Translation of Hypotaxis and Parataxis from the Pragmatic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

English is a hypotaxis-prominent language while Chinese is parataxis-prominent. English puts stress on hypotaxis for its integral structure and precise morphological changes while Chinese on parataxis for its clear meaning and accurate expressiveness. It is a tangible result of differences between the two languages in modes of thinking, philosophical tradition and profound cultural explanations of the differences. This paper will contribute to tentatively probe into the reasons why writers in English would rather adopt the paratactic structure than hypotactic one structure from the pragmatic perspective. The author thus recommends that the characteristics of hypotactic and paratactic structures in English and Chinese should be discussed from the pragmatic perspective, so as to improve the traditional translation techniques and contrastive study between the two languages.

Keywords: Hypotaxis, parataxis, pragmatics.

1. Introduction

The study on hypotaxis and parataxis is one of the most significant research topics in Contrastive Linguistics, Textual Linguistics and translation. Hypotaxis is about sentence arrangement while parataxis is about idea-conveying construction. Hypotaxis emphasizes on the formal cohesion; parataxis, on the other hand, the semantic coherence. Their semantic inequality is remarkably realized by syntactic hierarchic forms. Both hypotaxis and parataxis are important text strategies in English and Chinese. English is a hypotaxis-prominent language while Chinese is parataxis-prominent. English puts stress on hypotaxis for its integral structure and precise morphological changes while Chinese on parataxis for its clear meaning and accurate expressiveness. It is a tangible result of differences between the two languages in modes of thinking, philosophical tradition and profound cultural explanations of the differences.
Therefore, hypotaxis and parataxis are of great significance for translation practice. Consequently, as stated in most textbooks, there is a natural tendency in C-E translation, that is, to simply omit connectives words from hypotactic approach to paratactic approach in English-Chinese translation; on the contrary, to add connectives in Chinese-English translation.

However, the use of parataxis and hypotaxis is not absolute. Language users may sometimes choose the less frequent usage compared to the commonly used expressions according to their own language habits. The choice of either hypotaxis or parataxis will be applied is not accidental, it is used to bear and convey certain implied pragmatic meanings. The process of using languages is a process of making choices. The choice of different language forms manifests the choice of various meaning in the forms of grammar and diction. Language users, while expressing their meanings, may choose these hypotactic devices rather than those paratactic ones, or vice versa. Thus, the choice they made will probably possess pragmatic meanings rather than simply semantic meanings. The significance of the choices can be fully manifested in certain pragmatic aspects, such as markedness, style and context.

It is believed that hypotaxis and parataxis are not obligatory regulations of language system, but objective pragmatic choices made by the language users. The author thus recommends that the characteristics of hypotactic and paratactic structures in English and Chinese should be discussed from the pragmatic perspective, so as to improve the traditional translation techniques and contrastive study between the two languages.

2. Study of Hypotaxis and Parataxis in Pragmatic Framework

English tends to apply more hypotactic devices over paratactic ones; while Chinese favour more parataxis in preference to hypotaxis. This tendency reflects the differences in language characteristics and cultural roots respectively. Prominent distinctions between the two lie in the advantage of hypotaxis and parataxis. However, hypotaxis and parataxis are not restrained to one single language. There are sometimes hypotactic structures in Chinese and paratactic structures in English. For example:

(1) 我所记得的故乡全不如此。我的故乡好得多了。但要我记得他的美丽，说出他的佳处来，却没有影像，没有言辞了。仿佛也就是如此。于是我自已解释说：故乡本也如此，--虽然没有进步，也未必有如我所感的悲凉，这只是我自己心情的改变罢了，因为我这次回乡，本没有什么好心绪。（鲁迅：《故乡》）

And paratactic in English:

(2) The cut bled, the pain was sharp; my terror had passed its climax, other feelings succeeded. (Jane Eyre)

(3) Early come, early served.

