in four-character sentences, where four-character sentences include four-character idioms as well as non-idiomatic four-character short sentences. On the other hand, English

is a “shape-fitting” language, whose sentence structure has the characteristics of highly formalized and rigorous logic. It expresses the internal logical relationships of the language through the change of morphological means, including word affix changes, verb tense changes, noun number changes, adjective comparative level changes, etc [5]. English sentence structure uses a large number of logical connectors such as “and”, “but”, “as”, “therefore”, “as if”, “moreover” to express the relationships between sentences, such as conjunction, causation, or turn and assumption. For example:

Foreign media reports:

Paragraph 1: In 2008, the hand-made techniques **used to** make Liuzhou Luoshifen were among the second batch of items **included on** the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region’s intangible cultural heritage list.

Paragraph 2: Many Chinese netizens took to social media to express their admiration for the blogger for being able to make the local dish popular nationwide **and** express their approval of the young vlogger’s new business.

Chinese media reports:

Paragraph 1: 以美食为基，以文化为魂。作为一种更有创造性的文化软实力，美食在满足口福之欲的同时，更是一种精神享受与文化体验。

Paragraph 2: 从 2018 年至今，李子柒柳州螺蛳粉已逐步占据行业市场一半以上份额，取得全行业排名第一的成就，并带动了螺蛳粉市值的有效增长。而李子柒本人也是“农村致富带头人”推广大使，其品牌螺蛳粉大火的同时，也带动了乡村经济的发展。

In the news reports about Li Ziqi’s original brand of “Luosifen” which is a kind of rice noodles, the introduction of “Luosifen” being included in the second batch of intangible cultural heritage list of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in paragraph 1 was expressed in foreign media through the use of a complex compound sentence formed by changing the verb form of “use” and “include”. Paragraph 2, on the other hand, used the conjunction “and” to link the two sentences, sharing the same subject, and forming a longer sentence. In Chinese media reports, shorter sentences are preferred, with “作为...” which means “as a...”, “在...同时” which means “at the same time”, “取得了...” which means “achieved...”, and “带动了...” which means “led to...”, etc., serving as independent units of language called “lexical chunks”. These units flow naturally and smoothly in a linear fashion, with no emphasis on the use of explicit connectors to convey meaning, instead focusing on implicit cohesion. It can also be seen that four-character phrases such as “美食为基” which means “food as the foundation” and “文化为魂” which means “culture as the soul” are used.

5. Discourse Differences

In English, the discourse style tends to be direct, practical, and focuses on the accuracy of words and the depiction of actual facts. Nouns and verbs are used more frequently, while adjectives and adverbs are used less frequently [6]. In contrast,

the learning philosophy that Chinese native speakers have been taught from a young age includes the idea that writing or composing an article should have “literary flair” [7], which has almost become a common cognition among every Chinese person, regardless of their educational level, from highly educated high-achievers to illiterate “country bumpkins.” Therefore, articles of different genres in Chinese writing tend to have a touch of meandering complexity and ornate vocabulary, with more use of adjectives and adverbs, and the use of more exaggerated writing techniques.

In literary works even more, a large number of exaggerated and figurative writing techniques are used to pursue the beauty of artistic conception and literary style. This may be influenced by the beautiful words in ancient Chinese poems. In view of the differences in style between English and Chinese, translators should pay special attention to this point when translating from Chinese to English. A specific example is given below:

Foreign media reports:

Li, a famous vlogger **with** 11.9 million followers **on** YouTube, said **at** a press conference **on** Tuesday **that** Luoshifen is **not only** a local intangible culinary heritage, **but also** a potential means to provide employment **to** many people living **in** poverty.

Chinese media reports:

提到李子柒，很多人都或有耳闻。李子柒作为视频博主被人熟知，她的视频内容不仅在国内大受欢迎，在国外也收获了众多粉丝的喜爱，前段时间更成为历史上首位 YouTube 订阅破千万的中文创作者。一箪食一瓢饮、日出而作日落而息，李子柒的视频成为不少外国友人了解中国文化的窗口。

In the above examples, in the Chinese news report, “一箪食一瓢饮” which means “a basket of food and a gourd of drink”, “日出而作日落而息” which means “rising with the sun to work and setting with it to rest”, we can see the Chinese language’s characteristic of pursuing “poeticism” and “literary elegance” permeating every aspect of written expression. While in the foreign media’s written report, the use of prepositions “with”, “on”, “at”, “to”, “in” and logical connectives “that” and “not only, but also” links together a sentence that stretches over three or four lines, and the prepositions are followed by mostly nouns and verb participles, giving the overall style of the text a more realistic tone and presenting the content directly, with fewer adjectives.

6. Conclusion

Chinese and English belong to two different language systems. Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language system, while English belongs to the Indo-European language system. The origins and development of these two languages are based on different cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, and customs formed in different geographical environments by two different ethnic groups. Language is the crystallization of human wisdom, and different languages reflect and embody the

unique linguistic symbols constructed by different ethnic groups due to their different ways of thinking. By analyzing and comparing the structural components of sentences in these two languages, we can gain a deeper understanding of the essence of language, the connotations and differences of English and Chinese, and provide guidance for cross-cultural communication and translation practice.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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