



Structural Shift in Chinese to Arabic Translation: A Case Study in Diplomatic Translation

Yuliang Fan

School of Middle Eastern Studies, Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, China

1870554388@qq.com

Abstract. This paper selects original Chinese diplomatic texts from 2023 and their Arabic translations as corpus material. It applies the concept of “structural shift” from Catford’s Category Shift Theory as a guiding framework to systematically analyze the source texts and their translations. Based on translation cases and considering the linguistic characteristics of Arabic, this study further categorizes “structural shift” from three angles: “voice”, “grammatical structure” and “word order”. The aim is to elucidate transformations such as “active - passive voice shift”, “personal subject - impersonal subject”, “positive - negative shift”, “grammatical structure shift” and “adjustment of main and subordinate clause order” that occur during the translation process. The study explores the applicability of “structural shift” in practical translation contexts and offers specific strategies for its application in Chinese to Arabic translation.

Keywords: Category Shift Theory; structural shift; translation strategies; diplomatic documents.

1 Introduction

The progress of translation is inseparable from a profound consideration of the linguistic aspects of both the source text and the target text. The summary of translation strategies also depends on the analysis and categorization of language characteristics and translation examples. This paper chooses “structural shift” from the linguistics theory, Category Shift Theory, as its foundation. By conducting a comparative analysis of the source text and the translation, this study explores translation strategies guided by this theory, starting from a linguistic perspective.

The author conducted a general search on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) by entering “structural shift” into the search box, specifying the subject as “foreign languages and literature,” and the document source as “academic journals.” Without setting a specific year range, 28 papers were retrieved. After reviewing them, it was found that only 5 of these papers specifically discussed Catford’s translation shift theory, “structural shift.” The remaining papers did not focus on translation transformation or Category Shift theory; instead, they primarily researched and summarized sentence patterns and structures in the process of Chinese-English translation.

In their 2017 paper, Li Qingming and Jiani conducted a study on the translation of the book “Flying the Big Jets” from the perspective of “structural shift” within three specific categories: “active-passive transformation,” “positive-negative transformation,” and “topic prominence vs. main clause prominence.” Through translation examples, they demonstrated the practicality, feasibility, and direct guiding role of Catford’s Translation Category Shift Theory in the Chinese translation of aerospace technology English.^[1]

In their 2018 paper, Tang Liqin and Wang Xueming conducted a more comprehensive categorization of “structural shift” in accordance with the linguistic characteristics of English. Beyond the widely acknowledged “active-passive transformation,” they also encompassed “causative structural shift,” “theme-rheme shift,” “declarative + comment shift,” “main clause - subordinate clause shift,” “end-weight shift,” and “personal - impersonal voice shift” within the purview of structural shift. This not only offered fresh insights into delving deeper into the concept of structural shift but also established a more robust foundation for syntactic-level Chinese-English translation. Furthermore, it expanded the horizons of future theoretical discussions on structural shift among scholars in the field.^[2]

In their 2019 paper, authored by Sun Siyu and Yang Fan, the focus was on “structural shift” in political discourse. They conducted an analysis and interpretation of translation cases, specifically delving into “active - passive voice shift,” “topic prominence - subject prominence shift,” “positive - negative shift,” and “pre-modifier - post attributive shift.”^[3]

In their respective papers, Zhang Xia sheng and Yin Dan (2013)^[4] and Zhang Xia sheng (2015)^[5] conducted research and systematic categorization of Chinese-English translation using the lens of “structural shift.” The former focused on the translation of the film “Roman Holiday,” while the latter delved into the translation of the play “Teahouse.” Both articles further broke down the components of structural shift into “voice shift,” “positive - negative shift,” “word, phrase, or clause word order,” and “personal - impersonal voice shift.” “Voice shift” pertains to the conversion between active and passive voices, while the adjustment in the positioning of words, phrases, and clauses within sentences during translation was collectively termed “word order shift.” The approach not only introduced novel perspectives but also expanded the practical application domain of the theory in translation practice, thereby enhancing its utility and explanatory capacity in the field of structural shift analysis.

Based on the defined categories of structural shift as outlined in the aforementioned research, taking practical considerations into account within the context of Chinese-Arabic translation, translation strategies from the perspective of structural shift in Chinese-to-Arabic translation are being explored.

