

The Application of Thematic Progression in English-Chinese Translation Practice

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Abstract. With the development of linguistics, the conceptions of theme and rheme as well as thematic progression have aroused attention in translation area as the three conceptions provide a new thought in translation, which makes the translation more flexible instead of concentrating on the elements in a sentence. However, each language has its own characters, so as the thematic progression in different languages. In this paper, six common thematic progression will be introduced, and whether the original thematic progression in English should or can be retained in the translated Chinese version will be discussed, in order to sort out relevant translation methods for the above issues.

1. Introduction

The traditional theories about translation mainly concentrate on word meaning, morphology, syntax, rhetoric etc. However, there is not so much discussion and study in the methods and skills of discourse reconstruction of target text. It is believed that the study of translation skill should on the basic of the structure of discourse, as the practice form of language is not the existence of separated words or sentences. In translation practice, translators are most likely to treat with a discourse with more than two sentences, and these sentences have relations not only in syntax and semantics, but also in the relations, changes and development of theme and rheme, which called thematic progression.

Thematic progression was raised by two linguists---F. Danes and Mathesins, and was posed on the basic of the real meaning of certain words. It was also accepted by Halliday and the system features language school, who redefined the conceptions of theme and rheme. Halliday confirmed that theme is the start point of information that already known to the readers, while rheme is used to describe theme, which is the new or unknown information in the context. On the perspective of hierarchy, thematic structure is a way to organize discourse, with the main performance of thematic progression.

Every text, including its paragraphs, can be seen as the sequence of the theme. The theme of text in nature lies in the coherence and linking, the reciprocal relationship and the hierarchy as well as the relationship with the whole paragraphs, the text and the situation. All these complicated theme relationships as “thematic progression”. Different scholars make different classifications for the thematic progression, and thematic progression is classified into six kinds in this paper. Many studies show that, the thematic progression in both Chinese and English are almost the same, and comprehending the progression in one language is benefit for translating the language into another.

With the guidance of Danes’ and Halliday’s theory, differences and similarities between thematic progression in Chinese and English will be analyzed, in order to make sure whether to retain or transform the thematic progression while doing translation between Chinese and English.

2. Classification of Patterns of Thematic Progression

In accordance with the research of Fries and Danes, thematic progression can be classified into six types as follows.

2.1 Parallel Pattern.

In this pattern, all sentences in the discourse set the theme of the first sentence as the starting point, and all the following sentences treat the theme as their own themes and introduce different rhemes in order to clarify the them in different angles. For example:

a. My brother //is in America. He //has been there for several months. He //is an engineer and he //is working for a big firm.

The above sentence can be generalized into the following mode:

$T1 \rightarrow R1$

$T1 \rightarrow R2$

.....

$T1 \rightarrow Rn$

2.2 Extending Pattern (Succession Pattern).

In this pattern, the rheme or part of the rheme of the previous sentence is the theme of the latter sentence, and a new rheme will be introduced by the theme (which is also the rheme of the previous sentence). This pattern can bring out new information and give impetus to the expression of thought. For example:

a. Mr. James Scott// has just bought another garage in Pinehurst. Pinehurst// is only five miles from Silbury.

b. I //love you both so much, and you// have earned the new puppy that's coming with us to the White House.

The mode of the above sentences is:

$T1 \rightarrow R1$

↓

$T2 \rightarrow R2$

↓

.....

↓

$Tn \rightarrow Rn$

2.3 Centralized Pattern (Concentration Pattern).

The first sentence makes basic description of theme and rheme, and the following sentences start from a new theme with the same rheme as the first sentence, which means the sentences in the discourse, except for the first one, start from new points but end in the same situation. For example:

a. Father //gave him a preset. Mother //gave him a present. Uncle Jim //gave him a present. We //all gave him presents for his birthday.

The above sentence can be generalized into the following mode:

$T1 \rightarrow R1$

$T2 \rightarrow R1$

.....

$Tn \rightarrow R1$

2.4 Overlapping Pattern.

The theme of the first sentence is the rheme of the second sentence, and the theme of the second sentence is the rheme of the third sentence, etc. For example:

a. I //was reading a book, while little John// entered to bother me, and I //was angry with him.

b. Fishing// is my favorite sport. I// often go on Saturdays. Some fishermen// are even less lucky than I.

The mode of the above sentences is:

$T1 \rightarrow R1$

$T2 \rightarrow R2(T1)$

.....

$$T_n \rightarrow R_n(T_{n-1})$$

2.5 Coordinate Pattern.

In this pattern, two themes alternately appear in the whole discourse with different rhemes. However, these rhemes are the differences under the same aspect. This kind of pattern is usually used in the comparative expression of two characters as follow example.

a. In China//, we celebrate our holidays with all family members, while in American //people celebrate their holidays with their own family. In China//, people use chopsticks, but in America, people use knife and fork.

