

Contrastive Study on Relative Words and Relative Clauses between English and German

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Abstract

Based on the syntactic theory and the contrastive analysis approach, this paper analyses the three kinds of relative words and their corresponding clauses in both English and German. Furthermore, the similarities and differences between English and German relative clauses are found, so that the detailed contrastive knowledge between them are concluded.

This study aims to make contribution to improve the positive transfer between English and German and reduce their negative transfer during the English-German bilingual learning process of Chinese learners.

Key words: relative word; relative clause; English; German; contrastive analysis

1 Introduction

As the first section of the paper, this introduction part includes the study background, the study significance and the paper organization.

1.1 Study background

As English and German belong to West-Germanic branch subordinated to Germanic family under Indo-European languages, they are the two most relative languages and thereby have many same or similar features in phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, semantics, such as the same part of speeches, the similar tenses of verb and also the same kinds of relative words.

The relative clause is also called attributive clause, which is one of the most important and frequently-used sentence patterns in both English and German. As the modifier, it can limit, supplement or explain somebody or something occurring in the main clause. The relative word is used to guide the relative clause. According to their forms and functions in the relative clause, both English and German relative words can be classified into three types: the relative pronoun, the relative adverb, and the structure of preposition plus relative pronoun.

1.2 Study significance

Although English and German have the same classification on relative words, the practical function of these relatives in the concrete application has some differences. Based on the contrastive analysis of relative words between English and German, the author finds the similarities and differences between English and German relative clauses, aiming to help the bilingual learners get a better understanding on English and German relative clauses, so that it contributes to the decrease of the negative transfer between English and German as well as the improvement of the positive transfer effect on the English-German bilingual learning of Chinese learners.

1.3 Paper structure

This paper consists of four parts. Section one is an introduction. Section two outlines syntax and contrastive analysis as the theoretical basis, and reviews the contrastive study between English and German at home and abroad as well. Section three is the core part, which states the concrete application of three kinds of relative words in both English and German relative clauses and revolves the similarities and differences among these relatives. Section four concludes the main findings and exhibits the limitations of the present study.

2 Literature review

In this section, the related syntactic theory to the sentence structure and the contrastive analysis approach applied in contrastive study are presented. Apart from the exhibition of the theoretical framework, this section also gives a review on the English-German contrastive study at home and abroad.

2.1 Theoretical framework

Syntax involves the study of the largely unconscious finite set of rules that enable speakers to create and understand sentences. It also explores the relationships among the components of sentences. Sentences are built up around verbs, which in turn determine the kinds of phrases that make up the sentences. The structure of the sentence of a language is called the syntax of that language (Heny, 1994). Chinese linguists Hu Zhuanglin (2011) classified the syntactic constructions of sentences into

two main types: endocentric and exocentric constructions. Furthermore, depending on the relation between constituents, endocentric constructions fall into two types: coordination and subordination.

According to the classification, the relative clause is one of the three basic types of subordinate clauses which are used to modify the head. The syntactic function of the relative clause is as the modifier to modify the main clause, while the relative word has a variety of the syntactic function such as subject, object or adverbial in the relative clause.

Contrastive linguistics is an important branch of linguistics, which not only refers to the common and different points of languages but also interprets the deep reasons for these linguistic phenomena. It can be used in some fields like foreign language teaching, translation, in which its high practicability can be proved.

The contrastive analysis has become an important research method in modern linguistics. It compares two or more languages in a synchronic aspect and describes their similarities and differences, so as to promote the study of the contrastive languages (Yang Shuling, 2009: 48). This approach is applied in this study on the similarities and differences between English and German relative clauses.

2.2 English-German comparative study

In Europe, the comparative study between English and German is multidimensional, including both the traditional grammar comparison and the contrast of coordination valence, which refers to journal papers, general works, as well as theses from masters and doctors. And in Germany, the comparative study has been carried out among four languages. Hans Glinz published the book *Grammars in comparison: German, French, English, Latin in 1994*. Meanwhile, Professor Christiane von Steutterheim from Heidelberg University and the Swedish scholar Mary Carroll have studied the English-German comparison for a long time (Li, 2012: 108).

In China, the publication of the book *A German-English Contrastive Grammar* in 1993 symbolizes the systematized formation of the contrastive study between English-German Grammar. And the publication of another two books *Practical Contrastive English-German Grammar from Lu lijun in 2006* and *New Contrastive Grammar of German and English* from Li Dongliang in 2013 promote greatly the English-German contrastive study in Chinese academia.

Chinese English-German contrastive study is mainly from the perspective of phonology, morphology, syntax. Phonologically, Wu Jianxiong published an article in 2004 entitled "The Negative Effects of English in German Phonetics Learning" in the journal of *Deutsch Lernen*. Morphologically, Li Ying wrote a paper "A Contrastive Study between German Prepositions 'mit' and English Prepositions 'with'" in 2011; In syntax, Liu Qing presented the public in 2014 with an article "A Comparison of the Compound Sentences in German and English".

