

A Contrastive Study of English and Chinese Existential Sentences from the Perspective of Cognitive Linguistics

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Abstract: Existentials, which play an irreplaceable role in daily communication sentences, are a kind of special syntactic structure in both English and Chinese. Taking a cognitive perspective, this paper conducts a contrastive analysis of the existential sentences in terms of visual perception, mental perception and information encoding, in the hope of finding out the similarities and differences between them.

1. Introduction

Existentials are sentences that denote the existence of someone or something in some place. They are one of the most frequently-used sentence patterns in both English and Chinese. In recent years, many domestic scholars have been doing quite a lot of researches on the contrastive study of English and Chinese existential sentences (ES). All the research work done by the pioneer researchers provides highly insightful inspirations for future researchers.

On the bases of the relevant cognitive linguistic theories, this paper conducts a contrastive study of English and Chinese existential sentences, in the hope of revealing some of the underlying motivations, and the similarities as well as differences between the two languages in ESs.

2. Existential sentences in English and Chinese

ES, as a kind of special sentence pattern in both English and Chinese, has its own established structural modes. The notional subjects and main verbs in ESs are used on strict conditions. In English, the subjects are often introduced by the dummy element 'there' while in Chinese they are mostly by introduced temporal or locative phrases.

2.1 English existential sentences

English existential sentences are formally composed of: 1) Locative Phrase + Existential Verb Phrase + Existential Noun Phrase'; 2 'THERE + BE + Existential Noun Phrase + Locative Phrase (Temporal Phrase)' structure. For example:

- (1) At the door is/sits a dog.
- (2) There was a bridge over the river ten years ago.

There is no overt lexical maker to indicate the identity of an ES for sentence (1). But sentence (2) is formally revealed by the word 'there'. Obviously, the 'there' at the initial position of model sentence (2) is semantically insignificant. This 'there' is called 'preparatory there', 'temporary there' and 'expletive there' in different schools of linguistics. Whatever the name is for 'there', one thing is for sure for almost all scholars: 'there' in ES is only an introductory element (known as dummy 'there') with no specific meaning at all; therefore it is often unstressed in pronunciation. The 'there' in ES should be differentiated from the adverbial 'there', which indicates a distant location not far from the speaker. Compare:

- (3) There is no bus now. (dummy 'there')
- (4) There is our bus. (adverbial 'there')

2.2 Chinese existential sentences

In Chinese, ES is mostly used to depict the states of things that are objectively present at a

certain scene, involving no actions or movements. The basic structure for the ESs in Chinese is in the form of ‘Locative Phrase + Existential Verb Phrase+ Existential Noun Phrase’. For example:

- (5) chaguanli zuozhe xuduo xianren
 in tea house sit many idler
 (6) lantianshang fuzhe jiduo baiyun
 in blue sky float several cloud

However, this is not always the case. There are Chinese ESs which may indicate movements. For example:

- (7) shenhou zoulai liangge nianqingren
 from behind walk two young man
 (8) yingmian shilai yiliang kache
 in front ride one truck

3. Cognitive motivations of existential sentences in English and Chinese

Viewing language learning as a kind of cognition not so different from any other types of learning experience, cognitive linguistics studies language forms, meanings and the underlying regularities on the basis of the basic human cognition. It attributes the motivations and characteristics of the forming of sentences to the bodily experience of human beings. Specifically, the form of language is actually the mappings of the external world onto language through human experience. In other words, the language structures are not selected at random, but have their own roots in human experience structure. Amongst all, visual perceptions, mental perceptions and information encoding are really powerful in explaining the generating mechanisms of language forms.

ES is one of the typical language structures that are based on the perceptual experiences of human beings. And the human perceptions mainly consist of visual perceptions and mental perceptions. Besides, ES may also find its own motivations in the Information Theory.

