

A Study on Modifiers in the English Language

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Abstract—Over the past few decades, due to the development of applied linguistics, many systematic and theoretical achievements have emerged in the field of English language structure. However, in most grammatical monographs, the reference to Modifier is very general and it lacks a complete and precise definition. In this paper, for the first time, the author studies Modifier as a grammatical unit, and systematically explores it in terms of definition, classification, position and research purpose, so as to understand and explain some other phenomena of linguistic structure in English from a new perspective.

Index Terms—modifiers, definition, classification

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, due to the development of applied linguistics, many systematic and theoretical achievements have emerged in the field of English language structure. However, in most grammatical monographs, the reference to Modifier (Mer or M) is very general and it lacks a complete and precise definition.

In the past, the studies on modifiers in English were confined to attributives that modify a noun phrase in the form of words, phrases or clauses. According to Liu Yingde, attributives are grammatical units before or after a noun or pronoun phrase that take the functions of modification, limitation or further explanation (Liu, 2002). By “attributive modifiers”, Yang Qing means grammatical units modifying a central word in terms of characteristic, shape, scope or category, which include noun phrases, adjective phrases, participles and clauses (Yang, 1994). Li Farong and Ma Bingyu claim that as a modifier of a noun phrase, both relative clauses and other modifiers are similar in that they are closely connected with each other, the former being regarded as the deep structure and the latter the derivation of the former (Li, F. & Ma, B., 1994). Some studies on modifiers in English were conducted from the angle of language style or language function. Yue Guixiang mentions that adverbial modifiers in scientific English are mostly adverbs ending with “ly” and seldom used in scientific English are adverbs for description or lyric (Yue, 2002). Adverbial modifiers can be classified into adjuncts, disjuncts and conjuncts in terms of function. Adjuncts typically modify verbs and disjuncts convey a comment on the content of the clause to which they are peripherally attached; conjuncts, on the other hand, are logical adhesives, functioning to connect a new sentence with the context.

It is true that Modifier has been discussed in various forms in many famous English grammars. For example, “modifier” and “modification” are mentioned many times in *The Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (CGE), written by Randolph Quirk, et al. in 1985. And in *Contemporary English Grammar* (CEG) written by Liu Shitong in 1997, modification is an equivalent to modifier. Also in 1997 *A New English Grammar* (NEG) chiefly edited by Zhang Zhenbang has a detailed discussion on modification of noun phrases. Unfortunately, no grammar gives a logical and definite definition of modifier. In CGE and CEG there are many examples demonstrating the modifying characteristic of some grammatical units, but no definition of modifier. In NEG no definition of modifier is given and, even worse, Chapter 40 in NEG confusingly emphasizes the difference between modifier and adverbial, neglecting the modifying function of adverbials.

In actual fact, the research of modifiers in the English language is of considerable value. In this paper, for the first time, the author studies Modifier as a grammatical unit, and systematically explores it in terms of definition, classification, position and research purpose, so as to understand and explain some other phenomena of linguistic structure in English from a new perspective.

II. DEFINITION

MODIFIER is discussed in various forms in many famous English grammars, in which the study of modification is restricted only within the range of words or phrases, but none of which gives a logical and complete definition of it. In my eyes, MODIFIER can be discussed as an independent structure in the English language. To be exact, a modifier (Mer) is a grammatical unit which limits or extends the meaning of another grammatical unit while a modifiee (Mee) is a grammatical unit whose meaning is limited or extended by another grammatical unit (Gu, 2003).

III. CLASSIFICATION

Modifiers can be classified in terms of form, modifiee or function.

A. Classification in Terms of Form

4. He uses simple language (Mee) so that his foreign customer might understand him when no interpreters are available (Ms).

respectively to the following simple sentences:

1. The girl (Mee) from England (Mp) can speak good Chinese.
2. He set off again (Mee) in spite of my attempt to dissuade him (Mp).
3. I'm concerned about the question (Mee) on the profit decrease as a result of additional employment (Mp).
4. He uses simple language (Mee) so as to let his foreign customer understand him with no interpreters available (Mp).

B. To Explain Complicated Grammatical Structures

By means of modifier some difficult structures in English can be better understood.

