

# Negative Transfer of Chinese Sentence Patterns on Students' English Writing

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**Abstract**—The necessity of improving the English writing ability of the Chinese students has been realized gradually and writing is always difficult for Chinese students as well as for teachers of English. Among the many difficulties, errors from the influence of Chinese sentence patterns are the obscure one which students cannot overcome easily. This paper, which aims at exploring the differences between Chinese and English sentence patterns, along with the causes of negative transfer of Chinese sentence patterns on students' English writing, is desired to be of some help to both language teachers and language learners.

**Index Terms**—negative transfer, Chinese sentence patterns, English writing

## I. CHINESE SENTENCE PATTERNS VS. ENGLISH SENTENCE PATTERNS

According to linguistic typologies, the basic word order of both Chinese and English is SVO, the two languages, however, are considerably different in terms of rigidity. English word order is quite rigid (Odlin, 1989). In an English sentence, a subject-predicate structure is stringently obeyed and a predicative verb is the center of a sentence. So each English sentence is a cubic architecture with the trunk of subject-predicate structure and the kernel of predicative verb. And English sentences are linked by various cohesive devices in order to show the logic relationship of these sentences. On the contrary, Chinese word order is more flexible, which is connected by the semantic meaning of the sentence. Besides the basic SVO structure, two or more verbs can appear in one Chinese sentence and a complete sentence can be made up of two or more sentences. The sentence is composed in thought flow; there are hardly cohesive ties to connect the sentences; the relation between subject and predicate is loose in form. Three types of distinctive sentence patterns will be discussed respectively.

### A. *Topic-comment Sentences vs. Subject-predicate Sentences*

The first Chinese typical sentence is a topic-prominent one compared with English subject-predicate sentence. By "topic structure", we mean any grammatical configuration consisting of two parts: the topic, which invariably occurs first, and the comment, a clause which follows the topic and says something about it (徐烈炯, 2009). It is widely accepted that English sentence is a language unit including subject and predicate. A topic in Chinese appears at the beginning of a sentence, but it can be or cannot be the subject in an English sentence. For example, the English equivalent for "夏天很难保存食物" is "It's difficult to preserve food in summer". "夏天" in Chinese is the topic, while an temporal adverbial in English. Hockett (1958) suggested that topic and comment generally characterized the immediate constituents of predicative constructions. "The speaker announces a topic and then says something about it". In discussing Chinese, Hockett points out that many Chinese comments themselves consist of both a topic and a comment. There can be two or more topics in a sentence. In this way, a Chinese sentence can be built up of predications within predications. Hockett's example of this is: 我今天城里有事。I today town-in have thing. "I have business in town today." (1958) Thus the relationship between topic and comment is much looser, syntactically, than the relationship between subject and predicate.

### B. *Multi-predicate Sentences vs. Multi-preposition & Noun Sentences*

Secondly, there exist multi-predicate sentences in Chinese. 林同济(1980) stated, "Emphasis on verbs is the basic trend for making Chinese sentence. Multiples of verbs are used in order of time to create an effect of verb prominence even in the cost of ellipse of connectors." He called it chronicle style. For example, 老关急忙跳下车去, 摸摸腰间的勃朗宁, 又向四下里瞥了一眼, 就过去开了车门, 站在门旁边. The series of verbs "...跳下...摸摸...瞥了...过去开了...站..." indicate the actions taking place in order of time. On the other hand, plenty of abstract nouns and prepositions are used frequently in English. Let's look at this typical sentence. "Coming!" Away she skimmed over the lawn, up the path, up the steps, across the veranda, and into the porch. The Chinese translation equivalence is "来啦!", 她转身蹦着跳着地跑了, 越过草地, 跑上小径, 跨上台阶, 穿过凉台, 进了门廊. In English sentences, there are a series of prepositions such as "over", "up", "across", and "into", indicating a series of actions.

### C. *Paratactic Sentences vs. Hypotactic Sentences*

The third sentence pattern is a paratactic pattern in Chinese compared with a hypotactic one in English. Quirk et al

(1972) introduced seven sentence types according to the grammatical functions of the constituents involved in an English sentence. According to their structure, sentences are simple, compound, complex and compound-complex. Having the structure of subject and predicate as the core, English sentences can be extended by conjoining or embedding with overt connectors. There is no limit of the number of embedding clauses. Please look at these sentences.

This is the cat.

This is the cat that killed the rat.

This is the cat that killed the rat that ate the malt.

This is the cat that killed the rat that ate the malt that lay in the house.

This is the cat that killed the rat that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.

