

A Study of Culture Translation on Chinese Ancient Town from the Perspective of Transforming Topic-Prominent Structure into Subject-Prominent Structure

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Abstract: XI Jinping stressed “cultural self-confidence” in numerous occasions. From “cultural self-confidence”, the cultural factors related to cultural topics in Chinese cultural texts have certain rules to follow, and the equivalent effect can be achieved in Chinese-English translation by choosing the appropriate Themes. The ancient towns in Guangdong are a part of Lingnan culture, which reflects the rich topics including ancestral hall culture, Lingnan folk architecture culture, slow life culture and so on. This paper intends to study the choice of Themes in English subject-prominent structure, thus to achieve the effect of transmitting Chinese cultural charm more accurately and explore the general rules of transforming Chinese Topic into English Theme and provide some useful enlightenment for Chinese-English culture translation.

1. Introduction

Chinese traditional understanding of “culture” is divided into “text” and “education”. “Text” indicates character, article, literary talent and so on, while “education” means reclamation and civilization. Qu Shui Poem, one of Chinese ancient famous literary works, prefaced “influence social folkways with divine reason and social life with culture”, and the “culture” here refers to the civilization of the culture. Studies by British anthropologists E.B Taylor, B.K. Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe shows that culture contains the sum of material and spiritual products of certain groups. Ancient town culture is the wisdom crystallization of a certain social group in ancient China. In view of cultural communication, the understanding of ancient town lies not only in the concept of some cultural things or factors. In the process of communication, more emphasis should be made on the alienation of text structure without losing the original taste of culture. Categorized in different language families, Chinese and English sprout from different social groups and involve different thinking modes and habits. Traditionally, Chinese is considered to be a “form-dissolved” language, and its language organization is embodied in “topic prominent”, while English is “subject prominent”[1]. Nida also points out that Chinese is expressed as “parataxis”, that is “semantic means is used in the connection within a sentence or the connection between sentences”, and English is expressed as “hypotaxis”, that is “either syntactic or lexical devices are used in the connection within a sentence or the connection between sentences”[2]. Therefore, in the process of C-E translation, both cohesion in form and coherence in meaning should be taken into consideration. Based on the concept of “theme”, “rheme” and “thematic progression” proposed by Prague School scholars[3-4], this paper aims to study the way of translating Chinese ancient town text into English.

2. Theme, Rheme and Thematic Progression

2.1 Theme and Rheme

Mathesis put forward the concepts of “theme” (T), “transition” (Tr) and “rheme” (R). Other representatives such as Halliday and Firth further refined this concept, and divided the “theme” into three categories: simple theme, multiple theme and sentence theme. The Prague School defines “theme” as “known information” and “rheme” as “unknown information” or “new information”, and

considers “known information” at the beginning of the sentence as “theme” and “unknown information” after “theme” as “rheme”. Some academics have questioned the “known information” in Theme and “unknown information in Rheme. In “Re-examination on Theme and Rheme”, XU categorizes the information in Theme into five groups: known, partially known, related, new and guiding information, while that of Rheme into four: new, partially known, related and known information[5]. According to Prague School’s definition of Theme and Rheme, it’s conspicuously conflicting between the defined information and the position of the Theme and Rheme, especially for languages of different languages, such as XU’s reference to the guiding function of the Theme, which performs, with “zero information”, as part of grammatical completeness, but does not exist in Chinese in the general case or be loaded with cultural information which is common-sensible for natives but unfathomable in context.

2.2 Thematic Progression

In 1974, Danes put forward the theory of Thematic Progression from the perspective of discourse construction, regarding Theme as the starting point to explain the internal development of the discourse with the continuous advancement of the Theme. Danes first proposed three basic patterns: constant, linear and derived Theme Progression. Later in China, XU Shenghuan, YANG Fei and HUANG Yan expanded the patterns.

