

Original Paper

Topic-Oriented Strategies in E-C Energy Translation

Zexuan Wang¹

¹ School of Law and Humanities, China University of Mining and Technology-Beijing, Beijing, China

Received: November 11, 2023 Accepted: December 27, 2023 Online Published: January 11, 2024

doi:10.22158/eltls.v6n1p28

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/eltls.v6n1p28>

Abstract

Based on the topic-oriented strategies in English-Chinese translation, this paper focuses on its application in Energy translation. Many energy terminology and complex sentences are utilized in energy text. Therefore, the translation must take the Chinese structure into consideration. According to functional grammar, the difference between Chinese and English is explored to unveil the expression of English-Chinese translation. Chinese features in topic-prominent language, and English features in subject-prominent language. In translation process, shifting these two characters makes translation more appropriate and readable.

Keywords

Energy English, Topic-Oriented Strategies, English-Chinese Translation

1. Introduction

Languages are structured diversely to express different relations, and they do not express the meaning in the same way. In grammatical scope, Chinese seems like structure of bamboo while English speakers are inclined to express their thoughts by subject-predicate structure. Obviously, their differences result in the distinct expression method and make topic-oriented analysis feasible in E-C translation.

Energy text contains abundant long and difficult sentences. Apart from looking up parallel website, it is also significant to sort out the structure of sentences. The sentences in energy translation usually have two models of collocation including SVO structure and modifier-head structure. SVO is the most common sentence pattern. In the structural shift in SVO sentences, the author has concluded two sorts, subject to topic and object to topic.

While in modifier-head sentences, certain languages tend to place modifiers or determiners before the head words they modify or determine (Greenberg, 1984). Attached to the former, this structure provides possibility for the author to make some transitions of the modifier-head sentences (Wang, 2015). Two approaches are addressed in this section, that is, “modifier to topic” and “head to topic”.

The above four kinds of structural shifts are divided into two aspects, and each kind of shift will be

attached to examples from energy texts.

It is necessary to restructure the syntax in long and difficult sentences in energy translation. The author will list the first version and modified version of translation to reveal the general rule of the structural shift. The result will concern about the translation method which will remind translator does not strictly adhere to the subject-predicate structure. To conform to the expression conventions, it is necessary to seek appropriate methods for adjusting the word order to align with the topic-prominent sentence structure in Chinese.

2. Pre-Translation

Pre-translation process focuses on clearing the original material and searching proper tools for upcoming translation. According to this process, the language resources and credibility of translation can be guaranteed, which is helpful during the translation process of the selected passages.

2.1 Translation Tools and Parallel Websites

Pre-translation lays emphasis on translation tools and parallel references. The author in this report reviews different sorts of translation tools and parallel websites, which provides language materials about energy translation.

Some of dictionaries are very useful, such as Collins Dictionary and Free Dictionary, which the translator accidentally used to solve troublesome challenges. Corpus like SKELL can provide correct collocations in syntax and lexical aspects.

As for perplexing expressions in energy translation, the author visited some parallel websites including EIA (U.S. Energy Information Administration) and U.K. Government. The IEA (International Energy Agency) is of great significance in searching parallel texts in energy annual reports.

2.2 To Clear the Structure of the Passage

The author read the text quickly to understand the main idea of the passage. In scanning reading step, the author browses new words and expressions in order to preview difficult sentences, and record the terminology in the passage so as to facilitate the understanding during translation.

3. Analytical Framework

3.1 Topic-Prominent Structure in Chinese

Chinese features in topic-prominent language. It lays emphasis on the establishment of topic and coherence between topic and illustration (Xu, 2009). With explaining what the topic-prominent structure is, scholars vary on their standpoints. Charles Li and Thompson (1976) defined the three kinds of structures, languages that are subject-prominent, topic-prominent, both subject and topic prominent and neither subject nor topic prominent. According to this report, in topic-prominent languages, the basic structure of sentences favors a description in which the grammatical relation topic-comment plays a major role.

