

A Contrastive Analysis Between the Chinese and English Versions of *If I Were King* from the Perspective of Hypotaxis and Parataxis

Chen Hongping

School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Baoding, 071000, China

Zheng Yameng*

School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Baoding, 071000, China

Abstract

Though sharing some commonalities, English and Chinese do hold their own characteristics. Hypotaxis and parataxis are generally considered to be among the most significant differences between English and Chinese. Though previous studies have analyzed hypotaxis and parataxis from different perspectives, a few of them have applied them to prose translation. *If I Were King*, a typical essay written by Nie Gannu, is translated by Zhang Peiji (2012) and compiled in his *Selected Modern Chinese Essays 1*¹. This paper is in an attempt to make a contrastive analysis between the Chinese and English versions of *If I Were King* from the perspective of hypotaxis and parataxis. The first part gives a brief introduction to the previous studies on hypotaxis and parataxis and *If I Were King*. The second part clarifies the meaning of hypotaxis and parataxis. Methodology is discussed in the third part. As the main part of this paper, the fourth part is the case studies on three levels: the lexical level, syntactic level and discourse level. The final part makes a summary and provides some practical suggestions. Through analysis, this paper aims to make other language learners have a better grasp of hypotaxis and parataxis so as to facilitate translation, especially prose translation. Besides, this paper may also provide enlightenment for scholars of contrastive linguistics.

Keywords: Contrastive analysis; Hypotaxis; Parataxis; Case studies; Three levels.



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1. Introduction

It is undeniable that there exist many differences between English and Chinese. Contrastive studies between English and Chinese have been conducted by many scholars both at home and abroad, including Nida (1982), Lian Shuneng (1993), Pan Wenguo (1997) and Shao Zhihong (2013), who have agreed that Chinese emphasizes parataxis while English puts emphasis on hypotaxis. Nida (1982) has also pointed out that perhaps the most prominent difference between English and Chinese is hypotaxis and parataxis.

If I Were King, depicting an imaginary world where the author is the king, is a typical essay written by Nie Gannu, an outstanding essayist in modern China. This essay has been translated by Zhang Peiji and compiled in his *Selected Modern Chinese Essays 1*. As Zhang Peiji (2007) has mentioned, it is a satirical essay written in a clear and plain manner, showing contempt for despotic rulers and servility. Following Zhang Peiji, Liu Shicong and Cai Lijian have also translated *If I Were King*. Although Zhang Peiji's translation is the earliest, it is also the most classic. Therefore, Zhang's translation is chosen in this paper.

Until now, there are studies focusing on the pragmatic meanings (Shen Lianyun, 2003), cultural interpretations (Xu jun, 2006) and philosophical reflections (Zhang Sijie and Zhang, 2001) of hypotaxis and parataxis. However, researches on applying hypotaxis and parataxis to prose translation is insufficient. Furthermore, the studies on *If I Were King* are relatively deficient as, up to my knowledge, there are no more than five relevant papers. Thus this essay aims to conduct a contrastive analysis between the Chinese and English versions of *If I Were King* from the perspective of hypotaxis and parataxis. This paper also attempts to provide other scholars with some practical suggestions on translation between Chinese and English.

2. Theoretical Framework

It has been generally recognized that English language favors hypotaxis while Chinese places emphasis on parataxis. To begin with, the meaning of hypotaxis and parataxis needs to be clarified:

The so-called "parataxis" means that the words or clauses in a sentence are connected by means of language such as connectives to express grammatical meaning and logical relations....The so-called "hypotaxis" means that the grammatical meaning and logical relations of words and clauses are expressed through inherent meaning of words or clauses (Lian Shuneng, 1993).

This definition implies that the differences of hypotaxis and parataxis exist only on the lexical and syntactic levels. However, other scholars insist on the view that the differences also exist on the discourse or textual level (Pan Wenguo, 1997). This paper combines the two opinions and tries to make a contrastive analysis between the Chinese

¹ *Selected Modern Chinese Essays* (four volumes), cover many a representative prose created by brilliant essayists of modern China. Zhang Peiji's successful translation has provided a model of Chinese modern prose's translation for Chinese translators.

and English versions of *If I Were King* from the perspective of hypotaxis and parataxis on three levels: the lexical level, syntactic level and discourse level.

3. Methodology

As a qualitative study, this paper employs contrastive analysis and case studies to justify itself. Because Chinese lays stress on parataxis while English on hypotaxis, there must exist differences in the expressions of the Chinese and English versions of *If I Were King*. Only through contrastive analysis can those differences be found and analyzed effectively. It is noteworthy that contrastive analysis is often used in bilingual/multilingual and bi-cultural/multicultural areas.

