

Original Paper

Differences between English and Chinese Thought Patterns and Their Influences on Translation

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Abstract

Translation plays a pivotal role as a bridge in facilitating mutual understanding and cooperation between different cultures. However, it is a great challenge for translators to reproduce the closest natural equivalent of the source language messages in the target language. However, misunderstandings or mistranslation during translation are not uncommon due to the challenges of not only converting language forms but also bridging distinct cultural contexts. These challenges stem from different patterns of thought reflected in linguistic and cultural expressions. This thesis explores how the divergent patterns of thought between Chinese and Western cultures affect translation, examining the deep mechanisms of language generation and development. Therefore, a shift of thought patterns and some feasible methods of transfer in translation is to ensure the translation is natural, authentic, and aligned with the target language's conventions.

Keywords

patterns of thought, methods of transfer, linguistic and cultural expressions

1. Introduction

As a kind of interlingual and intercultural communication, translation concerns with not only the rendering between the source and receptor languages, but also the communication between the two cultures. However, the latter constitutes the greatest challenge in translation. Different environmental contexts, unique patterns of thought, values, customs, and religious beliefs of various countries and ethnic groups create distinct cultural connotations and characteristics, resulting in noticeable cultural differences. These cultural discrepancies hinder the exchange and communication of information, posing certain challenges and difficulties for translation. Language serves as an instrument of thought, enabling the direct articulation of ideas and cultural expressions. Thought and language are interdependent, with each influencing the other; initially distinct, they later converge and unite (Lin

Dajin, 1996). As Liu Miqing (1993) asserts, language mirrors thought, with thought shaping linguistic expressions. The nature of many linguistic expressions arises from the interplay between language and thought. Thought patterns influence the vocabulary or phrases used in discourse to convey ideas, the sentences that articulate judgments, and the overall structure and organization of texts that facilitate inference. The pattern of thought is at the deepest level of culture. Language use reflects the selection and formulation of thoughts. Translation involves not just converting linguistic forms but also transferring underlying thought patterns. Understanding differences between Chinese and Western patterns of thought and making a shift in these patterns during translation enhances a natural and idiomatic translation.

This thesis compares Chinese and Western thought patterns to highlight their differences, which are reflected in the respective languages. It demonstrates that thought patterns and language expressions are closely intertwined; What's more, language differences stem from varying thought patterns and serve as mediums for conveying different thought patterns. Therefore, recognizing these differences aids in translation between the two languages, enabling a more coherent and natural translation by effectively transferring thought patterns.

2. The Research on Chinese and Western Patterns of Thought

A lot of esteemed scholars carried out contrastive studies on Chinese and Western patterns of thought, have contributed significant and influential insights to this area of research.

Yan Fu is the first one who provides a comprehensive comparison of Chinese and Western thought patterns, highlighting that Chinese worldview is cyclical and stagnant, relying on assumptions in decision-making, while Western thought is linear and progressive, emphasizing experimentation and formal logic.

The exploration of thought patterns in Chinese and Western cultures has evolved significantly since the early 20th century, particularly during the May Fourth Movement, which catalyzed a reevaluation of traditional Chinese thought. Scholars such as Gu Hongming and Liang Suming began to articulate the perceived superiority of Chinese thought patterns and culture in contrast to Western democratic culture. In contrast to Liang's views, Hu Shi argued that although Chinese and Western cultures exhibit inherent differences, the fundamental mental capacities of humans are similar, with variations arising from different social environments, suggesting that if the Chinese social context had reflected that of the West, the cultural results might have been similar, thus highlighting the complexities of cultural relativism and the influence of historical contexts on thought evolution

Further advancing this comparative study, scholars like Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao articulated distinct cultural dichotomies. Chen Duxiu noted that Eastern societies tend to prioritize the family unit, whereas Western cultures emphasize the individual. Li Dazhao, on the other hand, posited that a fundamental distinction lay in the contrasting orientations towards peace in Eastern thought versus a proactive, dynamic nature in Western thought. These insights laid the groundwork for a broader inquiry into how

these cultural frameworks influence various domains, including philosophy and social organization. Scholars Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao have different opinions on Chinese and Western cultures, noting Eastern societies prioritize family while Western cultures focus on the individual. Then, Lin Yutang argued that the feminine and tender traits of Chinese culture shape its patterns of thought and national character, highlighting strengths in intuition and reality while also acknowledging potential abuses, ultimately leading to a unique and contradictory Chinese identity marked by indomitable vitality and super wisdom. Zhang Dainian distinguishes between Chinese dialectical thought, which values unity and harmony, and Western metaphysical thought, focused on analytical reasoning and conflict, highlighting how these differences affect translation practices and cultural interpretations. The discussion on Chinese and Western thought has evolved from claims of cultural superiority to recognizing the interplay of social context and philosophy and the implications for translation, emphasizing synthesis and harmony for a deeper understanding of human thought and expression.