3.1 Visual perceptions

3.1.1 Visual perceptions embodied in English existential sentences

Broadly speaking, English ESs have two main functions. One is to indicate the static existence of something or someone, the other is to specify the appearance or disappearance of something or someone. For example:

- (9) On the desk is a lamp.
 (10) Out of the trees flew a bird.

Sentence (9) suggests the static existence of the lamp, which reflects people’s visual perception of objects. Usually people perceive the place of objects before the objects themselves. This kind of visual perception order corresponds to the linear order of the linguistic symbols. And this correspondence is a perfect example of the influence of human visual perception on the compositions of English ESs. Sentence (10) is a typical ES in English which indicates that ‘something happens or appears at a certain place’. We can analyze the visual perception process of sentence (10). Someone walks down an alameda with trees on both sides and a bird in the trees. Will he notice the trees first or the bird first? Normally he will first perceive the existence of trees because relatively the trees are much bigger in shape and size than the bird. Hence they are more conspicuous. Perhaps he wouldn’t have noticed the existence of the bird at first because it is so small. He realizes the existence of birds possibly because of the sound the bird makes when it flaps the wings. Therefore the perception of the whole event could be like this: he sees the trees first, then he hears the sound of the fluttering of wings, finally he realizes that it is a bird. This ‘Place + Action + Agent’ perception order amazingly matches the linear order of sentence (10), or perhaps more precisely the visual perception determines or at least influences the generation of the syntactic structures of sentences. Therefore visual perceptions constitute one of the important motivations of the English ESs.

3.1.2 Visual perceptions embodied in Chinese existential sentences

Functionally, Chinese ESs are quite similar to their English counterparts. Nie (1989:9) identified two types of Chinese ESs, namely, static ES and dynamic ES. They are usually in the form of ‘Locative Phrase + Existential Verb Phrase+ Existential Noun Phrase’. For example:

(11) hubian shidengshang zuozhe yidui laonian fufu
lakeside on stone bench sit one old couple

(12) menhou tanchu yige xiao naodaiguazi
behind the door popup one small head

Similar to the visual perception process of English ESs, Chinese ESs also follow the ‘Place + Action + Agent’ pattern. Specifically, it is ‘hubian shidengshang (on the stone bench by the lakeside)+zuozhe (sit)+laonianfufu (old couple)’ in sentence (11) and ‘menhou (behind the door)+tanchu(popup)+xiao naodaiguazi(small head)’. It seems that both the Chinese people and people in English-speaking countries share roughly the same visual perception mode: Place + Action + Agent.

3.2 Mental perceptions

Mental perception is the development and extension on the basis of visual perception. It is the change from concrete perception to an Abstract one. While the ‘Place + Action + Agent’ mode in visual perception reflects strong iconicity in language structures, mental perception forms a kind of indirect and Abstract existential schemata.

3.2.1 Mental perceptions embodied in English existential sentences

To some extent, ES is a kind of existential structure as a result of the judgment or conclusion made by the human brain on the bodily experience or perception of something or some event. The existential structure in English usually takes the ‘THERE + Existential Verb Phrase + Existential Noun Phrase’ form. For example:

(13) There is a pen in the box.

(14) There were many uprisings in history.

(15) There is a suspicion in my mind.

Especially worth noticing is the introductory word ‘there’. Most scholars agree on the dummy nature of ‘there’. Bolinger (1997) regards it as a kind of Abstract orientational concept; Lakoff (1987) thinks it suggests an Abstract mental space; Langacker (1999) points out that ‘there’ denote a kind of Abstract circumstance, indicating certain relations. However scholars might understand it in ESs, ‘there’ has evolved into a kind of schematized element, declaring the existential schemata. The existential schemata is Abstracted and generalized from the visually-perceived concrete objects or events through mental perceptions. Therefore, the ESs with ‘there’ can not only indicate the existence of concrete things as shown in sentence (13), but also Abstract things or events as in sentence (14) and (15). In this sense, the word ‘there’ is a marker of the existential structure conceptualized in the development of the human cognition. Naturally the Abstract mental perceptions also constitute one of the motivations of ESs in English.

