A Comparison of Transitivity System in English and Chinese

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Abstract

Transitivity system is an important concept of Systematic Functional Grammar (SFG) as well as a useful tool for discourse analysis. Based on Halliday's theoretical framework, this paper compares the similarities and distinctions between English and Chinese on the transitivity system, hoping to deepen the understanding toward the two languages from a new aspect and throw light on E-C translation. The research indicates that the six processes on the transitivity system in English and Chinese is semantically the same and can remain unchanged in E-C translation, while in certain circumstances process transfer is necessary.

Key words: Comparison; Transitivity system; English and Chinese translation implication

INTRODUCTION

Functional grammar provides three metafunctions of language: ideational, interpersonal and textual function. Ideational function is composed of experimental and logical function, a grammatical resource to construe the world around us and inside us. Experimental function is to express the experience, ideas as well as "going-on", and situations, involving sorts of things that might happen, people, and relevant circumstances. It is mainly realized through transitivity system, voice, and polarity. Transitivity is a grammatical system of experimental function that helps to express the outside physical world as well as human spiritual field.

Being a linguistic analysis device, transitivity system is used to investigate various kinds of texts since it is first defined by Halliday who has conducted the initial transitivity analysis of the literary discourse *The Inheritors* by William Golding (Halliday, 1971), showing that the transitivity analysis model is useful and effective to explore man's characters and thematic meaning. Since then, subsequent scholars such as Burton, Stockwell etc. have conducted relevant studies under the framework of transitivity system. In China, Zhu Shichang examines four extracts from the transitivity perspective: two from Charles Dickenss's *Oliver Twist*, the other two from D. H. Lawrenee's *Women in Love* (Zhu, 1995). Li Fagen illustrated the uses of six processes of transitivity in translation and tried to attest the operations and availability of functional linguistics in translation (Li Fagen, 2004).

To sum up, most studies mainly use transitivity system as means of discourse analysis. Some of them connect with applied linguistics such as translation and other languages. Few have conducted contrastive researches. In view of previous studies, this paper first briefly reviews the transitivity system theory of Halliday. Then a comparison is conducted between English and Chinese from two perspectives accordingly—traditional grammar and transitivity system. Parataxis and hypotaxis is discussed in terms of traditional grammar, illustrating the general features of the two languages. Subsequently, the essential grammatical component—predicate is examined to lay foundation for the later transitivity analysis. As to the transitivity system, this paper compares English and

Chinese on the six processes through illustrations and analysis, in hope of facilitating E-C translation.

1. TRANSITIVITY SYSTEM

Transitivity, also termed as "transitivity system", is a semantic category in SFG. It is used in much broader sense than the transitivity of verbs of traditional grammar. As Halliday (1967) stated in his academic paper, transitivity is a property of clauses instead of verbs (Halliday, 1967, p.38-39). Thompson (2000) also explicated that transitivity is a system for describing the whole clause, rather than verb and its object.

Transitivity system is a system or network expressing people's experience of the external world as well as the internal world through clauses. It specifies the different types of processes that are recognized in language and the structures by which they are expressed (Halliday, 1994, p.106-362).In the view of SFG, clause is the basic linguistic unit which can be divided into three constitutional parts: (i) the process itself; (ii) participants in the process; (iii) circumstances associated with the process. These parts construct the frame of reference for interpreting our experience of happening, doing, sensing, meaning, being and becoming.

Process is the core element of transitivity, which can be related with one or more participants and circumstances. The process is the action, state or whatever that is being referred to and typically realized by means of a verb or a verbal group. Thus it is inferred that the main verb in a process determines the process type. Depending on different types of verbs, there are altogether six processes according to SFG, namely material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral and existential process.

Participants literally mean the entities involved in the process which is either human or even animate or inanimate and realized by nominal groups. Usually, there are two primary participants involved in certain processes, namely Actors and Goal in material, Senser and Phenomenon in mental, Carrier/ Identified and Attribute/Identifier in relational, Sayer and Receiver in verbal process, except Existent in existential and Behaver in behavioral process. Circumstances are concerned with temporal and spatial settings which are linguistically expressed with adverbial groups or prepositional phrases. In certain cases, there maybe more participants associated which play an indirect role in the clauses: Beneficiary and Range. Beneficiary refers to the one to whom or for whom the process is said to happen. Generally, it appears in material, verbal and relational processes. A Beneficiary can be Recipient (the one that something is given to) or Client (the one that services are done for) in a material process and Receiver (somebody or something that is addressed to) in a verbal process. Range specifies the range or scope in a process, and usually comes up in mental, material, and verbal process.

