

# Research on the Word Order Adjustment of Translation from the Perspective of Thematic Meaning

Yifu Shen

School of North China Electric Power University, Baoding 071000, China

1107518801@qq.com

**Abstract.** In the practice of English-Chinese translation, an important issue facing translators is to adjust the word order. For literary texts, word order directly affects the fluency of the translation, and it also involves the transmission of the aesthetic value of literary texts. The traditional translation theories focus more on the conveying of meaning and content and do not emphasize too much on the word order. This paper is aimed at deepening the translator's understanding of the word order by analyzing the role of word order, and making the word order play a greater role in the future translation practice.

**Keywords:** thematic progression; word order; translation.

## 1. Introduction

The research on word order typology is generally considered to be the research work that originated in Greenberg (1963). In the second half of the 19th century, Whitney and William Dwight observed the classification and arrangement of linguistic phenomena in his masterpiece *Life and Growth of Language and Language and Language Studies*, and thought the position of the language component "as the most important feature of the language form." Since the 1980s, researches taking word order as an independent grammatical phenomenon have become more and more prevalent. For example, Slobin and Bever (1982) have defined the word order of children's language in cross-language researches. These grammatical models assume that word order is not a recessive feature of clauses. The arrangement of component bodies can be inferred from the semantic features of each word and its interrelationship with the components of other different parts of speech. Halliday's definition of the theme and the rheme is: "The subject is the starting point of information, ... the rest of the message, that is, the part in which the subject is unfolded, in the words of the Prague school, is the rheme[1]." In the clause, if the first grammatical unit coincides with the subject in the traditional sense, then it is an "unmarked theme". If the first grammatical unit is not the subject, then the subject is a "marked theme". This paper is based on the thematic progression theory of linguist M. A. K. Halliday and discusses how to use the method of word order adjustment in translation practice.

## 2. The Difference Word Order Brings in Semantics Conveying

Despite some sentences have the same conceptual meanings, they do not necessarily mean the same. Which component of the sentence is made as the theme is related to the thought and intention of the author. If the order of some components is changed, the meaning will also be different. An example will be displayed to offer an explanation of the mentioned difference:

I drink water.

Water I drink.

These two sentences have the identical conceptual meaning but different linear structures or orders, which gives them separate meanings. The first one, with an unmarked theme structure, merely requires a little cognitive labor, because readers are so accustomed to its regular order. Its theme is "I", same with the grammatical subject. Sentence two draws more reader's attention and consumes more cognitive labor. Functioning as the object, "water" in sentence 2 is an example of unmarked theme because it does not lie in its regular location after the verb. Readers will ask themselves: why does the writer organize the information in such a way? What does s/he want to emphasize? In English,

the use of the two sentences is not blurred; instead, it is confined by the certain context. Apparently, more emphasis on water is laid on the latter: I drink water, not other liquids.

### 3. The Application of Word Order Adjustment in Translation

From the examples above, it can be proved that word order has a non-negligible role in conveying meanings. Therefore, in the process of translation, the translator should try to preserve the thematic progression of the original text in order to achieve the maximum degree of “dynamic equivalence”(Dynamic equivalence is to be defined in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language. This response can never be identical, for the cultural and historical settings are too different, but there should be a high degree of equivalence of response, or the translation will have failed to accomplish its purpose[2].) For example:

4. I like Danish cheese best.[3]

4a. 我最爱吃丹麦奶酪.

5. Danish cheese I like best. [ibid]

5a. 丹麦奶酪我最爱吃.

The two pairs are directly translated into Chinese with strict order and are both perfectly matched: they both correctly convey the conceptual meaning and are in accordance with the thematic prominence—the first is the most common one, which can be easily understood; the second make the “Danish cheese” prominent because the change of the word order.

However, translation is also called “the art of incompleteness”, and 100% equivalence does not usually happen. This is because the characteristics of English and Chinese are distinct, and the way the theme is promoted is also limited by their own grammatical systems i.e. the feasible word order in the source language may be wrong in the target language. Therefore, in the pursuit of “thematic prominence”, the consideration of the grammatical structure of the target language cannot be abandoned. For example:

6. It is Danish cheese that I like best. [ibid]

6a. 我最爱吃的是丹麦奶酪.

7. Reluctantly, she agreed to help. [ibid]

7a. 勉强是勉强, 但她还是答应帮忙.

8. Randy, his name is. [ibid]

8a. 兰迪, 他的名字叫兰迪.

In example 6a, the order of Chinese changes a little compared with the source text on account of the difference lying between Chinese and English language—there exists no fixed emphatic structure in Chinese; to achieve the same emphatic goal, the translation strategy is adding or deleting words or shifting the word order. But they express the same meaning of “My favorite food is Danish cheese, not something else” in the same way. If example 7 and 8 were translated into “勉强地, 她同意帮忙” and “兰迪, 他的名字是”, the limitation of the word order in Chinese would be gone beyond; in other words, it would be unacceptable for Chinese readers because of the contradiction of the Chinese grammar.