This paper believes that the differences of hypotaxis and parataxis exist not only on the lexical and syntactic levels, but also on the discourse level. To fully justify this viewpoint, several cases will be discussed in the following part. On the lexical level, cases related to nouns, pronouns, and verbs are selected because they are more frequently used in practical use. Therefore, they are more representative than other words like adjectives and adverbs. Generally, English nouns, pronouns and verbs may have morphological changes in different contexts. However, this is not the case for Chinese. On the syntactic level, Chinese often omits the subject of a sentence and the logical relationship in a sentence is not necessarily expressed explicitly while an English sentence must contain a subject and the logical relationship should be explicitly expressed by using logical connectives. Such kind of cases will be discussed on the syntactic level. Similarly, cases concerned with discourse cohesion will be discussed on the discourse level as Chinese discourse coherence are realized by inherent meaning of sentences while English discourse coherence are realized by cohesive devices like reference, ellipsis and conjunction.

4. Case Studies

This part attempts to conduct a contrastive analysis of the Chinese and English versions of *If I Were King* from the perspective of hypotaxis and parataxis. The analysis centers on three levels: the lexical level, syntactic level and discourse level. Related cases are provided in each of the three levels.

4.1. Case Studies on the Lexical Level

In English, nouns, pronouns and verbs will exploit morphological changes to express different meanings in different contexts. In Chinese, however, spellings of nouns, pronouns and verbs are relatively fixed and rarely have morphological changes. These differences may call for morphological changes of these words while translating from Chinese into English.

4.1.1. Nouns and Pronouns

Generally speaking, Chinese nouns have relatively fixed forms regardless of the single or plural meaning they may convey in different contexts. However, an English noun in an English sentence is either in its single or plural form according to the meaning it carries. Similarly, English pronouns should change their forms with case while their Chinese equivalents rarely show any change. In other words, Chinese covertly shows its meaning while English overtly utilizes morphological changes of nouns and pronouns to express different meanings. For example,

① “我将看不见一个人的脸，所看见的只是他们的头顶或帽盔。”

“I could see none of their faces; all I could see were the tops of their heads or the hats or helmets on their heads.”

As Chinese emphasizes parataxis, there are no morphological changes to separate plural meanings from single ones of nouns and it has been a convention among Chinese that they share the same signs. Therefore, it is, at first sight, hard to distinguish whether “头顶” and “帽盔” convey single or plural meanings. However, a native Chinese speaker, judging from the preceding phrase “他们的”, can figure out that the two Chinese phrases “头顶” and “帽盔” are in the plural. In contrast, English emphasizes hypotaxis and thus the English version is supposed to explicitly present the plural meaning by making morphological changes, that is, adding suffix “-s” to single forms of “head” and “hat”. That is why “头顶” and “帽盔” are translated to “heads” and “hats”.

② “没有在我之上的人了，没有和我同等的人了，我甚至会感到单调，寂寞和孤独。”

“There would be no one above me or on an equal footing with me. I would even feel bored, lonely and isolated.”

Since Chinese language prefers parataxis, there are no morphological changes to differentiate between the nominative case and objective case of pronouns. However, English lays stress on hypotaxis and it is expected to use either the nominative case or the objective case form of a pronoun in a specific position. In the Chinese version, the first two “我” serve as subject and the third one as object, but its form stays the same no matter what constituent it serves as in the sentence. When translating from Chinese into English, however, the first two “我” are translated as “I” and the third one as “me” respectively. In this case, a translator is expected to make morphological changes of nouns and pronouns when translating from Chinese into English.

4.1.2. Verbs

Owing to the effects of parataxis, the forms of Chinese verbs remain relatively the same and seldom have morphological changes. Oppositely, English language prefers hypotaxis and thus English verbs assume different forms including past tense, present participle and past participle forms in different contexts.

③ “在电影刊物上看见一个影片的名字：《我若为王》。”

“Recently in a movie magazine I came across the title of a film: *If I Were King*.”

Compared with the Chinese sentence that implicitly signifies that the action “看” was done through the word “见”, the English translation explicitly uses “came across”, the past-tense form of “come across”. In other words, Chinese verbs in present tense and past tense share the same form but this is unacceptable in English. Therefore, when translating from Chinese into English, the translators should pay special attention to the translation of verbs.

④ “我若为王，自然我的妻就是王后了。”

“If I Were king, my wife would of course be queen.”

This case proves that Chinese lays stress on parataxis while English emphasizes hypotaxis. Though both two sentences refer to a hypothetical situation, the verbs in the Chinese sentence do not show morphological change at all while the English version explicitly employs the subjunctive modals “were” and “would be”.

As illustrated above, owing to the differences between parataxis and hypotaxis, nouns, pronouns and verbs in the Chinese version of *If I Were king* rarely have morphological changes that English versions do. One can clearly get the meaning from different forms of nouns, pronouns and verbs in the English version while he has to analyze the Chinese version to find the meaning implied in the signs. In that case, it is reasonable to argue that the differences between Chinese and English versions of *If I Were king* corroborate the view that Chinese emphasizes parataxis while English puts emphasis on hypotaxis on the lexical level. When translating, translators are expected to analyze the Chinese sentences so as to find the real meanings implied in words and translate these words properly and vice versa.

