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A COMPARISON OF WORD ORDER IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE

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1. Introduction: both have the same basic word order.

It is a well-known fact that both modern English and modern Chinese have the subject-verb-object (SVO) word order though the former belongs to the Indo-European language family whereas the latter is a member of the Chinese-Tibetan language family. Look at the following examples.

- (1) a. I have a computer.
 - b. Wo you yige jisuanji.
 I have a computer
- (2) a. They are not engineers.
 - b. Tamen bushi gongchengshi. they not be engineer
- (3) a. She has seen that film.
 - b. Ta kan le nage dianying.
 she see (AM) that film (AM=Aspect Marker)
- (4) a. What did you say?
 - b. Ni shuo shenmo? you say what
- (5) a. We saw them go.
 - b. Women kanjian tamen zou le.
 we see them go (AM)
- (6) a. My brother did not come.
 - b. Wo xongdi meiyou lai.
 I brother not come

From the above six pairs of examples, we can see clearly that in (1) (3) (4) (5) both the English and the Chinese are of the SVO structure, in (2) both of the SVC

(complement) structure and in (6) both of the SV structure. In other words, we find no difference in the word order between English and Chinese in terms of the sentence elements S, V, O/C. In this case, we say that both languages are of the same basic word order: SVO. Then, what is it that makes them appear so different from each other that native speakers of one find it very difficult to learn the other as a foreign language and translators or interpreters of one are often in trouble in their translation work? The author of this paper has done some research and come up with a few results that will help the above learners, translators and other people concerned out of, at least, some of the trouble or difficulty that stands in their way.

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2. Where do the differences lie?

Since she could not find any difference in the word order of the main elements of the sentence between English and Chinese, the author of this paper had to look elsewhere in her research. In the end, she has found that it is the secondary elements or the modifiers that make the two languages look so different from each other and therefore cause so much trouble for the people concerned. Specifically speaking, it is the attributives and the adverbials that have brought about the complexity with regard to word order in the two lamguages. This paper will examine some aspects of this complexity in the following. Regardless of differences in grammatical terminology in English and Chinese, on most occasions this paper uses the English concepts to cover the similar or roughly the same grammatical phenomena in both systems.

2.1. Positions of attributives

Attributives or elements that modify a noun or pronoun take different positions in English and Chinese. In the former, attributives are divided into two classes: those placed before the noun they modify — Quirk et al call this phenomenon premodification (1972: 902) — and those after the noun they modify — postmodification (1972: 860). For example:

- (7) I visited his delightful house. (premodification)
- (8) Half my first new salary is spent. (premodification)
- (9) He frightened the girl (standing) in the corner. (postmodification)
- (10) That was the day on which he left. (postmodification)

In (7) and (8), the individual words his, delightful; half, my, first, new are premodifiers or attributives placed before house and salary respectively to qualify them. However, in (9) and (10), the participle phrase standing in the corner, the prepositional phrase in the corner, and the attributive clause on which he left are postmodifiers placed after girl and day respectively to qualify them. Just as these examples have shown, when the attributives of a noun are individual words, they are usually placed before it. If they are participle or prepositional phrases or clauses, they are generally placed after it (Xu Shizhen 1985: 136).

Chinese, however, is quite different. It has all its attributives before the noun they modify. For instance, if we turn the English in (7) through (10) into Chinese in (11) through (14) respectively, they will look something like:

- (11) Wo canguan le *tade lingrenyuquaide* fangzi. (premodification) I visit (AM) his delightful house
- 12) Wo divici xinfade banshude gongzi hua wanle. (premodification)
 I first newly issued half salary spend (AM)
- (13) Ta xiahuai le zai nage jiao shang (zhanzhe) de guniang. (premodification)

he frighten (AM) in that corner there (standing) (AtM) girl (AtM=Attributive Marker)

(14) Na shi ta liqu de rizi. (premodification) that be he leave (AtM) day

From the comparison of examples (7) and (8) and examples (11) and (12), we find no difference in the position of attributives of nouns between English and Chinese. All the attributives are in the form of individual words and take premodification in both languages. However, a careful look will lead to the difference between (9) and (10) and (13) and (14) in terms of the position of the attributives. The attributives in (9) and (10) have postmodification while the attributives in (13) and (14), just like those in (11) and (12), again have premodification.

Now, we may conclude that attributives in Chinese are always placed before the noun they modify whereas the attributives in English are usually placed before the noun they modify if they are individual words and are generally placed after the noun they modify when they are in the form of prepositional or participial phrases or the attributive clause. This conclusion may be formulated as follows:

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English NP - 1. ATiw + N

2. N + ATph/ATcl (where NP = Noun Phrase,
AT= Attributive,
iw = individual word,
N = Noun,
ph = phrase,
and cl = clause.)

Chinese NP - AT + N
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And it is exactly the difference between English NP2 and Chinese NP that constitutes one of the major factors that cause the two languages to appear so different from each other in word order, the other factor being the positions of adverbials to be dealt with in the next part of this article.