Shi (1992) suggested that the topic chain is a common organizational form in Chinese discourse. It

manifests as a linear structural characteristic, primarily characterized by effectively linking smaller units together to form a coherent discourse.

In spite of possessing a structure, topic-prominent sentences exhibit simplicity with only two primary constituents: the “theme” and the “instruction clause” (Feng, 2002). The interdependence among structural units relies on information correlation rather than the alignment of word categories and sentence constituents, thereby creating a perception of a loosely knit structure.

3.2 Subject-Prominent Structure in English

English is termed a subject-prominent language. This section will mainly concern two aspects about subject, the definition and characteristics of subject.

Halliday (2004, p. 56) proposed that the subject is that element which is picked up by the pronoun in the tag in a declarative clause. But this is not the definition of the subject, it is the way to identify it. And other definitions of subject like “that noun or pronoun which is in the nominative case” are more limited by the grammatical perspective.

As for characteristics of subject, Halliday (2004, p. 54) classified subject into three sorts, psychological subject, grammatical subject, and logical subject. Mostly, the subject-predicate structure is based on the grammatical function of subject. While the kinds of structure found in language are rather varied, the realization of the different metafunctions tend to follow certain regular principles. It has been acknowledged that English has limitations in which restricted in grammatical principles. However, in E-C translation, the relationship between source text and target text must be coherent.

In *An Introduction of Functional Grammar*, Halliday emphasized the grammatical subject. According to Halliday, grammatical subject meant “that of which something is predicated”. It was called “grammatical” because at the time the construction of subject and predicate was thought of as a purely formal grammatical relationship (ibid.). This formal grammatical constitutes the rigorous grammar of English, further highlighting its distinction from Chinese.

2.1.3 The Transition Between Subject-Prominent Sentence and Topic-Prominent Sentence

According to Lian Shuneng (1993, p. 29), the different between topic-prominent and subject-prominent structure are suggested in two aspects: “Compact vs Diffusive” “Hypotactic vs Paratactic”. In English, the combination of subject and predicate forms the kernel of a sentence, with the verb controlling the primary constituent pattern. While Chinese is not constrained by morphological rules and lacks the consistent subject-predicate agreement relationship, thus lacking a mechanism to govern the entire sentence.

When a sentence is SVO form, its focus is turned to the main structure of the sentence. E-C translation is the transition from English to Chinese. Correspondingly, the sentence structure should undergo modification (Wang, 1993). One important measure of thematic sentence generation is the phenomenon of displacement (Xu, 2007). Topic-prominent sentence refer to the meaning of expression which must be topped at the sentence. By contrast, occasionally, limited by the grammatical principle, the subject is not necessarily located at the beginning of the sentence.

According to Yang (2003), it is essential to make transition in translation. Chinese is considered a topic-prominent language. The topic structure reflects a thinking process in which the speaker first brings up a specific topic. English, on the other hand, typically adheres strictly to the Subject-Verb (SV) structure, while Chinese often employs a “topic-comment” structure. It is common in Chinese for the topic to be placed at the forefront in the sentence, and a significant portion of it is unmarked.

Therefore, in E-C translation, certain workable strategies for translators are required in transition of sentence structure. Normally, this kind of transition is called syntactic restructuring. Microscopic word order refers to the linear arrangement of phrases, while macroscopic word order pertains to the sentence-level word order (Liu, 2006), which constitutes the primary focus of this report.

4. Case Analysis

In this chapter, the main emphasis of the discussion is the analysis of different translation strategies of structural shift in energy texts. The concrete analysis will be conducted on the types of structural shift and what strategies can be used to solve the problems in translation.

4.1 Structural Shift in SVO Sentences

4.1.1 Subject to Topic

This approach guides the translator to set the English subject as the Chinese topic. Among all the structural shift, this one looks upon the most common type. In this particular type of structural shift, the subject in English encompasses the topic information of the sentence. In Chinese, the subject can also be served as the topic of the sentence. Consequently, during the process of translation, it is feasible to directly employ the subject in English as the corresponding thematic element in Chinese. The following are several illustrative examples, where the relevant are in bold or underlined.

