

The Comparison between Inanimate Subjects in English and Animate Subjects in Chinese

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ABSTRACT. *Due to the different thinking pattern between oriental and the occidental countries, there are a lots of inanimate subject sentences in English. Inanimate subject sentence is a common and unique language phenomenon in English, but not in Chinese. This paper discusses the causes, classification and translation skills of the inanimate subject sentences, aiming to help students better understand and use inanimate subject sentences and cultivate students' English thinking, so as to realize the free switching between Chinese and English.*

KEYWORDS: *Chinese and western thinking; Inanimate subjects; Animacy*

1. The Definition of Inanimate Subjects

An animate subject refers to a subject (usually a noun or noun phrase) which itself is (or represents) a living being (e. g. a man, she, etc.), or is typically characteristic of a living being (e. g. eye, mind, etc.). An inanimate subject refers to a subject (usually a noun or noun phrase) which itself is (or represents) a non-living being (e. g. fact, words, door, etc.), or is typically characteristic of a non-living being (Xiong, 2012:113). O. Jespersen believes that the inanimate sentence is “the author is out of the picture, and hides behind the impersonal language and communicates with the reader” (Jespersen, 1951:236).

2. The Causes of Inanimate Subjects

Sapir-Whorf-Hypotheses suggests that our language helps mold our way of thinking and, consequently, different language may probably express speakers' unique ways of understanding the word (Hu, 2017:143). This hypothesis shows that language and thinking are related, and language to a certain extent reflects the culture and way of thinking of the language. Language promotes the formation of thinking, which in turn is expressed by language.

The formation of inanimate subject sentences is mainly due to the different

thought pattern between oriental and the occidental countries. Chinese people pay attention to subject thinking, while Westerners pay attention to object thinking, so the Chinese are more used to using animate subject, while Westerners are used to using inanimate subject.

For thousands of years, the Chinese nation has believed in the philosophy of “the unity of man and nature, and the integration of all things”. This is reflected in Huangdi Neijing: “the earth is square and the heaven is round. Correspondingly, human beings have round head and square feet. There is moon and sun in the sky, and man has two eyes. There is wind and rain in the sky, and people have the feeling of happiness and angry(百度百科,2019) “.This sentence shows that the shape and structure of human body correspond to all things in the world. The structure of human body can find the corresponding objects in nature. Human body seems to be the epitome of heaven and earth, emphasizing the unity of human existence and natural existence. On the one hand, the Chinese nation regards the “Id” as its perspective to understand the world. On the other hand, Chinese nation regards the whole world as a huge system containing numerous “Id”. This kind of thinking mode of perceiving the outside world with human as its center eventually makes Chinese a language with strong subject consciousness(孙兴文,2006:127).

English is influenced by the western culture of ancient Greece and the formal logic created by Aristotle. Most western countries are in an open marine geographical environment. Since ancient Greece, Westerners have paid attention to the study of natural objects(李芬芬,2013:32). Western culture advocates “the opposition between man and nature, the dichotomy between things and human beings”. It holds that man’s thinking is an objective thing independent of nature, and that man can change nature or even conquer nature through struggle and efforts, which makes English a language with strong object consciousness.

3. The Animacy Hierarchy of the Noun

“Animate” in inanimate subject refers to life. The sentence with an animate subject is called animate subject sentence, otherwise it is called a inanimate subject sentence. Animacy and inanimacy are relative. To study the inanimate subject, learners should have a concept of the animacy hierarchy. Animacy is regarded as one of the important attributes of human language(Szewczyk and Schriefers,2011:209). Ji Jie ranks the animacy hierarchy of nouns in the following order:

生命体	非生命体
人>动物>身体>植物	≈群组机构>心理概念>人造实体>状态概念>天然实体>属性概念
高	低

3.1 Concrete Things Serving as the Subject

The subject of this kind of inanimate subject sentence is usually some nouns expressing concrete things. For example: sign, watch, etc. This kind of sentence is generally matched with the animate predicate, which makes the sentence have the effect of personification and more vivid, as if the inanimate things are suddenly alive.

e.g. (1) The sign says everyone has a responsibility to protect the environment.

牌子上写着保护环境人人有责.

e.g. (2) My watch says it is twelve o'clock.

我的手表显示现在是十二点.

Translation method: The method of reservation can be adopted in E-C translation, which is to say, the object serves as the subject directly. Generally speaking, in Chinese, Chinese people use subject as the subject. Due to the influence of western languages, the object serves as the subject in Chinese is more and more common, which is accepted by people and can not make readers feel awkward to read.

3.2 Time or Time Period and Place Serving as the Subject

The subject of this kind of inanimate subject sentence is usually time, time period or places, and the collocation of animate predicates is usually witness, see, experience, etc.

e.g.(1) The tourist numbers for London saw a significant increase between 1985 and 1999.

1985 至 1999 年之间,伦敦的游客数量显著增长.

e.g.(2) The past two decades have witnessed the rapid development of China's economy.

过去二十年,中国的经济快速发展.

