

The Influence of Chinese and Western Ways of Thinking on Chinese-English Translation from the Perspective of Person and Object

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Abstract

Influenced by traditional philosophical views, Westerners prefer object consciousness, while the Han people prefer subject consciousness. Therefore, this difference in subjective and objective philosophical views has led to very different ways of thinking between Chinese and Westerners. The most direct manifestation of differences in thinking is language differences. Chinese tends to go with an personal style, while English an impersonal style. This thesis uses Shen Congwen's Biancheng as the original text, and Gladys Yang's and Jeffrey C. Kinkley's English versions as the references to explore specific forms of Chinese personal subject and English impersonal subject, analyze and contrast the characteristics of Chinese and English.

Keywords

The difference in the way of thinking; Chinese and English; personal subject and impersonal subject; language characteristics; Biancheng.

1. Introduction

Biancheng is a novel about love written by famous Chinese writer Shen Congwen and has been deeply loved by Chinese people including Gladys Yang, a well-known Chinese translator. He and his wife worked together to translate the novel Biancheng into English and transmitted the novel to the West. The English version gained great attention from the West. Jeffrey C. Kinkley also translated Biancheng into English and his translation was highly praised by Western readers. Due to the differences in Chinese and Western cultures, the way of thinking between China and the West is also very different. Therefore, translators need to consider it when translating Biancheng to make unique Chinese language features and culture known to the West.

The difference in the way of thinking of the Han people and Western people is reflected in the expression characteristics of English and Chinese. English and Chinese have different characteristics in phonetics, characters, words, semantics, syntax and texts. As far as syntactic features are concerned, English prefers impersonal subject, while Chinese likes personal subject more. The former uses inanimate, abstract things or concepts as the subject of a verb, while the latter uses a person or an animal as the logical subject of the verb, emphasizing "who did what?". Therefore, English often presents a "personal tendency" to highlight the objectivity of things, reducing subjective judgment to a certain extent and making the sentences described objective; Chinese often presents a "personal tendency", which narrates things, evaluates and judges people's behaviors, attitudes, or feelings about things and events from a human perspective, increasing the subjectivity of sentences. From the personal and impersonal perspective, this paper discusses the influence of differences in Chinese and Western thinking modes on Chinese-English translation and the language characteristics of Gladys Yang and Jeffrey C. Kinkley's versions.

2. Reasons for the Differences in the Expressions of English and Chinese

Language is the carrier of culture, reflecting a nation's specific history, culture, customs, and the code of conduct. At the same time, language is also the outer shell of thinking. The way and process of thinking of humans are revealed through expression, reflecting the thinking mode of a nation. Therefore, in a comparative study of languages, different ways of thinking among different ethnic groups must be considered.

The culture of the English-speaking nation mainly comes from the Aegean Sea and the ancient Greek culture. In the relationship between human beings and nature, the English-speaking nation advocates "the separation of man and nature", and believes that all things in the world are in opposition to each other, such as: man and nature, society and nature, material and spirit, thinking and existence. Humans go beyond nature, are not dominated and controlled by nature, and can transform and dominate nature through their own power. The nature of human beings is to conquer nature with their own wisdom and scientific power and people can become the master of heaven and earth. This spirit of taking things as the main body, taking nature as the base, and focusing on the objective observation, research and exploration of nature has gradually formed the Westerners' "object-type" way of thinking. This way of thinking takes the natural world as the center of human observation, analysis, reasoning, and inquiry, and focuses on the influence of "things" on people's thinking and behavior, highlighting the importance of "things". Meanwhile, this kind of way of thinking has brought about the intentional "separation of things from me" in the language expression of Westerners, so that things can be expressed in an objective way, thus forming one of the expression characteristics of English---emphasizing impersonal subject.

The language characteristics of Chinese with emphasis on personal expression come from the "way of life" and "the way of academic study" promoted by Confucius, Mencius and Lao Zhuang. For example, Laozi of Taoism put forward that "people are the subject of all things", and Zhuangzi put forward the idea of "heaven and earth coexist with me, and all things and I are one". It can be seen that they pursue the unity of man and nature. Mencius, the representative of Confucianism, once said that "all things are prepared for me", that is, I, as the universe, has a common essence with all things. This kind of thinking of "the unity of heaven and man" regards heaven and humanity as one, highlighting the subjectivity of human beings and reflecting the humanistic thinking of Chinese culture. After long-term development, it has formed the unique "subjective" way of thinking of the Chinese nation. Under the influence of this way of thinking, the Han people tend to think, explore and solve problems subjectively, and express themselves in subjective language.

