

# Analysis of the Differences between English and Chinese Language Structure

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## **Abstract:**

Both English and Chinese have their own long-term development history. In the process of continuous improvement, both languages have formed their own characteristics. Due to the different environments, there are inevitably some differences between the two languages. Their differences are mainly reflected in pronunciation, grammar, text structure, language taboos and so on. These differences lead to English learners not being able to completely get rid of Chinese's interference when learning English, so that mistakes are made in the process of using it. Therefore, it is important for English learners to analyze the differences between English and Chinese sentence structures composed of words and phrases that are used to express complete meanings. It also necessary for them to consciously understand and grasp these differences.

The differences between English and Chinese language structure are actually the concrete manifestations of the differences between their thinking patterns in language. This paper explores the differences between English and Chinese sentence structure. Specifically, it analyzes the differences from four aspects: hypotaxis and parataxis, the structure of simple sentences, sentence classification, word order, active and passive voice. It can help learners get rid of the interference of Chinese during the English learning process to some degree.

**Keywords:** the differences between English and Chinese, sentence structure, hypotaxis and parataxis, word order, active and passive voice.

**摘要：**

不管是英语还是汉语，都有着各自悠久的发展历程，在不断进步的过程中，两种语言都形成了自己的特点。由于形成环境的不同，二者之间难免存在一定的差异。它们的差异主要体现在发音、语法、篇章结构、语言禁忌等方面。这些差异导致英语学习者在学习英语语音和文字时不能完全摆脱汉语的干扰，以至于在运用英语的过程中产生错误。因此，对于英语学习者来说，分析由词和词组构成的、用来表达完整意思的英汉句子结构的差异，并自觉地理解和掌握这些差异是很重要的。

英汉语言结构的差异,实际上就是英汉民族思维差异在语言中的具体体现。本文探讨了英汉句子结构的差异,具体来说,笔者从形合与意合,简单句句式结构和句子分类,语序,主动与被动这四个方面分析了英汉句子结构的差异,以期为英语学习者摆脱汉语的干扰提供帮助。

**关键词：**

英汉差异, 句子结构, 形合与意合, 语序, 主动与被动

**1 Introduction****1.1 Background**

The relationship between culture and language is closely related. Language is the carrier of culture. The cultures of different nationalities leave a strong imprint on people's language expression in the process of conveying them. People with different social and cultural backgrounds will have different ways or habits of thinking and speaking. When learning a new language, people will naturally bring his own habits into a new language, causing mistakes, not being able to speak freely or express ideas precisely and concisely. Therefore, in the process of learning English, learners should have sufficient knowledge of the differences between English and Chinese, in order to help them better master English.

**1.2 Purpose and significance**

In recent years, China has paid more and more attention to English, and it has gradually become an indispensable tool for people to interact with each other. There are certain differences in sentence structure between Chinese and English because of their different backgrounds. These differences may bring some difficulties to us during the process of learning English.

First of all, British and American people's way of thinking is linear. They follow the principle of generalization to concrete, from the whole to the individual. Secondly, English belongs to the Indo-European language family, and Chinese belongs to the Tibetan language department. The two languages are far apart. English is compact while the Chinese is loose in structure. Linguistics compare the English sentence to the "bamboo syntax", that is, the English sentence is made up of various connected words, just like the bamboo connected by the knot. The Chinese sentence is likened to "flowing syntax", that is, the Chinese sentence is coherent even without connecting words. There are still many differences that require us to understand and learn so that we can learn English better.

This study compares the differences in the English and Chinese sentence structure, which is aim to make English learners have a better learning effect on English.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Hypotaxis and parataxis

As we all know, the English language is not allied to the Chinese. Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family, while English belongs to the Indo-European language family. They have their own rules and characteristics in terms of pronunciation, word formation, syntax, rhetorical form and layout. There is no lack of similarities between the two, but there exist obvious differences as well. Because the Western nation pays attention to analyzing things, so English is a morphological language. However, under the long-term influence of Chinese traditional philosophy and culture, the Han nationality focus on the whole. This mode of thinking is reflected in Chinese, that is, Chinese uses less or no formal words when making sentences.

Eugene A. Nida (1982) said that from the linguistic point of view, the most important difference between English and Chinese is the difference between hypotaxis and parataxis. Wang Li, a famous Chinese linguist, first proposed two concepts of hypotaxis and parataxis in his book "Chinese Grammar Theory" and regarded them as two basic organizational forms of language.

