

# Views on Contrast Between Chinese and English

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**Abstract:** In this article, the author discusses the differences between Chinese and English in morphology, construction and sums up them in the following three aspects: (1) Covertness and overtness, (2) parataxis and hypotaxis and (3) open and closed

## 0. Introduction

A contrast in the wider sense is the total description of two languages, including their pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. However, when we say “contrast” we incline to take it in the narrower sense and often emphasize the grammar. Of course, the contrast of grammar involves some matters of pronunciation and vocabulary which wouldn't be centered on in our discussion.

In this article, we are going to make a macroscopic contrast between English and Chinese on three aspects and what to be discussed below will not be confined to grammar.

## 1. Covertness and Overtness

Covertness and overtness refer to the language feature that

certain form classes and their relations in a sentence and or can not be told from overt markers. In inflected language, in English for instance, plural forms of nouns or tense forms of verbs can often be indicated by some markers, -le (了) for verbs. But they can't be simply regarded as markers for nouns and verbs, for their combinations with nouns and verbs are restricted by many elements and lack generality. In most cases, the total grammatical behavior of Chinese form classes is not revealed except in certain frames; otherwise it remains implicit, or covert. For example, when the word “初” (*chu*) is used to express the meaning of order, it is only suitable for the first ten days of a month in traditional Chinese calendar. Expression like “初十一” (the eleventh) is not permissible. Only double-syllable or multi-syllable numerals, not one-syllable ones, can be used as predicates. For instance, in Chinese, we can say “他十一” (he is eleven or as for something he has eleven of them). But we can't say “他十” (he is ten or as for something he has ten of them) unless we add a suitable classifier after it or it is used in the particular places where comparisons are made. For example, we can say “他六, 我八” (as for something he has six of them and I have eight of them). However, there are no morphological suggestions in Chinese to tell people why we can say this and why we can't say that. The following is an often quoted example:

庖有肥肉, 厩有肥马, 民有饥色, 野有饿殍。

The translation of “有” as “have” in all instances brings out the construction as S-V-O type. It seems that the other analysis is also permissible if we can give it a sound explanation. For instance, we can consider that four nouns at the beginning of the sentences (庖、厩、民、野) as place adverbials.

The most grammatical categories in Chinese language are covert and have no overt markers. Therefore, people may often analysis and understand the same grammatical structure in different ways. Under the current research level, it's very difficult to set up an objective grammatical standard to balance the various theories unless we can discover the form of Chinese-the covert forms.

Things are different in English. Some form classes and their relations in sentences may be told from the forms and this is the result of morphological interdependence and interaction of various syntactical elements. Thus we can say, in inflected languages, forms can not only express the grammar, but also restrain it. In the following sentences, for example, we can roughly tell the part of speech of each word from its ending; and the morphological changes of some constituents in the sentences are their very response to certain grammatical rules.

Statements about crime are not criminal language; nor are statements about emotions necessarily emotional language.

In the sentence, the plural noun "statements" is marked by its form. As the subject of the sentence "statements" requires its predicate "are", a variant of "be", under the principle of subject-verb concord. In English, the subject and predicate agree to each other in forms, thus form the core pattern which can give guidance to the sentence for its final completion. This guidance, that is, the principle of SV concord, makes the relation between subject and predicate in a sentence very clear.

In order to explain the obvious grammatical difference between English and Chinese, let's analysis the following examples:

(1) 果然那次就摔了下来, 磕破了我的膝盖呢。

And sure enough, I fell down once to have my knee broken.

(2) 光是烛灰一夜就有几升之多，可见他夜读何等勤奋了。

By the volume of ashes we can imagine how avidly he read at night.

In English, sentences are marked by their forms, so it's not difficult to tell each sentence element. But in their corresponding Chinese statements the matter is not so. It seems that we can hardly tell exactly which word or phrase in Chinese sentence is the subject or the predicate from the surface of a sentence.

