

# Differences Between English and Chinese Thought Patterns and Their Influences on Translation and Writing

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**Abstract**—For historical, regional or other reasons, there are some great differences in thought pattern between the English and Chinese. Language expression varies in different thought patterns. Understanding the difference is beneficial to the culture exchange. This paper aims to talk about the differences between two thought patterns and their influences on translation and writing.

**Keywords**—*thought patterns; differences; translation; writing*

## I. INTRODUCTION

A language is a tool of thought. It gives expression to the idea and culture directly. Thought is dependent of language and vise versa; and language and thought first separate and unite later. (Lin Dajin, 1996:177) A certain national language has some relationship with its national feature and culture characteristics. Thought patterns vary as cultures differ from one another. The thinking patterns of western nations are often depicted as individual, analytical, abstract and accurate; however, the thinking patterns of eastern nations are described as holistic, dialectical, concrete and visualized, subjective and ambiguous. Western people show partiality for analysis, while Eastern people pay more attention to synthesis. Those differences between thought patterns have great influences on translation and writing.

## II. THE INFLUENCE OF THOUGHT PATTERN DIFFERENCES ON TRANSLATION

### A. The Pattern of Thought

Each culture has its own special way of thinking, and the same words or symbols on many occasions create different images in the mind of people with different culture, or rather one's pattern of thought could hardly separate from his culture. For hundreds of years, holistic thinking has been exerting influence on Chinese language. As a result, in Chinese the holistic and synthetic syntactical structure is emphasized, and circular repetition often appears in Chinese. This is rarely emphasized in English. For example:

1) 这年头什么都要送礼, 生要送礼, 老要送礼, 病要送礼, 死要送礼。 (Nowadays you will have to present gifts on almost

every occasion — gifts for the newborn, the aged, the sick and the dead.)

2) 镇子坐落在一个峡谷里, 东面是山, 西面是山, 南面是山, 北面也是山。 (The small town lies in a valley surrounded with mountains.)

("A Contrastive Study and translation in Chinese and English". 1991: 451)

The above examples show that the phonological advantage in Chinese contributes to the circular repetition, which, as a result, makes the sentence sound very rhythmic and the sentence structure seems simplified.

It is also very interesting to compare the different views of time in English and Chinese culture. Time is a continuous concept in both cultures, but it is different when it comes to expressing "future" and "past". Chinese people consider what will take place as "后", and what has happened as "前", e. g. "前无古人, 后无来者", "前事不忘, 后事之师." But the reverse is true in English. e. g. "But we are getting ahead of the story" (不过我们说到故事后头去了). In Chinese, there are "前十名" and "后十名", while in English, they should said as "the upper ten/the top ten" and "the lower ten/the bottom ten".

### B. Values and Aesthetic Standards

Values are overt expressions of what is considered good or bad, beautiful or ugly. Influenced by the philosophical idea of the Central harmony, the Chinese have developed their particular aesthetic standards, one of which is unique emphasis on the beauty of balance. For example, antithesis is an important figure of speech; it emphasizes a contrast by presenting contradictory or similar ideas by using two or more words or sentences in sharp juxtapositions. Antithesis is much more prevalent than it is in most English forms. Good illustrations for this are 人无千日好, 花无百日红 (proverb) and 满招损, 谦受益 (Book of songs). (Zhang Guangming, 2001:110). Moreover, four-character pattern is a kind of linguistic form widely used in China, and the formation of many Chinese four-character compounds with co-ordinate relations also reveals this aesthetic standard of balance. For example, 天造地设, 天涯海角, 同心同德, 海阔天空, 五湖四海, 相辅相成, 十拿九稳, 年深日久, 繁荣日盛, and many others. When people translate English into Chinese, they should

consciously have this in mind and use some four-character compounds when it is appropriate, aiming to make the language more vivid and lay an emphasis on meaning.

### C. Tradition and Custom

There are many metaphorical expressions in both languages, which have long been accepted through common practice by people. Though they have the same pragmatic meaning, the objects of the metaphorical expressions are often different. (涂开益: 1989: 43) For example, "as stupid as a goose (蠢得像猪)", "to work like a horse (干活像黄牛)", "like a hen on a hot girdle (如热锅上的蚂蚁)", "birds of a feather (一丘之貉)", "as old as hills (天长地久)", "as thin as a shadow (瘦得像猴)", "to spring up like mushrooms (雨后春笋)", "to spent money like water (挥金如土)", "to cast pears before a swine (对牛弹琴)", "to shed crocodile tears (猫哭老鼠)" "as blind as bat (有眼无珠)" "wet like a drawn rat (湿如落汤鸡)". From the above examples, it can be seen that each culture has its own way to express things. Therefore, in order to keep with the equivalence in pragmatic meaning, sometimes the metaphorical images have to be changed.

## III. THE INFLUENCE OF THOUGHT PATTERN DIFFERENCES ON WRITING

Generally speaking, English is a partially synthetic and partially analytical language characterized by overtness in grammar, hypostasis in syntax, comparatively free word order and flexible word formation. While Chinese, as an analytical language, often neglects its form and emphasizes coherence. An oriental paragraph tends to follow a circular line of development, which mirrors the psychological characteristics of the Chinese people.

It is typical of the Chinese students to have both Chinese and English thought patterns at their disposal in the English writing process, which is revealed at the levels of sentence structure, paragraph structure and text organization.