4.2. Case Studies on the Syntactic Level

Generally speaking, there are five basic sentence patterns in English: SV, SVP, SVO, SVOO and SVOC. In contrast, Chinese has no fixed sentence patterns. To put it another way, Chinese sentence structure is relatively free. For example, the subject of a Chinese sentence can be omitted and the logical relationship in a sentence is not necessarily expressed explicitly.

4.2.1. Subject

As Chinese focuses on parataxis, the subject of a Chinese sentence can be omitted without making misunderstandings. In contrast, an English sentence is bound to include a subject as a consequence of hypotaxis.

⑤ “我的妻的德性，我不怀疑，为王后只会有余的。”

“With all her moral excellence, of which I make no doubt, she would be more than qualified for being a queen.”

Since hypotaxis is favored by English language while parataxis is emphasized by Chinese, there are many differences between the two sentences. First of all, the English sentence begins with a capital letter while the initial word in the Chinese sentence shows no changes at all. In the Chinese sentence, the real subject “我的妻” of the sentence “(我的妻)为王后只会有余的” is omitted without causing ambiguity. Oppositely, the English version needs to add the subject “she” since an English sentence is bound to include a subject. That is to say, a null-subject Chinese sentence should be translated into an English sentence with a subject.

4.2.2. Sentence Cohesion

⑥ “这自然是一种完全可笑的幻想，我根本不想做王，也根本看不起王。”

“This is of course a ridiculous fancy, for being a king is the last thing I aspire to and also a thing I utterly despise.”

With some efforts, one can understand that the Chinese sentence covertly implies a cause-effect relationship within the sentence. However, there is no need to explicitly use a conjunction of causality like “因为” here because parataxis is favored by Chinese language. In contrast, English prefers hypotaxis and thus the English translation adds “for”, a conjunction of causality to overtly express the cause-effect relationship within the sentence.

Given that a Chinese sentence can omit its subject and conjunctions while this kind of omission is unacceptable in English, it relies on translators’ effort to find out the subject and correlations of the clauses in Chinese sentences and add subjects and connectives in the English version to match English expressions and vice versa.

4.3. Case Studies on the Discourse Level

Traditional grammar researchers divide language units into two ranks: words and sentences (Pan Wenguo, 1997). Structuralists divide language units to five ranks: morphemes, words, phrases, clauses and sentences. Additionally, modern linguists add discourse and text to the classifications. To put it in another way, the discourse is on a hierarchic level above the sentence. In terms of discourse, English frequently employs cohesive devices like reference, ellipsis and conjunction to realize coherence. In contrast, Chinese seldom uses such devices and it relies on readers or translators’ understanding to find the implied semantic and logical meaning.

⑦ “一个太子或王子是如何地尊贵呀，会如何地被人们像捧天上的星星一样地捧来捧去呀。假如我能想象，倒是件不是没有趣味的事。”

“Imagine how noble and dignified a crown prince or prince would be and how people would keep lauding him to the skies like mad! It is indeed great fun for me to visualize all of this.”

As Chinese emphasizes parataxis, cohesive devices do not overtly appear between the two Chinese sentences and it relies on readers’ own understanding to find out the logical relationship implied in the two sentences.

Influenced by hypotaxis, the English version adds “this”, a kind of reference, to refer to the preceding sentence. As a consequence, “this” in the English version successfully units the two sentences together and discourse coherence is realized.

As illustrated above, hypotaxis and parataxis do have effects on the way how Chinese and English discourses realize coherence. In this case, translators are supposed to utilize cohesive methods involving reference, ellipsis and conjunctions on the discourse level when translating from Chinese into English.

5. Conclusion

This paper has made a contrastive analysis of the Chinese and English versions from the perspective of hypotaxis and parataxis. And the case studies demonstrate that how hypotaxis and parataxis influence the translation of the Chinese version of *If I Were King* on the three levels: the lexical, syntactic and discourse level. Judging from the cases illustrated, English is characterized with explicitness and Chinese with implicitness, that is, English prefers explicit use of morphological changes of words like verbs and cohesive devices such as connectives while Chinese relies on the grammatical and logic meaning implied in its word order. Consequently, translators are not expected to merely make literal translation and they are expected to undergo transformation between parataxis and hypotaxis when doing translation from Chinese into English and vice versa. Here are some suggestions for Chinese-to-English translation:

- a. To Choose appropriate forms of nouns, pronouns and verbs in different contexts;
- b. To add subjects and conjunctions to English sentences if needed.
- c. To add conjunctions like “for”, “yet” and “unless” and use more cohesive devices such as reference and ellipsis so as to match English expression and realize discourse coherence.

And it is noteworthy that even though Chinese emphasizes parataxis and English puts emphasis on hypotaxis, sometimes Chinese also uses hypotaxis and English may use parataxis.

Additionally, because of limited ability and energy, this paper uses only one essay as the research object. In the future, more examples, essays and even other genres are needed to testify how hypotaxis and parataxis influence Chinese and English expressions so as to facilitate the translation from Chinese into English and vice versa. All in all, this paper is expected to facilitate prose translation and provide enlightenment for other scholars of contrastive linguistics.

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