1. a great many (Mer) women workers (Mee)
2. a great many (Mee) of the women workers (Mer)
3. The cup is full (Mee) of water (Mer).
4. My father was rather disappointed (Mee) with my work (Mer).
5. I'm sure (Mee) that they will arrive on time (Mer).
6. I'm sure (Mee) of the fact that they will arrive on time (Mer).
7. I'm glad (Mee) that they've accomplished their goals (Mer).
8. I'm glad (Mee) because of the fact that they've accomplished their goals (Mer).
9. He realized that he came too much (Mer) early (Mee).
10. He realized that he came too (Mer) much (Mee) early.
11. He realized that he came (Mee) too much early (Mer).
12. Their thoughts are too (Mee) profound to be expressed clearly (Mer).
13. The questions are more (Mee) difficult than I've expected (Mer).
14. A whale is no more (Mee) a fish than a horse is (Mer).
15. Should they at least (Mer) conceal the truth until after the family vacation (Mee)?
16. Certainly I don't (Mer) teach because teaching is easy for me (Mee).
17. Until such (Mee) time as mankind has the sense to lower its population to the point where the planet can provide a comfortable support for all (Mer), people will have to accept more "unnatural food".

C. To Obtain More Information when Reading

In reading, one can obtain more information by studying and analyzing modifiers. A psychologist thinks of Complete Concept as the standard of a sentence while a grammarian regards SV as the standard of a sentence. A word and a phrase often convey simple concepts while a clause and a sentence convey comparatively complicated concepts. In reading, modifier serves as a bridge to form as many concepts as possible in order to obtain as much information as possible. For instance, we can, from the sentence:

I often drive to Pudong early in the morning, as do many businessmen who live in downtown Shanghai.
firstly obtain a general concept:

I often drive to Pudong.

and then, with the help of modifiers, get more concepts such as:

1. Many businessmen often drive to Pudong.
 2. Many businessmen live in downtown Shanghai.
 3. It is early in the morning that I, as well as many businessmen, often drive to Pudong.
- So, we may call this method of reading "Modifier Reading" or "SV Reading".

D. To Apply Modification-guided Strategies in En-Cn Translation

The essence of modification is semantic limitation or extension, so the translation of modifiers from English to Chinese should first take meaning conveyance into consideration. But, due to the difference between English and Chinese, the form and style of modifiers in English should also be paid enough attention to in translation. Since modifiers in this paper are mainly analyzed on a linguistic level, culture is excluded from the discussion on translating strategies.

On the basis of studies on modifiers in the English language, the author puts forward in this chapter three strategies for translating modifiers from English to Chinese from the angles of form, meaning and style — conveying meaning through conceptualization and contextualization; restructuring form through lexical conversion and order rearrangement; and reproducing style through naturalization.

1) Conveying Meaning Through Conceptualization and Contextualization

Meaning is something conveyed or signified. The process of translation is using another language to convey the original meaning, the original meaning maintained while the language changed. Although there are different views on translation criterion, being faithful to the original meaning (faithfulness) is given priority to (Fang, 2004). In translation, conceptualization is an effective way to have an adequate understanding of the original. In general sense, conceptualization means the process of forming a concept in mind. For example, in the sentence:

The large house in which the businessman lived has been sold to a farmer who owns lots of money.

The reader may get simple concepts on a lexical level such as “large”, “house”, “businessman”, “live”, “sell”, “own”, “money”. These lexical concepts are isolated from each other in meaning. According to grammarians, the standard of a sentence is whether or not it contains a subject and a verb; in the eyes of psychologists, the standard of a sentence is whether or not it conveys a complete concept. From the above sentence the reader can get some complete concepts through conceptualization on a syntactical level:

The house has been sold.

A farmer bought the house.

The house is very big.

The businessman lived in the house.

The farmer is very rich.

Modification, always related to semantic meaning, is frequent and flexible in English, so the translation of modifiers in English largely decides the quality of the whole translation. Conceptualization helps a lot in translating modifiers in English. The translation of modifiers considerably depends on the extent to which the translator conceptualizes them. For example, in the following assumed translations of the above sentence, modification is conceptualized in different degrees. In Translation 1 modification is fully conceptualized while in Translation 5 modification is zero-conceptualized.

Original: The large house in which the businessman lived has been sold to a farmer who owns lots of money.