It is a multi-level hypotactic sentence with explicit connectors including five levels which are five clauses. Contrary to it, Chinese sentence is a mono-level sentence. If we translate this sentence into Chinese, we have to change the word order: 屋子是杰克盖的。老鼠吃了堆放在屋里的麦芽。这是那只吃了老鼠的猫。This is a group of sentences instead of a simple sentence. It's a paratactic sentence without connectors, which is typical to Chinese sentences. Predicates alter with the change of subjects. The order of the clauses is different, either. Chinese prefers a clause sequence of subordinate-main in complex sentences.

因为风太大，所以比赛改期了。

Because the wind was too strong, the competition was postponed.

The sentence structure is subordinate-main, as indeed is acknowledged by the Chinese term for these complex sentences, which is 偏正复句. The "because" adverbial clause offers some information that explains the proposition in the main clause. Generally speaking, the semantic meaning of the sentence determines that the sequence of information in Chinese is fixed. In particular, in Chinese conditional, concessive and cause and effect sentences, the main clause usually comes after the subordinate clause. This comparatively fixed sequence of information indicates that connectors are scarcely necessary. In Chinese, when two sentences are juxtaposed, even if there are no connectors, we still know that the first sentence includes meanings such as "although", "if", "because", etc., because the subordinate component must come at the beginning (王力, 1984). In English, however, the "if" clauses, the "because" clauses, the "though" clauses and the "when" clauses can either go before or after the main clause. This indicates that connectors are necessary, for English does not follow natural order. For example, without some necessary connectors, an English reader does not know which sentence in "He twisted his ankle. He fell down." is the cause and which is the effect.

## II. ANALYSIS OF ERRONEOUS SENTENCES IN THE WRITING OF CHINESE STUDENTS

There are various manifestations of the errors in three kinds of transfer sentences including (1)passive voice without "be", (2)redundancy of the topic, (3)subjectless sentences, (4)omission of linking verbs and auxiliary verbs, (5)inconsistency of the actor and action, (6)there-be structure as the topic, (7)two or more predicate verbs, (8)comma splices, (9)fragment sentences. Among them, (1)-(6) belong to topic-comment sentences, (7) is multi-predicate sentences and (8)-(9) belong to paratactic sentences (黄俊娟, 2004). Now let's see some examples selected from the writing samples of Chinese students.

### A. Topic-comment Sentences

(1) Advertisements through many ways sent to people.

In this sentence, a passive voice should be used according to the subject "advertisements". As the passive voice is usually omitted in Chinese, it's grammatically correct to let the passive voice replaced by active voice in Chinese sentences. This student wrote the sentence "Advertisements through many ways sent to people." by Chinese "广告通过各种途径传递给人们". The predicate verb "sent" is translated from Chinese phrase "传递" which shows an active voice, while a passive voice is needed here.

(2) The person who has a credit card doesn't mean he is in fashion.

The student wrote this sentence "The person who has a credit card doesn't mean he is in fashion." from Chinese translation "一个人有信用卡并不意味着他很时尚", without considering its logic grammatical relationship. In an English sentence, one subject-predicate structure is strictly obeyed and a predicate verb is the center of a sentence. The subject in English should be a noun, a noun phrase or a subject clause. As "一个人有信用卡" is a subject-predicate structure, it should be converted into a subject clause which serves as the subject in this sentence.

(3) When we go shopping, often use the credit card to buy something we can't afford.

This is a subjectless sentence. In a Chinese sentence, subject is often omitted, and this is forbidden in the English sentence. For the Chinese people, this sentence "当我们逛街的时候, 经常用信用卡买一些负担不起的东西" is acceptable. On the contrary, the English speakers view this sentence "When we go shopping, often use the credit card to buy something we can't afford." as an wrong sentence unless we add a subject to the main clause. Clearly, the student transferred a Chinese sentence into his English writing.

(4) It has become a fashion, and we can happy to have a credit card.

In English an adjective cannot be used as a predicate. An adjective should be used with a linking verb to form a

complete predicate construction.

(5) There are more and more students have their own credit cards.

In Chinese, “there-be” structure states a topic followed by a comment. Based on it, this student made his wrong sentence.

(6) Credit cards have many advantages and disadvantages.

This sentence indicates inconsistency of actor and action. The action “have” cannot be completed by the actor “credit card”. English grammar requires that the action “have” should be finished by a person.

The above sentences can be changed into the following sentences:

- (1) Advertisements are sent to people through many ways.
- (2) That the person who has a credit card doesn't mean he is in fashion.
- (3) When we go shopping, we often use the credit card to buy something we can't afford.
- (4) It has become a fashion, and we can be happy to have a credit card.
- (5) There are more and more students having their own credit cards.
- (6) There are many advantages and disadvantages of having credit cards.