2. COMPARISON BETWEEN E-C TRANSITIVITY SYSTEM

2.1 Some Differences in English and Chinese—Traditional Grammar

As to the distinctions between Chinese and English, most scholars conducted studies from the perspective of traditional grammar. In this part, it would review several current primary contrastive studies in China and give a brief comparison on a particular essential grammatical constituent—predicate.

2.1.1 Parataxis and Hypotaxis

Many scholars have conducted contrastive researches on English and Chinese languages from various aspects, such as Liu Miqing compares the two languages from the angle of translation (Liu Miqing, 2006)and Lian Shuneng does a comprehensive study between the two languages (Lian Shuneng, 2011). Generally speaking, these scholars unanimously contend that Chinese is a kind of parataxis language while English is hypotaxis. Parataxis means the coherence of a text relying on phrases, the meaning of the sentence and logic rather than any language forms. In contrast, hypotaxis is supported by linguistic forms (means of vocabulary and forms) to demonstrate the syntactic relations and to connect the whole text (Liu Miqing, 2006, p.113-119). The two linguistic features can be reflected in phrases, sentences as well as passages. In Chinese, usually no conjunction is used in the phrases or texts as they are woven in logic (example 1and 3); however in English conjunction is used to combine words into phrases, phrases into sentences and sentences into texts (example 4 and 5).

Examples

纽约市 The city *of* New York

汗流浃背 *with* sweat streaming down one's back

In another moment down went Alice after it, never once *considering* how in the world she was to get out again.

一转眼工夫，爱丽斯便跟着它跳了进去，却连想都没想一下，自己究竟怎样才能够再跑出来。

Undoubtedly the differences between English and Chinese don't merely lie in parataxis and hypotaxis. To be specific, sentence parts, voices, tenses of the two languages etc. vary considerably. Since the transitivity process is determined by the predicate, a brief comparison on predicate is presented, and the reason of process transfer will be explored further.

2.1.2 Predicate

Significant differences exist in the predicate of English and Chinese. In English sentences, verbs primarily act as the predicate with a certain system of form changes. However, the predicate in Chinese contains more than verbs. Two aspects are focused on in the following analysis: in English and Chinese what kind of constituents serve as a predicate and how it relies on sentence subject

and linguistic changes.

a. Constituents serving as a predicate

English predicate bases and centers on verbs, which cannot be replaced by any other types of constituents like adjectives, nouns etc. The forms of English predicate involve concord agreement, tense, voice and even the whole sentence or passage, constituting the core of English sentence structure. In contrast, Chinese predicate consists of various constituents and is very compatible. Apart from verbs and verbal phrase, noun, noun phrase, adjective phrase, prepositional phrase etc. can also serve as predicate. For example:

1. He *worked* hard for a living.
2. She *is* very pretty.
3. 你的态度不好。
4. 明天清明。

In example 1 and 2, the content verb "work" and the link verb "is" serves as predicates, while in example 3 and 4, the adjective 不好 and the noun 清明 serves as predicates.

b. Reliance on subject and the linguistic changes

In English, the predicate is strongly dependent on the subject, and forms fixed rule such as concord agreement. Predicate must collocate with a subject and cannot make up a sentence independently. Furthermore, English predicate changes in tense, voice and mood which form the fundamental English grammar. By comparison, predicate of Chinese is independent of subject. Chinese predicate, not restricted by subject in terms of person and number, is relatively stable and can forms sentences independently without subject. And Chinese predicate doesn't have any variations but basic forms in tense, voice etc. Here are several instances:

5. He *studies* English.
6. 他学英语。
7. He *studied* English before.
8. 他以前学过英语。

In example 5, third person singular is used to indicate a present action and concord agreement. However as to its Chinese version (example 6), the basic form of the verb can express simple present tense. Example 7 involves simple past tense to explicate a past action, while its Chinese translation adds a circumstantial phrase 以前 to mark things happened in the past.

Overall, there are plenty of unique and internal attributes in both languages which bring about lots of problems when people try to transfer from one language to another. However, those thorough grammatical studies of the two languages have provided implications for language transfer. The latter functional analysis could also act as an important reference for translation.

2.2 Comparison of Transitivity System in English and Chinese

As there is no similar network to the transitivity system in the Chinese grammar, the following analysis is based on

Halliday's transitivity system given the common attributes all languages share. Moreover, the paper provides some suggestions in E-C translation depending on the comparison.