In this connection, the attributive clause in English complicates the matter to a great extent. The English language has a whole array of complicated system of such clauses (LI & LI 1994: 62-75). Of all the important features of the English clause, it

is postnominal, has a relative pronoun (which, that, who, whom or whose), which on proper occasions may be omitted, or a relative adverb (when, where, how or why) to introduce it, and has subject-verb agreement with a finite verb. For the same phenomenon, Chinese does not call it a clause but an attributive, which is prenominal, has no relative pronoun or adverb but a relative marker de to follow it, and no subject-verb agreement without any finite verb. For instance:

- (15) The book that/which is on the desk belongs to me. Shuzhuo shang de shu shi wode. desk on (AtM) book be mine
- (16) The books that/which are on the shelf belong to her.

 Shujia shang de shu shi tade.

 bookshelf on (AtM) book be hers
- (17) The person who is speaking is my brother.
 zhengzai shuohua de nage ren shi wode gege.
 (AM) speak (AtM) that person be my brother
- (18) The people who are speaking are my teachers.

 zhengzai shuohua de naxie ren shi wode laoshi.

 (AM) speak (AtM) those people be my teacher

Incidentally, when two or more attributives occur before the same noun, there are general rules for their relative order both in English and in Chinese. The following rules in English are based on Quirk et al (1972: 146, 925):

- A. Predeterminer + determiner + ordinal + cardinal/quantifier + open-class premodifier + noun head: one is followed by the next in that order.

 (e.g. half my first new salary/both these last two days/all the little English butter)
- B. Determiners etc. + general + age +colour + participle + provenance + noun + denominal + noun head: one is followed by the next in that order. (e.g.: some intricate old interlocking Chinese designs/a grey crumbling Gothic church tower)

In passing, the attributive comparision above does not include the non-restrictive attributive clause because in Chinese it will become two separate sentences. Look at the examples as follows.

- (19) My father, who works in London, has come back to see me.

 Wo baba zai lundun gongzuo. Ta huilai kan wo le.

 I father in London work he back come see me (AM)
- (20) The City of Tianjin, which is one of the biggest three cities in China, is nice.
 Tianjin shi hen piaoliang. Ta shi zhongguo san da chengshi zhi yi.
 Tianjin city very beautiful it is China three big city of one

2.2. Positions of adverbials

The adverbial "is an extremely complex area of English grammar" (Quirk et al, 1972: 40) and the author of this paper has no intention of trying to sound comprehensive. In terms of word order, the English adverbial may generally take three possible positions in a sentence: preposition, medial position and postposition, depending on various factors. It may be realized by adverbs, noun phrases, prepositional phrases, finite verb clauses, non-finite verbal phrases, and so on. Look at the following.

- (21) Tom often goes to bed late (medial and post position)
- (22) Making a lot of noise they praised Tom. (preposition)
- (23) Peter was playing although he was very tired. (postposition)
- (24) When they saw the report, they were amused. (preposition)
- (25) I'll stay with my aunt Julia while in Boston though I may stay with a friend of mine. (postposition)

In Chinese, however, the English adverbial is branched off into two different categories: the adverbial and the adverbial complement. The former is usually placed before the verb or adjective it modifies whereas the latter is usually placed after the verb or adjective it modifies. (Xu Shizhen 1985: 145) For example:

- 15 ri dansheng. 5 yue yu 1920 nian Yuehande fuqin day be born month John's father on year (adverbial; premodification) yu 1920 nian 5 yue 15 ri. dansheng Yuehande fuqin day month father be born on year John's (adv complement; post) John's father was born on May 15, 1920. (adverbial of time; postmodification)
- zuozhe. zai wu qian Tamen (adverbial; premodification) be sitting before at house they zuo *zai wu* qian. Tamen before (adv complement; postmodification) at house they They are sitting before the house. (adverbial of place; postmodification)
- (28) Tangmu shuohua hen kuai.

 Tom speak very fast (adverbial; premodification)

 Tangmu congmingde hen.

 Tom clever very (adv complement; postmodification)

 Tom is very clever. (adverbial of degree; premodification)

From the above, we see that the adverbial in Chinese takes a very rigid position; it is always placed before the verb or adjective it modifies: premodification. The adverbial in English, however, may take various postions as mentioned above as the circumstances require. We may formulate this idea as follows:

Position of English adverbials:

E1
$$S + V + O + ADV$$

E2 $ADV + S + V + O$
E3 $S + ADV + V + O$
E4 $S + V + ADV + O$
E5 $S + Vpart1 + ADV + Vpart2 + O$
E6 $ADV + ADJ$
E7 $ADJ + ADV$

Position of Chinese adverbials:

C1
$$S + ADV + V + O/ADV + S + V + O$$

C2 $ADV + ADJ$

Normally, most of the adverbial clauses, and many other kinds of adverbials in English have postposition, that is, placed after the main clause or at the end of the sentence as Formula (E1) above shows — which forms a sharp contrast with those in Chinese as Formula (C1) above shows — but when they are put before the main clause or at the beginning of the sentence, they are usually done so for a reason: being emphasized, made more formal, needed rhetorically, and so on. Look at the following pairs for comparison.

