

Chinese Topicalized Structures: Functions and Translation

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Abstract. The thesis takes an empirical approach to the functions and translation methods for Chinese topicalized sentences. The present study attempts to probe into the functions and appropriate translation methods of the Chinese topicalized sentences. Finally, the study boils down to the following conclusions: (1) there are mainly four functions of Chinese topicalized sentences in different contexts, namely the descriptive function, the informative function, the focusing function and the cohesive function. (2) the proposed translation methods for Chinese topicalized sentences are restoring, splitting, restructuring and converting.

Introduction

The concept of topic is of high importance to the study of the Chinese language, and the study of the Chinese topicalized sentence has drawn much attention of the linguistic world for many years. According to Charles N. Li and Sandra A. Thompson (1981), Chinese is a topic-prominent language, and English is a typical subject-prominent language. The difference raises an unavoidable question in the domain of Chinese-English sentence translation: how can the translator realize the functions of Chinese topicalized sentences in English? Over the years, many scholars have discussed the characteristics, functions, classifications, and other relevant aspects of Chinese topicalized sentences; however, a little has been attempted to deal with the translation of this sentence structure. The present study aims at probing into the translation methods of Chinese topicalized sentences with their functions as a basic benchmark.

Functions of Chinese Topicalized Sentences

According to the study, Chinese topicalized sentences can be divided into five groups according to the five major functions in various contexts. The first function is the descriptive function. The sentences with this function are aimed at describing things, usually the time, the place, or the outlook of people. Zhu Dexi (1982) claims in *Lectures on Grammar* that the speaker usually uses a topic of his interest as the subject, and the predicate is the explanation of the topic. For instance:

1986年, 我出生了。

In this sentence, the temporal topic of the sentence is “1986年” (the year of 1986), and the comment part of the sentence is the description of what happened that year.

The second function is the informative function. If the topic of a Chinese topicalized sentence introduces the information known to the listeners, and the comment part of the sentence is to give the new information, then the sentence can be identified as one with the informative function. According to Halliday (2000), given information is the kind of information which can be recoverable to the listener, while new information, on the contrary, is not recoverable to the listener. For instance:

阿凡达这部电影, 我们都觉得很好看。

The topic “阿凡达这部电影” (Avatar) of the above sentence is assumed to be familiar to the listener, so they can be considered as the given information. In the book *A Grammar of Spoken Chinese* (1968), Chao writes, “The grammatical meaning of subject and predicate in a Chinese sentence is topic and comment”. In the example, Avatar, as the predicate, serves as the topic.

The third function is the focusing function, which also aimed at giving information; however, the new information comes first in the position of the topic this time. Quirk (1972) argues that a unit

of information is often represented by each tone unit, and the focus of information is where the nucleus falls. For instance:

Everyone called him Johnny.

The focus of the sentence falls on the word “Johnny”; The topics should be used to contrast or to emphasize” (Xu, 2002: 5) . however, the name of the function here is derived from another kind of focus ---- the contrastive focus ---- which appears in the earlier part instead of the last part of a sentence.

The fourth function is the cohesive function. In order to form a context, what we need is not merely the sentences but also the cohesive devices. The theme and rheme theory describing the English language states that a sentence often consists of a theme accompanied by a rheme. “The theme refers to the element about which something is stated” and the rheme is what is stated about the theme” (Mathesius, 1975: 81). In *Cambridge Grammar of English*, “the theme/topic is typically the starting point of the clause, who or what the clause is ‘about’. The rheme/comment is the main part of the message, the important information given about the topic” (Michael & Ronald, 2006: 778). According to Brown G. and Yule G, the theme of a sentence has two major functions. “Firstly, connecting back and linking it to the previous discourse, maintaining a coherent point of view” (Brown and Yule, 2000: 126). The following examples serve to explain the point.

李雷考上了清华大学，学校派代表去他家祝贺。这条新闻，第二天就传遍了县城的大街小巷。

The content of the topic “这条新闻” (the piece of news) refers to the information given in the previous sentence; therefore, the topicalized sentence is of the cohesive function.