## 2. Parataxis and Hypotaxis

Parataxis and hypotaxis are two concepts often used in the contrastive study between Chinese and Indo-European languages. Their difference lies in that the connection of words or sentences is realized whether by meanings of linguistic forms including lexical and morphological forms or by their internal meaning or logical order. The former lays emphasis on the cohesion of words or sentences in form while the latter the coherence in meaning.

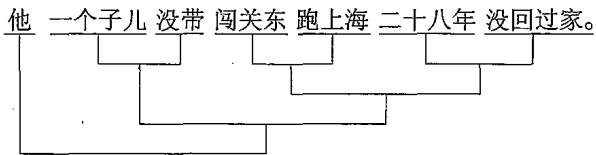
From microstructure of syntax, the incorporation of sentence elements in Chinese lays stress on parataxis, that is, the relation between different constituents in a sentence is internalized unnecessarily in Chinese. For example:

It is the unshakable sincerity of the Englishman's belief in his own superiority which is at once the strength and weakness of race.

英国人对自己的优越性之坚信不移，既是这个民族的优点，又是这个民族的弱点。

In English, “which” , as a relative pronoun, is used as a means of hypotaxis. But we couldn't find its equivalent in the corresponding Chinese translation. It is replaced by some independent phrasal or clausal pieces naturally organized on meaning.

The so called “合” (he, to combine) , is a basic means to make the separated linguistic symbols organized. In fact, as two forms of expression, both hypotaxis and parataxis exist in every language, but different language has different emphasis. Chinese language focuses on parataxis. It is affected by the traditional philosophical thoughts of Chinese that people think high of meaning, spirit and vigor of style. Chinese language has a history of thousand of years. Because of the tradition strength, it can exclude the complicated changes that exist in Indo—European languages. The realization of syntax in Chinese depends on meaning and is independent of forms. Taking the following sentences as an example, we can see that the relations of word in it are almost of non-form cohesion, and unity and coherence can be got only by the analysis of direct constituents.



The reason why English lays emphasis on hypotaxis is that it has varied syntagmatic devices. The advantage of hypotaxis lies in that it has a high visual differentiation and a dominant manifestation of grammatical relations.

(1) Forgetting politics momentarily, both Tory and Labor M. P. s

joined in a standing ovation as she entered.

他走进会场时，工党议员和保守党议员都站起来欢呼，他们暂时忘记了党派界限。

- (2) There are no historic or legal precedents to which I can turn in this matter, none that precisely fit the circumstances of a private citizen who has resigned the Presidency of the United States.

在这件事上，我没有历史或法律的先例可循，没有任何什么可以丝毫不差地适用于辞去美国总统之职的这样一位公民之身。

Chinese has a tradition that ideas dominate speech. The advantage of parataxis is that sentences are concise and can be connected by the order of ideas to form the covert content of meaning in which the idea operates as a logical clue for connecting, cohering and composing. Generally speaking, meaning in Chinese is only subject to expression, sentences and structural words so it can be freely separated or amalgamated and has the strong function of language intuition. We can see that the linking elements in sentences are often omitted, but this doesn't result in confusion of comprehension especially in spoken Chinese.

三省十八县，汉家客商，瑶家猎户、药匠，壮家小贩，都在这里云集贸易。猪行牛市，蔬菜水果，香菇木耳，懒蛇活猴，海参洋布，日用百货，饮食小摊……满街满圩人成河，嗡嗡嚶嚶，万头攒动。若是站在后山坡上看下去，晴天是一片头巾、花帕、草帽，雨天是一片头蓬，纸伞、布伞。（《芙蓉镇》）

From eighteen countries in three provinces came Han merchants, Yao hunters and physicians, and Zhuang pedlars. There were two markets for pigs and buffaloes, stalls of vegetables, fruits mushrooms and edible fungus, snakes and monkeys, sea-slugs, foreign cloth, daily

necessities and snacks... the place swarmed with people, rang with a hubbub of voices. If you looked down from the back hill on fine days, you saw turbans, kerchiefs, straw hats; on wet days, coir capes and umbrellas of clothe or oiled paper.

