

Freshmen's Misuses of Impersonal and Personal Subjects in C-E Translation

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Abstract: *It has been allegedly acknowledged that personal subjects are more used in the Chinese language while impersonal subjects more in the English language. Attempts are made, with translated sentences by some freshmen, to analyze their misuses of impersonal and personal subjects in C-E translation, with an aim to probing into ways to help them avoid thinking familiarity and to help them improve their translation so that they could translate better based on the expression habits in the English language.*

Keywords: *impersonal subject; personal subject; misuses; thinking familiarity; expression habits*

1. Introduction

The difference in thinking reflects the linguistic psychological tendency formed by ethnic groups that “speak a certain language” for thousands of years. Each language, thus, embodies the characteristics of the thinking of the people who “speak that language”^[1]. Mr. Qian Mu, a master of traditional Chinese studies, once pointed out: “Chinese culture is centered on humanities, in which life is the nature, and which is the most humanistic consciousness and the most humanistic spirit. Chinese culture is essentially a humanistic culture”^[2]. This long-term accumulation of humanistic culture has formed the subject-type way of thinking in the Chinese language, that is, the way of thinking that observes, analyzes, reasons and studies things with people as the center^[3]. The Chinese language focuses on the subject thinking, and the old saying “Everything is prepared for me” tends to describe objective things, people and their behaviors from the perspective of “me”, and personal subjects, like “wo (I)”, “ni (you)”, or “ta (he, she or it)”, are often used in sentences, often implying the subject or omitting the person due to the linguistic features specially directed to the Chinese language. In contrast, the English language, seen from its historical origin, places more emphasis on objectivity, reflecting the “separation of things and me”, and highlighting the influence of objects on people’s way of thinking and behavior. Impersonal subjects are, therefore, commonly used in the English sentences, which cannot be omitted. In order to naturally present the semantic content of sentences, English sentences often use abstract nouns or abstract concepts as the subject, which often have metaphorical or anthropomorphic rhetorical overtones, with subtle tone, rigorous structure, and conciseness^[4]. The epithetical expression (and other impersonal expressions) is a common style of writing in English, especially in written language, official documents, news, scientific and technological treatises, and literary works such as essays and novels. According to previous research, this difference has an impact on the choice of sentence subject in Chinese-English translation, so this article, taking as an example the translated versions by freshmen, attempts to analyze their misuses in terms of personal and impersonal subjects, and to probe into the reasons for their mistranslations so that they could avoid thinking inertia and do better in their future translating practice^[5].

2. Literature Review

With “personal and impersonal” or “personal, impersonal” as the keywords, we searched the Chinese academic article bank CNKI and found that there is a total amount of 130 relevant literature, and the specific inclusions are shown as follows(Figure 1):

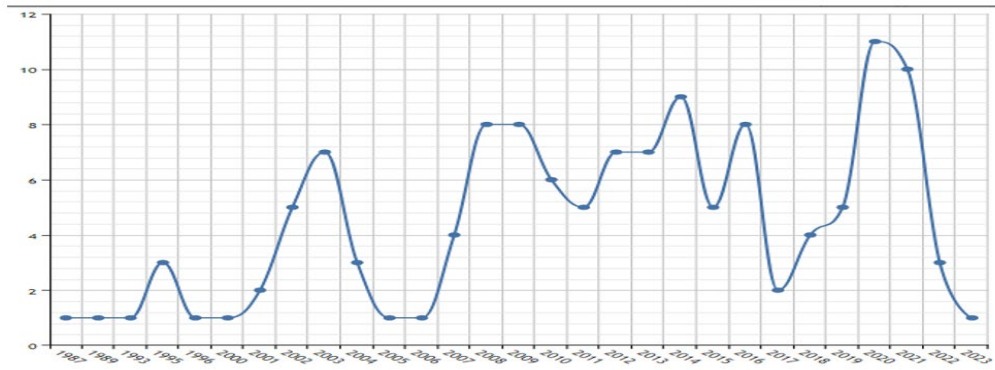


Figure 1 Inclusion of CNKI articles in “personal and impersonal” or “personal, impersonal” (as of May 31, 2023, source: CNKI)

We have, according to the research of previous generations, sorted out, read, and summarized the literature, from which it can be known that personal subjects are often used in Chinese sentences while impersonal subjects are often used in English sentences, due to the influence of their respective thinking styles.

1) In the choice of subject, the Chinese sentences mostly use the animate subject, while the English sentences use the non-animate subject. ^{[6][7][8]}

2) In terms of sentence structure, the Chinese sentences often use active voices whereas the English ones mostly use passive voices. ^{[9][10]}

3) When it comes to the case in which the subject cannot be confirmed, a generic name is often used in the Chinese language, while “it” is often used in English. ^{[11][12]}

We selected two similar Chinese and English reports in Beijing Weekly, compared and analyzed the above three situations, and came up with the following results (Table 1):

Table 1 Reported in Beijing Weekly on the selection of personal and impersonal subjects respectively in Chinese and English

	Reported in Chinese	Reported in English
Subject selection	Animate subjects: 14	Non-animate subjects: 31
Sentence structure	Active voices: 20	Passive voices: 13
Generic and it	2	–

(Note: The selected Chinese report has a total of 20 sentences, and the English report 48 sentences)

As can be seen from the table above, it is basically consistent with the results of the previous research, but some differences are not obvious because the selected study sample is small. This also shows that the difference between English and Chinese languages in terms of physical and personal names does exist, but it is not absolute, and we should also analyze it on a case-by-case basis.