As shown in the examples, the first sentence is quite long; the usage of connective words underlined in the example makes the whole sentence more coherent and enhances the logical relation of clauses, thus we could clearly grasp the main idea with the help of the connectives. On the other hand, the two English sentences are featured paratactic instead. The sentence cited from Jane Eyre seems quite “abnormal” because no connective words are used; on the contrary, the clauses are just arranged in a linear way to leave space for readers to further observe the meaning by themselves. As for the third one, it is a structure commonly used in idioms and proverbs. The paratactic structure adopted in the third sentence could better illustrate the features of proverbs and make us remember them more easily.

Here, we can see the usage of either parataxis or hypotaxis is not absolute in either Chinese or English. Language users may sometimes choose the less frequent used words compared to the commonly used devices of their own language habits. Paratactic devices could
strike people as being “marked”, so we could safely conclude that paratactic devices are less used than hypotactic ones in most English sentences. Moreover, paratactic devices can be used for a special purpose by choosing paratactic devices in preference to hypotactic ones. Writers make their utterance more oblique and obscure than it needs to be. The choice of hypotaxis and parataxis is not random, it is used to bear and convey certain implied pragmatic meanings. Then this paper will contribute to tentatively probe into the reasons why writers in English would rather adopt the paratactic structure than hypotactic one structure from the pragmatic perspective.

3. Implications for Translation Practice

3.1 Traditional Translation Techniques of Hypotaxis and Parataxis

Based on the analysis of distinctions of hypotaxis and parataxis in English and Chinese, together with their cultural differences, it is generally supposed that translators should modulate the coherent relationship of the target language in E-C and C-E translation. Therefore, in most translation textbooks, the authors will clearly exemplify the tactics of translation, that is, to transfer hypotactic features into paratactic ones while translating from English to Chinese, and vice versa. For example, according to Pan Wenguo (1997:338), we could omit some words when we translate from Chinese to English, but we have to provide the connective words definitely; on the other hand, we have to omit the connectives in E-C translation. In short, it is to simply omit and add connective words. Of course, we will tackle the problem of omission and addition in the translation among different languages, but it is believed not to be so prominent in E-C and C-E translation.

3.2 Omission: From English to Chinese

In E-C translation, translators should not confine to the hypotactic structures of the original text, but rather apply proper paratactic devices according to the Chinese linguistic tradition to achieve the effect of appropriateness. First of all, we should fully understand the original text, and then reproduce it with the forms of Chinese expression. Sometimes, we need to re-write the sentence in accordance with the logical relations and time order. For examples:

(1) All was cleared up some time later when news came from a distant place that an earthquake was felt the very day the little copper ball fell.

Version: 过了一些时候，从远方传来了消息：在小铜球坠落的当天，确实发生了地震。这一切终于得到了澄清。

(2) If you confer a benefit, never remember it; if you receive one, remember it always.

Version: 施恩勿记，受恩勿忘。

From the examples above, we could see English relies heavily on the connective words, as shown in italic parts, to form a sentence. However, in the translated version of Chinese, we seldom use this way to achieve the coherence of the sentence. Then we will see the examples of structure “so…that…” in English. Since Chinese is featured as paratactic and English is hypotactic, we do not always translate it into “如此…以至于…”, as shown in the example below:

(3) Poverty was driving them. Together they presented so appealing a picture of honest necessity that even the clerk was affected.

Version: 如今贫困正在逼近她们。当时她母女俩那种贫困窘迫的情景是很动人的，那账房也受感动了。

(4) You feel such a sense of exhilaration that you wouldn’t exchange it for all the power and glory of the world.

Version: 你是那样的快乐，使你对世界上的任何权利和荣誉视若敝帚。
3.3 Addition: From Chinese to English

Sometimes, a Chinese compound sentence seems to be parallel in structure, but actually it often implies certain subordinate relation between the two. Besides, the logical relation of the two is clear even without connective words in Chinese. Omission of the connective words could make the sentence more precise. On the other hand, when translated into English, the logical relation should be explicitly delivered. For example:

(1) 早知今日，何必当初?
    Version: If I had known it would come to this, I would have acted differently.

(2) 种瓜得瓜，种豆得豆。
    Version: As you sow, so will you reap.

(3) 聪明一世，糊涂一时。
    Version: Smart as a rule, but this time a fool.

