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A Comparative Study of Word Orders In English and Chinese Coordinate Constructions

Yang WU

College of Foreign Languages, Hunan City University, Yiyang, 413000, CHINA

Abstract: Word orders in English and Chinese coordinate constructions vary considerably although they share some similarities. Traditional semantic explanations are not fully sufficient to account for the differences. In this article, we make a comparative study of word orders in English and Chinese coordinate constructions and attempt to provide a semantically, phonologically and pragmatically based explanation.

Keywords: Word Order; Coordinate Construction; Explanation

1. Introduction

In A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language, Quirk et al define coordination as ‘the combining of similar elements into parts or series. A conjoin may be any constituent such as a predicate, a predication, a phrase, or a word. The important point, however, is that the conjoins of each construction are parallel to one another in meaning, function and also (generally) in form.’ (Quirk, 1985: 942)

Though coordinated in similar forms, word orders in English and in Chinese might differ. Traditionally, word orders are explained from a semantic point of view, which shows its limitations when applying to the differences. In this article, we make a comparative study of word orders in English and Chinese coordinate constructions and attempt to provide a semantically, phonologically and pragmatically based explanation.

2. Similarities

Some universal cognitive principles related to sequence and proximity are adopted both in English and Chinese, such as temporal sequence, positive-negative, salient entity-less salient entity and proximity iconicity.

2.1. Temporal sequence

According to Landsberg (1995:81), ‘the order of elements in language parallels that in physical experience or the order of knowledge’. In coordinate constructions, a temporal sequence is reflected both in English and Chinese, so that the event that happened first is put before the event that follows it. e.g.

(1) chūn xià qiū dōng
spring, summer, autumn and winter

(2) zǎo zhōng wǎn fàn
breakfast, lunch and supper

(3) Paula is flying to Madrid tonight and to Athens next week.

bō lǎ jiāng yú jīn wǎn fēi dī mǎ dé lǐ, xià xīng qī fēi dī yǎ diǎn.

3.3. Phonological constraints

Word orders in English and Chinese coordinate constructions are much affected by phonological mechanisms. However, each of them has its own phonological constraints. English word order is affected by vowel constraints and the “short before long principle” while that of Chinese by constraints of Mandarin tones.

(1) English Vowel Constraints

In English, if the conjoins are monosyllabic words, they are generally arranged according to the order of vowels, i.e. the low vowels come after the high ones, the back vowels come after the front ones (Quirk, 1985:971). On the contrary, the word orders in the Chinese versions are the exact opposite. e.g.

(19) north and south

/ɔ:/ (front) /au/ (back)

nán běi

(20) right and left

/ai/ (high) /e/ (low)

zuǒ yòu

(21) old and new

/ɔu/ (front) /ju:/ (back)

xīn jǐu

(22) eyes and ears

/ai/ (high) /iɔ/ (low)

ěr mù

(23) eat and drink

/i:/ (high) /i/ (low)

yīn shí

(24) rich and poor

/i/ (front) /uɔ/ (back)

pín fù

(25) back and forth

/æ/ (front) /ɔ:/ (back)

qián hòu

(2) English Short Before Long Constraints

English word order is also influenced by a “short-before-long” principle. If one of the conjoint has more syllables than the other, the order of conjoined words can, however, be influenced by a tendency for the longer word to come second. This is particularly noticeable in the so-called binominals, i.e. relatively fixed conjoint phrases having two members, e.g. big and ugly, cup and saucer.’ (Quirk, 1985:971)

Examples illustrated in many books on translation can be satisfactorily explained by this ‘short before long’ principle. e.g.

(26) fire and water

shuǐ huǒ

(27) joy and sorrow

kǔ lè

(28) bride and bridegroom

xīn láng xīn niáng

(29) art and literature

wén yì

(30) widow and widower

guān guǎ

(3) Chinese Tonal Pattern Constraints

Many Chinese scholars have discovered through years of hard work that there are two factors determining word order of Chinese coordinate disyllables: meaning and tone (Chen Aiwen, Yu Ping, 1979 : 101). Chinese Mandarin is characterized by four tones and the most distinctive feature of Chinese is the use of tones and the alternative arrangement of even and uneven tones. Being artistically expressive, the contrastive even and uneven tones sound like music. The regulation of tones and pitches plays a decisive role. It means that compounding of Chinese disyllables is generally arranged in accordance with ‘four tones and eight pitches’—clear even, obscure even; clear rising, obscure rising; clear going, obscure going; clear entering, obscure entering. (yīn píng, yáng pín, yīn shàng, yáng shàng, yīn qù, yáng qù, yīn rù, yáng rù) (Pan Wenguo, 1997:280) e.g.

(31) píng shàng (even, rising): ˊ ˋ

huā niǎo

birds and flowers

(32) píng qù (even, going): ˊ ˋ

tián jìng

track and field

(33) píng shàng (even, rising): ˊ ˋ

chí zǎo

sooner or later

(34) yīn píng, yáng pín (clear even, obscure even): ˋ ˋ

xuè ròu

flesh and blood

3.4. Pragmatic reasons

Both in English and in Chinese, it is not uncommon to find cases in which the word orders violate the above mentioned constraints. In these circumstances, the variations are made stylistically and are explained for pragmatic purposes.

The sequence of coordinated numerals provides a good example. When numerals are linked, they often follow a natural sequence, which is the case both in English and in Chinese. But under special circumstances such as the Olympic Games or the Oscar ceremony, the English order of presenting awards is entirely different from the traditional Chinese practice, though the former has now been accepted and practiced in China. In the West, the gold medal or the first prize, instead of being awarded first, is deliberately announced in the end in order to create on the audiences a sense of anticipation and excitement.

The same is true of countdown on rocket launch. With the announcing of “Five, four, three, two, one, blast off!”, the pleasurable tension of wondering is created for the