【Example 1】

【Source Text】China presents the largest forecast uncertainty, as most of its wind and PV projects usually become operational in December, and developers are rushing to make up for delays due to COVID-19, and complete projects before subsidies are phased out at the end of the year.

【Target Text】中国的不确定性最大，这是由于其大部分风能和光伏项目通常在 12 月投入运营，开发商正急于弥补新冠肺炎疫情造成的延误，并计划在年底补贴终止前完成任务。

【Analysis】The whole sentences centers on “China” and “developers” acting as the topic of the sentence. Obviously, the sentences contains two clauses. The first clause begins with “China” and the other clause begins with “developers”. Given that only one thing is said about the topic, that is to say, in every clause the Chinese version can only have one word or phrase as its topic. Under this premise, the translator must choose two words or phrases form the source text as the topic of Chinese version.

In order to determine an appropriate translation topic, it is imperative to conduct a thorough analysis of the intended meaning conveyed in the source text. In the first clause, the object is “the largest forecast uncertainty”, and it contains an adverbial clause which introduced by “as”. Nevertheless, the information in the perplexing sentence clearly manifests the topic word. The “largest forecast

uncertainty” and “its wind and solar PV projects” are both related to “China”. Therefore, “China” is the topic word in the first clause. Familiarly, in the second clause, the central focus of the sentence resides in the fact that “developers” serve as the subject for both “make up” and “complete projects”. This information constitutes the foremost message conveyed by the sentence, thereby establishing it as the overarching theme. Therefore, the subject in English can be used as the topic in Chinese version.

【Example 2】

【Source Text】 Alongside electrification, hydrogen and sustainable bioenergy, CCUS will need to play a major role.

【Target Text】 因此，CCUS 需要在未来与电气化、氢能、可持续生物能源三种技术一同发挥重要作用。

【Analysis】 Although the second example begins with “Alongside electrification, hydrogen and sustainable bioenergy”, this phrase is not the starting point of the information flow. Instead, it is “CCUS” which refers to this new kind of technology that is being talked about announces the theme of the discourse.

This sentence has a long modifier which reflects a companionship relation between “CCUS” and “other energy resources”. Analyzing from the sentence structure, “CCUS” is the subject of sentence. Therefore, in Chinese version, “CCUS” will be organized as the topic of Chinese version.

In above two examples, the topic is easy to be recognized and the structures are not to be arranged due to the simple structure of original texts. However, in the English, the subject can also encompass the subject present in a subordinate clause. Furthermore, and it can equally serve as the main information that is shifted as the topic in Chinese version.

【Example 3】

【Source Text】 China accounted for 85% of the global growth in coal consumption, which it needed to power its rapidly growing industrial economy and build its infrastructure.

【Target Text】 煤炭可以为快速增长的工业经济与基础设施建设提供动力，因此，全球煤炭增长的 85% 来自中国。

【Analysis】 Compared with the example 1, this sentence is shorter in length but bears some chunks which contains more layers of meaning. The expression “it” (referring to coal) is the subject of the attributive clause rather than the element of main body, it plays the most important part for representing the center of information.

In the restructuring process of this sentence, it is necessary to focus on the coherence of the two parts in whole sentence. China accounted for the most of global growth because of the major role of coal. Therefore, “coal” represents the main meaning of the sentence which can be the topic in Chinese version.

Despite it is easy to shift the subject in English version to topic in Chinese version. This method of shift has its limitation. When taken coherence and longer sentences into consideration, more methods of shifting should be sought for.

4.1.2 Object to Topic

This kind of structural shift is another practical way to render the subject-prominent sentence into the topic-prominent sentence on SVO level. In this approach, the object is set as the topic of the Chinese version and other elements as comment parts. This translation approach will be demonstrated in the following two examples.

【Example 4】

【Source Text】 Carbon Capture, Utilization and Storage (CCUS) is the only group of technologies that contributes both to ①reducing emissions in key sectors directly /②and to removing CO₂ to balance emissions that are challenging to avoid – a critical part of “net” zero goals.

