

Analysis of the Influence of Differences in English and Chinese Modes of Thinking on Language Expression

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Abstract: Language expression is shaped by linguistic structure, cultural convention, cognitive habit, and communicative purpose. Based on a critical review of English-Chinese contrastive research, this paper examines three related tendencies: holistic and analytic orientation, image-based and abstract-conceptual preference, and context-dependent and explicit-linear organization. It considers how these tendencies appear in lexical choice, sentence construction, discourse progression, and pragmatic framing. The discussion does not use broad cultural labels as self-sufficient explanations. Instead, it treats the observed contrasts as variable preferences mediated by genre, context, bilingual experience, and audience. The analysis suggests that effective teaching and translation should connect formal comparison with functional interpretation. Learners need to identify semantic boundaries, recover implicit clause relations, reorganize information for target readers, and adjust politeness strategies and cultural images to the communicative situation. It also explains why formally acceptable sentences may remain rhetorically awkward or pragmatically unsuitable for target readers. Such training can improve accuracy and coherence without turning recurrent differences into fixed stereotypes.

Keywords: English-Chinese thinking differences; Language expression; Intercultural communication; Parataxis and hypotaxis; Pragmatic strategies

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1. Introduction

The relation among language, thought, and culture has remained a central issue in linguistics and translation studies. Sapir defines language as “a purely human and noninstinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols”^[1]. This definition places language within human cultural experience rather than treating it as a neutral list of labels. Later comparative work has generally rejected the strong claim that language determines thought, but it continues to ask

whether habitual linguistic patterns guide attention and expression. Nisbett, for example, distinguishes relatively holistic and analytic orientations while also noting variation within cultural groups ^[2].

The issue is best approached through a distinction between linguistic resources and deterministic cultural claims. Languages provide conventional ways of marking agency, linking clauses, packaging topics, and managing interpersonal distance, but speakers are not confined to one permanent pattern. Education, professional training, bilingual experience, and genre knowledge can alter the choices a writer makes. The same Chinese-English bilingual may rely on contextual inference in an informal conversation, use explicit logical markers in an academic article, and adopt highly conventional politeness formulas in an institutional email. A contrastive account is therefore useful only when it explains recurrent preferences without converting them into fixed psychological attributes.

Existing studies approach the comparison from different levels. Li and Thompson explain the typological importance of topic and subject, while Lian surveys contrasts in lexicalization, syntax, discourse, and translation ^[3-4]. Shen goes further by asking how several grammatical contrasts may form a connected system rather than a catalog of isolated facts ^[5]. Recent work has brought the discussion into translation theory and teaching: Wang emphasizes the interaction of experience, cognition, and linguistic choice, and Xiang and Yang examine how differences in perspective affect Chinese-English translation ^[6-8]. Read together, these studies suggest that language structure matters, but so do genre, proficiency, disciplinary convention, and the immediate communicative task.

This paper therefore adopts a conceptual and literature-based contrastive approach. It uses representative examples to examine four levels of expression: lexis, sentence structure, discourse organization, and pragmatics. The examples are explanatory rather than corpus data. The aim is to identify recurrent points at which cross-linguistic transfer may occur, to distinguish structural constraints from rhetorical preferences, and to show why a formally correct expression can still sound unclear, misplaced, or pragmatically inappropriate in the target language.

2. Conceptual framework

The framework used here is deliberately modest. It does not claim that cognitive habits can be read directly from a single word or construction. Language expression emerges from the interaction of grammatical resources, cultural knowledge, discourse convention, and communicative purpose. A missing subject may be recoverable from the Chinese context; an English conjunction may be required by the logic of a particular sentence; and a writer may delay a claim because a genre permits contextual preparation. These choices need to be interpreted together rather than attributed automatically to national character ^[4-5].

Three dimensions organize the analysis. The first contrasts a holistic orientation, which gives salience to relations and situational configuration, with an analytic orientation, which foregrounds discrete entities and explicit propositional relations ^[2]. The second concerns image-based and abstract-conceptual preferences. Both languages use metaphor, but they conventionalize different images and distribute abstract meaning differently across words and contexts. The third contrasts context-dependent organization with explicit-linear organization. The former allows information to be recovered through shared knowledge and sequence; the latter tends to mark agents, logical relations, and argumentative progression more overtly. Similar contrasts have been discussed in English-Chinese language and translation research, although the labels and examples

vary across studies ^[5, 7].