"Parataxis" mainly refers to sentences are connected by their internal logical relations That is to say, there is often no connected word between words and words or sentences and sentences. In fact, through the understanding of words and sentences, we can find there exists a certain logical connection. "Hypotaxis" mainly refers it expresses meaning through grammatical means of the language itself. Specifically, the main structure of the sentence is more prominent, and the articulation between words or sentences generally has obvious signal words. If the signal word is not significant, the relationship between the two is shown by grammar. Lin Kuan (2014) believed that Chinese pays attention to the coincidence of meaning, it is often simple and clear. While English pays attention to the coincidence of form and structure, and it is rigorous. In English, the combination of the components of a sentence usually uses appropriate or linguistic conjunctions to express its structural relationship. In Chinese, the combination of the elements in a sentence mostly depends on the semantic penetration and less on the conjunction, so the form of the syntactic structure is short and concise.

According to Zhang Qin (2007) , English emphasizes the integrity and rationality of syntax. English sentences commonly use morphological changes, function words such as articles, prepositions and conjunctions, non-predicate verbs like infinitive, gerunds and participles, clauses and independent subjects to express various grammatical relationships. In contrast, Chinese can express ideas in almost any language unit. It is free and unrestrained, and the grammar is incomplete and unreasonable. There is no morphological change in Chinese, and there are no non-predicate verbs, attributive clauses, independent subject and article, especially in many cases, the lexical words are omitted.

For example, in Shelley's poem "Ode to the West Wind", there is a famous phrase: "If winter comes, can spring be far behind? " (冬天来了, 春天还会远吗?) Here, "If" in English shows a "hypothesis-judgment" relationship between the clause and the main sentence. But in Chinese, there isn't any connected word, and it does not appear abrupt. Instead, it feels more coherent. In short, "form" is an indispensable element of English sentences, while Chinese sentences are centered on "meaning".

## **2.2 Sentence structure and classification**

Both Chinese and English are composed of words, and sometimes appropriate conjunctions are added. There are many sentence components in Chinese, such as subject, predicate, object, attributive, complement, and adverbial. Similarly, there are six kinds of sentence components in English. However, they differ greatly in the composition and the types of sentences.

First of all, they have great differences in the sentence structure of simple sentences. The simple sentence is the basic sentence structure which only includes the subject, predicate and object. In terms of subject, the subject of Chinese can be omitted, as long as it does not affect the reader's reading. In English, however, in addition to imperative sentences, other kinds of sentences should have their own subjects or formal subjects. Moreover, in English, the subject can be a noun, a verb, or a phrase. However, the subject of Chinese is mostly people or things, and the phrase is rarely seen. In addition, in the difference between the simple sentence and compound sentence, the simple sentence of English must have a subject, a predicate and an object, and the phrase can also become a sentence component. However, in Chinese, a single sentence is a phrase of subject and predicate. In short, the two have great differences in sentence structure.

Then, there are also large differences between the two languages in terms of sentence types. There are only two types of sentences in Chinese: simple sentences and complex sentences. While in English, there are three types of sentences: simple sentences, compound sentences, and parallel sentences. In English, compound sentences and parallel sentences are used frequently. Generally speaking, English sentences are long with complex structures, which will cause great difficulties for English learners.

## **2.3 Word order**

English and Chinese have gradually developed under the influence of different cultures. The order of language components plays an important role in declarative language and syntactic relation. The structure of simple sentences determines people's understanding and mastery of the whole sentence.

Hu Aiping(2005) proposed that in both English and Chinese, there is a certain word order in both spoken and written language, and it is presented in a linear combination of language units. Liu Yan (2012) believed that from the perspective of linguistic morphology, Chinese belongs to the analytic language, whose main feature is that the word order is generally fixed. While English belongs to the language that is gradually transformed from synthetic to analytical. Therefore, its word order is relatively fixed while also changing. This is the reason why English and Chinese differ in word order. Li Yongbin (2017) agreed that Chinese focus on the logical order, which belongs to the natural word order, while English not only belongs to the natural word order, but also has the specific word order and flexible sentence structures.

A comparative analysis of the differences between English and Chinese can help us to communicate better. In this way, learners can better understand the differences in the word order between English and Chinese.

### 2.3.1 Differences in word order of the subject-predicate structure

Xie Hua (2008) believed that English is a form-oriented language, focusing on the form and structure of sentences, and subjects are indispensable. While Chinese emphasizes the coherence of semantics. There can be no subject in Chinese sentences, and the position of subject is flexible. In Chinese, the head of a sentence is its theme. It is sometimes the subject, sometimes not, but the object or other component of a sentence. It's very important for English learners to master the similarities and differences between subject and theme.

In a particular language environment, the subject must be preserved in an English sentence, but the subject is often omitted in a Chinese sentence. The status of the subject in English is very important. Except for imperative sentences, each sentence must have a subject. In an English sentence, the predicate verb is the center, and the relationship between the subject and the predicate is inseparable. While in a Chinese sentence, the emphasis is on the meaning of the theme, always putting the theme in front and the comment at the back of the sentence.