【Target Text A】 碳捕集利用与封存(CCUS)就是这样的技术，既可以实现在关键领域减少排放，又可以实现消除二氧化碳，以平衡那些难以避免的排放—这是净零目标的关键环节。

【Target Text B】 实现净零目标的关键在于两点，一是直接降低关键领域的碳排放水平；二是清除二氧化碳，中和“难减排”行业的碳排放。在众多技术方案中，碳捕集利用与封存（CCUS）技术是唯一一组可以同时实现净零双重目标的技术选择。

【Analysis】 The above two sentences share something different. The object in the source text is set as the comment in the target text A but topic in target text B. Target text A conveyed the fundamental meaning of the sentence, but it fails to emphasize its focal point. Notice that from the sentence, translator should know what is the theme of the sentence. In E-C translation, it is often inappropriate to directly translate the subject in English into the topic in Chinese (Yang Ming, 2003). The sentence has two aspects which are emission reduction and zero carbon dioxide. These two aspects connect the “net zero goals” with a dash. This is very convincing to show what is theme of two aspects, that is, critical part of net zero goals contain two aspects. Therefore, the object “a critical part” shift to the topic of Chinese version.

Target text B divided the source text into two parts. The subject “CCUS” is singled out and becomes the subject of a new sentence. Given the aforementioned approach, the translation would render CCUS as the comment in the source text. Nevertheless, considering the structural composition of the source text, “CCUS” can also serve as the subject in a distinct sentence. Consequently, the application of subject shift methodology becomes imperative. The proposition “CCUS” in the source text forms a new topic in the second sentence of the Chinese version, which is referred to as the new topic in Chinese. It can be written as “R1→T2” (where R represents the rheme and T represents the theme/topic).

Because of this transition, the translation can significantly enhance the sense of layer. The preceding sentence emphasizes the importance of net zero goals, while the subsequent sentence describes the role of CCUS in achieving this goal. Obviously, this example shows that the object can also be topic of Chinese, and Chinese more lays emphasis on the topic chain of the sentence. Therefore, topic and comment are semantically interrelated.

【Example 5】

【Source Text】 This portfolio of projects is increasingly diverse – including power generation, cement

and hydrogen facilities, and industrial hubs – and would double the level of CO₂ captured globally, from around 40 million tons today.

【Target Text A】 此项目的投资方式（组合）越来越多样化——包括发电、水泥、氢能设施和工业枢纽的建造。这些项目将会让全球二氧化碳捕获水平从目前的 4000 万吨增加约一倍。

【Target Text B】 目前，全球二氧化碳捕集量约为 4000 万吨，随着 CCUS 项目组合日益多样化（涉及发电行业、水泥行业、制氢设施以及 CCUS 枢纽建设），这一数值还将翻一番。

【Analysis】 Example 5 shows a typical shift from object to topic. The sentence contains an interjection. Target text A renders the interjection directly and connects it with a new sentence. Consequently, translation A introduces a new topic, while preserving the subject of the source text in Chinese version. Translation A makes the translation text appears redundant and lengthy, and fails to highlight the key points effectively.

By contrast, it is reasonable to establish the object “the level of CO₂” as the topic in Chinese version. Seen from the whole sentence, the predicate of “portfolio of projects” is “is”, and it expresses a condition of increase. However, the whole sentence is surrounded by “the level of CO₂” including “40 million” and “would double”. So it is more appropriate to set the object as the topic in Chinese version. Apart from the methods to establish the subject and object as the topic in Chinese at the SVO level. The structural shift can be approached in more micro aspect. Chinese has its characteristics in expression and short phrases while English prefers long and neat sentence structure. Therefore, other two methods focus on the subject or object modified by attributive modifiers or adverbial modifiers. In these examples, both the modifier and head words can be chosen as topic in Chinese version.