The three dimensions intersect. A culture-loaded lexical item may require contextual explanation, a clause may omit an agent because the discourse already identifies it, and an entire paragraph may delay its main claim because a particular rhetorical tradition values contextual buildup. These are not separate manifestations of a single cultural essence. Rather, they are choices made at different linguistic levels under different constraints. The analytical task is to determine where meaning is encoded: in lexical semantics, grammatical form, information order, genre convention, or shared inference. This distinction prevents the explanation of every English-Chinese difference by an undifferentiated appeal to “thinking style.”

These dimensions are analytical lenses, not permanent properties of individuals. A bilingual writer may use a compact, explicitly signposted structure in an English abstract and a more cumulative structure in a Chinese essay. The same writer may also choose differently in a business email and a literary translation. For that reason, the link between thinking and linguistic form is best understood as probabilistic and bidirectional: repeated forms can encourage habitual patterns of attention, while changing communicative practices can reshape the forms speakers prefer. The question is not which language is inherently more logical or implicit, but how each text allocates meaning among lexical choice, grammar, discourse structure, and inference.

3. Influence on language expression

3.1. Lexical expression

At the lexical level, the two languages often divide semantic fields along different boundaries. Chinese items such as *guanxi*, *renqing*, and *mianzi* combine description with evaluations of social relationships. Depending on context, *guanxi* may mean an ordinary relationship, a useful connection, a personal network, or reciprocal ties. English, by contrast, distinguishes among job, career, and profession, and among family, household, and home, in ways that a single broad Chinese equivalent may not preserve. Contrastive research has long treated such non-equivalence as a problem of semantic range and cultural association rather than a search for one fixed counterpart ^[4].

Lexical mismatch also appears in collocation and register. An English word that seems equivalent in a bilingual dictionary may be restricted to a professional, legal, or informal context, while the Chinese source item may be neutral. Conversely, a Chinese expression may carry interpersonal evaluation that is not encoded in its most obvious English counterpart. Translators therefore need to examine not only denotation but also habitual co-text, social meaning, and genre. A technically accurate term can still be misleading when its collocational profile or evaluative force differs from that of the source expression.

Culturally conventional images create a second difficulty. *Taoli mantianxia* evokes a teacher whose students are found in many places, while *luoye guigen* connects return with the image of a falling leaf returning to its roots. A literal version may be effective in literature, where the image can be sustained, but cumbersome in a report or business text. In the latter contexts, the translator may need to foreground the function, such as educational achievement or attachment to one’s place of origin. Xiang similarly stresses that translation teaching should make students notice shifts between image-based and more abstract modes of expression ^[7]. The practical issue is not whether one language has metaphor and the other does not; it is whether the selected image is recognizable and useful to the target reader.

Context also changes the meaning of apparently familiar words. *Fangbian* may mean convenient, available, appropriate, or willing to help. Thus, *nin kan fangbian dehua* can be rendered as “If it is convenient

for you” or “I would appreciate it if you could...,” but not normally as the learner expression “if you are convenient.” Yisi may refer to meaning, intention, interest, a token gift, or an indirect suggestion. These examples show why dictionary equivalence is only the first step. Collocation, interpersonal stance, and the function of the utterance must be considered before an English item is chosen.

3.2. Sentential expression

At the sentence level, a recurring contrast concerns paratactic sequencing and explicit clause linkage. Chinese can place two clauses in sequence and leave a causal, temporal, or conditional relation to inference. In *tian leng le, duo chuan dian yifu* (“It is getting cold; wear more clothes”), the second clause is understood as advice motivated by the first. English may state the relation overtly: “Since it is getting cold, you should wear more clothes.” This does not mean that Chinese lacks logical structure. Rather, the relation is distributed differently between form and context, a distinction emphasized in English-Chinese contrastive studies ^[4-5].