2 Theoretical Basis

The term “structure” originates from the definition of language’s four categories in “Scale and Category Grammar” proposed by British linguist M.A.K. Halliday. British translation theorist J.C. Catford conceptualized this linguistic concept into translation

theory and formally introduced the theory of translation shifts in his work “A Linguistic Theory of Translation.” The paper focuses on “structural shift” for several reasons. Firstly, Category Shift Theory, being grounded in linguistic principles, offers a more detailed and specific foundation and analytical perspective for translation at the linguistic level. Secondly, “structural shift” is a significant component of Category Shift Theory and holds a substantial role in the translation practice, making it an unavoidable topic in the discussion of translation transformations during the translation process.

2.1 Catford’s Translation Theory

Catford defines translation as “the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL).” He believes that the central problem in translation practice is to find TL translation equivalents.^[7] According to Catford, a textual translation equivalent is “that portion of a TL text which is changed when and only when a given portion of the SL text is changed.”^[7] Catford emphasizes the existence of a correspondence between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL) during the process of translation. Therefore, when a specific portion of the source text changes, there will be a corresponding change in the target text.

Simultaneously, when using equivalent translation materials to replace source language materials, it is essential to consider factors such as language differences and context. The target language may not achieve a complete formal correspondence with the source language, meaning it is challenging to establish a one-to-one formal correspondence between the source and target languages. To bridge this gap, translation often involves departing from formal correspondences, a process referred to as “shift.” These shifts can be classified into two categories: level shifts and category shifts.

2.2 Category Shift from the Perspective of General Linguistics

In the 1960s, M.A.K. Halliday conducted research in general linguistics, focusing on both Chinese and English, to establish a more concise and explanatory grammar framework. His goal was to explain how language functions at the level of grammar while also addressing the relationships between grammar and vocabulary, as well as grammar and phonology. This work led to the development of “Scale and Category Grammar.” According to M.A.K. Halliday, language can be categorized into four domains: “unit,” “class,” “structure,” and “intra-system.” These categories were used to explain that linguistic grammatical forms belong to the highest level of abstraction in language.^[6] Category Shift is built upon the foundation of “Scale and Category Grammar,” and it starts with these categorized domains as its point of departure. It enables the transformation of linguistic forms from the source language to the target language during the translation process by taking these categories into consideration.

In grammar, the term “structure” refers to the category used to illustrate the similarity between events in a continuous context. For example, in a verb-object construction sentence, it can be symbolically represented as S P A (where S stands for subject, P stands for predicate, and A stands for adverbial). Therefore, different sentences, even if they exhibit different semantics, can still conform to the verb-object construction

grammatically, demonstrating similarity at the level of grammatical structure. On the other hand, “structure” comprises elements in a linear process that can be represented in written form. The linear relationships between these elements collectively form what we refer to as “order” from a formal standpoint^[6].

In summary, the concept of “structural shift” can be further subdivided into three secondary categories: “voice transformation,” “grammatical structural shift,” and “word order transformation.” Firstly, it is widely agreed that “active to passive voice shift” is a significant type of structural shift. Given that “active” and “passive” are two crucial voices, the transformation between them falls under the category of “voice transformation.” Secondly, “grammatical structural shift” focuses on the prominent changes in the formal relationships among various components during the translation process. For instance, it involves transformations from a subject-verb-adverbial structure to a subject-verb-object structure. Finally, while changes in the order of elements within sentences occur in both of the preceding types of transformations, these changes are necessary for maintaining sentence coherence. “Word order transformation” specifically addresses adjustments in the sequence that occur in complex sentences between the main clause and subordinate clauses during the translation process.

3 The Application of Structural Shift in the Translation of Diplomatic Documents

In 2023, China made remarkable progress in its diplomatic efforts, achieving significant outcomes in its foreign policy. Chinese President Xi Jinping played a pivotal role in these diplomatic achievements, participating in a series of important international events and delivering key speeches. This paper selects President Xi’s speeches and addresses delivered during significant diplomatic events such as the China-Central Asia Summit, BRICS meetings, and the Belt and Road International Cooperation Forum as its linguistic corpus. Each sentence in the Chinese original text is compared with the official translation to establish a bilingual parallel corpora. These selected materials not only promote China’s diplomatic ideology of win-win cooperation to the world but also serve as excellent linguistic analysis materials due to their profound cultural background and rich vocabulary.