The above sentence can be generalized into the following mode:

$$T_1 \rightarrow R_1$$

$$T_2 \rightarrow R_2$$

$$T_3(T_1) \rightarrow R_3$$

.....

$$T_{n+1}(T_2) \rightarrow R_{n+1}$$

2.6 Derivation Pattern.

In this pattern, the first sentence makes basic description of theme and rheme, and the rhemes of following sentences are derived from the first sentence's rheme. For example:

a. We //were having a general cleaning. Window cleaning // is done by group one. floor cleaning //is done by group two. All the cleaning work //is done well by the whole class.

b. Doing exercise is good for our health for the following reasons. The first reason isThe second reason is.....The third reason is.....

The mode of the above sentences is:

$$T_1 \rightarrow R_1$$

$$T_2(R_1') \rightarrow R_2$$

.....

$$T_n(R_1''''''') \rightarrow R_n$$

3. Principles of Retaining the Original Thematic Progression in English-Chinese Translation

When talked about how translators can deal with thematic progression in translation, Baker mentioned two methods: a) the original thematic progression can be retained without changing the original meaning; b) the original thematic progression can be retained without changing the original meaning. If the thematic progression of the original text cannot be reused in translations, you have to give it up and choose the thematic progression that suitable for target text, in order to ensure its continuity.

In order to realize the above principles, several issues should be solved.

1) What is the significance of the thematic progression of the original discourse for translators? It is shown in the following two aspects. First, the original thematic progression is a way to reflect the author's communicative intentions, which should be understood by translators. Second, though translators cannot stiffly copy the original thematic progression, it is still the vital reference of translation.

2) Although the thematic progression of original English discourse should be retained to the greatest extent, how the translators can achieve the aim in the Chinese version? Accurate statistics is not made, however, the result is relatively clear that the thematic progression of English version cannot be entirely retained in Chinese version. Despite of this, translators should not neglect the information shown by the original thematic progression. Translators should try their best to reproduce the progression which has definite rhetorical purpose.

3) How to rebuild a translation under the circumstance of losing thematic progression in the English discourse? Just as the principle posed at the beginning of this part: "without changing the original meaning". It means that the expressions should be formal and natural.

Generally speaking, translators always set the thematic progression in the original discourse as a reference. It is an issue of translator's ability in using the target language and writing. Translators need to retain the original meaning in a fluent and continuous way.

4. The Application of Thematic Progression in English-Chinese Translation

4.1 Retaining the Thematic Progression of Original Discourse.

In some cases, humans have similar thought, which is shown in language. If it is broken, the whole discourse will not in line with communicative habits. Thus, sometimes the thematic progression of English discourse can be retained in its Chinese version. For example:

Studies (T1) serve for delight, for ornament, for ability (R1). Their chief use for delight (T2) is in privateness (R2); for ornament (T3), is in discourse (R3); and for ability (T4), is in the judgment and disposition of business (R4). (Bacon, Of Studies)

The above original discourse is in parallel pattern, and the theme is about study. All the rhemes in the following sentences focus on the same theme. The whole discourse express studies from several aspects in order to show the great importance of studies. Meanwhile, the translation is faithfully convey the thematic progression and information structure of the original text, which shows that the parallel pattern is easy to transform from English versions to Chinese ones.

4.2 Transforming the Thematic Progression of Original Discourse.

In most cases, there are many differences between English and Chinese. English focuses on sentence structure and structural integrity, while Chinese use words or sub-sentences to show the logic. Thus, English focuses on hypotaxis, while Chinese focuses on parataxis. Therefore, in order to realize effective translation, translators should not neglect any differences between the two languages, and need to make suitable adjustment in organizing translations. As a result, the thematic progression need to be revised as well.

5. Summary

The six types of thematic progressions can be found both in English and Chinese, thus translators have the chance to retain the thematic progression, and realize the functional equivalence. However, due to the differences between the two languages and cultures, the ratio of keeping the thematic progression patterns of the original text is relatively low in English-Chinese translation. Translation strategies and methods adopted by the translator as well as the translator's quality and experience also have influences on the translation.

Apart from the factors of the language and translators, the length of a discourse will affect the thematic progression as well. Generally speaking, the shorter a discourse is, the greater the possibility of maintaining the original thematic progression is; the longer a paragraph, particularly when the paragraph contains several sentence groups, the greater the probability that a translator intends to adjust even reconstruct thematic progression in his translation. Meanwhile, the complexity of the original thematic progression also play a role in the translation's thematic progression. The more complicated the original thematic progression is, the greater the possibility of changing the original thematic progression is, and vice versa. Parallel pattern, extending pattern, centralized pattern, coordinate pattern, and derivation pattern are relatively simple, and more likely to be retained in the translations. But overlapping pattern and other combined patterns are more complex, so they may be changed in the target discourses.

Above all, translators should know that the thematic progression is not simply about sentence elements, it is the mode that drive the direction of the development of a certain discourse, which can break boundaries between sentences. The original thematic progression can be a reference to the translators, which can be used to sort out the logic and grasp the comprehensive information of the original text, and should be retained to the greatest extend. But if it is difficult to keep the original thematic progression, translators ought to transfer the thematic progression into a more suitable one and make the translation meet the habits of target language.

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