Translation Methods

The focus of this part is the translation methods for Chinese Topicalized sentences. Four major translation methods have been selected and will be discussed respectively.

Restoring

When the method of restoring is adopted, the topic of the sentence can be preserved in the original place in the target language. For instance:

大门外立着一伙人，赵富贵和他的狗，也在里面，都探头探脑的挨进来。”（《呐喊》，44）

Outside the gate quite a crowd had gathered, among them Mr. Zhao and his dog, all craning their necks to peer in. (*Call to the Arms*, 45)

The topic of the Chinese sentence “大门外” (outside the gate) is a locative word referring to a certain place. With regard to the function, it is with the cohesive function. In the translation, the topic is translated by using the preposition “outside” and it remains at the initial position. Moreover, the translated sentence also sounds idiomatic because in English there is a group of sentences called existential sentences in which the locative or temporal words appear at the beginning of the sentence either for emphasis or for cohesion.

Splitting

In some cases, the method of splitting is adopted to reproduce the meaning and the function of the original sentence. Usually, the topic and the comment in the Chinese sentence will be divided into two English sentences. The following examples can show us the specific use of the method.

大：哼，上学，念书，那是一个小姐的梦。（《雷雨》，282）

HAI: Schooling? Education? Humps! That’s something for young ladies to dream about. (*The Thunderstorm*, 283)

The sentence is with the informative function. In the translation, the original sentence is divided into four short sentences. The topic of the original sentence consists of two parallel verbal phrases, which are translated into two short interrogative sentences in English. Since the words are uttered in a play, the translator takes this into consideration and uses two parallel interrogative sentences

which are more actor-friendly. Moreover, the new information of the sentence which is the speaker's attitude towards the topic is transferred into an independent English sentence. In this way, the informative function of the original sentence is reproduced.

Restructuring

In some situations, the position of the topic in a Chinese topicalized sentence must be shifted to the other part of the sentence so as to conform to the idiomatic and grammatical usage of the English language. The shift of the position of a topic in the translation is achieved by the method of restructuring. For instance:

贵: 一个当差的女儿, 收人家点东西, 用人家一点钱, 没有什么说不过去的。(《雷雨》, 24)

LU: Don't worry. There's nothing wrong in a servant's daughter accepting gifts or money from people. (*The Thunderstorm*, 25)

The example is with the informative function. In the translation, the position of the topic is shifted to the end of the sentence. What is more, the translator also adds another sentence "don't worry" to transform the original pragmatic meaning of the sentence, which is to make his daughter feel at ease about her relationship with Zhou Ping. By doing so, the translator reproduces the informative function of the Chinese sentence by highlighting the point that the speaker thinks there is no big deal about a servant's daughter accepting things from people.

Converting

The method of converting is also largely applied in the translation of the Chinese topicalized sentences. In the first place, the Chinese topicalized sentence can be translated by converting the original sentence structure. As for the translation of the topic in these situations, usually, the topic blends into the converted sentence structures and continues to assume its original function.

这院子, 是他家还未如此凋零的时候, 一到夏天的夜间, 夜夜和他的祖母在此纳凉的院子。(《呐喊》, 372)

This yard was the place, before his family fortunes declined, **where he used to come with his grandmother on summer evenings to enjoy the cool**. (*Call to the Arms*, 373)

The above example is an argument co-referential topicalized sentence with the descriptive function. As we can see, the Chinese topicalized sentence is translated into an attributive clause in English, which is often used to give more descriptive information about the subject. The position of the topic remains at the beginning of the sentence, but its part of speech is changed in order to lay a foundation for the appearance of the attributive clause in the end of the sentence. In this way, the translation sounds idiomatic, and it realizes the original descriptive function.

Conclusion

The present study has probed into the functions of the Chinese topicalized sentences in different contexts and came up with five appropriate methods for translating these sentences into English. Firstly, the knowledge of the five proposed functions can be used to help us understand the meanings of Chinese topicalized sentences in various contexts as well as be used as a benchmark for judging the translated version of topicalized sentences. Secondly, the five proposed translation methods can be applied in the future C-E translation practice of topicalized sentences. They play an important role in transforming both the semantic meaning and function of original sentences into the target language.

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