3.1 Voice Shift

“Active” and “passive” are two common voices in language. In the translation process, the transformation between active and passive voice may involve changes at the grammatical level as well as adjustments in word order, but the most noticeable transformation is the change in voice itself. Due to cultural and pragmatic expression habits, Arabic often uses the passive voice to convey general facts, while Chinese typically uses the active voice to state general facts, with “people” often acting as the agent.

Example 1

Chinese: Zhèxiē Zhōngguótiè nǐngjiézhè wǒmen chángqī yílái de shìjiàn

(DemPron) (S.AdjP) (V) (PersPron) (AdjP) (Adv) (Part) (O.N)

tànsuǒ.^[1]

(O.N)

Arabic: Tead hadhih al-khasa'is al-Siniyah bulurah li juhodi-na al-tawilah
(V.Pass) (DemPron) (S.Art-N, Pl) (Art-Adj) (O.N.Acc) (P) (N.Pl.Gen- PossPron) (Art-Adj)
al-amad fi al-mumarasat wa l-istikhafat.^[2]

(Art-N) (P) (Art- N.Pl.Gen) (Conj) (Art- N.Pl.Gen)

English: These distinctive Chinese features are the crystallization of our practices and explorations over the years. (Translated from Chinese)

In the original Chinese text, “Zhèxiē Zhōngguó tèshè” serves as the agent, “níngjiézhe” functions as the verb, and “wǒmen chángqī yǐlái de shíjiàn tànsuǒ” serves as the patient. In the Arabic translation, the original agent is replaced with a subject, and the sentence is led by the passive verb “Tead.” The original verb “níngjié” is transformed into a structure involving a passive noun and an object, which conveys the meaning of “Be thought of the crystallization of...”. The sentence changes from an active voice to a passive voice, reflecting the customary usage of Arabic and making the translation more in line with Arabic linguistic conventions.

3.2 Grammatical Structure Adjustment

In Arabic, as a typical hypotaxis language, there is an emphasis on complete sentence structure and logical coherence. Various grammatical elements within sentences are interconnected through their own “case shifts” and “definiteness/indefiniteness” to achieve mutual cohesion. Chinese, on the other hand, is a typical isolating language that lacks inflectional morphology, placing importance on the order and logical relationships among sentence components. During the process of translating from Chinese to Arabic, to achieve equivalent translation, it is necessary not only to faithfully convey the original meaning and retain the original context but also to align with Arabic language logic and pragmatics as closely as possible. This requires navigating the grammatical differences between the two languages and, therefore, involves adjustments and shifts in grammatical structure to achieve the goal of equivalent translation.

Example 2

Chinese: Zhǐyǒu hézuò gòngyíng cáinéng bàchéng shì, bàn hǎoshì,

(AdvP) (S.N) (S.N) (Adv) (V) (O.N) (V) (O.AdjP)

bàn dàshì.

(V) (O.AdjP)

Arabic: La tunjizu a'mal nafica wa a'dhimah illa min khilal itta'awun

(Neg) (V. 3sg.Pass.Past) (S.AdjP. Pl. Nom. F) (Conj) (Adj.F) (Det) (PP) (N.Gen. Def)

wa al-kasbal-mushtarik.

(Conj) (AP. Def)

¹ In this paper, Chinese examples are transcribed into Latin letters using Hanyu Pinyin and are annotated using the Leipzig interlinear annotation method.

² Arabic examples in this paper are transcribed into Latin letters according to ISO 223 standards and are also annotated using the Leipzig interlinear annotation method.

English: Win-win cooperation is the sure way to success in launching major initiatives that benefit all. (Translated from Chinese)

In Example 2, the Chinese original text, which conveys an emphatic tone, is translated into Arabic using a double negation structure, represented as “La...illa...(لا)...لا.” Since “La (لا)” is a negation particle in Arabic, this transformation results in the conversion from an affirmative sentence to a negative one. Chinese expressions that carry a sense of emphasis with limitation are often translated into double negation sentences during the conversion process. Such transformations, achieved through changes in grammatical structure, ensure equivalent translation both semantically and contextually.