According to Firbas’s Communicative Dynamism, the information in the next sentence can be divided into dynamic and static to progress the sentences. Generally speaking, the known information that plays a grammatical role in the next sentence is defined as static, and the unknown information is defined as dynamic. The position of dynamic and static information in a sentence varies according to the type of text and the environment in which the sentence is used.

In a word, when discussion thematic progression, we cannot do without considering Subject, Topic and Comment. Subject is the title, while Topic is the way or direction. What’s more, Comment is the details or materials to demonstrate the Topic. To interpret the Theme and Rheme, we cannot ignore personal cognitive knowledge on the Subject, Topic or Comment. Besides knowledge on language, knowledge expressed in an explicit form is an indispensable part of general knowledge base[6].

3. Case Study of Transformation from Topic Progression to Thematic Progression

Topic is not a pure syntactic concept, so the attempt to limit it to the syntactic pattern dooms to failure [7]. Since Topic is not a syntactic concept, it is not accurate to analyze the position of Topic in the sentence from the syntax, but should be analyzed in context, that is, the structure and the content of the passage. Chinese-English translation is the process of transforming Subject-related topics into English Theme and Rheme.

3.1 Subject, Topic and Comment

In view of meaning, Topic (Tp) is related directly to Subject, and Comment(C) is to Topic. Since Chinese text is relatively loose in format and incomplete in structure, the position of Topic in the sentence cannot be fixed. Take the Chinese script on the Boundary Marker at Guangzhou Shawan Ancient Town as an example. The first half the script is a brief introduction of the content. Subject or the described object is surely the “Boundary Marker”, followed two Topics: the introduction to general content and the specific content on this marker. The text structure is as follows:

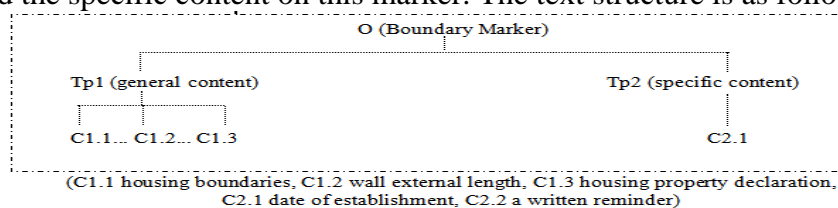


Fig.1

It can be seen that Tp is new information relative to O, and C is also new information relative to Topic. However, relative to Tp and C, O is known information. The progression of the passage is the

process to list a number of Tp, and then put in details as comment, thus the passage is promoted vertically or horizontally.

3.2 Transformation from Topic and Comment to Theme and Rheme

Syntactically, Theme and Rheme correlates to the elements in the nearest sentence. Considering the importance of each sentence, O, Tp and C together constitute the text in radiation.

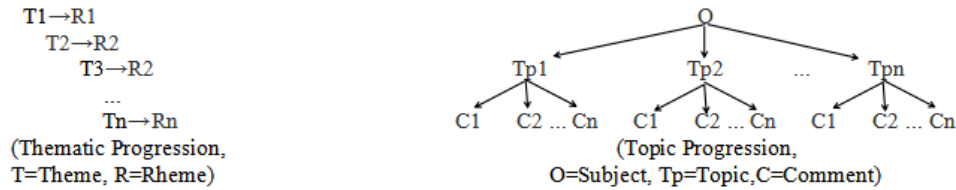


Fig.2

Topic is closest to Subject, and the importance of Topic is greater than that of Comment. The first half of the script prefaces the Subject, Boundary Marker, followed general contents of boundary marker.

