

# The Basic Differences of Textual Cohesion between English and Chinese

Zhonger Wang<sup>1,\*</sup>, Nurliyana Bukhari<sup>2</sup>, and Qi Tang<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Foreign Language, Shanghai Lixin University of Accounting and Finance

<sup>2</sup>School of Education and Modern Languages, Universiti Utara Malaysia

<sup>3</sup>School of International Business, Chongqing Technology and Business University

**Abstract:** This paper discusses the differences of cohesive devices between English and Chinese in sentence structure and text organization. Chinese has the characteristics of topic prominence, while English is subject prominent; Due to the differences in thinking styles between China and the West, there are differences in subject consciousness and object consciousness between English and Chinese. This leads to the differences between theme and rhyme in English and Chinese texts, and these differences also lead to the differences in cohesion. In addition, the parallel structure and loose grammatical relationship of Chinese and the tree structure and relatively strict grammatical restrictions of English can make the difference of textual cohesive devices.

## 1. Introduction

Linguistic communication always appears in textual form and therefore texts are the primary form of linguistic manifestation. The translator does not translate words or individual sentences unless an isolated sentence has text status. Text translation, therefore, is a text-oriented event. And the attempt to discover the interdependence between the syntactic and semantic constitution of a text has become one of the subjects of text analysis. In the book of *Cohesion in English*, Halliday and Hassan first advanced the concept of cohesion and made a systematic account in textual level [1].

However, each language possesses certain distinctive characteristics which gave it a special character. Since Chinese and English belong to different language families: the former falling into Sino-Tibetan language family while the latter classified into Indo-European language family. Both of the languages have their own language systems and unique features. Therefore, it seems impossible to seek complete one-to-one correspondences between the two languages. On the other hand, translators have to ensure that text cohesion and coherence are upheld when converting a string of words and structures into a string of equivalents. A translator must respect the features of the receptor language and exploit the potentialities of the language to the greatest possible extent.

A lot of contrastive studies of English and Chinese in terms of cohesion display the uniqueness of the two languages at the textual level. For example, the personal demonstrative can be omitted in the Chinese language [2]. That is, zero markers are more frequent than English

in cohesion; conjunctives are less used as indicators of how the argument is being developed than that in English, or rather, implicit logical relations often appear in Chinese while English language prefers explicit surface devices. As these language phenomena involve the basic organizational patterns of the English and Chinese texts, we shall devote this paper to overview the basic differences in textual cohesion between English and Chinese so as to deeply account for the differentiations.

## 2. The Difference in Theme-Rhyme Arrangement

### 2.1. The Notion of Theme-rhyme Arrangement

One basic aspect of texture which works in harness with cohesion is theme-rhyme arrangement. An order predominates in the sentence in which a theme precedes, and is commented on by a rhyme [3]. The Prague linguists view theme and rhyme broadly as “what the sentence is about” and “what is said about it” respectively. In terms of textual cohesion, the theme-rhyme arrangement is closely related to the informational structure, or rather, as the theme is usually given information, it is likely to be located at the beginning of the sentence; on the other hand, the rhyme relates to new information. This can be illustrated in the following sentences:

- (1) The rain destroyed the flowers.
- (2) The flowers were destroyed by the rain.

Sentence (1) presupposes that the theme “the rain” is given information referring back to a previous topic on

\* Corresponding author: ZhongerWang@hotmail.com

weather and the rhyme “destroyed the flowers” is new information. Sentence (2), however, informs the reader of what the reader what happened to the flowers in response to such a question as “the flowers are all gone”. What happened to them? Thus, the theme-rhyme arrangement plays a role in textual cohesion. When the theme coincides with the given information, this theme plays a role of the TOPIC within the sentence.

## 2.2. Subject-prominent and Topic-prominent

However, the organization of the clause in terms of theme and rhyme is largely restricted by the rules of the sentence structure. Therefore, different languages are not similar in this respect as they differ in their strategies in constructing sentences according to the difference of the notions of topic and subject [4]. Let’s look at the examples as follows, which are provided by Xu Yulong in Contrastive Linguistics:

(3) (a) I like beans. (b) Beans I like. (c) \* beans like.

(4) (a) 我喜欢豆子。(b) 豆子我喜欢。(c) 我豆子喜欢。

(5) What did the rat do to the cheese. The cheese was eaten by the rat.

(6) 老鼠把奶酪怎么样了? 老鼠把奶酪吃了。

Obviously, there are great differences in theme-rhyme arrangement. In example (3) it is grammatically wrong to put “beans” between the subject “I” and the predicate “like” although the textual cohesion required so, whereas in (4) the object “豆子” can be placed at any position. As to (5) and (6) we focus on the answers and can find the noun 奶酪 in (6) is posed to the left of the verb “吃” owing to the occurrence of the word “把”. In other words, the special structure introduced by “把” allows the much more flexibility in Chinese language. It contributes the theme including both given information 老鼠 and 奶酪, whereby it can represent the topic of the sentence. Compared to the response in (6), the English answer in (5) only in part realizes the function of cohesion as only the “rat” can be the theme of the sentence whereas in the Chinese version the theme 老鼠把奶酪 become the topic of the sentence.