3. Case study

3.1 Research target

We selected in this study 6 natural teaching classes, all freshmen, of which 3 are English majors, with a total number of 149 students (hereafter referred as English 1, English 2, English 3), and of which 3 are non-English majors, respectively, in accounting, computer science, and finance, the total number being 149 students as well (hereafter referred as non-English 1, non-English 2 and non-English 3). Till this study is conducted, none of the six nature classes has been offered any relevant translation courses.

3.2 Analysis of results

We selected in this study a total of 10 simple Chinese sentences, and all these 10 sentences are active-voiced sentences with “animate subject”, as detailed in the following table (Table 2):

Table 2 Sentences translated from simple Chinese "animate subject" active-voiced ones

sentences translated from simple Chinese "animate subject" active-voiced ones	
Sentence 1	An idea occurred to me suddenly.
Sentence 2	Her name escaped me for a moment.
Sentence 3	Her dishonesty has barely discerned.
Sentence 4	The smell of these flowers reminds me of my childhood.
Sentence 5	His illness prevented him from attending the meeting.
Sentence 6	His name is on the last of the list.
Sentence 7	The time limit prevented me from visiting some countries.
Sentence 8	Both sides were splashed with blood on the battlefield.
Sentence 9	On the night of his speech contest, his efforts to improve his spoken English skills paid off.
Sentence 10	Surprise, fright, and shock made her heart heavy.

Six nature teaching classes were assigned with the task of translating into English these 10 sentences in their first English class, none of whom has been provided any guidance, and no deadline was set for completion. A total of 276, among 296 candidates, valid translations were received as of the date of data analysis, covering a general range of ninety-two points six percent. We then analyzed the 276 student translations in terms of "personal" and "impersonal" subjects, as is shown in table 3 and table 4:

Table 3 Data analysis of the active-voiced sentences of the Chinese "animate subjects" translated into English "animate subjects ± passive-voiced sentences"

	English 1 (50)	English 2 (55)	English 3 (44)	Non- English 1 (47)	Non-English 2 (28 copies recovered)	Non- English 3 (52)	total 276	Percentage (%)
Sentence 1	28	31	14	11	6	10	100	36.2
Sentence 2	8	13	1	1	1	1	25	9.1
Sentence 3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sentence 4	10	10	2	1	1	1	25	9.1
Sentence 5	6	4	0	0	0	0	10	3.6
Sentence 6	1	2	1	0	0	0	4	1.4
Sentence 7	1	2	0	0	0	0	3	1.1
Sentence 8	19	21	9	5	2	2	58	21
Sentence 9	45	44	30	30	12	32	193	69.9
Sentence 10	2	3	4	0	0	0	9	3.3

Table 4 Percentage of active-voiced sentences translated from Chinese "animate subject" into English "non-animate subject ± passive-voiced sentences"

	English 1	English 2	English 3	Non-English 1	Non-English 2	Non-English 3
Sentence 1	56	56.3	31.8	23.4	12.8	19.2
Sentence 2	16	23.6	2.3	2.1	3.6	1.9
Sentence 3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sentence 4	20	18.1	4.5	2.1	3.6	1.9
Sentence 5	12	7.2	0	0	0	0
Sentence 6	2	3.6	2.3	0	0	0
Sentence 7	2	3.6	0	0	0	0
Sentence 8	38	38.1	20.5	10.6	7.1	3.8
Sentence 9	90	80	68.2	63.8	42.9	61.5
Sentence 10	4	5.5	9.1	0	0	0

It can be seen, through the above two tables, that the test students have only done a relatively good job in the conversion of the Chinese active-voiced sentences with animate subjects into the English passive-voiced (if any) with non-animate subjects in the translation of sentence 1 and sentence 9, and 100 and 119 students consider the object scale conversion respectively, accounting for thirty-six point two percent and sixty-nine point nine percent. But, comparatively speaking, they have done bad in the other 8 sentences, with a low nominal conversion rate of less than ten percent. Except for sentence 8, the conversion rate being a relatively high percentage of twenty-one percent, conversion rate for sentence 6 is one point four percent, sentence 7 is one point one percent, and sentence 3 is 0%.