3. Characteristics of Chinese and Western Patterns of Thought

“Thought patterns refer to the standardized forms, methods, and processes of thinking used to reflect the objective world.” These patterns encompass both logical thinking—based on concepts, judgments, and reasoning—and non-logical thinking—driven by intuition, inspiration, and imagination. Common methods include induction, deduction, and analogy. The thought process integrates these forms and methods in cognitive activities.

Individuals’ thought patterns are shaped by social development and vary due to differences in occupation, gender, education, knowledge structure, and personal attributes. However, members of the same ethnic group, sharing a common social and cultural environment, tend to have similar thought patterns. Comparing thought patterns across different ethnic groups reveals both similarities and differences, which is essential for addressing and overcoming cross-cultural communication barriers.

3.1 *The Concrete Pattern of Thought versus the Abstract Pattern of Thought*

Chinese traditional patterns of thought emphasizes “the unity between everything and man” and relies on deriving images through observation. Rather than relying on logical sequences of conception, judgment, and reasoning, the Chinese typically create mental pictures through imagination. In essence, Chinese thought often translates abstract concepts into concrete images. In English, the process of nominalization often leads to a higher degree of abstraction. When writers rely heavily on nouns rather than verbs, they may ultimately distance themselves from the immediate context of their writing. In English, nominalization often results in abstraction.

Relying too heavily on nouns rather than verbs can ultimately cause the writer's focus to shift away from the immediate context of their work—such as the timing, manner, and emotional state of the action. This tendency can subtly cultivate a pattern of abstraction, generalization, and imprecision (Gowers, 1987:79). Abstract language in English is characterized by the frequent employment of abstract nouns. In contrast, Chinese tends to utilize more concrete or specific terms and adopts a

“practical approach,” often conveying abstract concepts through metaphors, similes, allegories, or other methods to ensure clarity. Compare English sentences with the Chinese versions:

1) English: The actual date of the completion of the purchase should coincide with the availability of the new facilities. (= The purchase should not be completed until the new facilities are available)

Chinese: 必须等到有了这些新设备, 才能购买这批货。

2) English: The absence of intelligence is an indication of satisfactory developments. (= No news is good news)

Chinese: 没有消息即表明有令人满意的进展。

3) English: She wondered whether her outspokenness might be a liability to Franklin.

Chinese: 她怀疑自己那么心直口快, 是否会成为弗兰克林的包袱。

4) English: : He had surfaced with less visibility in the policy decisions.

Chinese: 在决策过程中, 他已经不那么抛头露面了。

As a result of the above difference, the conversion of English abstract words into Chinese concrete words, figurative expressions or verbs is often employed in translation.

3.1.1 Intuition versus Evidence

Chinese traditional thought values practical experience and holistic thinking, often relying on intuition to grasp the inherent essence and principles of objects through a direct, though vague, perception. Intuitive thinking emphasizes sensory awareness, inspiration, and sudden insight. This approach is rooted in Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, and reflects the philosophical concept of “The Unity of Man and Heaven.” This mode of thinking is also evident in language usage. For example, phrases like “suddenly realizing,” “having a breakthrough,” or “fully understanding” praise someone’s intelligence by highlighting their “good intuition.” Language interpretation often focuses on “meaning” and “implied sense,” with less emphasis on scientific analysis. Evaluations are typically expressed through reflections, essays, or critiques rather than systematic analysis. In contrast, English-speaking cultures emphasize rational knowledge and empirical evidence, leading to a more systematic approach to language analysis. While Chinese sentence meanings can often be inferred contextually, English sentences, particularly complex ones, require grammatical analysis for accurate understanding.

The primary difference between Chinese and Western thought is their reliance on intuition versus logic. Chinese pattern of thought often employs intuition and analogy, reflecting a more concrete approach, as seen in Taoism where abstract concepts may be inadequate. In contrast, Western thought emphasizes logic and rationality, rooted in Aristotelian reasoning. Aristotle’s formal logic, established in ancient Greece, remains fundamental, focusing on conception, judgment, and reasoning. Western thought pattern values scientific analysis and experimentation, with Einstein highlighting that logic and empirical evidence are crucial for accurate understanding.

