

## Sentence-making and thought patterns: Probe into the differences between English and Chinese\*

GAO Jing

(Foreign Languages School, China University of Political Sciences and Law, Beijing 102249, China)

**Abstract:** Different histories and cultures breed people in the West and the East, and shape their different thought patterns. The differences are manifested in languages they speak and constitute an obstacle in bi-directional understanding and interpretation. In the paper, efforts are made to exemplify the differences in English and Chinese sentence-making, and explain them in terms of the different thought patterns. The author hopes to facilitate readers to have a better understanding of the 2 different peoples and languages.

**Key words:** sentence-making; differences in English and Chinese; thought pattern

### 1. Introduction

The relationship between language and thought has been discussed a long time ago both in the West and East. As early as the 5th century, St. Augustine held that language was merely labels applied to already existing concepts (Gumperz, 1996). For German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), language was only one of many tools used by humans to experience the world. Wilhelm von Humboldt, on the other hand, proposed in 1820 that thoughts are produced as a kind of inner dialogue using the same grammar as the thinker's native language and therefore "the diversity of languages is not a diversity of signs and sounds but a diversity of views of the world" (Pütz, 2000). His view was developed further by Edward Sapir and Sapir's student Benjamin Lee Whorf, who once said, "we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language" (Whorf, 1956). In China's Spring and Autumn and the Warring States Periods (770 B.C.-221 B.C.), Confucius and LAO Tzu held that language was a tool of thinking. And people can skip details of many contemporary scholars in China who also contributed various views on the issue. The arguments on whether language decided thought originally or thinking decided language are similar to the argument on chicken and egg, and have not been settled. What can be safely said is that language and thinking are closely related and mutually reflected.

Translation deals with transformation of the 2 different languages. However, the differences between the 2 languages constitute an obstacle in the translation. This obstacle is obvious in the translation between English and Chinese, and different techniques to tackle these differences have been offered. However, without knowing the causes of these differences, the task of translation may be too laborious to be finished.

Efforts have been made to explain the differences between English and Chinese in terms of the different

---

\* Social science research project funded by China University of Political Sciences and Law (No. 020493).

Gao Jing (1978- ), female, lecturer of Foreign Languages School, China University of Political Science and Law; research fields: sociolinguistics, second language acquisition.

thought patterns. ZHENG (1992) said in his book *A Comparative Study on Cultures in China and the West* that English is a language of sound which has inflection and stress and highlights creation, while Chinese is a language of image, toned, uninflected, and highlights collection, and pointed out the differences of thinking are reflected by the languages. Similar remarks can be found in ZHANG and CHENG's (1991) book *Tendencies of Chinese Thinking*. However, the differences they perceived are both from a holistic perspective. When people communicate in languages, they do not think as much about whether it is language of sound or image as how to express their mind through sentences, and this is where the obstacle of translation lies. Therefore, in the paper, the author tries to find the differences of sentence-making between English and Chinese and their relationship to the different thought patterns.

## 2. Two ways of sentence-making

Sentence is made up with words, which are put together according to syntactic and semantic rules, as subject, predicate object, complement, etc.. The differences in sentences between English and Chinese may, therefore, be grouped into 2 categories: differences in sentence-making constituents and differences in relationships between these constituents.

### 2.1 Sentence-making constituents

In English and Chinese sentences, the same constituents can be found (subject, predicate, object, predicative and complement), but they vary in the 2 languages.

#### 2.1.1 Fixed or flexible?

The constituents of an English sentence are more grammatically fixed. The subject position, for example, can only be occupied by nouns, pronouns or other grammatical structures that act like nouns, such as a gerund as in "Playing football is his hobby". There are also stricter rules to govern the predicate: it can only be definite verb. If the rules are violated, the sentence is ungrammatical and incorrect.

Chinese has loose grammatical rules to govern sentence-making constituents. Almost all kinds of words can act as all kinds of constituents. The part of speech seems to be irrelevant here. Subject position, for example, can be filled with verbs, adjectives, or even prepositional phrases, besides the normally accepted nouns as in the following examples (see Example 1):

Example 1: (1) 踢足球(play football)是他的爱好。

Literally: Play football is his hobby.

(2) 漂亮 (beautiful)是女人的资本。

Literally: Beautiful is a woman's asset.

Meaning: Beauty is a woman's asset.

(3) 在台上坐着老师们。

Literally: On the podium is sitting the teachers.

Meaning: On the podium sit the teachers.

Words that can serve as predicate are more surprising to English-speaking people. It can be adjective: “中国人民勤劳勇敢” (Literally: Chinese people diligent and brave.), nouns: “他北京人”(Literally: He Beijinger), “的” structure: “小李开车的” (Literally: Xiao LI, drive’s), or prepositional phrase: “现在我在家”(Literally: Now I at home). The constituents in sentences are less governed by the form, but by the meaning of the sentence.