Example 3

Chinese: Zhǐ yào gèguó yǒu hézuò de yuànwàng, xiétiào de xíngdòng, tiānqiào
 (AdvP) (S.N) (V) (Adj) (O.N) (Adj) (O.N) (S.N)
 kěyǐ biàn tōngtǔ, “lù suǒ guó” kěyǐ biàncéng “lù lián guó”, fāzhǎn de wādi kěyǐ
 (V) (O.V) (S.N) (V) (O.N) (S.AdjP)
 biàn chéng fánróng de gāodi.
 (V) (O.AdjP)

Arabic: Talama takun hunaka al-rahbah fi al-ta’awun wa
 (Cond) (V.F) (Adv) (S.Art-N) (P) (Art-N) (Conj)
 al-’amal al-munsak li’da duwal al-’alam, satatawala al-hawayat ila
 (AdjP.Def) (P) (O.NP.Def) (V.F.Fut) (S.Art-N.PI) (P)
 turoq mumahhidah, wa yatawala ‘al-balad al-munghalik bari’an’ ila
 (O.AdjP.Indf) (Conj) (V) (S.AdjP.) (P)
 ‘balad mutawasal bari’an’, wa tatatawala al-mustanaqat lil-tanmiya ila
 (O.AdjP.Indf) (Conj) (V.Fut) (S.NP) (P)
 arad khasbah lill-izdihar.
 (O.NP)

English: When countries embrace cooperation and act in concert, a deep chasm can be turned into a thoroughfare, land-locked countries can become land-linked, and a place of underdevelopment can be transformed into a land of prosperity. (Translated from Chinese)

In example 3, in the Chinese original text, “Zhǐ yào gèguó yǒu hézuò de yuànwàng, xiétiào de xíngdòng” is a typical subject-verb-object structure, where “gèguó (countries)” serves as the subject, “yǒu (embrace)” as the verb, and “hézuò de yuànwàng, xiétiào de xíngdòng (cooperation and act in concert)” as the object. The English translation faithfully retains the grammatical structure of the Chinese original.

In the Arabic translation, the verb “takun (تكون)” serves as the predicate, meaning “exist.” Based on the verb used and its grammatical structure in the translation, the Arabic text is directly translated into English as “The cooperation and act in concert exists in countries.” During the translation from Chinese to Arabic, there is a positional switch between the subject and object. This change not only alters the original grammatical structure but also involves a shift from a personal subject to an impersonal subject. In Chinese expression, the subject is often a specific noun or pronoun, such as “gèguó (countries).” In contrast, Arabic allows for a broader range of subjects, not limited to nouns or pronouns. Phrases and expressions describing general facts can also

serve as subjects in Arabic, and this phenomenon occurs more frequently than in Chinese. The translation approach not only aligns with Arabic expression habits but also emphasizes conveying the semantic meaning of the original text.

Example 4

Chinese: Shìjiè zhī biàn, shídài zhī biàn, lìshǐ zhī biàn zhèng yǐ qián suǒ wèi yǒu
 (S.Np) (S.Np) (S.Np) (Adv)
 de fāngshì zhǎnkāi.
 (V)

Arabic: Fi al-waqt al-rahn, tatur' taghyirat' ala al-'alam wa al-'asr
 (P) (Art-N.Gen.Def) (Art-Adj.Def) (V.F.Pres) (S.N. Pl.Indf) (P) (O.Art-N.Gen) (Conj)

(O.Art-N.Gen)

wa al-tarikh bi-shaklin ghayr musbuk.

(Conj) (O.Art-N.Gen) (P-N.Indf) (Adj.Indf)

English: Changes of the world, of our times, and of historical significance are unfolding like never before. (Translated from Chinese)

In Example 4, the original Chinese text is a subject-verb-adverbial sentence, with three coordinated noun phrases as the subject and an intransitive verb as the predicate. However, in the Arabic translation, the core part shared by the three noun phrases in the original subject, “Shìjiè zhī biàn, shídài zhī biàn, lìshǐ zhī biàn (Changes of the world, of our times, and of historical significance),” which is “biàn (meaning Change),” is extracted and used as the subject. The modifying parts of the three noun phrases, “Shìjiè, shídài, lìshǐ (the world, our times, historical significance),” appear as the object in the Arabic translation. The grammatical structure of the Arabic translation becomes a typical “subject + predicate + object” structure, which is significantly different from the original “subject + intransitive verb” structure. The reason for this change is that the Arabic translation chose the combination “tatur...ala...,” which is similar in meaning to the English expression “happen to.” This choice establishes the “subject-verb-object” structure in the translation.

