

Brief Discussion on the Origin and Diachronic Evolution of the Alternative Complex Sentence “Prefer A Rather Than B”

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Abstract—The sentence pattern of “prefer A rather than B” appeared in Zhuzi’s Language Category in Song dynasty for the first time. At that time, the pattern of “prefer A rather than B” had a function of conjunction, which was used in the choice of complex sentences to express the preferred semantic relationship. This sentence pattern was initially formed in the Song dynasty, fully developed in the Ming and Qing dynasties, and matured in the Republic of China era.

Keywords—alternative complex sentences; “prefer A rather than B”; origin; evolution

I. INTRODUCTION

Alternative complex sentence is also called preferred complex sentences. The speaker makes a clear choice among the two or more possible items provided by the clause.¹ This format means to choose one by measuring gains and losses in two things, or the speaker thinks that one way of doing is not appropriate, so he proposes another way (the speaker thinks that the other way is better). He gives up one and chooses the other in a euphemistic tone.

II. THE ORIGIN OF THE SENTENCE PATTERN “PREFER A RATHER THAN B”

During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, there appeared a sentence pattern of “prefer A rather than B”. For example, “Book of History Dayumo” records “If there is anything suspicious in determining the seriousness of the offence, it is better to treat it lightly in sentencing. If there is anything suspicious in determining how great the merit is, it is better to give an abundance reward. Instead of killing innocent people by mistake, we would rather make mistakes in law enforcement.”

- (1) “As far as the general rite is concerned, it is better to be frugal than luxurious. As far as the funeral is concerned, it is better to mourn the dead with grief than to handle the funeral ceremony properly.” (“The Analects of Confucius · Bayi”)

- (2) Confucius said, “Luxury makes you overstep rites. It’s better to be shabby than overstepping rites.” (“The Analects of Confucius · Shu’er”)

During this period, there also appeared “it’s better to ... than...” and “instead of ..., it’s better to...” For example,

- (1) “Instead of killing all the people in Yue State, it is better to win the people of Yue. My majesty, which one is better do you think?” (“Guoyu · Gou Jian Resting in Kuaiji”)
- (2) “If misfortune occurs, it is better to reward excessively than to abuse punishment; instead of hurting good people, it is better to let evil people benefit.” (“Xunzi · Zhishi”)
- (3) “When the woman saw this situation, she said to her parents, ‘it is better to be a wife than a concubine.’ A man may have dozens of concubines.” (“Zhuangzi · Dechongfu”)

In the Tang Dynasty, the sentence pattern of “would rather... than...” appeared. For example,

- (1) “You need to move forward and backward according to the actual situation and distinguish the good from the bad. You would rather get high position and great wealth by following him than perish by betraying him.” (Vol. 38, “Tangwen Shiyi”)

In the Song Dynasty, there appeared the sentence pattern of “prefer doing to doing”. For example,

- (1) Zhang Qingzhi said, “I prefer losing Yanjing to losing the regime.” (“Records of Southern Migration”)
- (2) “At present, the national expenditure has not been reduced and the annual revenue cannot be reduced either. If we don’t get it from mountains and businessmen, we need to get it from peasants. But I prefer getting it from businessmen to getting it from peasants.” (“Mengxi Bitan · Official Affairs II”)

In the Ming Dynasty, the sentence patterns of “might as well... than...” and “instead of..., would rather... than...” appeared. For example:

¹ Zhang Bin. Modern Chinese Descriptive Grammar, Business Press, 2010, P 659.