Topic prominence offers a more specific illustration. Li and Thompson state: “The present paper is an attempt to lay the foundation for a typology based on the grammatical relations subject-predicate and topic-comment” ^[3]. Chinese readily places a topic before a comment, as in *zhe ben shu, wo kan wan le* (“As for this book, I have finished it”). English normally integrates the information into a subject-predicate clause: “I have finished reading this book.” Their typology explains why the learner sentence “This book I have read it” contains redundant reference in English. English can topicalize an element for contrast—“This book, I have finished”—but the construction is more marked than the ordinary Chinese topic-comment pattern.

Argument omission follows the same principle of recoverability. *Yijing anpai hao le* can become “It has already been arranged” when the result is foregrounded, or “We have already made the arrangements” when agency matters. The translator must therefore decide who acted, whether responsibility should be visible, and which information belongs in subject position. Such decisions are grammatical, but they also affect stance. An active clause can identify responsibility, whereas a passive clause can keep attention on the process or result.

Sentence restructuring is especially important when several Chinese clauses share an implicit topic. A word-for-word English version may produce a chain of coordinate clauses with uncertain logical relations or unstable reference. The translator may need to divide the sequence, supply a subject, subordinate one proposition, or turn an action into a noun phrase. The appropriate solution depends on information focus rather than on a mechanical rule that every Chinese clause requires an additional connective. Explicitness should clarify the relation actually intended, not add formal markers where no relation has been established.

3.3. Discourse expression

At the discourse level, the main question is not sentence correctness but the order in which a text makes its purpose and evidence visible. Kaplan argued that “logic ... is evolved out of a culture; it is not universal”, thereby drawing attention to culturally associated rhetorical patterns and comparatively linear organization in English expository writing ^[9]. His model has been criticized for broad cultural generalization, yet its enduring contribution is to show that paragraph organization is not culturally neutral. In present-day academic writing, the more useful question is not whether one group “thinks linearly,” but what a particular genre asks writers to state first and what readers expect to be made explicit.

Abstracts provide a clear example. An English abstract that spends most of its space on broad background may postpone the research object and contribution. A more reader-oriented sequence states the

purpose, approach, main observations, and implications early enough for the contribution to be identified. This pattern should not be imposed mechanically on every Chinese genre, where more contextual preparation may be acceptable. What requires adjustment in translation is the sequence of rhetorical functions, not merely the wording of individual sentences.

The same issue arises in introductions and argumentative paragraphs. English-language journals often expect a visible research problem and an early indication of how the paper addresses it. A paragraph normally benefits from a controlling claim whose relation to the supporting examples is explicit. Chinese prose can also be tightly organized, but some texts allow a more cumulative movement from situation to evaluation. When translated without rhetorical reordering, such a passage may remain grammatical while appearing delayed or diffuse to the target reader. Discourse-level translation must therefore examine the function of each sentence within the paragraph, not only its local meaning.

Cohesion presents a related but distinct problem. Halliday and Hasan state that “cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another”^[10]. They further show that textual relations can be realized through reference, conjunction, substitution, and lexical cohesion. English academic prose often signals contrast or consequence with markers such as *however*, *therefore*, and *in contrast*, whereas Chinese can rely more on thematic continuity or semantic association. The pedagogical point is not to maximize connectives. A connective is useful only when it makes a genuine relation visible; excessive signposting can make a paragraph mechanical.

3.4. Pragmatic expression

Pragmatic contrast becomes visible when similar intentions are framed differently. A Chinese request or criticism may begin with contextual preparation or a tentative question, as in *zhe ge fang'an shi bu shi hai keyi zai zhenzhuo yixia* (“Could this proposal perhaps be reconsidered?”). English also mitigates imposition, but often through conventional modals, hedges, and a clearly stated action: “Could you please send the document by Friday?” The contrast is therefore not simply indirectness versus directness. Politeness depends on how clarity, social distance, and the burden placed on the listener are balanced in a particular setting^[4].