These examples show that Chinese is less restricted by the sentential structure. Furthermore, the subject in Chinese is not so definite as that in English, which gives rise to the difficulty of recognizing the subject-predicate relationship, whereas this subject-predicate framework predominates in English. As far as this difference is concerned, Li and Thompson point out that English language is subject-prominent while Chinese is a language that is topic-prominent. In other words, English, as a kind of subject-prominent language is sentence-oriented while Chinese, the topic prominent language, is discourse-oriented.

Therefore in English the subject is indispensable in most cases. This can also be confirmed by the fact that there are five basic sentence types, namely, SV, SVO, SVOC, SVC [5]. In addition, subject-predicate agreement is required with regard to the number, person, etc. On the other hand, generally speaking, it is not the

case in Chinese language as it shares the properties of topic-prominent language. As we have stated above, the topic in a sentence may not be the same as the grammatical subject and not function as a necessary grammatical constituent just as subject does. That is, the topic is syntactically independent of the rest of the sentence. Therefore, this basic construction of the Chinese language manifests a topic-comment relation rather than a subject-predicate relation [6]. So it is unnecessary to keep the grammatical relation of the agreement between the subject and predicate. Thus this allows the zero marks possible in terms of textual cohesion. That, to a large extent, accounts for the phenomenon that it is quite often for Chinese to omit personal demonstratives which normally function as subjects in English. For example:

(7) (a) 忽然收住, 赵伯韬摇摇身体站起来, 从烟匣中取一支雪茄衔在嘴里, 又将那烟匣向李玉亭面前以推, 做了个“请罢”的手势, 便又埋身在沙发里, 架起了腿, 慢慢地擦火柴, 燃着那支雪茄。(选自茅盾:《子夜》)

(b) With this, Chao Po-tao suddenly swung his feet to the floor and stood up. He took a cigar from the case on the table and stuck it between his teeth, then slid the cigar-case toward Li Yu-ting with a gesture of invitation to help himself. He settled himself on the sofa again, propped up his legs, slowly stuck a match, and began lighting his cigar. Selected from *The Midnight* by Xu Mengxiang

Obviously, the theme-rhyme patterns are quite similar in the versions of both English and Chinese. However, the topic 赵伯韬 spreading through the whole text, becomes a topic-chain while in the English version, the topic is replaced by the demonstrative “he” in the next sentences, which cannot be omitted in the light of the grammatical necessity.

## 2.3. Subject and Object Consciousnesses

It is generally admitted that language and thought are two independent circles but overlapping in some parts where language and thought are consistent with each other. That is to say, language is greatly influenced by the way of thinking, or rather, by culture. Traditionally, Chinese people believe both nature and man are integrated into a whole [7]. So the relationship between human and nature is not regarded as the differentiation between subject and object. Because of this, in Chinese language the subject are related to “man” in most cases, whereas in English language either men or things can be adopted as the subject because in western countries people prefer to judge things in an objective way. This also exerts an influence on the arrangement of theme, whereby leads to the differentiation in textual cohesion. We could have an example:

(8) (a) During this period an intense competition developed between research workers in Australia and in America, and basic discoveries followed one another in rapid succession.

(b) 这期间澳大利亚和美国研究工作者开展了紧张的竞赛，因而，基础性的发现接二连三涌现出来。

Here the cohesion of addition realized by the word “and” is shifted into the causal relation owing to the different theme-rhyme arrangements in the English and Chinese texts—one uses “competition” (object); the other adopts “研究工作者”(subject).

(9) (a) 当第一时期，富农耳里听到的是所谓江西一败如水，蒋介石打伤了脚，坐飞机回广东了。

(b) In the first period, what appealed to the rich peasants was the talk about the Northern Expeditionary Army’s sustaining a crushing defeat in Jiangxi, about Chiang Kai-shek’s being wounded in the leg and flying back to Guangdong.

In this instance, the subjective theme “富农耳里听到的” was replaced by the objective theme “what appealed to the rich peasants” in the translated version. Accordingly, the explicit means of structural recurrence what appealed to the rich peasants was the talk about was substituted for the implicit coherence between 江西一败如水 and 蒋介石打伤了脚..., the meaning of which is supported by the historical cultural context.

The instances above partially account for the difference in the respect of cohesion. However, both the similarity and differences coexist in English and Chinese languages. So do the cohesive devices. With the development of intercultural communication more and more common properties may be shared by both languages.