2.2.1 Material Process

Material process expresses the notion of happening and acting which can be realized through verbs or verbal phrases. Semantically, clauses of material process in both Chinese and English are similar. In English there are "go", "run" ,"catch" as well as abstract ones such as "resign", "dissolve" etc. As for Chinese, there are also similar words like 坐,摘,跑,拍,打,扛,挑,抬,捧,编织,掏出 etc. and abstract actions such as 完结,添加,罢免,升职,开除 and so forth. Halliday contends that according to different standards, the material process can be grouped into active and passive type. Some illustrations are given as follows:

1. The car   went away   like a whirlwind. (Active)
   Actor   Process: material   Circumstance
2. 汽车   像一阵风似地   开走了(Active)
   Actor   Circumstance   Process: material
3. He   broke   a glass. (Active)
   Actor   Process: material   Goal
4. 他   打碎了   玻璃杯(Active)
   Actor   Process: material   Goal
5. He   is playing   the guitar. (Active)
   Actor   Process: material   Range
6. 他   在弹   吉他 (Active)
   Actor   Process: material   Range
7. She   brought   me   some souvenirs. (Active)
   Actor   Process: material   Beneficiary   Goal
8. 她   带给   我   一些纪念品。(Active)
   Actor   Process: material   Beneficiary   Goal

The components in material process, namely Actor, Goal, Range, Beneficiary and Circumstance can find its equivalence in Chinese of the same structure without changing processes. However, the position of Circumstance in Chinese is rather flexible.

In the material process, if there are two participants involved, it can be expressed in both active voice and passive voice. In the active voice, the sentence subject is the subject of logic — Actor, while in the passive voice, it is the Goal which acts as the subject of the clause. In English, the passive voice structure is: be + V-ed/en, while in Chinese, the passive voice is formed by adding 被, 让 or 叫 in front of the Actor and Process sometimes. As for the actor is not necessarily appear in both Chinese and English unless the actor is to be emphasized.

9. He   is cheated (by someone). (Passive/Intentional)
   Goal Process: material (Actor)
10. 他   被 (让别人)   骗了。(Passive/Intentional)
    Goal   (Actor)   Process: material

Actually, Chinese expressions of passive voice is more various without 被, 让 or 叫. In some circumstances, im-

perative mood appears in the sentence without an actor.

11. 这些垃圾为什么还堆在这儿？

12. 发现了错误,一定要改正。

Although the two instances above seem active without Actors, in fact passive voice should be used in English. Actor is often omitted in Chinese to keep objectivity or politeness. Therefore, such sentences in Chinese should be translated into passive voices in English.

13. Why the garbage *is* still *piled* there?

14. Wrongs must *be righted* when they are discovered.

In the following cases, clauses of passive voice without an Actor in English should be transferred into active voice in E-C translation with the Actor added. For example:

15. On these occasions he *was given* a dinner in his honor.

16. 这时候，主人总要为他举行宴会。

Based on the analysis above, the realization of material process in Chinese and English is similar and both of them involve verb or verbal phrases. Thus the material processes of all types in English can also be translated into material processes in Chinese. However, the semantic construction in some circumstances is different. Therefore, in the E-C translation process the construction needs to be adjusted according to habitual expression. Moreover, the transfer between active and passive voice of material process needs to be paid attention to in E-C translation.

2.2.2 Mental Process

Mental process is the process of feeling, thinking and perceiving which can be categorized into three groups: affection, cognition and perception. It is realized by words such as "like", "worry", "fear", "believe", "understand", "know", "see", "hear", "watch", "want", "imagine", etc., in English, while in Chinese 知道,听见,思考,望见,理解,恨,认为,相信,意识到,后悔 and so on. In general, there are two participants in mental process: Sensor and Phenomenon. Sensor is animate while the phenomenon is not necessarily animate. All these situations above in Chinese and English are the same, for instance:

17. I　　hate　　　　to do housework.
Sensor　Process: affection　Phenomenon
18. 我　　讨厌　　　　做家务。
Sensor　Process: affection　Phenomenon
19. She　didn't hear　　the news.
Sensor　Process: perception　Phenomenon
20. 她　　没听说　　　这个消息
Sensor　Process: perception　Phenomenon
21. I　　don't understand.
Sensor　　Process: cognition
22. 我　　　　无法理解
Sensor　　Process: cognition

In English, the mental process is a two-way process. That is to say, in the active voice, the Sensor and the Phenomenon can both at the position of subject without changing the meaning. For example, I notice it; it strikes me (Halliday, 1994). In Chinese, there are also similar situations like 我喜欢他,他吸引我. However, theses cases are few in Chinese and usually the mental process is a one-way process with the Sensor as the only subject. For example, 我忘记了这事.