### 3. Open and closed

Open and closed refer to the expansion function of the sentence structure. Expansion is a means to make the language expression more minute and complete. People sometimes express simple ideas and sometimes express more complicated ideas. A complicated idea can be expressed with sentence groups or some longer complex sentences also.

The expansion function of sentence is different between English and Chinese. The basic sentence structure in Chinese has a feature of open beginning and closed ending, while in English the case is just the opposite.

The so-called “open beginning” means that the beginning of a sentence allows reversed linear expansion to a great extent. While the “open ending” refers to the natural linear expansion to a more great extent at the end of a sentence. For example:

- |     |   |                   |
|-----|---|-------------------|
|     | ← | 句首                |
| (1) | ← | 上海人               |
| (2) | ← | 是上海人              |
| (3) | ← | 很像是上海人            |
| (4) | ← | 听口音很像是上海人         |
| (5) | ← | 这位朋友听口音很像是上海人     |
| (6) | ← | 他说这位朋友听口音很像是上海人   |
| (7) | ← | 我听他说这位朋友听口音很像是上海人 |

It can be seen that the sentence “上海人” when being reversedly expanded can derive seven standard sentences. But imagine that if we expand the above sentences in the opposite direction, it can't be derived as many grammatically correct sentences because of the weak function of natural linear expansion in Chinese.

句尾 →  
 上海人 → (1)  
 上海人不习惯北方生活 → (2)  
 上海人不习惯北方生活这话说得太对了 → (3)

Case in English is just the opposite. Restrained by grammatical rules, English sentence has a closed beginning. So generally we often add time or place adverbials at the end of a sentence. However all the expanded sentences are not necessarily acceptable in intuition.

← 句首  
 (1) ← He said  
 (2) ← Yesterday he said  
 (3) ← At ten o'clock Yesterday he said

Sentence (2) is grammatically correct but may not be acceptable in intuition. The natural linear expansion in English has the advantage which can make English sentences much longer than Chinese ones. Let's see the following famous children's folk rhyme:

句尾 →  
 This is the cat → (1)  
 This is the cat that killed the rat → (2)



This is the cat that killed the rat that ate the malt —————→ (3)

This is the cat that killed the rat that ate the malt that lay in the house  
 —————→ (4)

This is the cat that killed the rat that ate the malt that lay in the house  
 that Jack built —————→ (5)

The reversed linear expansion of a basic English sentence is theoretically boundless. The grammatical requirements to the realization of open ending expansion are that modifiers can be posted and there is a connecting device, a means of hypotaxis, by which postpositive elements can be introduced. There are not postpositive devices in Chinese. Chinese modifiers are proposed and thus sentences can be reversedly expanded at the beginning conditionally. Nevertheless, because of the weak prepositive mechanism in Chinese, this beginning expansion should also be limited to a certain extent.

Studying these problems has the practical significance. From the viewpoint of translation, it would be easy to analyze the inner grammatical relation of the source sentence on one hand and further to consider the arrangement of the target sentence on the other hand by mastering the expansion features in both Chinese and English. That is the very reason why we often divide a long English sentence in English-Chinese translation and always contract Chinese sentences in doing Chinese-English translation—the main part of the sentence is translated first and then the modifiers are placed in their proper order.

#### NOTE

As a full morpheme, *chu* is bound and means “beginning”, as in 起初 (at first) 初等 or 初级 (first grade, elementary grade), 月初 (month’s beginning), 初次 (for the first time). As a prefix it is used for the days

of the month: 初一 (the 1<sup>st</sup>), 初二 (the 2<sup>nd</sup>), 初三 (the 3<sup>rd</sup>), ..... 初十 (the 10<sup>th</sup>), after which the days are called by numbers, 十一 (the 11<sup>th</sup>), etc., without prefix. When the Gregorian calendar was first used in China in 1912, the days of the month were called such and such 号 (number), while dates called by *chu*-or by plain numerals above ten were applied to the lunar calendar only. However, the old terms are more and more used for the Gregorian calendar, too, gradually displacing the new term 一号, 二号 .... As for the 日 (day) in dates, it is never used in speech, except when one is talking bookishly.

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