In a word, traditional translations techniques intend to omit the connective words in English to Chinese translation, and add the connective words in Chinese-English translation. The versions, to some extent, are natural as shown above, by taking different characteristics of Chinese and English languages into consideration. Semantic meanings in the original texts have been effectively transferred to the target audience by using tradition translation techniques. However, it is too far to be satisfying. As we have mentioned, a sentence is conveying not only semantic meaning, but sometimes rather pragmatic meaning. Therefore, the problem of how to preserve pragmatic meaning of the source text should be recognized and properly settled. In the following part, the author is going to employ the pragmatic view on translation techniques of hypotaxis and parataxis.

4. Pragmatic View on Translation Techniques of Hypotaxis and Parataxis

4.1 Intention should be reproduced

In terms of frequency, parataxis outweighs hypotaxis in Chinese; by contrast, English applies more hypotactic strategies in sentences and texts construction. There is a natural shifting from hypotactic approach to paratactic approach in E-C translation. On the other hand, the usage of parataxis and hypotaxis is not absolute in either Chinese or English. Language users may sometimes choose the less frequent usage compared to the commonly used expressions of their own language habits. Thus, the choice he or she made in their writings will probably possess pragmatic values rather than simply semantic meaning. An English or Chinese text should be judged from its context, writing style and the intention of the writer to decide whether it is parataxis or hypotaxis. This paper is not to negate the traditional rendition between Chinese and English, but to supplement and enrich the traditional translation strategies. The intention of the producers, first of all, should be recognized, and furthermore, translators should, first of all, figure out the producers’ intention, and then reproduce the intention with both hypotactic and paratactic devices.

4.2 Different Approaches to Achieving Intentions

In generally, hypotaxis refers to the way explicit expression. Parataxis, on the other hand, adopts the implicit expression. More often, the explicit expressions will carry more emphatic meaning than the implicit ones. For example:

(1) How could you, when you know that this might damage the apparatus?
    Version 1:(hypotactic)既然你知道这样会损坏仪器，你怎么能这样做呢?
    Version 2:(paratactic)知道这样会损坏仪器，你怎么能这样做呢?

(2) If you tell me all about it, I shall be able to decide.
    Version 1:(hypotactic)如果你把一切都告诉我，那么我就能做出决定。
    Version 2:(paratactic)你把一切都告诉我，我就能决定了。
From the two translation versions listed above, we could see that Version 1 applied more connective words to transfer the emphatic meaning. Version 2 conducted more or less a feeling of adumbration with little attention.

In E-C translation, we need to alter the formal structure of the original text, reproduce the sentences by considering the features of target language. For example:

(3) The key to success is not information. It’s people.
   Version: 成功的关键不是信息，而是人。

(4) The four men huddled there and said nothing. They dare not smoke. They would not move.
   Version: 四个人聚在那儿不说话，不敢抽烟，也不愿走开。

(5) 让世界了解中国，让中国走向世界。
   Version: 让别的国家的人知道中国。中国和世界建立广泛的联系。

After analyzing the original text, translator should consider how to express the difference in both semantic and pragmatic aspects to achieve the effect of equivalence. The first version is translated in accordance with the Chinese way of diction; while the second one adopts a similar structure as the original. The two versions could be regarded as appropriate since the translators try to carry out the rendition with different purposes. Therefore, we should adopt different methods accordingly to convey the semantic meaning, cultural differences and implied purposes so as to get an appropriate delivery in translation.

5. Conclusion

The author adopts the pragmatic perspective to conduct a tentative probe into the problem. It is believed that the choice of either hypotaxis or parataxis will be applied is not accidental, they are used to bear and convey certain implied pragmatic meanings. Therefore, the choice they made will probably possess pragmatic meanings rather than simply semantic meanings. The significance of the choices can be fully manifested in certain pragmatic aspects, such as markedness, style and context. Consequently, for the “marked” use of hypotaxis and parataxis in Chinese and English, the value of emphatic meaning, theme and style and the pragmatic factors have been explored within the pragmatic framework. It is concluded that translation studies, in order to be more effective, should take pragmatic factors into consideration.

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References