- (1) "I recall that, I might as well untie the knot and jump down than bit off the wine and fall down. It would be better." (Chapter 39, "Sanbao Eunuch's Journey to the West")
- (2) Gui Zu caught Song Shi, and Song Shi appealed to a new official: "he said I'm not filial. I cannot say I'm very filial. But he calls me ashpit. What a shame am I! Instead of being humiliated, I would rather be called unfilial to my elders. (Chapter 60, "Baogong Case")

In the Qing Dynasty, there appeared sentences of "might as well ... instead of...", "rather than...", "would...", "prefer A to B" and "would rather ... than..." For example:

- (1) "To be honest, I might as well bring some money to show filial piety to my uncle instead of trying so hard to please him." (Chapter 18, "Twenty Years of Unusual Phenomena")
- (2) "We two can't live anyhow. Rather than hanging by others, we would die in Shuanglong Mountain." (Chapter 5, "Sanxiajian")

The author believes that the sentence pattern of "might as well... instead of..." originated from the format of "rather than..., would..." in the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period. "宁" (níng) is a function word in ancient Chinese, which means that the speaker chooses one of the two things he does not want or would not like to do but he need to choose one through comparative analysis. The one chosen by the speaker is hypothetical when he speaks, sometimes exaggerated for the sake of language effect, so as to foil the speaker's unwillingness.

III. THE EVOLUTION OF THE SENTENCE PATTERN OF "PREFER A RATHER THAN B"

The sentence pattern of "prefer A rather than B" has undergone a long period of diachronic evolution, which can be divided into three periods: formation period, development period and maturity period.

The format of "instead of..., it's better to..." first appeared in Guoyu and Zuozhuan in the Spring and Autumn Period and Warring States Period. For example, "In this way, the people all strive to be good. Instead of doing good in the countryside, it's better to do it in hometown; instead of doing good in hometown, it's better to do good at home (Guoyu · Zuohuangong Guan Zhong's Government). For another example, "Fan Xianzi said to Wei Xianzi: 'It's better to build the city wall there than to guard it in Chengzhou. The Son of Heaven has already spoken, even if something happens later, Jin State may not participate. To obey the orders of the Son of Heaven and to make the princes get a breath, there will be no trouble in Jin State. What are you going to do if you don't try to do it?' (Zuozhuan · The 32ed Year of Zhaogong) But in these two examples, "与其" (yǔ qí) and "不如" (bú rú) are not related words. "与其" (yǔ qí) is a phrase composed of "与" (yǔ) and "其" (qí). "与" (yǔ) is a conjunction expressing hypothetical meaning, and "其" (qí) has the function of personal pronoun. "不如" (bú rú) is a phrase composed of "不" (bú) and "如" (rú). "不" (bú) is an adverb expressing negative

meaning, "如" (rú) is verb meaning "like". During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, there were a few examples about this sentence pattern. But at this time they are not real conjunctions. Therefore, it can't be considered as an early example. For example:

- (1) Whether successful or not, there is no way to evade the responsibility for an offence. It is better to flee from Jin than to work hard and not be satisfied by the monarch. In this way, the emperor achieved his wish, and the prince avoided the danger of death. He would also gain a good name and become Wu Taibo. Isn't it very good? ("Guoyu · Jinyu")
- (2) When the spring dries up, both fish are exposed to the dry mud at the bottom of lake and wait to die. They can only spit out a few bubbles to wet each other and continue their lives. Although this is very touching and noble, for fish, it is better to roam in the great rivers and lakes, even if no one knows each other, than to express loyalty and friendship with death. ("Zhuang Tzu · Great Master")

A. Formation Period: Song Dynasty

Li Suqin believed that in the Wei and Jin Dynasties, The match of "与其... 不如" (yǔ qí... bú rú) and "与其... 不若" (yǔ qí... bú ruò) began to be fixed.² However, in Li's article she did not give the specific use examples of the corresponding format "would rather... than..." in the Wei and Jin Dynasties. Wang Tianyou believed that there is no specific instance of this format in the Wei and Jin Dynasties.³ At the same time, the author did not find the instance of the format in Wei and Jin Dynasties after searching. Until the Song Dynasty, there were a few instances of this sentence pattern in Chinese, which was not common. The sentence pattern of "would rather... than..." is the preferred relation of "prefer A to B". The first clause connected with "与其" (yǔ qí) is the negative unit that helps to deduce the key point of sentence meaning. It has the mood of presumptive speculation about things. The latter clause connected with "不如" (bú rú) is the key point of the whole sentence meaning expression. For example, "If you make friends with others, it is better to associate with honest people than with people without integrity." (Vol. 45, "Zhuizi's Language Category") In this case, "与其" (yǔ qí) is a hypothetical conjunction used to choose the beginning of the first clause in the compound sentence, and it is a situation in which the speaker expresses his subjective hypothesis. The last clause connected by "不如" (bú rú) is the key to the speaker's semantic expression.