### B. Multi-predicate Sentences

- (1) Different people have different views, have different choices.
- (2) Have a credit card means we can use money now, but pay back to the bank later.
- (3) In addition, I think use credit card to pay for goods is a fashionable style.
- (4) We can buy clothes, pay for tuition, go travel with it.

Each of these sentences consists of two or more predicate verbs. In a typical English sentence, however, only one predicate verb can exist. As in Chinese, it is fairly common to use two or more verbs as predicates, so it is not difficult to find that these sentences are transferred from Chinese. In the last sentence “We can buy clothes, pay for tuition, go travel with it.”, the series of verbs “buy”, “pay”, “go”, “travel” cannot all be used as predicates, so we either choose one as the predicate and change the forms of the other three verbs or use cohesive tie to connect these verbs. In the same way, a more idiomatic English expression of the first sentence should be “Views and choices vary from people to people”. In this sentence, “有不同的观点, 有不同的选择” are both verbal phrases and used as predicates, and no cohesive tie exists to connect them. So influenced by this Chinese structure, the student translated it directly into English “Different people have different views, have different choices.” Obviously, the students transfer Chinese multi-verb sentences into English. These sentences are erroneous multi-predicate sentences, because verbs are predicates in English. The influence of Chinese multi-verb sentences contributes to the cause of negative transfer of multi-predicate sentences.

The above sentences can be changed into the following sentences:

- (1) Views and choices vary from people to people.
- (2) Having a credit card means we can use money now, but pay back to the bank later.
- (3) In addition, I think using a credit card to pay for goods is a fashionable style.
- (4) We can buy clothes, pay for tuition, and go traveling with it.

### C. Paratactic Sentences

- (1) Firstly, it's useful and convenient to buy things, it's necessary for you.
- (2) Many students have credit card, some people think it is wrong.
- (3) I have a credit card, it makes me happy.
- (4) We go to work, credit will be more important at that time, we should cherish it.
- (5) On the one hand, using credit cards brings us convenience, we needn't take much cash any longer.
- (6) For example, we are in the college far away from home, our parents can give us money at home when we have credit cards.

As we all know, each English sentence is a cubic architecture with subject-predicate structure as the trunk and predicative verb as the kernel. There must be only one subject-predicate structure in a sentence. However, in these sentences, two or more subject-predicate structures appear and no connectors exist between these clauses to make up a compound or complex sentence (Yu, 2009). It's quite clear that the first sentence “Firstly, it's useful and convenient to buy things, it's necessary for you.” is composed of two sentences. The cause-and-effect relationship of these two sentences has to be revealed by a connector here. Also, the other sentences need cohesive ties to show the logic relationship of the sentences. These sentences share the identical feature that they are made in natural and temporal sequence with no connectors to link them, which frequently happens in Chinese and reflects the influence of Chinese paratactic sentence patterns on English writing.

The above sentences can be changed into the following sentences:

- (1) Firstly, it's useful and convenient to buy things, so it's necessary for you.
- (2) Many students have credit card, but some people think it is wrong to have one.
- (3) I have a credit card, which makes me happy.
- (4) When we go to work, credit will be more important at that time, so we should cherish it now.
- (5) On the one hand, using credit cards brings us convenience, because we don't have to take much cash any longer.

(6) For example, if we are in the college far away from home, our parents can give us money at home when we have credit cards.

### III. NEGATIVE TRANSFER OF CHINESE SENTENCE PATTERNS

After the deeply and detailed analysis, evidence shows that negative transfer of Chinese sentence patterns leads up to syntactic errors in students' writing. Next the negative transfer of Chinese sentence patterns on the English writing of the students will be further examined.

#### A. *Negative Transfer of Chinese Global Thought on English Writing*

Chinese global thought can be embodied by topic-prominent sentences. The sentence "When we go shopping, often use the credit card to buy something can't afford." comes from the Chinese sentence "当我们逛街的时候, 经常用信用卡买一些买不起的东西"。"我们", which is used as the topic in the clause, can be omitted, because it has been mentioned in the subordinate clause, so that this sentence "经常用信用卡买一些买不起的东西" is logically correct in Chinese, with which the Chinese readers do not feel confused. So a subjectless sentence is frequently seen in Chinese where the subject is omitted (王力, 1984). It proves the case of Chinese global thought. Global thought means collecting various parts into a whole in thought or combining its different nature, respects, relations and so on. The global people, to whom the Chinese people belong, start with the whole picture, and they regard things as a whole and understand them by association. If the subject "we" has been mentioned in the previous part, even if it is omitted in this sentence, readers also know who often use the credit card to buy something they can't afford. The frequent appearance of subjectless sentences shows that students tend to write based on Chinese global thought. Influenced by this kind of thinking mode, when the student was composing, he probably could not notice that it was an incorrect sentence. However, the subject "we" in an English sentence must not be omitted, otherwise it will not be a complete sentence, for the Western grammatical rules demand every sentence need a subject. English-speaking people prefer analytic thought, which tends to depart a whole picture into several parts or separate its nature, respects, relations and so on. Analytic people start with the separate parts and then put them together to make a whole. A complete sentence is composed of a complete subject-predicate structure, complete with several parts governed by its grammatical rules. If the subject "we" is omitted, it is not a complete whole any more. If no linking verb connects a subject and an adjective, it is not a complete predicate structure any more. Thus English thinking patterns are quite different from Chinese global thinking patterns so that there are many errors appearing in the students' writing. With the global thought, those students composed these incorrect topic-comment sentences which cannot be accepted by English natives of analytic thinking patterns. Therefore the primary cause of topic-comment sentence rests with negative transfer of Chinese global thought.