The emergence of the theme is a modification of the traditional translation theory in that it pays attention to the ideographic meaning of the word order. In the discourse structure, what is used as a theme in a clause is often associated with other clauses adjacent to it, forming a certain pattern of thematic progression, which, if a specific aesthetic intent is implanted, will produce a specific aesthetic function. When translated, the word order containing aesthetic intentions or functions should be paid enough attention. For example:

9. The fury of which she was incapable had been burning in my soul all day, and tears, hot and large, had continually been scalding my cheek; ... [4]

9a. 她所不能感到的怒火在我心里燃烧着. 大滴的热泪一直不断的在洗着我的脸颊.....[5];

9b. 她所不会有的火气，整天在我心里燃烧着，大滴大滴的热泪，一直烧灼着我们脸颊.....[6];

9c. 她所不会有的火气，整天在我心里燃烧着，一颗颗眼泪，硕大而滚热，一直在烧灼着我的脸颊.....[7]

Translators of 8a and 8b change the original structure of “tears, hot and large,” into “hot and large tears” perhaps for the fluency of the translation text. But by using a comma, 8c proves that the original theme can be retained without the disruption of Chinese language. Here is another example:

10. A face was thrust in at the window of the carriage, a face crowned with matted hair that fell in a fringe above the scarlet, bloodshot eyes. The lips parted, showing the white teeth; and then the lantern was lifted to the window so that the light should fall upon the interior of the carriage. One hand held the lantern, and the other clasped the smoking barrel of a pistol; they were long, slim hands, with narrow pointed fingers, things of beauty and of grace, the rounded nails crusted with dirt.

Joss Merlyn smiled; ... [8]

The heroine in the carriage was in great horror for a robbery happened just before a moment ago. What she saw was all in her terrified mood. “A face”, “a face crowned with matted hair”, “the lips”, “the lantern was lifted to the window”, “one hand” etc., are themes of their clauses. They are either parts of a body or some things, seemingly irrational but really shocking and frightening. Besides, it exactly depicted what the woman had seen in a logical order, which means it successfully made the scene reoccur and bring a sense of nearby horror to the readers. Here is one version of translation:

10a. 窗外伸进来一张脸，那人长着一头缠结的头发，像流苏一样垂落下来。他瞪着一双血红的眼睛，张着嘴唇，露出白白的牙齿。他把提灯举到窗口，灯光照进车内。他一只手举着提灯，另一只手抓着还在冒烟的枪管。他有一双长长的、细细尖尖的手，很漂亮，很优雅，只是有些泥土粘在了圆圆的指甲上了。

焦斯·默林笑着.....[9]

This version successfully conveys the meaning of the source text without any doubt. However, it changes nearly all the original thematic progression pattern: all the clauses using body parts or things as theme are changed into person-related themes—if retranslated into English, the text will be:

At the window of the carriage, a face was thrust in. The man was crowned with matted hair that fell in a fringe above the scarlet, bloodshot eyes. His lips parted, showing the white teeth; and then he lifted the lantern to the window so that the light should fall upon the interior of the carriage. One of his hand held the lantern, and the other clasped the smoking barrel of a pistol; they were long, slim hands, with narrow pointed fingers, things of beauty and of grace, the rounded nails crusted with dirt.

Jos Merlin smiled...

It still expresses the same conceptual meaning but gives readers a completely different sense: the original thematic pattern disappears. So does the previous terrifying atmosphere. The fascination and aesthetic value of the language declines considerably. To some extent it does not hinder the comprehension of the readers. But when it comes to literary translation, good fluency and correct information is merely the most fundamental elements but never the most essential ones. The reason why literature works is loved by the audience is because they are of unique aesthetic value. In many cases, the word order plays a vital role. Therefore, to bring that fascination to another country, translators must not overlook the word order.

Fortunately, there does exist wise translators. Here is another example:

10b. 一张脸戳进车窗，一张顶着缠结头发的脸，流苏一样垂落的头发下面，是一双血红的眼。两片嘴唇张开着，露出白白的牙齿。接着，提灯举到了窗口，灯光照进车内。一只手举着提灯，另一只手抓着还在冒烟的枪管。那是一双长长的、纤细的手，细细尖尖的手指，很漂亮，很优雅，圆圆的指甲上覆满了泥土。

焦斯·默林笑着.....[10]

This version largely preserves the original thematic progression model while does not ignore the word order tolerance of the target language. It can be considered as an excellent version.

#### 4. Summary

This paper demonstrates that the word order, which embodies certain thematic progression pattern, plays an important role in the literary text through a brief introduction of some related word order researches, the interpretation of the importance of the word order and the detailed case analysis. Therefore, in the process of translation, the translator should not only be satisfied with the transmission of literal meaning, but also try his/her best to retain the original thematic progression mode of the source text, in order to preserve the aesthetic value of the original text and bring better reading experience to the readers as much as possible.

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