3.3 Word Order Adjustment

Chinese, as a paratactic language, has a significant impact on the interpretation of meaning due to its word order. At the paragraph level, the positions of main and subordinate clauses are relatively fixed, especially when the subordinate clause serves as a component that provides explanations, limitations, or groundwork, it often appears at the beginning of the paragraph, while the main clause is placed afterward. Arabic, on the other hand, differs in this regard; the positions of the main and subordinate clauses are more flexible, allowing for adjustments without affecting the semantics.

Example 5

Chinese: Zuòwéi shānhǎi xiānglián、 rénwén xiāngqīn de míngyùn gòngtóngtǐ①, wǒmen yào yǐ tǐyù cù hépíng②, jiānchí yǔ lín wéi shàn hé hùli gòngyíng③, dǐzhi lěngzhàn sīwéi hé zhènyíng duikàng④, jiāng yàzhōu dǎzàoichéng shìjiè hépíng de wèndìng máo⑤.

Arabic: Yanbaghi la-na 'an na'mal 'ala ta'zez al-salam 'abra al-riyadah②, wa nata-masak bi-hasan al-jawar wa al-manfa'ah al-mutabadilah wa al-kasb al-mushtarik③, wa

naqata' 'aqliyat al-harb al-baridah aw al-mujabahah bayn al-ma'askarat④, bima yaj'al Asia marsat al-istiqrar li-salam al-'alam⑤, wa nahnu nysh fi mujtama' dhayi mustaqbal mushtarik yatasama bi al-tawasul al-jughrafi wa al-taqarub al-thaqafi wa al-insani①.

English: As a community with a shared future connected by mountains and rivers as well as cultural affinity, we should use sports to promote peace, pursue good neighborliness and mutual benefit, and reject Cold War mentality and bloc confrontation. We should make Asia an anchor of world peace.

(Translated from Chinese)

In Example 5, sentence ①, “Zuòwéi shānhǎi xiānglián, rénwén xiāngqīn de mìngyùn gōngtóngtǐ (As a community with a shared future connected by mountains and rivers as well as cultural affinity),” is an adverbial clause in the original Chinese text and is placed at the beginning of the sentence, serving as an introductory explanation. The same situation is reflected in the English translation. In the Arabic translation, sentence ① is placed at the end of the paragraph, but this adjustment doesn't affect the expression of meaning. When translating long sentences or paragraphs from Chinese, adjusting the order of main and subordinate clauses appropriately can help improve the understanding of the translation. Therefore, further exploration of “word order conversion” within the category of structural shift is relevant in these cases.

4 Conclusions

Category Shift Theory, based on the foundation of general linguistic grammar theory, inherits the meticulous consideration of language phenomena in linguistics. It provides precise and micro-level theoretical guidance in the translation process. Structural shift, as a significant component of Category Shift, focuses on the grammatical structure of language. It is not only an important topic in linguistic research but also a crucial consideration in translation practice.

From the viewpoint of structural shift, a comparative and analytical study is conducted on Arabic translations of Chinese diplomatic documents. The categorization further delves into three types of translation transformations: “voice conversion,” “grammatical structural shift,” and “word order alteration.” This comprehensive approach aims to encompass a wide range of translation conversion phenomena and provide more practical guidelines for other translators involved in rendering diplomatic literature into Arabic.

References

1. Li, Q., & Jia, N. (2017). “Structural Shift” and “Category Shift” in the Translation of Aerospace Technology English into Chinese: A Case Study of the Translation of “Flying the Big Jets.” *Journal of Changchun University of Science and Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*, 30(02), 126-129.
2. Tang, L., & Wang, X. (2018). On Structural Shift in English-Chinese Translation. *Journal of Kaifeng College of Education*, 38(12), 43-46.

3. Sun, S., & Yang, F. (2019). Exploring the Translation of Political Texts from the Perspective of Structural Shift Theory. *Literary Education (Part I)*, (02), 164.
4. Zhang, X., & Yin, D. (2013). Structural Shift in Film Subtitle Translation: A Case Study of the Classic Film “Roman Holiday.” *Journal of Inner Mongolia University for Nationalities (Social Sciences Edition)*, 39(02), 100-103.
5. Zhang, X. (2015). “Structural Shift” in the Translation of Drama from English to Chinese: A Case Study of the Translation of “Teahouse” by English Scholar Alister S. Mason. *Sichuan Drama*, (04), 87-89+111.
6. Hu Zhuanglin et al. “An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics.”[M] .Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005.
7. J.C. Catford. *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*[M]. Oxford University Press,1965.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