### 2.1.2 Who loves to use verbs?

Chinese people are quite flexible in using words, but what kinds of words do they prefer to use compared with English-speaking people? Statistics show that 26.1% of words in a lecture written in Chinese are verbs, compared with 7.31% in an English lecture (CHENG, 1998). Chinese people prefer to use verbs (underlined in the Example 2), which are more lively and vivid. In English, however, there are more nouns, prepositions and relatives, which may make sentence more logical and closely-knit. Look at the following examples (see Example 2):

Example 2: (1) He looked at me with a smile.

他微笑着看着我。

(2) Rockets have found application for the exploration of the universe.

火箭已经被应用于探索宇宙。

(3) The children went swimming with the teacher by bus.

孩子们跟着老师坐公交车去游泳。

Verbs are used in the places where English people will put in prepositions, nouns and relatives. Besides, the verbs in Chinese are usually put in the order of time.

In this way, a vivid picture is created. So LIN (1980) called this way of sentence-making a chronicle style. In English, however, the order of time is often broken in order to create a spatial frame and to strengthen the relationships between words. The same sentences may be expressed in this way in English in the Example 2.

### 2.1.3 What’s in the subject position?

Another tendency in sentence constituents is that Chinese tend to use person as subject, but English people tend to use object, as in the following sentences (see Example 3):

Example 3: (1) 目前大家都同意这个计划是最好的。

Now all the people agree that this plan is the best (Literally).

It is now agreed that this plan is the best.

(2) 为了出版这本自传，他还走访了许多老人的学生来获取信息。

In order to publish this biography, he also interviewed the old man’s many students to get in information (Literally).

His interview also included the old man’s students to get in information for the publishing of

the biography.

In Chinese, active voice is always used. If the doer can not be found, a sentence without subject will be constructed. For instance, “下雨了。搞得我心烦意乱” (Literally: Raining. Make me annoyed). In English, an object often stands in an obvious place.

## 2.2 Relationships between sentence-making constituents

Besides the differences in the separate constituents, relationships between the constituents are also different in the 2 languages.

### 2.2.1 Relationship within a simple sentence

In English, a simple sentence must include subject, predicate and object (in the case of transitive verbs). A sentence can not dispense with none of them. Furthermore, the logical relationship is clear: If the subject is the doer of the predicate, an active voice will be used; otherwise a passive voice. Other constituents are linked together by prepositions or participles. In Chinese, on the contrary, sentences without subject or predicate are frequently found, and relationships between different constituents are loose and unclear. For instance, “台上坐着老师们” (Literally: On the podium is sitting the teachers), “今晚有电影” (Literally: Today has a movie). The subjects of these 2 sentences are neither doer nor receiver of the predicates, but the place and time of the event, which will be treated as complement in a prepositional phrase in English. The relationship between subject and predicate is more like “topic+comment” in Chinese sentences.

### 2.2.2 Relationship between clauses

Differences in complex and compound sentences are also obvious. In Chinese, sentence of flowing water often occurs (LV, 1979). In such sentence, short clauses with related meanings are put together to form a long sentence, and as long as semantic relationship is reasonable, syntactic relationship will not be considered. For instance, “不一会，北风小了，路上浮尘已刮净，剩下一条洁白的大道来，车夫也跑得更快” (Literally: In no time, the northern wind is weakening, the dust on the road is cleared, a clean road is left, the rickshaw boy is also running faster.) (LU, 2005). In English, words and clauses must be united syntactically by relatives. English sentence is like a building, with everything closely connected. If something can not be put into the structure of the building, another building can not be built. There are more meaning-united sentences in Chinese, and more form-united sentences in English.

## 3. Two ways of thinking

Owing to such factors as different natural environments, historical developments, thought patterns of Chinese and Westerners have developed in their own distinct ways. The differences will be manifested in languages, which are generally taken as a tool to express one's mind. In the paper, an attempt is made to explain the different ways of sentence-making in terms of the 2 varied thought patterns.

### 3.1 Loose or strict?

The thinking pattern of Westerners is strict, while that of Chinese is loose. Philosophers in the West, since ancient Greece, began to give emphasis on logic, nature and forms of the objects around them. They turned to strict rational analysis and formal reasoning in order to know an object. The individual constituent is the startpoint of their analysis, and they demand everything to be precise. During the process of analysis and reasoning, each step is taken in a strict manner, because each small error may lead to a wrong result. In China, people stress on perceptual understanding (悟). The start of perceiving is, instead of individual constituent, the object as a whole. They highlight the totality and internal unity of the observed object. The constituents and the surface logic are not so important to them, and details of them may often be ignored, because feelings play a very important role in their process of thinking. These different patterns of thinking may account for the different attitudes towards sentence constituents.