4.2 Structural Shift in Modifier-Head Sentences

4.2.1 Modifier to Topic

This approach is preferable when modifier is suitable to be established as topic while head word regarded as comment, illustrated by the following examples.

【Example 6】

【Source Text】 The 2000s had seen the largest growth in coal demand in history --- greater than the previous four decades combined.

【Target Text】 21 世纪初，煤炭需求量出现了历史新高，超过了前 40 年的总和。

【Analysis】 As shown in the above example, “growth” is the head word modified by “coal demand” and “history”. The “2000s” is the subject of source text. What this sentence mainly talks about is the largest growth in coal demand which is set as the topic of Chinese version. The reason why the modifier “coal demand” is set as the topic is that the whole sentence is around “coal demand”, including “history”. The “2000s” is a time which is not necessary in the sense of thesis. Therefore, translator makes a structural shift of the modifier word.

It is noticed that “coal demand” is an adverbial modifier in the sentence. The structural shift can be used in different level. But the principle of transformation remains unchanged and the adverbial modifier can still serve as the theme of the translated text.

【Example 7】

【Source Text A】But recent technology and policy developments are now radically changing the sector and with it, the electricity security model that has prevailed for the past century. These developments include steep declines in the costs of variable renewables, the trends of decentralization and digitalization, and the impacts of climate change.

【Target Text A】但随着技术和政策的发展，发电行业正在发生根本性的变化，已经盛行一个世纪的电力安全模式也将发生改变。这些主要变化包括这些发展包括可变可再生能源成本的大幅下降、权力下放和数字化的趋势以及气候变化的影响。

【Target Text B】但近期，可变可再生能源成本急剧下降，电力系统分散化和数字化趋势显现，气候变化带来诸多影响，种种技术和政策的变化推动电力行业经历深刻转型，二十世纪盛行的电力安全模式也将改变。

【Analysis】 Example 7 shows a typical syntax restructuring in E-C translation. Example contains two sentences. By observing the given passage, it becomes evident that the former sentence elucidates the result. The expression of “the changing of technology and policy developments” adequately signifies the consequences of the transformation, which led to a modification of the power safety mode in the twentieth century. Conversely, the latter sentence focuses on the specific circumstances, evidently delineating the causal factors that precipitated the alteration. Hence, the translator opted to reorganize the syntax of the sentence, adopting a sequence that follows the logical progression of cause and effect, with the cause preceding the result.

Moreover, this sentence shows a typical of structural shift from modifier to topic. The expression highlighted in example 7 is modifiers. In target text A, translator uses Chinese words “的” to express the relationship between modifier and head word. Target text A strictly follows the subject-predicate logic of English, which allows it to convey the basic meaning but fails to consider the topic of the translated text. The latter sentence in example 7 consists of three head-modifier phrases. Compared with target text A, target text B shifts the original structure and set the modifier as topic. By adopting such an approach to translation, not only does the theme of the target text become more accentuated, but it also effectively emphasizes the reasons that brought about the transformation in the electricity security model. In terms of linguistic features, Chinese predominantly employs shorter sentence structures, and facilitating a shift in focus aligns more harmoniously with the expressive traits inherent in the Chinese language, thus enhancing the overall fluency of the translation.

4.2.2 Head to Topic

Head words which modified by modifiers, in essence, are subjects and objects or their appositive. This type of structural shift is not commonly seen in E-C translation, but it is more prevalent in Chinese four-character words, which can enhance the coherence of the translation.

【Example 8】

【Source Text】After years of slow progress and insufficient investment, interest in CCUS is starting to grow.

【Target Text A】在经过多年的缓慢发展和投资不足之后，人们对 CCUS 的兴趣开始增长。

【Target Text B】多年来，CCUS 一直发展缓慢，投资不足，如今却愈加受到青睐。

【Analysis】Obviously, the sentence consists of two phrases, “slow progress” and “insufficient investment”. If used directly as the subject, the translation will result in an excessively long topic. Therefore, it is necessary to convert the long subject into an appropriate Chinese topic sentence. The original sentence emphasizes two parts, each with a modifier-head structure.