3.1.2 Ambiguity versus Clarity

The traditional Chinese cultural way of thinking has a strong image while the Western cultural way of thinking has a strong abstraction. The characteristics of this way of thinking are fully reflected in both

English and Chinese. Chinese is a typical hieroglyph. Most of the Chinese characters are ideograms of sound, shape and meaning. Their characteristics are known by their shape. English is a phonetic transcription. There is no connection between pronunciation and meaning. The abstraction is extremely strong and there is more polysemy. In terms of the use of vocabulary, Chinese seldom uses nouns of abstract concepts, and often uses specific nouns of meanings; but in English, the use of abstract rankings is significantly higher than that of Chinese. Therefore, in English-Chinese translation, it is necessary to embody the concepts expressed by abstract nouns in order to conform to the habits of Chinese readers and the habits of Chinese-speaking sentences.

3.2 The Integral Pattern of Thought versus the Analytical Pattern of Thought

The comparison between the Chinese Integral Pattern of Thought and the Western Analytical Pattern of Thought can be approached through their fundamental approaches to understanding and interpreting the world.

The Chinese Integral Pattern of Thought is deeply rooted in a holistic view of the world. This perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things, reflecting a view that nature, society, and the individual are part of a larger, interdependent whole. This pattern of thought is evident in the concept of “万物一体” (the unity of all things), which suggests that everything in the universe is interrelated and mutually influential. Chinese Integral Pattern of Thought is illustrated by examples of Yin-Yang Philosophy and Integrated Diagnosis in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Yin and Yang, which embodies the principle of duality and balance, represent opposite but complementary forces that are interconnected and interdependent. The practice of TCM exemplifies this integrated approach. In diagnosing a patient, a TCM practitioner considers a wide range of factors including pulse, tongue appearance, facial color, and lifestyle. This comprehensive assessment reflects the holistic nature of Chinese thought, where symptoms are understood as part of a broader, interconnected system.

The Western Analytical Pattern of Thought tends to adopt an analytical approach, focusing on breaking down complex systems into their constituent parts to understand and solve problems. This method involves analyzing each component separately to understand the whole. This thought pattern emphasizes empirical evidence and objective measurements. In contrast to TCM, Western medicine often uses specific diagnostic tools and tests to determine medical conditions.

In summary, Chinese views humans and nature as an interconnected whole, which gradually evolves an integral pattern of thought; In contrast, Westerners thought separates humans from nature, with an analytical approach prevailing in the West. Integral thought pattern is also reflected in the covertness of Chinese grammar, parataxis of sentence structure, and the general and vague meaning of words. Analytical thought pattern, on the other hand, is evident in the overtness of English grammar.

3.3 The Cyclical Structure versus The Linear Structure

Chinese people view the world as a continuous circle, which shapes their circular pattern thought. In contrast, Western thought tends to be linear, moving from the past through the present to the future in a straight line. The Chinese perspective embraces the natural cycles of life—such as the seasons, life and

death, and day and night—allowing things to follow their natural course. Lao Zi sees change as cyclical, eventually returning to its origin. This complete circular thought pattern aligns with a sense of harmony with nature, accepting what it offers without seeking more. Conversely, Westerners see the universe as a structured hierarchy and are driven to explore the unknown, aiming to master and utilize nature.

Chinese thought tends to be intuitive, concrete, and indirect. When speaking, individuals often meander around the main topic, delaying or implicitly expressing key ideas and opinions. In both discussion and writing, Chinese language expression generally progresses from secondary to primary points, from background to core issues, and from related information to the main topic. Narratives typically start with the peripheral context before addressing the central theme.

In contrast, Western thought is often more direct, with questions posed straightforwardly and critical content presented at the forefront. Westerners generally focus on specific conditions, reasons, and assumptions. Western typically introduces the main point first, followed by supplementary details. Thus, Chinese language emphasizes intuition and an integral approach, while English focuses on structure and conceptual clarity.

4. Linguistic Features between Chinese and Western Thought Patterns

Chinese and Western thought patterns exhibit both common traits and distinct differences. Their shared features can be attributed to the fundamental similarities in human brain structure and function, as well as the broadly similar paths of civilization experienced by humans. However, distinct natural, geographical, and cultural contexts have led to unique variations in these thought patterns. Consequently, the national characteristics inherent in Chinese and Western thought patterns significantly impact their respective languages.

4.1 Parataxis versus Hypotaxis

From what has been mentioned before, Chinese thought patterns tend to be integral and intuitive, focusing on experience and personal insight rather than clear-cut concepts and logical analysis. In contrast, Western thought patterns are more analytical, prioritizing scientific experimentation and formal reasoning. Linguistically, Chinese is characterized by its brevity and flexibility, with less rigid sentence structures and relatively short sentences, while English tends to have a more complex structure.