Translation method: In Chinese, people are used to using animate things as subjects, time and place as adverbials of time and place respectively. In the process of English-Chinese translation, the time and place that serves as the subject in the original text can be translated into adverbials, and the noun that serves as the predicate can be translated into a verb. For example, the nouns "increase" and "development" in the original sentence can be translated into the verbs "增长" and "发展" in Chinese. The adjectives in the sentence can be translated into adverbs "显著地" and "快速地" accordingly. Just because of the Chinese language habit, "地" will be omitted.

3.3 Abstract Nouns Indicating Mental Activity or Feelings Serving as the Subject

For example: anxiety, anger, etc.

e.g.(1) Anxiety seized me these days.

这几天我都很焦虑.

e.g.(2) All my courage deserted me.

我完全丧失了勇气.

Translation method: In E-C translation, the subject in the original text can be converted into predicate verb, and the predicate in the original text can be converted into the subject. For example, in the original sentence, “anxiety” is the subject and “me” is the predicate. In E-C translation, “me” can be regarded as the subject, while “anxiety” can be regarded as predicate verb.

3.4 Nouns with Action and Action Meaning Serving as the Subject

The subject of this kind of inanimate subject sentence is usually noun forms of verbs. For example: sight, arrival, thought, idea, etc.

e.g.(1) The very sight of him makes me angry.

我一看到他就生气.

e.g.(2) Measures should be taken to protect our environment.

(我们)必须采取措施保护环境.

Translation method:

1. The original meaning is that “看到他使我生气”, but it is obviously literal translation, which is not in line with the logical thinking of Chinese people. so the pattern “as soon as ... 就...” should be adapted in E-C translation. The translation should be “我一看到他就生气”, which is closer to the Chinese expression.

2. “Measure” in the example sentence contains the meaning of action. Such inanimate sentences can also be translated into sentences without subject, such as “必须采取措施保护环境”. Or general nouns indicating the agent, such as “我们”, “人们”, “每个人”, “政府”, etc.

3.5 ”It “Serving as the Formal Subject

e.g.(1) It never occurred to me that I could make it.

我从来没想过我会成功.

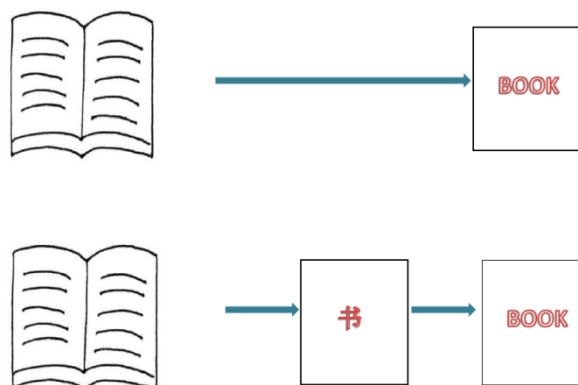
e.g.(2) It's very kind of you to help me.

你能帮助我真是太好了。

The functions and semantics of “it” can be classified into three categories: as a unspecified word, as a preparatory word and as a word introducing cleft sentence(Zhang,1989:830). “It” as a formal subject generally refers to all things (situations) or has some syntactic functions to make the sentence grammar complete or play an emphasis function, so as to enhance speakers’ mood(席建国,马苏勇,2002:28). Quirk once pointed out that “sometimes the subject only includes the meaningless substitute ‘it’ and does not reflect the essential substance”(Randolph,1985:354).

4. The Cultivation of English Thinking

The formation of inanimate subject is caused by the differences of thinking mode between China and the west, so the cultivation of English thinking is of great significance to our understanding of inanimate subject. English thinking means that when people see something or want to express an idea, the first expression is English, rather than the transformation process from Chinese to English. It is simply shown as follows:



Understanding the way of thinking in English is the premise of free switching between Chinese and English. Conditioned reflex can be established and free switching between Chinese and English can be realized after thousands of practices. There are some effective ways to cultivate students’ English thinking mode:

4.1 Understanding of Western Culture

Language is an important carrier of culture. Only on the premise of understanding the culture of the country can a language be mastered. The

development history of a country has an important influence on people's way of thinking. Only by understanding western culture can learners better understand western thinking, so as to overcome the negative transfer of mother tongue and get rid of the influence of Chinese thinking on English expression.

4.2 Large Amount of Imitation

A large amount of input can produce a large amount of output. On the premise of sufficient input and imitation, language sense can be formed by repeated stimulation of hearing and voice. The formation of language sense is the beginning of the cultivation of English thinking.

4.3 Participation in the English Atmosphere

With a certain vocabulary foundation, learners should speak English boldly and use English in real life, for example, describing one day in English or actively communicating with others in English. Cumulatively, a conditioned reflection of "direct English expression" can be formed rather than a psychological process of "first Chinese then English".

5. Conclusion

Language is a tool for the expression of ideas. To a certain extent, the structure and expression of language reflect the way of people's thinking all over the world. Learning inanimate subject sentence, a unique language phenomenon in English, is of great significance to understand western culture and master English thinking. This paper discusses the causes, classification and translation skills of inanimate subject sentences in English from the perspective of the differences between Chinese and Western thinking.

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