CCUS is the overarching topic of the sentence, however, the author presents “slow progress” and “insufficient investment” as distinct subtopics, thereby necessitating a structural transformation within the sentence. Therefore, the head word “progress” becomes the topic of “发展缓慢”, and the “investment” is set as the topic of “投资不足”.

According to above example, the situation which head words are set as topic happens rarely in translation, and this method often used as an approach to create a more balanced and symmetrical sentence structure, so as to present a more polished and harmonious translation.

5. Conclusion

In accordance with the theory of subject put forward by Halliday and Chinese discourse theory, on the basis of Xu Lina’s methods, this report tentatively applies four kinds of structural shift of topic sentences in E-C translation. The major findings are summarized as follows.

First, the differences between subject-predicate sentences in English and topic sentences in Chinese are concluded as “Compact vs Diffusive” and “Hypotactic vs Paratactic”. This difference is not only revealed in aforementioned examples, but it is also regarded as a cautionary reminder to translators about the disparities between English and Chinese. Merely transposing the subject without considering the difference can lead to a lack of smoothness and hinder comprehensibility, particularly when dealing with lengthy and complex sentences in E-C translation.

Secondly, the structural shift is classified into four types under two aspects. Generally speaking, according to Xu Lina’s methods, translator will cut language chunks and then arrange them in a logic way. SVO structure is the most common one, and many transformations are based on this pattern. From macro aspect, the shift includes “subject to topic” and “object to topic”. For example, “coal demand” and “CCUS” are maybe set as the object, but through structural shift, they become the topic in Chinese and the main tone of the translated sentence has been determined. By establishing the topic of the sentence, one can determine the general direction of the statement. In energy translation, lengthy and complex sentences are often encountered. Therefore, extracting the main theme of the translation can help make it more concise.

Thirdly, this thesis illustrates the practicality and necessity of topic-oriented approaches in E-C energy translation. Whether in energy and other sector translation, the shift between subject-prominent and topic-prominent sentence unveils the expression of language in English and Chinese, highlighting their inherent differences. Essentially, English is constrained by grammar, giving rise to a chained structure,

whereas Chinese, unrestricted by grammar, assumes a bamboo-like structure.

On the whole, this report validates the reasonableness and feasibility of topic-oriented strategies in E-C energy translation and to offer the translator a solid theoretical ground to choose appropriate strategies.

Reference

- Halliday, M. A. K. (2004). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Hasan. (2001). *Cohesion in English*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Li, C. N., & Thompson, S. A. (1976). *Subject and Topic: A New Typology of Language*.
- Shi, D. X. (1992). *The Nature of Topic Comment Constructions and Topic Chains*.
- Tsao, F. F. (1979). *A Functional Study of Topic in Chinese: The First Step Towards Discourse Analysis*.
- H. Greenberg, J., Lu, B. F., & Lu Z. J. (1984). *Some universals of grammar with particular efference to the of meaningful elements*. Contemporary Linguistics.
- Li, J., & Fan, X. T. (2008). *Application of Patterns of Thematic Progression to Literary Text Analysis*. Journal of Dalian University.
- Lian, S. N. (1994). *Contrastive Studies of English and Chinese*. Higher Education Press.
- Lin, L. H. (2006). *On the Topic Constructions in Chinese and their Transfer to L2 English Syntax*. Journal of Ningbo University (Liberal Arts Edition).
- Wang D. F., & Zhang, Y. Y. (1993). *A Comparison of English and Chinese Word Order and Translation*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research.
- Wang, K. M., & Xiao, Y. (1981). *A comparative Study of the English-Chinese Language Order*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research.
- Xu, L. N. (2010). *The Pragmatic Viewpoint of the Topic Sentence Orientation in the Translation*. Foreign Languages Research.
- Xu, L. N. (2010). *Structural Shift in Translation—From Subject to Topic*. Shanghai International Studies University.
- Yang, M. (2003). *Topic and Theme in English to Chinese Translation*. Foreign Language Research.