### 3.The Difference in Organizational Pattern

#### 3.1. The Difference in Organizational Patterns

Van Dijk advanced the theoretical framework—topic analysis. According to him, each topic of a text can be represented as a macro-proposition, and some of the topics are more general than others. So the entire macro-structure of a text displays a hierarchical organization of macro-proposition [8]. Their dependency can be represented by means of a tree-diagram which demonstrates the text’s underlying organizational pattern. By such a constructive study, there is conclusive evidence that the diagram of the Chinese text shows a linear development from top to a bottom with a macro-proposition developing directly out of the previous one, illustrated by a narrow “tree” with fewer “branches”; whereas the diagram of the English texts exhibits a less linear or parallel fashion with each macro-proposition having its own branching propositions. This accounts for the phenomenon that English texts are mainly subordinated while Chinese texts show a greater tendency for coordination than the English texts do.

This hierarchical structures representing dependency rely on the explicit means of cohesion within a text. In other words, in English various syntactic forms like conjunction words, relative pronouns or relative adverbs

are adopted to clarify the subordinate relations. However, in Chinese information is conveyed in a linear way. It does not resort to various grammatical devices to put all sentences together. Instead, the text, which is usually composed of short sentences, can be coherent by potential logical relations. That is to say, English language depends on hypotaxis while Chinese language shows a great tendency for parataxis. And a translator is responsible for contemplating and determining whether there is a shift between hypotaxis and parataxis. For example:

(9) As we zigzagged back and forth across the area, compared the profiles of the bottom obtained by this sonar to a detailed sonar map of the rift area.

译文：我们迂回曲折地横越那个海域，将这次用声纳探测到的海底分布图同一幅裂壳区域的声纳详图加以对照。

(10) He liked his sister, who was warm and pleasant, but he did not like his brother, who was aloof and arrogant.

译文：他喜欢他那热情可爱的妹妹，不喜欢他那冷漠高傲的哥哥。

In the above example, the hypotaxis is shifted to parataxis as either the conjunction word or the relative pronoun is omitted. But the logic relation is retained and the meaning is smooth.

#### 3.2. The Difference in Grammar Restriction

Comparatively, Chinese is a language with a more loose and flexible grammar and logical relations depend on the development of meaning while the grammatical relations play a secondary role. On the other hand, English is a language with a neat and strict grammar [9]. This strict grammatical restriction also allows for the possibility of verb ellipsis in English since we can resort to the grammatical markers such as finiteness and modality to know the omitted ones. For example:

(11) “My dear Mr. Bennet,” said his lady to him one day, “have you heard that Netherfield Park is let as last?”

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

“But it is,” returned she, “for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it.”

译文：有一天，班纳特太太对她的丈夫说：“我的好老爷，尼日斐花园终于租出去了，你听说过没有？”

班纳特先生回答到，他没有听说过。

“的确租出去了”，她说，“朗格太太刚刚上这儿来过，她把这件事的底细，一五一十地都告诉了我。”

(选自《傲慢与偏见》，王科一译)

In this instance, the verb ellipsis is used twice in the English version, whereas in the Chinese one no verbs are omitted. This accounts for the statement that the percentage of verbal ellipsis in English texts is higher than that in Chinese texts [10].

## 4. Conclusion

This paper is devoted to analyzing the basic differences of the two languages, namely, the differences in theme-rhyme arrangements and organizational patterns. Since Chinese is a topic-prominent language it is more flexible in theme-rearrangement while English is subject-prominent, in which subject-predicate framework predominates. Therefore, in English the subject is indispensable in most cases, whereas omission of subjects is allowed in Chinese. Next, the shift from the object consciousness in English to subject consciousness in Chinese, or vice versa can be partly responsible for the changes in logical relations, whereby leads to the differences in textual cohesion. Then, in English the hierarchical structure representing dependency relies on the explicit means of cohesion, while Chinese shows a tendency of the parallel structure. That is, the text composed of short sentences be coherent by potential logical relations.

## References

1. C. J. Xu, Y. Sun, *Front Educatl RES* **2**, 604-618 (2019)
2. J. F. Wang, X. F. Wang, *Assmt. Adv. Voc Tech EDU* **3**, 34-37 (2021)
3. J. House, *Translation: The basics* (Routledge: New York, USA, 2017)
4. N. K. Pokorn, *Interpret Transl Train* **3**, 189-208 (2009)
5. D. Kelly, *TTR* **21**, 99-125 (2008)
6. X. D. Li, *Interpret Transl Train* **16**, 177-202 (2022)
7. D. F. Li, *TGT. INT J Trans. Stud* **19**, 105-133 (2007)
8. E. Calvo, *J SPZD Trans.* **16**, 5-25 (2011)
9. K. Koskinen, *RUS J LING* **19**, 175-184 (2015)
10. V. G. Carmen, *Trans. Stud* **4**, 107-117 (2017)