- Jane did not go to school yesterday because she fell ill. (normal)

 Because she fell ill, Jane did not go to school yesterday. (emphasis)
- (30) She won first prize, though none of us had expected it. (OALD 4th ed.)

 Though none of us had expected it, she won the prize. (OALD: "more formal when used at the beginning of the sentence")
- Then he told me that my wife was killed in a car accident as if the first piece of news had not been enough to make me burst out crying. (normal) As if the first piece of news had not been enough to make me burst out crying, he told me that my wife was killed in a car accident. (emphasis)
- (32) She wouldn't go whatever he might say. (normal) Whatever he might say, she wouldn't go. (emphasis)
- (33) Five years later in the same cinema, he saw a film (followed by a long, long attributive clause). (rhetorical)

When two or more adverbials are used together in the same sentence, there seem to be a few general rules with respect to their order both in English and in Chinese. These rules are not always functional because there are too many factors influencing the matter. However, here in this article, they are extremely significant since they will enable the reader to see the difference in word order between the two languages. The following rules in English are based on Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983: 16):

- A. Adverbials of direction tend to go before those of manner. (e.g.: to the shop quickly)
- B. Adverbials of manner and position have interchangeable order with each other. (e.g.: in the room quietly/quietly in the room)
- C. Adverbials of direction tend to go before those of position and they tend to be adjacent. (e.g.: quickly around the track at the park/around the track at the park quickly)
- D. Adverbials of time and frequency tend to be placed after those of direction, manner, and position. (e.g.: to the shop in town at top speed every day at noon)
- E. Adverbials of time and frequency have interchangeable order with each other. (e.g.: every three days in a month/in a month every three days)
- F. Adverbials of purpose and reason tend to follow all other adverbials. (e.g.: to the shop in town very quickly every day at noon because..../for..../so as to..../in order to....)
- G. Adverbials of purpose go before those of reason. (e.g.: in order to get there in time because he does not want to miss the train.)
- H. Shorter adverbials tend to occur before longer ones, regardless of the above. (e.g.: on Monday with his usual indignation)
- I. When two or more adverbials of the same category occur in the same sentence, the most specific one tends to come first and the most general one tends to come last. (e.g., at 2:00 on September 1 in 1997)

And the following rules in Chinese where two or more adverbials occur together in the same sentence are based on Huang Borong (1994: 91), with exceptions.

- A. Generally adverbials in Chinese are placed before the main verb of the sentence.
- B. Adverbials of condition + time + place + manner + scope + negation + degree + way: each is followed by the next in that order. For example:
- (34) Xuduo daibiao zuotian zaixiuxshiili dou reqingde tong ta jiaotan.

 1 2 3 4 5

 many deputies yesterday in waiting room all enthusiastically with him talk

 Many deputies all talked enthusiastically with him in the waiting room yesterday.

3 4 5 2 1

35) Ruguo shi ta ta cai bu weile dedao zhege gongzuo zheme naixinde zainaer deng ne.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

if be he he just not for get this job so patiently there wait

(particle)

He just would not have been waiting there so patiently to get this job if it had been him.

2 3 7 5 6 4 1

In this part of the article (2.2.), we have been discussing the word order of the attributive and the adverbial in a sentence respectively and separately. Now if we put both elements together in the same sentence, we will find that the trouble that the difference between them causes in the two languages is even more serious. Look at the following pairs of sentences in English and Chinese:

(36) [Time goes fast for one] [who has a sense of beauty], [when there are pretty

1 2
children in a pool and a young Diana on the edge, to receive with wonder

3 anything you can catch] (Zhang et al. 1980: 158)

[Dang ni gen keaide haizimen zhan zaichizili, you you ge nianqingde Diana

3 zaichibian haoqide jieshou ni zhuoshanglaide renhe dongxi de shihou], [ruguo ni

2 dongde shenme jiao mei de hua], [shijian shi guode henkuaide]

1 (The translation into the pinyin Chinese is the author's.)

(37) [And I take heart from the fact that the enemy], [which boasts that it can occupy 1 2 the strategic point in a couple of hours], [has not yet been able to take even the 3 outlying regions], [because of the stiff resistance that gets in the way.]

(Zhang et al 1980: 159)

[Youyu shoudao wanqiang zudangzhe], [chuixu neng zaijixiaoshinei jiu]

4 2

[zhanling zhanlueyaodide diren shenzhi hanmeiyouneng zhanling waiwei didai],

3 [zheyi shishi shiwo zengqiangle xinxin.]

1 (The translation into the pinyin Chinese is the author's.)

3. Summary

The basic word order in modern English and modern Chinese is similar to each other. Both languages have the same word order SVO just as section 2.1. of this paper has clearly shown. However, these two languages often appear so different from each other in word order. A careful look has led to a very significant discovery that it is the two elements of the *attributive* and the *adverbial* that make English and Chinese look so different in the word order. This analysis will provide fresh insights into further studies of the two languages and give some help to those who have been puz-

zled by the complexity of the word order in learning, studying or translating one language into the other. Of course, there are other differences between these two languages in word order, such as those in questions, inversions, etc., but it takes another article or more articles to satisfy that purpose.

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