#### B. *Negative Transfer of Chinese Imaginational Thought on English Writing*

Chinese imaginational thought can be learned from multi-verb sentences, since verbs leave an impression of some concrete images. In this sentence "他必须吃, 必须喝, 必须穿", concrete impression of the daily activities are presented by the series of verbs "吃", "喝", "穿". The fact that Chinese get used to applying two or more verbs shows that they like to create concrete imagination. The Chinese multi-verb sentence emphasizes on creating images of concrete and vivid action by applying a series of verbs, which proves that Chinese-speaking people tend to explain abstract concepts by means of concrete imagination. Because of lack of abstraction in its pure sense, they pay close attention to the experience directly obtained through the senses based on perception, sensation, and idea. So Chinese description is likely to be more concrete, and thus abstract content is conveyed by concrete imagination. In contrast, English-speaking people prefer abstract thought, because prepositions and nouns reflect more abstract impression. The correct English sentence "Dressing, eating and drinking as well are equally important to him" indicates the importance of these daily necessities by means of abstract nouns such as "dressing", "eating", and "drinking". A great many of abstract nouns and prepositions in the English multi-preposition & noun sentences proves that expressing concrete things by means of abstract concepts is the way the English-speaking people prefer to depict concrete things. They think highly of the ability to use the abstract thought. They carry out their cognitive activities such as judgment and interference by means of using abstract concepts. By analyzing perceptual knowledge of the matter, they perceive the rational knowledge and understand its nature by abstraction, which causes the fact that their linguistic expression is more abstract. From the English translation "Views and choices vary from people to people." of the Chinese sentence "不同的人有不同的看法和选择", we can have a sense of abstraction due to the preposition phrase "from people to people". Unfortunately, affected by Chinese imaginational thought, the student chose to express the concrete description through the sentence "Different people have different views, have different choices." To sum up, Chinese students are so deeply influenced by concrete thought that they unconsciously transfer multi-verb sentences into their writing. There is no doubt that negative transfer of Chinese multi-verb sentences results from the negative transfer of concrete thought.

#### C. *Negative Transfer of Chinese Dialectical Thought on English Writing*

Chinese dialectical thought leads up to the negative transfer of paratactic sentence pattern. Take the wrong sentence for example, "On the one hand, using credit cards brings us convenience, we needn't take much cash any longer."

Which is translated from the Chinese sentence “另一方面，使用信用卡非常方便，我们不用再带现金了”. The cohesive ties are often omitted by the Chinese-speaking people in the sentence like “另一方面，使用信用卡非常方便，我们不用再带现金了”. Chinese readers won't misunderstand this sentence. We know clearly about the internal logic order of the clauses. In Chinese paratactic sentences, linguistic arrangement is looser and more implicit, and complex ideas are expressed in chronological and internal logic order. Linguistic parataxis leads students to pay more attention to its semantic meaning instead of its cohesive ties, so Chinese-speaking people prefer dialectical thought. Most errors in these sentences committed by the students are that they are finished with a comma instead of a stop. It indicates that the students make English sentences in a Chinese thought flow. They care more about the semantic meaning than about the subject-predicate structure in accordance with number, person, voice and tense. And the logic connection between sentences is covert more than overt. Therefore the students tend to write in temporal sequence, while English-speaking people prefer formal logic. If these sentences are translated into English, cohesive ties are necessary. As an inflectional language, English is full of various forms and complete syntax. It has strict formal logic, so all kinds of formal cohesive ties are given extra emphasis by English hypotactic sentences to achieve the complete linguistic forms which is strictly governed by its logic form. However, affected greatly by Chinese dialectical thought, Chinese students tend to write many English sentences which are actually comma splices and fragments. The highest frequency of paratactic sentences in those students' compositions proves the claim. We can draw the conclusion safely that negative transfer of paratactic sentences comes from the Chinese dialectical thought.

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