For example, from the sentence "I have finished my homework." (作业我做完了。), we can easily find that the object "homework" in this English sentence has become the theme of the Chinese sentence.

### 2.3.2 Differences in word order of the object

In Chinese, SOV sentence pattern is very common to be seen, that is, the object is often placed between the subject and the predicate.

For example, from the Chinese sentence “她英语很好，数学也很好”，we can find that the objects "English" and "Math" are placed before the predicate "does well in". However, when we translate this Chinese sentence into English, we must place the object behind the predicate verbs. The right translation should be "She does well in both English and Math."

In short, there is no SOV sentence pattern in English. Therefore, we must pay attention to the location of the object when we carry out Chinese-English translation.

### 2.3.3 Differences in word order of the attributive

In Chinese, the attributive is placed before the subject and the object, while the position of the attributive is not fixed in English. When adjectives, numerals, or participles are used as attributives, they are often placed before the key word. When prepositional phrases and attributive clauses are used as attributives, they are usually placed after the key word. For example, “在桌子上的书”, in Chinese, the attribute is placed before the central word "book", while in English it is placed after the central word "book". The correct translation should be "the book on the desk".

### 2.3.4 Differences in word order of the adverbial

The position of the adverbial is more complicated and not fixed. This is true in both Chinese and English. Therefore, in English-Chinese translation, only do we have a deep understanding of the differences in word order of the adverbial between the two, we can accurately change the position of it.

#### **2.3.4.1 Differences between the order of single adverbials**

In Chinese, the adverbial is placed between the subject and predicate. Common adverbials include adverbs of frequency, adverbial adjunct of place and time. However, in English, adverbials are generally placed at the end of the sentence, and only adverbs of frequency are placed between the subject and the predicate.

Take the translation "He always walks to school every day. (他每天总是骑车上学。)" as an example, we can see the difference of the adverbials' position.

#### **2.3.4.2 Differences between the order of multiple adverbials**

In English sentences, when the predicate has both adverbial adjunct of place and time, the adverbial adjunct of time should be put behind the place. However, in Chinese sentences, the order is just the opposite.

For example, from the sentence "She was born in Shanghai in 1988. (她 1988 年出生于中国。)", we can easily see the difference.

#### **2.3.4.3 Negative adverbs such as "not", "no"**

In English, negative adverbs are usually placed after linking verbs, modal verbs, and so on. In Chinese, the word order is exactly the opposite, and it is placed before the predicate. Common negative adverbs are not, no, hardly, etc.

For example, from the sentence "You need not run in hurry. (你不必狂奔。)", we can easily see the difference.

### **2.4 Active and passive voice**

In Chinese, active voice is often used, while passive voice is extensively used in English, and inanimate words are always chosen as subjects. In English passive sentences, you don't have to emphasize the performer of the action, just put it at the end of the sentence. If you don't want to or can't point out the performer, simply omit it. Relatively speaking, Chinese is accustomed to the expression of personification. The subject is often an object that has life and can carry out actions, so there are many active sentences in Chinese.

Westerners are used to relying on objective facts. In English, when it is inconvenient to say the performer of the action or the central topic of the conversation, but the English sentence requires structural integrity. At this point, passive voice is always used in the sentence.

For example, in the sentence "It is said by many that English is more and more important.", the word "it" is a formal subject and has no practical meaning. This also illustrates the prominence of the subject in English. Except for imperative sentences and idioms, most sentences use virtual subjects to achieve formal unity even without a real subject. However, in Chinese sentences, the status of the subject is not very high. It does not require the subject and the predicate, the tense, the voice and other aspects to be consistent. Therefore, the openness of Chinese is very strong.

Differences between active and passive voices in English and Chinese may lead to many questions for learners, such as translating English into Chinese. Duan Manfu (2004) proposed that English and

Chinese belong to different language families and linguistic forms, so there is a big difference in sentence structure. There are many ways to translate English passive sentences into Chinese. Therefore, learners must pay attention to this and don't be confused.

### 3. Conclusion

The cultural backgrounds of English and Chinese are different, which leads to the unique expression of both languages. Through the comparative study of English and Chinese, this paper analyzes the differences between English and Chinese sentence structure, and aims to strengthen the learners' ability to understand and master English. This paper analyzes the differences between English and Chinese sentence structure from four aspects: hypotaxis and parataxis, simple sentence structure and sentence classification, word order, active and passive voice. For example, "form" is an indispensable element of English sentences, while Chinese sentences are centered on "meaning". Chinese sentences use more active voices, while English sentences use more passive voices, etc. The purpose of this paper is to help English learners get rid of Chinese negative interference and do better in English.

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