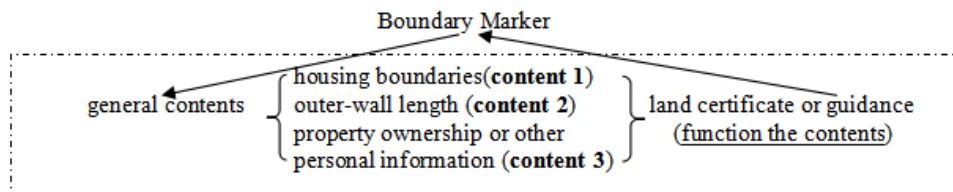


Fig.3

To reflect the relationship between these two Topics and the Subject in hypotaxis of English, instruction, substitution or supplement is employed in the sentences after the subject. The relationship between the Subject and Topic could be direct or indirect. The translation is as follows:

TL: *Boundary Marker is also called Boundary Stone. On the stone engraved mainly the housing boundary size, the length of four outer walls, declaration of property ownership or sometimes even the introduction to the property owner. It looks like a land certificate embedded in the wall of the house, which could be a clue for those who are seeking for their friends or relatives.* (Translated by the author)

The second part of the script introduce the specific contents on this Boundary Marker. What is closely related to the above Topics is the content. Topic progression is as follows:

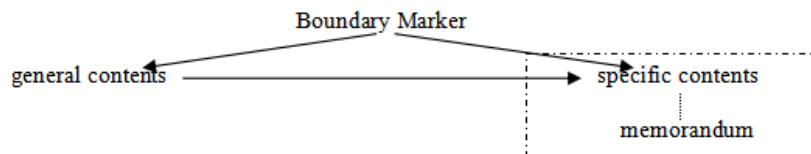


Fig.4

In translation, it's better to put the elements or things directly related to the Subject in the Theme or near the Theme to avoid unintelligibility or digression. Transformed as follows:

TL: *Founded in 1897, the 23rd year governed by Emperor Guangxu during Qing Dynasty, the Boundary Marker on this wall played as a memorandum on the dispute of whether or not leaving a gap between this wall and that of the neighbor's for water dropping, etc.* (Translated by the author)

3.3 Analysis on the Transformation from Chinese to English

Halliday categorized the Theme into two groups: Unmarked Theme and Marked Theme. Unmarked Theme is “an element that occupies the point of departure position of the clause and conflates with the grammatical subject”, and Marked Theme is “an element other than occupies the point of departure position of the clause but does not conflates with the grammatical subject”[8].

Unmarked Themes in Chinese script are more than those in English, because the main sentence of most importing in comprehending the English context. In many cases, marked Themes are helpful for variety of English sentences.

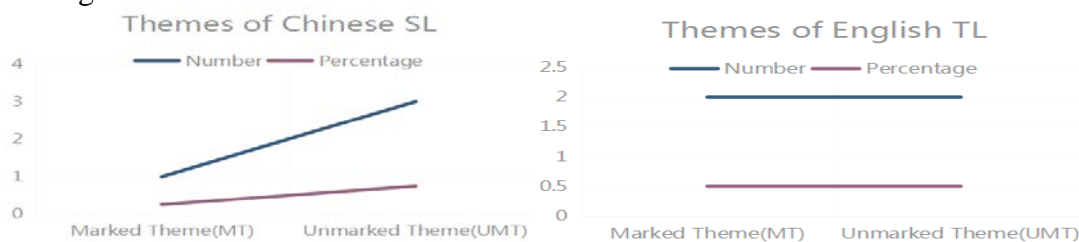


Fig.5

4. Conclusions

Since the formation of Chinese discourse differs from its English counterpart, the choice of Theme and Rheme could not be more important in translation. Whatever the Theme or Rheme of Chinese sentence is, more emphasis should be laid on the new or unknown information which forges the discourse ahead. The process of C-E translation is to put the new, important and readers-interested information into proper position of English discourse while be loyal to the original text. If the logical subject or modifier, Logical Theme, is considered, the formation of Chinese sentence would complete. Meanwhile, the Logical Theme is usually the old or known information, which is omitted or repeated in Chinese text but replaced frequently with pronoun in English text. The key to transfer Chinese Theme and Rheme into English is to accommodate either of them containing the new and topic-related information in an effective position of English sentence.

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