Translation 1: 该商人曾经住过的大房子已被卖给了一个有钱的农民。

Translation 2: 该商人曾经住过的大房子已被卖给了一个农民。

Translation 3: 大房子已被卖给了一个有钱的农民。

Translation 4: 大房子已被卖给了一个农民。

Translation 5: 房子已被卖给了一个农民。

Another effective way of guaranteeing meaning conveyance in translating modifiers is contextualization, which refers to translating some modifiers as connective devices in order to reflect the coherence of the original text. For example,

Original: Unfortunately (Mer), most students in rural areas have no access to electronic books.

Translation: 不幸的是, 农村里多数学生无法得到电子图书。

“unfortunately” in the original is a content-disjunct which modifies the clause attached. But, if used between sentences, it may be translated as a style-disjunct to achieve contextual coherence, as demonstrated below.

Original: Electronic books are very common in cities. Unfortunately (Mer), most students in rural areas have no access to electronic books.

Translation: 电子图书在城市里很普及。但是, 农村里多数学生无法得到电子图书。

2) Restructuring Form Through Structural Conversion and Order Rearrangement

In broad sense, as the materialistic manifestation of language meaning, language form includes buildings of words and phrases, sentence patterns, text arrangements, rhetoric devices as well as phonemic effects such as intonation, rhythm and rhyme. As we know, translation is neither word-to-word translation nor sentence-to-sentence translation. Form may be restructured in translation under the prerequisite of successful conveyance of meaning. In the practice of translating, modifiers in English may be converted from one part of speech to another, from one kind of clause to another and may be rearranged to achieve more adequate conveyance of meaning.

3) Reproducing Style Through Naturalization

Naturalization refers to the translation strategy through which a fluent style is achieved to minimize the strangeness of the foreign text for target language readers, while foreignization designates the type of translation in which a target text deliberately breaks target conventions by retaining something of the foreignness of the original. In most cases, naturalization and foreignization is a pair of concepts which are frequently used to discuss cultural transplanting. But, from the angle of pure linguistics, naturalization includes minimizing “the strangeness of the foreign text for target language readers” in grammatical rules, semantic meaning, and stylistic characteristics. The task of translation not only gives priority to conveying semantic meaning but also involves reproducing style in the receptor language. In translating modifiers in English, naturalization is preferred primarily because linguistic forms of English and Chinese are quite different even though they are of the same style. For example, in legal English some modifiers should be translated according to the style of legal Chinese, otherwise the translation wouldn’t be idiomatic. Here is an example.

Original: We hereby (Mer) certify that...

Translation 1: 我们在这里证明.....

Translation 2: 我们在此证明.....

Translation 3: 兹证明.....

Among the three translations, Translation 3 is the most idiomatic. Another good example is:

Original: This Policy of insurance witnesses that The People's Insurance Company of China (hereafter called "The Company") (Mer), at the request of NANTONG FAR-EAST TRADING CO. (hereafter called the "Insured") (Mer), and in consideration of the agreed premium paying to the Company by the Insured, undertakes to insure the under-mentioned goods in transportation subject to the conditions of this Policy as per the clause printed overleaf and other special clause attached hereon.

Translation 1: 中国人民保险公司 (下面叫做本公司) 根据南通远东贸易公司 (下面叫做被保险人) 的要求, 由被保险人向本公司缴付约定的保险费, 按照本保险单承保险别和背面所载条款与下列特款承保下述货物运输保险, 特立本保险单。

Translation 2: 中国人民保险公司 (以下简称本公司) 根据南通远东贸易公司 (以下简称被保险人) 的要求, 由被保险人向本公司缴付约定的保险费, 按照本保险单承保险别和背面所载条款与下列特款承保下述货物运输保险, 特立本保险单。

Comparatively, the underlined modifiers in Translation 1 are not translated according to the style of legal Chinese while Translation 2 is more idiomatic.

VI. SUMMARIZATION

The modifier in the English language is a highly generalized linguistic structure (or grammatical unit) abstracted from the English linguistic system, which complements and develops the English grammatical system. Its linguistic functions are mainly embodied in the limitation or extension of the meaning of the modifier. In verbal communication activities, we can recognize this linguistic structure phenomenon by means of transforming and generating concepts, make full use of its linguistic functions, and obtain as much information as possible, so as to achieve the goal of improving speech ability.

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