In order to fully illustrate the use of the sentence pattern "prefer A rather than B" in Song Dynasty, 15 ancient books are referenced around this period as examples.

² Li Suqin, Textual Research on Grammaticalization of "Would Rather", Hubei Social Sciences, No. 4, 2011, P 138.

³ Wang Tianyou, Law and Cause of Diachronic Evolution of "Instead of", Journal of Yan'an University (Social Science Edition), No. 2, 2010, P 91.

TABLE I. THE USAGE OF THE SENTENCE PATTERN “PREFER A RATHER THAN B” IN SONG DYNASTY

| Title | Records of Southern Migration | Zhuqi's Language Category | Mengxi Bitan | Qijing | Taiping Guangji | Stories of Song Dynasty | Collections of Su Shi | Ci Collections of Liu Yong | Rongzhai Suiji | Jisilu | 300 Song Ci | Ci Collection of Zhou Bangyan | History of Five Dynasties | Poems and Ci of Li Qingzhao | Words of Xin Qiji | Total |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------|--------|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|----------------|--------|-------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|-------|
| Prefer to do than do | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| It's better to... Than... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Would rather... Than... | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Prefer doing to doing | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| Would rather... Than... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Prefer A rather than B | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |

It can be seen from the "Table I" that the sentence pattern of “prefer A rather than B” in Song Dynasty is not common, which indicates that this sentence pattern in this stage is still in the process of formation. At the same time, the sentence patterns of “prefer to do than do”, “prefer doing to doing” and “would rather... than...” show a relatively strong trend of development.

B. Development Period: Ming and Qing Dynasties

Ming and Qing Dynasties are the periods of development for the Chinese sentence pattern “it's better to... than...”.

- (1) The Master said, “Better to pray to God than to die.” (Chapter 22, "Sanbao Eunuch's Journey to the West")

- (2) He said, “It's better to save one's relatives than to be eaten by an outsider.” (Chapter 3, "Biography of Xingshi Marriage")
- (3) It's better to stop early than to lose integrity, so I mean to retire from office. (Chapter 91, "Seven Swords and Thirteen Knights")
- (4) Now that the old man is old, he can't take into account the whole dynasty's politics. Instead of getting off the pot, he should be demobilized and returned to home. (Chapter 91, "Seven Swords and Thirteen Knights")

In order to fully illustrate the use of the sentence pattern “prefer A rather than B” in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, 15 ancient books are referenced around this period as examples.

TABLE II. THE USAGE OF THE SENTENCE PATTERN “PREFER A RATHER THAN B” IN MING AND QING DYNASTIES

| Title | Erke Paian Jingqi | Pingshan Lengyan | Yujiaoli | Haoqiu Biography | Wanli Yehuo | Sanbao Eunuch's Journey to the West | Biography of Xingshi Marriage | Secret History of Zhou State | Shigong Case | Revealing Original Shape in Officialdom | Jiehaihua | Rulin Waishi | Jiweiwei | Seven Swords and Thirteen Knights | Records of the States in the Eastern Zhou Dynasty | Total |
|---------------------------|-------------------|------------------|----------|------------------|-------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|---|-----------|--------------|----------|-----------------------------------|---|-------|
| Prefer to do than do | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| It's better to... Than... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

| Title | Erke Paian Jingqi | Pingshan Lengyan | Yujiaoli | Haoqiu Biography | Wanli Yehuo | Sanbao Eunuch's Journey to the West | Biography of Xingshi Marriage | Secret History of Zhou State | Shigong Case | Revealing Original Shape in Officialdom | Jiehaihua | Rulin Waishi | Jiweiqi | Seven Swords and Thirteen Knights | Records of the States in the Eastern Zhou Dynasty | Total |
|-------------------------|-------------------|------------------|----------|------------------|-------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|---|-----------|--------------|---------|-----------------------------------|---|-------|
| Would rather... Than... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Prefer doing to doing | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 8 |
| Would rather... Than... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Prefer A rather than B | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 7 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 4 | 6 | 31 |