Hypotaxis is the dependent or subordinate construction or relationship of clauses with connectives. English sentence building is featured by hypotaxis. Parataxis is the arranging of clauses one after the other without connectives showing the relation between them. Chinese sentence building is featured by parataxis.

To clarify the relations between words, phrases or clauses. English more often resorts to overt cohesion, frequently using various cohesive ties such as relatives (relative or conjunctive pronouns and adverbs, e.g., who, whom, whose, that, which, what, when, where, why, how), connectives (coordinate or subordinate conjunctions, e.g. and, or, but, yet, so, however, as well as, (n)either...(n)or..., when, while,

as, since, until, so ... that, unless, lest), prepositions, and some others. Compare English sentences with the Chinese versions:

5) English: 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.

Chinese: 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。

6) English: When I try to understand what it is that prevents so many Americans from being as happy as one might expect, it seems to me that there are two causes, of which one goes much deeper than the other.

Chinese: 为什么如此众多的美国人不能如想象中那样幸福呢? 我认为原因有二, 而两者之间又有深浅之分。

By contrast, Chinese more frequently relies on covert coherence (隐性连贯) and con-text, focusing on temporal or logical sequences. Instead of using various cohesive ties such as relatives, connectives and prepositions as in English, Chinese more often resorts to word order, contracted sentences (紧缩句), four-character expressions (四字格), and some grammatical or rhetorical devices such as repetition, antithesis, and parallelism. Consider the following examples:

7) Chinese: (如果) 他不来, 我(就)不去。(对照)

English: If he won't come here, I'll not go there.

8) 人(若)不犯我, 我(则)不犯人。(语序)

We will not attack unless we are attacked.

4.2 *The General-particular Order versus The Particular-general Order*

The Chinese emphasize integral and synthetic thought patterns, thus forming a general-particular order while the Western focus on individuality and analytical thinking, producing a particular-general order.

The word order of Chinese and English sentences is different. For example, in Chinese, family names precede given names, whereas in Western cultures, given names come first. When stating dates, Chinese use the format year-month-day, while Westerners use day-month-year. Additionally, in addresses, Chinese typically list from smaller to larger units (country-province-city-county-street-building-room), whereas the Westerners do the opposite. In storytelling, Chinese narratives follow a general-to-particular order, where broader concepts (general or whole) come before narrower ones (specific or part). Consider the following example:

8) Chinese: 他在位于 美国 纽约州 纽约市 的哥伦比亚大学读书。

English: He studies at Columbia University, New York, NY, U.S.A.

Chinese thought views humanity, nature, and society as an interconnected whole, emphasizing the unity and dialectical relationships among these elements. In contrast, Western thought, influenced by Western philosophy, advocates for the separation of subject and object, focusing on analyzing individual components separately and emphasizing formal structure and rule-based constraints.

In terms of language, Chinese does not prioritize formal structure, resulting in loose sentence

construction without a fixed subject or predicate framework. Chinese grammar relies on parataxis, where sentence coherence depends on semantics rather than explicit conjunctions, often using phrases or clauses. English, on the other hand, employs hypotaxis, with sentences connected by conjunctions to establish clear logical relationships. Therefore, in translating between Chinese and English, it is often necessary to convert multiple short sentences into a coherent, structured long sentence to align with English thinking patterns.

5. The Transfer of Thought Patterns in Translation

Differences in thinking patterns among ethnic groups can lead to misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication. Eugene A. Nida's principle of dynamic equivalence provides guidance on addressing these differences in translation. In his work "*Exploration of Translation Science*," Nida suggests that a translation is considered successful if the target audience experiences the same reaction to the translated text as the original audience does to the source text. Thus, it is crucial to consider the psychological responses of the target readers and respect their cognitive frameworks. The original author's thinking should not be imposed on the target audience. Due to varying Western and Eastern thought patterns, a word-for-word translation without appropriate adjustments may lead to misunderstandings. To achieve dynamic equivalence, diverse translation strategies and techniques are necessary to address these differences in thought patterns.

5.1 Transfer between Concreteness and Abstractness

Differences in thought patterns lead to varying preferences for verbs, nouns, and prepositions in Chinese and Western languages. English tends to favor abstract nouns and prepositions, resulting in a sense of abstraction and tranquility. In contrast, Chinese emphasizes verbs, which contributes to concreteness and dynamism. Consider the following examples:

9) English: necessity; abstraction; jealousy; arrogance

Chinese: 必要(性); 抽象(化); 嫉妒(心理); 傲慢(态度)

10) English: Their **refusal** to attend the conference embarrassed the chairman.

Chinese: 他们**拒绝**参加会议, 这使主席很为难。

11) English: Our appeal remained a **dead letter**.