### A. Sentence Structure

Chinese sentence structure is based on context, and lays stress on coherence rather than form. The sentence order represents the inner logical relationship of the sentence, while English sentences follow strict grammar rules. The following shows some examples:

(1) 天气较好, 我们去爬山.

As the weather was fine, we decided to climb the mountain.

(2) 与狗相比, 猫更好一些.

Cats are nicer than dogs.

(3) 在火车月台上, 我遇见了我过去的一个好邻居杰姆.

I encountered Jim at the platform of the train, who used to be one of my kind neighbors

(4) 有一天他请我吃饭, 他说因为家乡带来了一块腊肉. (Extracted from Zhang Tianyi's "Mrs. Huawei" and quoted in

A Contrastive Study of Writing & Rhetoric in English and Chinese)

One day he asked me to dinner, because, he said, a piece of preserved meat had been sent from his village. (Tra. By M. Ho and Clarence Moy)

(5) 只要你有毅力, 你就能够成功.

Only with perseverance and willpower can you succeed.

(6) 因为天黑了, 所以我加快了步伐.

Because it was dark, I quickened my pace.

### B. Paragraph Structure

A well-conceived and well-constructed paragraph is a unit, and often this unity is indicated by a key sentence which is called the topic sentence. The topic sentence states the main idea, which is elaborated by the rest of the paragraph. The topic sentence can be thought of as a kind of backbone, a spine, which supports the body of the paragraph and around which the rest of the structure is formed. However, the sentences made by Chinese students are short and simple. Here is an example taken from a student's exercise book.

People enjoy the remarkable wonder of the new century, while may suffer from troubles. For example, people have to struggle against environmental pollution, green house effect and the earthquake and etc. All these problems have ever damaged people's life.

It'd be better to change it to another way:

However, while people enjoy the remarkable wonders of the new century, they may suffer from troubles, such as environmental pollution, green house effect and the earthquake, which has already given a great damage to people.

Let's look at the following paragraph:

Everyone agrees that water pollution is a serious problem today. Oceans, lakes, and rivers all over the world are becoming polluted with garbage and dangerous chemicals. Factories contribute to the problem because they rely on the rivers for disposing of wastes. Oil and other chemicals can kill fish and people make water bad for drinking. Polluted water is a hazard to everyone. Since people are depending on water, they should be involved in finding a solution to this problem.

The above paragraph begins with the topic sentence that water pollution is a serious problem, and then it gives some details to illustrate that contaminated ocean, lake, river, and factory all contribute to the water pollution. In the end of the paragraph, it points out that polluted water is a hazard to everyone, and the problem needs to be solved. The whole paragraph follows a straight line of development.

Compared with this, let's look at the following paragraph written by a Chinese student:

When I was young, I heard the story "trying to help the shoots grow by pulling". It is said that a man in ancient

China was worried that the shoots of his crops might not grow fast enough, so he pulled everyone of them a bit upward. As a result, far from growing fast, his shoots all died away. His haste, unfortunately, caused a great loss. This is a lesson to people all. If people hope to accomplish something, they must do it step by step. On the contrary, the hastier people are, the more errors they are likely to make. Sometimes too hasty action may result in a complete failure.

The above English writing characterized with Chinese thought pattern that follows a circular line of development.

### C. Text Organization

Chinese tends to approach by indirection, and the text always follows a circular line of development. English tends to put forward the opinion at the beginning of the paper, and then analyze the problem, find solutions to the problem. According to Scollon (2000:93), "Western cultures use a deductive method of reasoning or argument, while Eastern culture uses an inductive method of reasoning".

Here are two essays on the same topic, from which people can see the different thought patterns. The former one is written by a Chinese student and the other one is written by a western student.

#### An Early Morning Walk

One morning, I got up very early and it was quiet outside. After a day's work and a good sleep overnight, I was overjoyed with the morning silence and decided to some morning exercises.

I walked towards the park assuming that there must be few people there. But when I arrived at the park, I found, to my surprise, there were so many people. I happened to meet one of my friends. We chatted about a lot of things we are interested in, playing badminton, and having several social dances together. We had a good morning. Taking an early morning walk is good to health. We may do a lot of things we like during this time because we can't do it at any other times. At the same time, it helps us to know more about the world and to widen our field of vision.

#### An Early Morning Walk

I find that the early morning is a delightful time to take a walk. Everything is fresh and peaceful and you can hear the birds singing as they greet the new day.

Walking is a wonderful exercise it requires no special equipment and can be done anywhere. Besides the obvious physical benefits of walking, such as burning calories and increasing strength and stamina, it has a positive effect on your mental well-being. Many doctors today recommend walking to their patients for relieving stress as much as for the physical benefits.

## IV. CONCLUSION

From all the above, people can see that English lets the facts speak for themselves and pursues the maximum objectiveness. The topic is stated at the beginning and then examples and illustrations proceed to demonstrate the central

idea. There is nothing that is not related to the central ideas in the whole essay. Thus the flow of ideas occurs in a straight line from the opening sentence to the last sentence. In the end, a distinctive conclusion is drawn. (You Zeshun, 1999:32) however, the Chinese passage doesn't state the topic directly in the opening lines, but constantly lays out relevant or even irrelevant information to provide many subjective perspectives for judging.

After giving a brief account of the different modes of thinking between Chinese and English, and their influences upon translation and writing, it may be realized that the study of the difference may bring a new thinking to the contrast study of Chinese and English and have a great importance in cross-cultural communication.

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