3. A Comparison of English Impersonal Subject and Chinese Personal Subject

3.1. The English Tendency for Impersonal Subject

3.1.1. Inanimate Subject and Animate Verb

The English's tendency for impersonal subject is first manifested in the collocation of "inanimate subject" and "animate verb". The Inanimate subject refers to different personal pronouns, and inanimate things are used as subjects to express abstract concepts, psychological feelings, names of things, time and place, etc. The animate verb expresses the actions and behaviors of people or social groups, such verbs as see, escape, kill, send and tell. In English, there are many sentences with inanimate subject and animate verb, and they are used in a wide range of situations. In this section, the author will analyze the English translation of Biancheng from three common expressions of inanimate subject and animate verb.

3.1.1.1 Noun with emotion as subject

Example: 翠翠忘到这个景致，忽然想起了一个可怕的想法，她想：“假如爷爷死了？”(Shen Congwen)

A fearful thought crossed her mind, "Can grandpa be dead?" (Gladys Yang)

A terrible thought suddenly occurred to Cuicui as she surveyed this scene: Can Grandpa be dead? (Jeffrey C. Kinkley)

In the original text, the author uses a personal subject to directly describe Cuicui's true thoughts, but when converting into English, the translator uses an impersonal subject. In Gladys Yang's translation, "a fearful thought", an inanimate noun which shows Cuicui's feeling, is the subject of the entire sentence. In Jeffrey's translation, "a terrible thought", an inanimate noun, is also used as the subject, which reflects Cuicui's psychological state of great fear when she sees this scene. The translations of both are the embodiment of the impersonal tendency of English. In Yang's translation, the use of the animate verb phrase "cross one's mind" and the inanimate subject of "thought" expresses Cuicui's mind, which reflects the language characteristics of English, and is also a common expression in the daily use of English.

3.1.1.2 Time or place noun as subject

Example:

因为商人的需要，水手的需要，这小小边城的河街，也居然有那么一群人，聚集在一起有吊脚楼的人家。(Shen Congwen)

And to cater for the merchants and boatmen, the shanties on the waterfront of the small town begin to house women of a special type. (Gladys Yang)

Certain kinds of big-city hangers-on follow commercial prosperity, to meet the needs of merchants and also the boatmen. Even this tiny border town had those types along its River Street. (Jeffrey C. Kinkley)

In the translation of Gladys Yang, the place noun "shanties" is used as the subject, and the predicate phrase "begin to house" is used as the animate verb. This kind of collocation method of using a place noun as the subject and the animate verb as the predicate is exactly what English pays attention to. Jeffrey C. Kinkley's translation divides the original sentence into two sentences, explains the reasons for the appearance of "hangers-on", and then says that because of the needs of merchants and sailors, hangers-on can even be seen in a small place like Biancheng. The translator uses "even" to connect the two sentences together through their logical relationship. Jeffrey uses the place noun "this tiny border town" as the subject of the entire sentence, and the animate verb "had" as the predicate. This collocation also reflects emphasis of English on the impersonal subject. At the same time, it also shows the unique way of the expression of English that often uses conjunctions to connect sentences.

3.1.1.3 Impersonal pronoun as subject

In English, the impersonal pronoun "it" is often used as the subject. In addition to replacing creatures or things other than people, "it" can be used as a kind of expletive word.

妓女多靠四川商人维持生活，但恩情所结，则多在水手方面。(Shen Congwen)

Whereas most of the women's income comes from merchants, it is usually the boatmen who win their hearts. (Gladys Yang)

The prostitutes depended on the Sichuan merchants for their living, but their love went to the boatmen. (Jeffrey C. Kinkley)

In Yang's translation, "whereas" is used to guide the adverbial clause of concession, indicating that the prostitutes income comes from businessmen, and "it is...who" is used to emphasize the importance of their emotional sustenance to sailors. "it" is used as an emphasized word to guide the part to be emphasized and used as the formal subject of the entire sentence. This kind of

impersonal pronoun "it" often makes sentences have a impersonal tendency, which reflects the thinking mode of English-speaking people and emphasizes the object. Jeffrey directly uses "prostitutes" as the subject to present their living conditions and the conjunction "but" to connect the two sentences, which is similar to Yang's translation. An abstract noun-love is used as the subject of the sentence, and the animate verb "go to" is used as the predicate, which vividly expresses the feelings of prostitutes.