Besides, other Chinese scholars do their bilingual research from the perspective of translation and teaching. For example, in 2011 Li Dongliang and Li Zipei have written an article with the title "Equivalence Problems in Term Translating among German, English and Chinese".

3. Relative words in both English and German relative clauses

Both English and German relative words can be divided into three types: the relative pronoun, the relative adverb, and the structure "preposition + relative pronoun". These relatives function as subject, object, attribute or adverbial in the relative clause. In the sequent parts, the three kinds of relative words and the grammatical constituents they play in relative clauses will be introduced respectively.

3.1 Relative pronoun

English relative pronouns include that, which, who(m), whose serving as subject, object or attribute in the relative clause. They have no variation in gender and number.

German common relative pronouns are der/das/die, dessen/deren, dem/der/denen,den/das/die, etc. There are many changes in German relative pronouns, such as the feminine, masculine or neutral gender, the singular or plural number. The gender and number of the relative pronoun depend on the gender and number of the antecedent in the main clause.

Moreover, German relative pronoun has four cases: nominative, genitive, dative, accusative. Each case plays a unique role in the relative clause. Nominative serves as the subject of the relative clause, genitive as the attribute, dative often as the indirect object, and accusative as the direct object, i.e. the German relative pronoun has more variations than the English one.

3.1.1 Subject

When the relative pronoun serves as the subject of the relative clause, pronouns who, that, which can be used in English clause, and the corresponding German relative pronouns are nominative pronouns der/das/die.

Ex. 1 The man who/that sits on the bench is my father.

Der Mann, der auf der Bank sitzt, ist mein Vater.

Ex. 2 The woman who/that stands under the tree is my mother.

Die Frau, die unter dem Baum steht, ist meine Mutter.

Ex. 3 The girl who/that plays on the ground is my sister.

Das Mädchen, das auf dem Sportplatz spielt, ist meine Schwester.

Ex. 4 The students who/that their homework have finished can go home.

Die Studenten, die ihre Hausaufgaben geschafft haben, können nach Haus gehen.

Ex. 5 In the morning he goes to the park which/that is not far away from his house.

Morgens geht er in den Park, der nicht weit von seinem Haus ist.

Ex. 6 Stefan drinks too much coffee, which will destroy his stomach.

Stefan trinkt zu viel Kaffee, der seinen Magen zerstören wird.

The examples above show that, when the relative pronoun refers to a person, the pronoun who or that is used as the guide word of an English relative clause, but a German clause uses the nominative pronouns der, das or die; when it refers to a thing, English has which or that serving as the relative pronoun, in contrast, German clause still uses der, das or die.

In the non-restrictive attributive clause, there are only two English pronouns which and who serve as the guide word of the relative clause, while there are der, das and die in German.

3.1.2 Attribute

When the relative pronoun plays the role of attribute in a relative clause, there exists only one relative word whose as the introducer in English, while there exist two genitive pronouns dessen or deren in German. When the antecedent is a singular, feminine or neutral noun, the pronoun dessen is the introducer; but when the antecedent is a singular and masculine noun or a plural noun, the guide word is deren.

Ex. 7 That's the book whose name is Me before You.

Das ist das Buch, dessen Name Ich bevor Dich ist.

Ex. 8 Students whose alarms don't go off should buy a new one.

Die Studenten, deren Wecker nicht klingelt, soll ein neuen kaufen.

3.1.3 Object

There are many English transitive verbs that only need one direct object, while other transitive verbs need two objects - an indirect object and a direct object. Same with English, German transitive verbs require one direct object or two objects.

Whether the relative pronoun serves as the direct or indirect object depends on the type of the verb in the relative clause.

(1) Direct object

When the relative pronoun is the direct object of the relative clause, it often refers to somebody or something. English relative pronouns which, that, who(m) can act as both the introducer and the direct object in the relative clause. Correspondingly, German uses the accusative relative pronouns den/das/die as the direct object.

English relative pronouns who(m), that, and which as the direct object in the relative clause can be omitted. In contrast, German relative clause removes its relative pronoun in no instance.

Ex. 9 I need a car (which/that) I can afford.

Ich brauche einen Wagen, den ich mir leisten kann.

Ex. 10 She is the girl (who/whom) I like.

Es ist das Mädchen, das ich mag.

Ex. 11 This is the bag (which/that) I lost yesterday.

Das ist die Tasche, die ich gestern verloren habe.

However, there is a kind of German verb such as "helfen", "fehlen", which requires only a dative noun or pronoun as its object. When the predicate verb needs a dative object, the German dative relative pronouns dem, der and denen can act as the direct object of the relative clause.

Ex. 12 He is a person (who/whom) you can't help.

Er ist ein Mensch, dem man nicht helfen kann.

Ex. 13 I have sympathy for those people who hasn't enough food to eat.

Ich habe Mitgefühl mit diesen Menschen, denen die Lebensmittel fehlen.