Table 5 Number of the students who translated the active sentence of "animate subject" in Chinese into English "non-animate subject ± passive sentence" (statistics with class as unit)

	English 1	English 2	English 3	Non-English 1	Non-English 2	Non-English 3
10	0	0	0	0	0	0
9	0	0	0	0	0	0
8	0	0	0	0	0	0
7	0	0	0	0	0	0
6	1	2	0	0	0	0
5	4	4	0	0	0	0
4	7	6	0	0	0	0
3	8	13	6	1	1	3
2	16	19	11	8	1	6
1	13	7	23	25	16	33
0	1	4	4	9	10	10
Void	2	2	2	5	9	8

As shown in the table 5, the conversion of the animate subject into the non-animate subject, as far as the class as a whole is concerned, is not ideal, in that only three of the 276 students have converted the Chinese personal subjects, mainly being "wo (I)" or "ta (she or he)" of six out of the ten sentences, and this accounts only for one point one percent of the conversion rate. Eight students have made the conversion of five of the ten sentences, accounting for two point nine percent, and 13 students of four of the sentences, accounting for four point seven percent. A total of 117 students converted the Chinese personal subjects for only one of the sentences, with a conversion rate of forty-two point four percent, and 61 students converted the Chinese personal subjects for two of the ten sentences, the conversion rate being twenty-two percent, and 32 students converted the Chinese personal subjects for 3 of the ten sentences, and the conversion rate was eleven point six percent.

The above results show that when translating the Chinese "animate subject" active-voiced sentence, most students, without taking into account the conversion from the Chinese active-voiced animate subject (personal subject) into the English impersonal subject, still use as the subject in the translated version the personal subject in the original Chinese sentences. For instance, 176 students, under the influence of their Chinese thinking stereotype, translated the standard version still into the Chinese active-voiced sentence "I suddenly think of / came up with an idea." It is therefore necessary to analyze the causes and to provide targeted theoretical guidance for their standard translation of the Chinese sentences into English.

4. Cause Analysis

After obtaining the results of the analysis, we distributed 298 questionnaires in these 6 classes and recovered 298 copies, with a recovery rate of 100%. We conducted a statistical analysis of the questionnaire and found that:

1) Ninety-eight percent of students thought that these 10 sentences were not difficult to translate, and only two percent of the surveyed students thought it was difficult;

2) Ninety-two point six of the students said that they know what is "animate subject" and what is "non-animate subject" and can give examples as well;

3) Seventy-five percent of students claimed to consider switching the subject when translating the Chinese "animate subject" active-voiced sentences, twenty-one point seven percent of them said they would consider it occasionally, and only three point three percent of them said they never considered it;

4) A surprising eight-six percent of students said that they do not understand the difference between English and Chinese impersonal and personal subjects: only fourteen percent of the surveyed students think they understand this difference, of which seventy-six point two of the students learned through their own references, and only twenty-three point eight of them said that they learned through classes.

5) 216 students affirmed that their Chinese thinking stereotype affects the choice of subject in their translating the Chinese active-voiced "animate subject", and they would still choose in their translated version the Chinese animate subject as the target subject. Twenty point one percent of the students said that they do not know how to choose, and that they would choose the one pleasing to the eye.

Based on the above survey results, it is believed that there are two main reasons why students do not perform ideally when translating the Chinese active sentence of “animate subject” into English:

1) There is too little translation knowledge involving “personal names” and “object names” in their instructed classes. Of the two hundred and ninety-nine students surveyed, only forty-two thought they understood the difference between English and Chinese personal and object names, of which thirty-two students had acquired this knowledge by consulting materials on their own, and only twenty-three points eight of the students said that their teacher had involved relevant content in class. We have not yet surveyed the teachers and are therefore not able to know why the relevant teachers are not involved in this translation knowledge in their lectures.

2) Inertial thinking influenced them too greatly. As we have already learned, under the influence of the way of thinking, the Chinese language pays attention to the subject thinking, which affects the students’ performance of translating the Chinese subject thinking sentence - “animate subject”, resulting in a large range of Chinese “personal name” being translated into English as still “personal name”, rather than Chinese “personal name” into English “object name”.

After analyzing the reasons, we taught the relevant translation knowledge in English class two, and a month later, the students of the class re-translated the same 10 simple Chinese “animate subject” active sentences, and we found that fifty out of fifty-five students, while translating those ten sentences, take into account the impersonal subject conversion and implement the conversion in their translation practice, accounting for ninety point nine of the students. Only three of them said that they forgot to do the corresponding conversion when translating, and two students did not explain the reason. This shows that it is necessary for us teachers to instruct relevant translation knowledge or theories in class to reduce the interference of Chinese thinking in translating from Chinese to English and to guide students in their translating practice and make their translations more standard.

5. Conclusion

We have learned through this study that the conversion of the impersonal subject when students translate the simple active sentence of the Chinese “animate subject” is not very ideal, mainly because of the influence of Chinese subject thinking and the lack of relevant translation theoretical knowledge. Therefore, we emphasize the need to teach relevant translation knowledge or theories in class to improve the readability of students’ translations in their translating from Chinese to English. There are of course many shortcomings in this study, such as few samples, limited coverage, and limited school-based research, and the results are not applicable to other schools. But all these are what we are going to make efforts in our near-future study.

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