Since two participants are involved in mental process, it can be expressed actively or passively. For example:

23. He didn't see me (active)

24. I wasn't seen by him. (passive)

25. She heard the shots. (active)

26. The shots were heard by her. (passive)

In fact, example 23 and 25 are rare in the real context. The Sensor is often omitted in the sentences, namely, "I wasn't seen" and "The shots were heard". However, in Chinese such kind of sentences are often in active voice, for example,没人看见我,有人听到子弹声了. In short, no matter which participant in the mental process is the subject in a clause, the Sensor always acts as the subject in its Chinese translation. And the passive voice in English is usually translated into active voice in Chinese with indefinite pronoun at the subject position, which does not cause the process change.

2.2.3 Relational Process

Relational process is to reveal the relationship between entities and it is a kind of being. In English, words such as be, get, become, represent, remain, look, sound, taste, have, seem, resemble, last etc. are used to realize the process. In Chinese there are also equivalent verbs: 保持,显得,生得,谓,称,算,有,看起来,像,持续etc. The relational process can be further divided into intensive, circumstantial and possessive type. And every type contains attributive mode and identifying mode. Generally speaking, there are two participant in relational process which are labeled Carrier and Attribute in attributive mode and Identified and Identifier in identifying mode. The following examples illustrate the six types.

27. The story　is　　　　　true.
Carrier　Process: intensive　Attribute
28. 这个故事　　是　　　　真的。
Carrier　Process: intensive　Attribute
29. The meeting　is　　　　on a Thursday.
Carrier　　Process: circumstance　Attribute
30. 会议　　　　是　　　　在一个周四。
Carrier　　Process: circumstance　Attribute
31. Tomorrow　　is　　　　25th.
Identified　Process: circumstance　Identifier
32. 明天　　　　是　　　　25号。
Identified　Process: circumstance　Identifier

From the above examples, it is concluded that both English and Chinese have six types of relational process and their semantic components are the same. However, some sentences in Chinese are different from English as follows:

33. 她很漂亮。

34. 这多么有趣呀!

These Chinese sentences do not contain a verb but

their meanings are integrated and the sentences are acceptable. The reason is that the predicate in Chinese is various while in English is simple. The examples above show that nouns along with adjectives in Chinese can also act as a predicate in a sentence and the sentence still belongs to the relational process. Whereas in the relational process of English copulative verb is a necessary indicator. However, the following instances show another cases.

35. *Are* both or either parents smokers?

36双亲或者双亲之一抽烟吗？

37. You *are* ignorant of the duties you undertake in marrying.

38.你完全不懂你在婚姻方面应承担的责任。

English sentences differ from its Chinese equivalences in process type. Example 34 is transformed from relational process to material process, while example 36 is changed into mental process. If the process type has to remain the same to achieve translation equivalence by being translated into双亲或双亲之一都是抽烟者吗？ and 关于婚姻方面应承担的责任你是不懂的, the two Chinese versions are neither fluent nor fitting in with Chinese habitual expressions. As a result, the process transfer is necessary due to the distinctive predicate and habitual forms of expression between Chinese and English.

To sum up, the relational process can remain unchanged in E-C translation. Whereas the features of Chinese relational process need to be noted in the translation since the predicate in Chinese is various and in certain cases process transfer is required.

2.2.4 Verbal Process

Verbal process is the process between the mental and relational process which embodies information exchanged by "saying" or other kind of verbal action. It involves both direct and indirect quotation. The words involved in this process are verbs such as "say", "explain", "praised", "ask", "tell", "talk", "boast", "describe" etc in English, and说，批评，表扬,谈话,告诉,问,要求,命令and so on in Chinese. The primary participants involved in verbal process are: Sayer, Receiver and Verbiage. The Verbiage can be quoted and reported.

39. I   explained   to her   what it meant.
Sayer Process: verbal Receiver Verbiage
40 .我   向她   解释了   这件事。
Sayer Receiver Process: verbal Verbiage
41. She always   praised   him.
Sayer Circumstance Process: verbal Receiver
42. 她   经常   表扬   他。
Sayer Circumstance Process: verbal Receiver

The examples indicate that the semantic components in verbal process are the same in the verbal process of English and Chinese. But the semantic structure differs. In example 34, the Receiver is put after the process while in example 35 the Receiver is before the process.