3.1.1.4 "There be" sentence pattern

Example: 小溪既为川湘来往孔道，限于财力不能搭桥，就安排了一只方头渡船。（Shen Congwen）

The water level fluctuates considerably, and while there is no money to build a bridge a ferry has been provided. (Gladys Yang)

This little stream was a major chokepoint for transit between Sichuan and Hunan, but there was never enough money to build a bridge. (Jeffrey C. Kinkley)

Among many sentence patterns which emphasize the impersonal subject, the "there be" sentence pattern is also an important one. In Yang's translation, "there is no money to build a bridge" is used to describe the fact that the financial resources are insufficient to build a bridge. Jeffrey also uses the same objectified sentence pattern "there was never enough money to build a bridge" in his translation to express the economic difficulties encountered in building a bridge from an objective perspective. From the two translations, it can be seen that the objectified expression of "there be" is often used.

3.2. Chinese Personal Expressions

The personal tendency of Chinese reflects the subject consciousness of Chinese people. The traditional Chinese philosophy is a theory about the existence, essence, meaning and values of people, which determines that Chinese philosophical thinking is a human-centered subjective thinking. It can be seen that many Chinese philosophers and their thoughts have subjective idealism, taking people as the criterion for judging everything, and believing that people determine everything in the world. One of the most famous is Lu Jiuyuan's famous words: The universe is my heart, and my heart is the universe. He equates man with the universe and thinks man is the master of all things. In this way, the traditional Chinese thinking is deeply rooted. Therefore, Chinese people pay more attention to subjective thinking and describe objective things from their own perspectives. That's why active sentences and personal subjects are very common in Chinese. Chinese personal expressions often use an animate subject or a general name in a non-subjective, active sentence or omitted sentence to express a thing.

3.2.1. The Animated Subject and the Active Sentence

Influenced by the traditional Chinese subjective thinking, Chinese sentences generally take people as the subject, and use the "animate subject" and "animate verb" collocation. According to the thinking habit of the Han people, only people or social groups have consciousness, so Chinese animate verbs can generally only be collocated with personal nouns.

Example:

那人便笑着说：“他从河里捉鸭子回来，在码头上见你，他说好意请你上家里坐坐，等候你爷爷，你还骂他！你那只狗不识吕洞宾，只是叫！”

In the original work, there are three personal subjects-animate subjects, namely "那人、他和你". At the same time, each animate subject is matched with an animate verb: 笑 laugh, 捉 catch, and 骂 scold. This combination of animate subject + animate verb not only shows the way of thinking of Chinese people, that is, who did what, but also shows the language characteristics of Chinese, that is, emphasizing the personal subject.

3.2.2. The General Term

The Han people's thinking habit focuses on man-made things and humans' power. Therefore, a personal subject is often used. If the exact person cannot be named, a general term is used, such as: someone, people, everyone, others.

Example:

渡船头竖了一枝小小竹竿，挂着一个可以活动的铁环，溪岸两端水面牵了一段废缆，有人过渡时，把铁环挂在废缆上，船上人就引手攀缘那条缆索，慢慢的牵船过对岸去。

In the original Chinese text, the author uses 有人 someone as a general term, because it is impossible to exactly say which person is and who is going to take the boat. So "someone" is used to refer to the person who wants to take a boat.

3.2.3. No Main Clause Or Omitted Clause

In Chinese, when the personal subject or general term is self-explanatory, the hidden subject-omitted personal subject is often used.

Example: 小溪既为川湘来往孔道，限于财力不能搭桥，就安排了一只方头渡船。

On the basis of the original text, an omitted subject can be added: although the creek is a channel between Sichuan and Hunan, (the local government) arranged a square-headed ferry due to limited financial resources. Everyone knows the omitted subject, so this kind of ferry is originally owned by the public, so there is no need to say more.

4. Conclusion

This paper takes Shen Congwen's *Biancheng* as the original text with its two English versions translated by Gladys Yang and Jeffrey, to discuss the difference in the way of thinking between China and the West, that is, the subject consciousness of the Chinese nation and the object consciousness of Westerners, and the consequences of this difference. This paper selects one of differences of language characteristics of Chinese and English, namely personal subject vs impersonal subject. From the perspective of the personal and impersonal subject, it discusses the impact of this difference on the English translation, as well as language used by the two versions when translators deal with the original text. It provides some references for future English translation of Chinese novels. When translating Chinese into English, translators should also take into account the difference in the way of thinking between China and the West, and translate the Chinese novel into a version that is easily acceptable to Western readers.

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