Routine expressions make the role of inference especially clear. *Chi le ma* (“Have you eaten?”) may function as relational contact rather than a literal request for information. Compliment responses may also differ: minimizing praise is conventional in some Chinese contexts, whereas “Thank you” is often expected in English. In institutional refusals, a Chinese message may give appreciation and explanation before the decision, while an English message may announce the decision earlier and then provide a reason. Teaching these forms as interchangeable sentence patterns misses the point. Learners need to identify the speech act, the relationship between participants, and the consequences of placing information earlier or later.

Pragmatic transfer often occurs even when grammar and vocabulary are correct. A request may sound vague because the expected action is not stated, while a refusal may sound abrupt because the writer has transferred an informational sequence that does not fit the target institution. The remedy is not to memorize one “polite sentence,” but to compare how speakers balance clarity, mitigation, obligation, and relational work across situations. Audience status, urgency, medium, and the consequences of misunderstanding must all be considered.

4. Pedagogical and translation implications

The first pedagogical implication is to replace broad cultural formulas with genre-sensitive comparison. “Chinese is indirect and English is direct” is too crude to guide an actual choice in writing. Students gain more from comparing how a journal abstract, business email, classroom exchange, and informal message express responsibility and politeness. The comparison should also leave room for variation across communities and for the effects of bilingual experience.

Training is most useful when it connects levels of analysis. Students can compare the semantic range of culture-loaded words, mark omitted agents in a Chinese source text, label the relation between adjacent clauses, and then test several English renderings. They can also reorder paragraphs or rewrite the same abstract for different readers. These tasks make information packaging visible and turn contrastive knowledge into a revisable procedure. Work on translation teaching and Chinese-English prose translation likewise supports attention to perspective, sentence organization, and target-language convention rather than isolated word replacement ^[7–8].

A useful classroom sequence begins with diagnosis rather than correction. Learners first identify the communicative purpose and target readership, then mark elements whose meaning depends heavily on context. They next compare alternative translations and explain how each version changes agency, emphasis, politeness, or cultural imagery. Finally, they revise the whole paragraph to ensure that sentence-level decisions form a coherent discourse. This process makes translation choices discussable and prevents teachers from presenting a single decontextualized answer as universally correct.

Translation practice adds a functional test. Nida defines dynamic equivalence as “the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message” ^[11]. The formulation directs attention to receptor response rather than mechanical preservation of surface form. From a cognitive perspective, translation also involves the translator’s experience, construal, and selection among linguistic alternatives ^[6]. This means that *taoli mantianxia* may require an explanatory paraphrase in an academic text but retain its image in a literary translation. The appropriate choice depends on what readers know and what the translation is expected to do.

Assessment can reflect this process by separating lexical accuracy, clause linkage, information order, cohesion, and pragmatic force. A student can then locate the level at which communication has failed instead of making unsystematic changes to individual words. Whenever possible, teaching examples should come from comparable bilingual texts, learner writing, institutional emails, or published translations. Source-based examples also help distinguish a recurrent tendency from an intuition that happens to fit one sentence.

The present discussion remains conceptual, so its claims require empirical testing. Future studies should record the source, genre, date, and communicative setting of examples. Learner corpora can reveal recurring transfer problems; parallel or comparable corpora can show whether a proposed contrast is frequent or genre-specific; interviews can clarify why bilingual writers selected one form over another. Combining textual patterns with writers’ accounts would provide a stronger basis for explaining how language structure, habitual attention, and communicative choice interact.

5. Conclusion

English-Chinese differences in expression are best understood as patterned preferences rather than fixed cultural oppositions. The preferences discussed here become visible in semantic boundaries, clause linkage, topic and subject choice, rhetorical sequencing, cohesion, and pragmatic framing. Their realization

nevertheless changes with genre, community, proficiency, and individual experience.

For teaching and translation, the goal is not to replace one “mode of thinking” with another. It is to help language users notice where meaning is carried: in the word itself, in grammatical form, in discourse order, or in shared inference. Source-informed contrastive training can reduce negative transfer and improve clarity without turning useful generalizations into stereotypes. Because the examples in this paper are illustrative, further corpus-based and genre-specific research is needed before broader claims are made.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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