Additionally, in the direct quotation of English, if the Sayer is noun group, there are three patterns: Sayer-

Verbal Process-Verbiage, Verbiage-Verbal Process-Sayer, Verbiage-Sayer Process-Verbal. For example:

43. (1) She said: "Don't worry".
(2) "Don't worry" she said.
(3) "Don't worry" said she.
44. (1)她说：“不用担心”。
(2)“不用担心”她说。

It is obvious that in Chinese, only two patterns: "Sayer-Verbal Process-Verbiage" and Verbiage-Sayer Process-Verbal are available. If the Sayer is not clear or can not be told in a verbal process, the subject can be the actor of the quoted clause or the quoted clause with "it".

45. He   is reported   to have gone abroad.
Verbiage   Process: verbal Verbiage
46. 据报道，   他出国了。
Process: verbal   Verbiage
47. It is said   that the novel has been published.
Process: verbal Verbiage
48. 据说，   这部小说已经出版了
Process: verbal Verbiage
49. 'All Nanjing will enjoy it too.' He   was told
Verbiage   Receiver Process: verbal
50. 人家   对他   说：“南京人都可以欣赏嘛。”
Sayer   Receiver   Process: verbal Verbiage

From the cases above, we can see that the quoted clause and reported clause are passive voices which are corresponding to据说/据报道of active voice in Chinese. Thus they can be translated into the pattern据说/据报道-Verbiage" in Chinese.

To sum up, the semantic components of verbal process in Chinese and English are the same. Difference occurs in the pattern of quoted clauses. Besides in a reported clause, the passive one in English is corresponding to the active in Chinese. Generally, verbal process of English clause is preserved in its Chinese translation.

2.2.5 Behavioral Process

Behavioral process is the activities concerning physiological and psychological behaviors, such as breathing, coughing, smiling, dreaming, staring, laughing etc. In Chinese, there are words like做梦,咳嗽,呼吸,凝视,嗅,微笑,叹息 and so on. Typically, only one participant is involved in a behavioral process, which is Behaver.

51. We   all   laughed.
Behaver Circumstance   Process: behavioral
52. 我们   都   笑了。
Behaver Circumstance   Process: behavioral
53. Mary   cried   loudly.
Behaver Process: behavioral   Circumstance
54. 玛丽   大声地   哭了。
Behaver   Circumstance   Process: behavioral

Example shows that the pattern "Behaver-Circumstance-Process: behavioral" can be found in both Chinese and English. The behavioral process is relatively similar between Chinese and English in terms of sentence structure and semantic components. Therefore in the E-C

translation, the behavioral process can remain unchanged in order to reach equivalence.

2.2.6 Existential Process

Existential process is the process of existing and happening. The typical verb of existential process is "be, exist, happen, remain, emerge, prevail", correspondingly in Chinese is 有,是,发生,出现,盛行etc. There is only one primary participant: Existent. Circumstances concerning time and place usually appears in this process.

55. There is   a bowl   on the table.
Process: existential Existent Circumstance
56. 桌上   有   一个碗。
Circumstance   Process: existential   Existent
57. (Does) life   exist   on Mars?
Existent   Process: existential   Circumstance
58. 火星上   存在   生命吗?
Circumstance   Process: existential   Existent

Through the comparison, we can see that the semantic components in English and Chinese are the same; hence it's unnecessary to change the process in E-C translation. Circumstance in Chinese appears at the beginning of the clause, while the one in English can appear at the beginning or the end of the clause. However there is one thing should be aware of. "There" as an indicator of existential process without any meaning can have a sense of meaning in some circumstances. For example, "There is your father". Here "there" is a circumstance of place in a relational process.

CONCLUSION

Transitivity system is complicated conception as well as practical tool in SFG. This paper conducts an attempted comparison of English and Chinese from the perspective of transitivity system. It is obvious that the verbal process, behavioral process and existential process of the two languages are basically the same with similar components and sentence structures. Whereas several distinctions which lie in the passive voice, habitual usages etc exist in the material process, mental process and relational process due to their complexities. Therefore, the former three processes can remain unchanged in E-C translation, and the latter ones need to be carefully studied according to the context of original text in terms of process transfer before translating.

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