Chinese: 我们呼吁犹如**石沉大海**。

12) English: He wanted to learn, to **know**, to **teach**.

Chinese: 他想学习, **增长知识**, **也愿意把知识教给别人**。

The above examples show that achieving the appropriate balance between concreteness and abstractness can be accomplished by using category words, converting parts of speech, using figurative words, and proper addition of words when translating from English to Chinese.

5.2 Rearrangement of Word Order

When translating from English to Chinese, it is often necessary to rearrange the word order due to the distinct linguistic characteristics of each language. Chinese, with its integrative thought pattern,

typically follows a general-to-particular order, while English, reflecting a more analytical thought pattern, tends to use a particular-to-general order. For example, in English, attributive phrases and clauses usually follow the nouns they modify, whereas in Chinese, these elements generally precede the modified nouns. Additionally, English speakers place temporal and locative adverbials at the end of a sentence, while Chinese speakers often position them at the beginning. When both types of adverbials are present, English places time adverbials after place adverbials, whereas Chinese reverses this order. Furthermore, in English, possessive pronouns precede the nouns they modify, and personal pronouns often appear in subordinate clauses before the main clause. In contrast, Chinese sentences typically mention nouns first. These and other differences necessitate adjustments in word order during translation between English and Chinese. Consider the following examples:

13) English: At once the sky grew dark, and the ground opened up near the spot where they were standing.

Chinese: 顿时天昏地黑，他们所站的地方附近的地皮裂开了。

14) English: Objects that do not transfer light cause shadows.

Chinese: 不透光的物体会造成阴影。

15) English: The woman **holding a baby in her arms** is waiting to see the doctor.

Chinese: 那个**手里抱着婴儿的**妇女正等着医生看病。

5.3 Rearrangement of Sentence Stress

According to these different features between Chinese and English languages, it can be found that Chinese and English speakers have different alignment of information. English always put the important information first, coming straight to the point. Chinese, on the contrary, describes the environment outside clearly and then touches the main information. When translating between English and Chinese, sentence structures often need to be rearranged due to the distinct characteristics of each language. English typically prioritizes important information at the beginning, directly stating the main point before elaborating. In contrast, Chinese often presents context and background first, leading to the main information in a way that provides sudden clarity. This reflects a difference in how information is aligned: English follows a direct approach while Chinese uses a more contextual one. Additionally, Chinese sentences often feature longer subject structures, whereas English prefers shorter subjects. Consequently, sentence stress must be adjusted during translation.

Westerners prefer a direct and straightforward approach in their speech. They often present the main idea first and then use various connecting means to provide additional information. As a result, English sentences typically place the structural emphasis at the beginning, with shorter openings and longer endings.

In contrast, Chinese speakers favor a more gradual and immersive approach. They tend to set the context and elaborate on the subject before revealing the main point. Consequently, Chinese sentences generally place the structural emphasis towards the end, with longer openings and shorter endings. Consider the following examples:

16) Chinese: 当读者读到小说最后几页,了解到书中女主人公,那位一向待大家很好的可爱的老妇人,轻时一连毒死了她的五个丈夫时,不禁会毛骨悚然。

English: The reader's hair stands on end when he reads in the final pages of the novel that the heroine, a dear old lady who had always been so kind to everybody, had, in her youth, poisoned every one of her five husbands.

17) Chinese: 当一艘大型班船进港的时候,许多小船载着各种杂货快速向客轮驶来。

English: Small boats loaded with wares sped to the great liner as she (指大型班船) was entering the harbor.

From these sentences, it can be seen that the structural focus of Chinese language is on the latter part. Based on the analysis above, the translation should prioritize placing the structural focus at the beginning and stating the main content first.

6. Conclusion

From what have been discussed above, the study of Chinese and Western thought patterns shows that these systems are fundamentally different. Because of the differences between Chinese and Western patterns of thought, the two languages are different in the way they are expressed. Chinese thought is characterized by integrity, intuition, and circularity, often viewed as more feminine, while Western thought emphasizes logic, accuracy, and linearity, which can be seen as more masculine. Therefore, it's necessary to accomplish the transfer of the different thought patterns, with the transfer of language structures and expressive ways as its main forms during translation. Despite these differences, increased intercultural communication is leading to a blending of these patterns, revealing both similarities and opportunities for mutual enhancement. As global interaction grows, mastering these diverse thought patterns can improve foreign language acquisition and understanding. To effectively learn a new language, especially English, it is crucial to immerse oneself in authentic materials, engage in diverse learning activities, and interact with native speakers to bridge the gap between different thought patterns.

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