(2) Indirect object

Many transitive verbs can be followed by an indirect object and a direct object in both English and German. In this case, the indirect object usually refers to a person. English has the introducers (to)+whom as the indirect object in the relative clause, and German dative relative pronouns dem, der and denen have the same function.

In German, the dative marks the indirect object of a verb, although in some instances, it is used for the direct object pertaining to an act of giving something. The relative pronoun dem is the dative form of der and das, which refers to feminine or neutral, singular person or thing. The pronouns der and denen are the two dative forms of die, the former refers to masculine and singular object, but the

latter is the plural form of all genders. Correspondingly, English uses the preposition structure “to+sb.” representing the indirect objects instead of the dative case.

Ex. 14 The man/woman whom I gave the books to is my father/mother.

Der Mann/Die Frau, dem/der ich die Bücher gab, ist mein Vater/meine Mutter.

Ex. 15 The students whom I promised a picnic to are very happy.

Die Studenten, denen ich ein Picknick versprach, sind sehr froh.

3.2 Relative adverb

The relative adverb serves as the adverbial constituent in the relative clause. The three typical English relative adverbs are when, where, and why. Similarly, German has three common relative adverbs wenn, wo, and warum.

Ex. 16 I want to work in a city where I don't need a car.

Ich möchte in einer Stadt arbeiten, wo ich kein Auto brauche.

Ex. 17 At that time when I saw him, he was quite strong.

Um diese Zeit, wenn ich ihn sah, war er ganz stark.

Ex. 18 These are the reasons why we do it.

Dies sind die Ursache, warum wir das tun.

Moreover, German has two directionally relative adverbs woher and wohin. The adverb woher means “where is sb./sth. from”, and wohin indicates “where does sb./sth. to go”. When the predicate verb of the relative clause refers to a movement and requires an adverbial element after it, the relative adverbs wohin and woher can become the guide words of clauses. Furthermore, the structure of “preposition relative pronoun” can substitute wohin and woher.

However, English lacks such kind of dynamic and directional relative adverbs and uses the adverb where or the structure “preposition + relative pronoun” to express the similar meaning of wohin and woher. When the antecedent is a proper noun of place, English can only use where to guide the relative clause.

Ex. 19 The city where I come / which I come from is New York.

Die Stadt, woher / aus der ich komme, ist New York.

Ex. 20 Berlin, where he will go is very beautiful.

Berlin, wohin/ in die er gehen will, ist sehr schön.

3.3 Preposition + relative pronoun

In the structure “preposition + relative pronoun”, the preposition is a part of the guide word and required by the predicate verb in the relative clause. This combined clause introducer can serve as the indirect object or the adverbial of time, place and manner etc.

3.3.1 Indirect Object

When the predicate verb in the relative clause requires an indirect object referring to somebody, the indirect object should be expressed by the structure “preposition (to) + whom”.

- Ex. 21 Do you know the woman whom I should give the money to?
Kennst du die Frau, der ich das Geld geben soll?

3.3.2 Adverbial

The adverbial constituent of time, place or manner required by the predicate verb in the relative clause can be expressed not only by the relative adverb but also by the structure “preposition + relative pronoun”.

- Ex. 22 This is the church in which our parents got married.
Das ist die Kirche, in der unsere Eltern geheiratet haben.
- Ex. 23 The pencil with which I write is expensive.
Der Bleistift, mit dem ich schreibe, ist teuer.

When the structure “preposition + relative pronoun” serves as the guide word of a German relative clause, the preposition should be always before the relative pronoun, whereas the preposition in English relative clauses can either at the end or at the beginning of the clause, unless the predicate is a verbal phrase that needs the preposition structure tag its verb closely.

- Ex. 24 The City which I live in is beautiful.
Die Stadt, in der ich lebe, ist schön.

German has another form replacing the structure “preposition + relative pronoun” to guide a relative clause. This kind of introducer is called “relative pronoun-adverb”, which bonds an adverb (usually *wo*) and a preposition together, such as *womit*, *wobei*. Sometimes it has an infix “*r*” between the adverb *wo* and the preposition for the pronouncing convenience, like *worauf*.

- Ex. 25 That's the bus which/that we're all waiting for.
Das ist der Bus, auf den wir alle warten. / worauf wir alle warten.

4 Conclusion

Based on the sentence structure related syntactic theory and contrastive analysis approach, this paper analyses the similarities and differences between English and German relative clauses from the perspective of three types of relative words.

Finally, it comes to the following conclusion: Although English and German are from the same language pedigree and have the same classification of the relative words, there are many differences on the relative clauses between these two language, including the different relative word forms, different verb positions, and distinctive word orders. Besides, German relative words change in genders, numbers and cases, which are responsible for the complication of German relative clauses.

Since the similarities and differences of relative words and relative clauses between English and German have been presented in this paper, which ought to help the Chinese bilingual learners get a better understanding on English and German relative clauses and contribute to their learning process of both English and German by reducing the negative transfer and improving the positive transfer between English and German.

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