### 3.2 Concrete or abstract?

Chinese think in a concrete way while Westerners in an abstract way, which is related the above mentioned. As feelings play an important role in their thinking, it is easier for Chinese to think when something is present for them to feel. If they have to think without the presence of the object, they may try to create a mental picture, because this picture may facilitate their process of intuition and understanding. This is the reason why Chinese prefer to use verbs and put verbs in the order of time. For Westerners, whether an object is present or not is not important, since they depend on deduction and logic when they are thinking. This way of thinking also reflected in language: They use more prepositions, participles and relatives to indicate the logical relationship. They concern more with spatial framework than historical picture.

### 3.3 Subjective or objective?

One basic issue in philosophy is the attitude towards relationship between subject and object, namely, how people think they are related to the outside world. Based on traditional philosophy, Chinese hold that human and the world are part of a united identity. The relationship between the human and the world is close. They think that everything is decided by human: They perceive the world through feeling and change, but the world through action. This human-centered idea permeates in all aspects of life including language. As all conscious actions are done by human, personal subjects and active voice are more often used. Besides, Chinese sentence is not restricted by forms, but decided by the speaker, which is also an example of this human-centered idea.

Westerners, on the other hand, think that human and the outside world are separate identities. The contradiction leads them to divide the world into 2 parts: with life and without life, perceivable and unperceivable, material and spiritual. They think human must compete with the other identity—the world. Therefore, the subject of object is often used. Besides, they think a preposition can establish itself only when it is composed of a subject and object, therefore, a sentence must include subject and predicate.

### 3.4 Circle or line?

Thought of Chinese precede in a circle, while that of Westerners precede in a line. Chinese do not think in a linear way, because they think cause and effect are mutually decided. From ancient times, they began to think in this way. Ancient Chinese thought the world was composed by gold, wood, water, fire and earth, each of which

depended on the others and was a part of one circle. In modern linguistics, a theory called hermeneutical circle (诠释圆环) (ZHANG & CHENG, 1991) is based on this way of thinking, and sentences in Chinese are, of course, a good example, especially the sentences of flowing water. Clauses with similar meanings are put together. Meanings of them depend on the whole sentence, and meaning of the sentence depends on individual clauses. Westerners think in a linear way. One is one, and one may precede or relate to two. Their deduction develops step by step. They depend on the outside logic to relate different parts. That is why the relationship of words is so important in English sentences, it enables the thought to continue, so sentences in English are like buildings: closely-knit.

#### 4. Conclusion

When a Chinese translator translates a Chinese text into English, first of all s/he has to understand the text and then rewrites it in English sentences. However, the target text in English, in most cases, is different from the text written by a native speaker. Actually, even the English text written by a Chinese scholar who has learned English for many years may look like “Chinese” in some subtle ways. An obvious example is the language used in *China Daily* and *New York Times*. The differences may be felt at one glance. The cause is not the inadequacy of the editor’s English, but the different inbred thinking pattern. Therefore, only when a person thinks in the way English-speaking natives think, can he really master the language of English.

In the paper, the author tries to find the differences the 2 ways of sentence-making and their relationship to the different thought patterns. The author hopes that her analysis may facilitate the readers to have a better understanding of the differences and gain a deeper insight into these 2 languages. Besides, a suggestion is given: When doing translation work, one can try to think in the way people in the target language think.

#### References:

- Brown, R. W.. 1958. *Language, thought and culture*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- CHENG, X.W.. 1998. A comparative study on the features of Chinese and English sentence-making. *Chinese Study*, (5).
- CHENG, Z. Y.. 1989. Chinese language and traditional Chinese way of thinking. *Xinhua Digest*, (1).
- DENG, F. Y.. 1999. Differences in English and Chinese and thought patterns in the East and the West. *Social Science Journal of Hunan Normal University*, (3).
- Gumperz, J. & Stephen, L. (Eds.). 1996. *Rethinking linguistic relativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- HU, C.. 1999. The relationship between differences in thought in the West and the East and the features of English and Chinese languages. *Nankai Journal*, (3).
- LIN, T. J.. 1980. A look at translation of long sentences from word order in Chinese. *Modern English Study*, (1).
- LU, X.. 2005. *The complete works of LU Xun (Vol. 1)*. Beijing: The People’s Literature Publishing House.
- LV, S. X.. 1979. *Problems in the analysis of Chinese grammar*. Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Pütz, M. & Marjoly, V. (Eds.). 2000. *Explorations in linguistic relativity*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- WANG, Y. C.. 1992. *Commentary on East and West cultures*. Beijing: Beijing University Press.
- Whorf, B.. 1956. *Language, thought, and reality: Selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. Cambridge, Mass.: Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- ZHANG, D. N. & CHENG, Z. Y.. 1991. *Tendency of Chinese thinking*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.
- ZHENG, C. M.. 1992. *A comparative study on cultures in China and the West*. Beijing: Beijing Language and Culture University Press.

(Edited by Chris and Suky)