It can be seen from the "Table II" that the sentence pattern of "would rather... than..." developed to a great extent in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The sentence patterns of "prefer A to B", "it's better to... than...", "might as well... than..." and "prefer doing to doing" did not show a strong trend of development in this period, and the sentence patterns of "instead of..., would rather..." had a certain degree of development in this period.

C. Maturity Period: Republic of China

The Republic of China is the mature period of the sentence pattern "would rather... than..." During this period, there were many use cases of this sentence pattern. For example:

- (1) Duwei Li Yan said, "If the Han envoy abandons me, I will be destroyed by Qiuci again. Instead of dying the day after tomorrow, it is better to follow the Han envoy and return to the east!" (Chapter 29, "Houhan Yanyi")

- (2) Fan Wenzheng responded with indignation: "if it goes like this, it will harm future generations. It's better to harm me than to harm my family's descendants." (Chapter 7, "Daqing Sanjie")

- (3) Instead of fighting with him outside Changsha City, it's better for us to come here and take Wuchang first and kill him downstream. (Chapter 22, "Daqing Sanjie")

- (4) So the meaning of Yedao is that, thinking the prince actually asks for Tao, instead of seeking the way of life and death, it's better to seek the way of rebirth and transformation. What do you think, my dear prince? (Chapter 21, "Secret History of Ancient Times")

In order to fully illustrate the use of the sentence pattern "would rather... than..." in the period of the Republic of China, 15 ancient books are referenced around this period as examples.

TABLE III. THE USAGE OF THE SENTENCE PATTERN "PREFER A RATHER THAN B" IN THE REPUBLIC OF CHINA

| Title | Houhan Yanyi | Qinshao Yeshi | Guangjingchao | Xitaihou Yanshi Yanyi | Xihan Yeshi | Wudai Gongwei Shi | Haidai Gongting Yanshi | Daqing Sanjie | Tangshi Yanyi | Songshi Yanyi | Qianlong Xuqi | Mingshi Yanyi | Chunming Waishi | Gujin Qinghai | Minguo Yanyi | Total |
|---------------------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------------|-------------|-------------------|------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|--------------|-------|
| Prefer to do than do | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| It's better to... Than... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Would rather... Than... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Prefer doing to doing | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Would rather... Than... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Prefer A rather than B | 1 | 6 | 10 | 8 | 8 | 1 | 4 | 7 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 55 |

From "Table III", it can be seen that there are many use cases of the sentence pattern "prefer A rather than B" in this period, and the use of this sentence pattern has entered a mature stage. The sentence patterns of "it's better to... than..." and "might as well... than..." do not show a strong trend of development. There are occasional examples of the sentence patterns of "prefer to do than do", "would rather... than..." and "might as well... than..."

IV. CONCLUSION

The conjunction "与其" (yǔ qí) began to take shape in the pre-Qin period, and the conjunction "不如" was first seen in the Wei and Jin Dynasties. The sentence pattern "would rather... than..." first appeared in the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, but at this time "与其" (yǔ qí) and "不如" (bú rú) are all phrases composed of two words, not real related words. For the first time, the sentence pattern of "would rather... than..." first appeared formally in Zhuzi's Language Category in Song Dynasty. At this time, "与其" (yǔ qí) and "不如" (bú rú) have developed into conjunctions, which can be used to alternative complex sentences and to express preferential semantic relations. This sentence pattern was initially formed in the Song Dynasty, fully developed in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and matured in the Republic of China.

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