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

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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 lā jiāng yú jīn wăn fēi dǐ mă dé lǐ, xià xīng qī fēi dǐ yǎ diǎn.

2.2. Positive - negative

When two opposing elements are linked, the positive often comes before the negative. e.g.

(4) Are you for or against the motion?

duì cǐ tí àn, nǐ shì zàn chéng hái shì făn duì?

(5) The Defense Department has neither confirmed nor denied the report.

guó fáng bù duì zhè yì bào gào jì méi yǒu pī zhǔn yĕ méi yǒu fǒu jué.

2.3. Salient entity - Less salient entity

Van Dijk (1977:106) suggests that 'descriptions of the state of affairs will be determined by perceptual salience so that the more salient entity will be mentioned first'. This is followed both in English and Chinese. Some of these patterns involve: large-small, near-far, up-down and inside-outside. e.g.

We can wait for you here or in the car.

wố mén kẻ yĩ zài zhè děng nĩ, yẻ kẻ yĩ zài chē nèi děng. The piston moved up and down with increasing speed. huố sãi shàng xià tiào dòng, yuè dòng yuè kuài.

(8) Soldiers were on guard inside and outside.

lǐ lǐ wài wài dōu yǒu shì bīng bă shǒu.

2.4. Proximity iconicity

Proximity iconicity follows that elements which have a close relationship are placed close together. This is shown both in English and Chinese since they tend to make a juxtaposition of things that semantically fall into the same class or category, except that the close combinations are more common in Chinese, while either close or loose combinations can be found in English. e.g.

Old, young, wise, foolish, tall and short men were invited without distinction.

suŏ yǒu nán de, wú lùn lǎo de shǎo de, cōng míng de yú chǔn de,

gão de ăi de, dōu yì shì tóng rén, yì yì yāo qǐng.

(10) They all gathered around, men and women, old and young.

nán n
án nắ nữ , lǎo lǎo shào shào, dà jiā dōu jù zài le yì
 α

In the Chinese versions, close combination is much more acceptable, in which commas would not be shown between nán (men) and nǚ(women), and between lǎo(old) and shào (young).

3. Differences

In addition to semantic explanations, word orders in English and Chinese coordinate constructions are also affected by phonological constraints and pragmatic reasons.

3.1. Initial-Weight vs End-Weight

The Chinese mode of thinking is characterized by synthetic thinking, while that of English is analytic. A syn-

thetic thinking manifests itself in the word order from the most significant to the least significant, whereas in English analytic thinking, the word order goes from the least significant to the most significant.

In coordinate constructions, if one of the conjoins is more significant than the other and is expected to receive more emphasis, Chinese has a tendency of placing the weightier element first, with the effect of an initial weight; whereas in English, the weightier element often comes last, with the effect of an end weight. e.g.

(11) jiù sǐ fú shāng,shí xíng gé mìng de rén dào zhǔ yì. Heal the wounded, rescue the dying, practice revolutionary humanitarianism.

(12) xử duỗ gàn bù bù shủ yú zhè ge jí tuán,yīn cǐ shòu dào le dǎ jī pái chì huò qīng shì.

Many cadres do not belong to this clique and therefore are slighted, pushed aside or attacked.

(13) fēng shōu nián duō jī lěi yì diǎn, zāi huāng nián huò bàn zāi huāng nián jiù bù jī lěi huò zhě shǎo jī lěi yì diǎn. Accumulate more in good years and less or none in years when the crops half fail or totally fail.

In (11), the Chinese jiù sǐ fú shāng (rescue the dying, heal the wounded) is arranged from the more urgent to the less urgent; in (12),dǎ jī pái chì huò qīng shì(attacked,pushed aside and slighted) is arranged from the most severe punishment to the least severe treatment; in (13),zāi huāng nián huò bàn zāi huāng nián (none or less in years) is arranged from the heavier loss to the less heavy loss, and bù jī lěi huò zhě shǎo jī lěi (totally fail or half fail) is ordered from the most unexpected result to the more acceptable. In English, however, the reversed order sound more idiomatic and is therefore more acceptable.

3.2. Second-Person view vs First-Person view

In the order of conjoined personal pronouns, the presence of the first personal pronoun plays a decisive role and the word order between English and Chinese is entirely different. Guided by the principle of politeness (Quirk, 1985: 964), English generally follows a 'second-person view', i.e. placing the second personal pronoun first and the first personal pronoun last, such as "you, he and I". In contrast, Chinese follows the 'first-person view' and seems to be more self-conscious, hence the order wŏ nǐ tā (me, you and him), with the first personal pronoun at the initial position. e.g.

(14) If you, Mary and I have already finished, we can have lunch.

yào shì wǒ nǐ mǎ lì dōu zuò wán le ,wǒ mén jiù chī fàn.

(15) We have a lot to talk about, you and I.

wǒ hé nǐ, wǒ mén yào tán hěn duō.

(16) Freda and I are good friends.

wǒ hé fú léi dá shì hǎo péng yǒu. (17) your, his and my reports.

wǒ de bào gào, nǐ de bào gào, tā de bào gào

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 / o : / (front) /au / (back) nán běi (20) right and left /ai /(high) /e / (low) zuŏ yòu (21) old and new / ∂ u/(front) /ju: / (back) xīn iiù (22) eyes and ears / ai /(high) /i ∂ / (low) ěr mù (23) eat and drink / i: /(high) /i / (low) yĭn shí (24) rich and poor /i /(front) /u ∂ /(back) pín fù

(25) back and forth

qián hòu

/æ/(front) / o:/(back)

(2) English Short Before Long Constraints

English word order is also influenced by a "short-beforelong" 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 socalled binominals, i.e. relatively fixed conjoint phrases having two members, e.g. big and ugly, cup and saucer.' (Ouirk .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 shuĭ huŏ

(27) joy and sorrow

kŭ lè

(28) bride and bridegroom

xīn láng xīn niáng

(29) art and literature

wén yì

(30) widow and widower guān guă

(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): huā niǎo birds and flowers (32) píng qù(even, going): 'tián jìng track and field (33) píng shàng(even, rising): 'chí zǎo sooner or later (34) yīn píng, yáng pín(clear even, obscure even): '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