3.2.2 Mental perceptions embodied in Chinese existential sentences

Different from English, there is no such overt formal marker signifying the existential schema in Chinese ESs, but there do exist certain kinds of schema suggesting the existential structures, taking the form ‘Locative Phrase + Existential Verb Phrase+ Existential Noun Phrase’ again. For example:

(16) binglengde jieshang mimanzhe yizhen qiliang
cold in street fill with a fit of sadness

(17) binglengde jieshang huangdangzhe jige heying
cold in street wonder several shadow

The above two sentences are quite similar in structure, but the semantic features of the existential subjects (the Existential Noun Phrase) are quite different. We can visually see the ‘heying’(shadow), but we can not see the ‘qiliang’(sadness). What we can do here is possibly to see the poor

conditions of the street and feel the ‘qiliang’(sadness). Whether it is the concrete ‘heiying’(shadow) or the Abstract ‘qiliang’(sadness), we always realize their existence in the ‘Place + Action + Agent’ pattern. Accordingly we make Chinese ESs in the ‘Locative Adverbial + Existential Verbs + Existential Subjects’ form.

3.3 Information Theory

Human language, as an important means of communication, is always the medium of message. Information stored in the human brain is always large in size and variety. In order to efficiently convey the right information, it is necessary that the human brain process all kinds of information, rearranging it in certain orders, selecting the required, integrating it and then sending it out in certain order. This is what we normally call information encoding and conveying.

According to cognitive linguists, the communication of information is actually a result of the projection of human conceptualization on syntactic structures. But how is the information organized and transformed into the relevant syntactic structures? Information Theory holds that every discourse is an information segment, with each consisting of known information and unknown information. Normally the known information, as the starting point of the information transmission, shows the theme of the discourse and educes the unknown information. Clearly the principle of cognition is from ‘known’ to ‘unknown’, from ‘old’ to ‘new’. This trend is shown in almost all language structures (except for certain rhetoric or poetic effect), including ESs.

3.3.1 Information Theory embodied in English existential sentences

The ‘known-unknown’ cognition mode is universal. English is no exception. But the following two sentences seem to be a bit contradictory.

(18) There is a clock on the wall.

(19) On the wall is a clock.

They both mean a clock exists and it is on the wall. But they are quite different in the information the speaker really wants to convey. We got to depict a situation for them respectively. Sentence (18) is the situation where the speaker means a clock is on the wall. But perhaps something else is also on the wall, say, a calendar. Sentence (19) is a different case where the speaker means a clock, and nothing else, is on the wall. Sentence (19) is a perfect example of the ‘known-unknown’ cognition mode while (18) is a bit different. Sentence (18) seems to be a violation of the ‘unknown-known’ cognition mode because ‘on the wall’ is obviously the known information. But it is not the case. The original sentence of (19) could be ‘on the wall is a clock’ (ungrammatical in traditional English but acceptable now with slightly different meaning). A makeshift is to add a dummy ‘there’ to stand for the old information and postpone ‘on the wall’ to the end. Some scholars regard it as a process of grammaticalization with the content element ‘on the wall’ transforming into the functional element ‘there’. Quirk, from a different perspective, believed that ‘there’ is to provide a communication point, introducing the new information. However scholars might treat ‘there’, it is safe to say that the English ESs are closely related to the information encoding modes.

3.3.2 Information Theory embodied in Chinese existential sentences

Chinese ESs also show the ‘unknown-known’ cognition mode to some extent, as can be shown by the following sentences:

(1) shushang you xuduo houzi
 in the tree there are many monkeys

(2) Jiali laile xuduo keren
 To home come many guests

(3) Yuanzili youren zaipaobu
 In the yard someone running

All these sentences abide by the ‘unknown-known’ cognition mode, which is a reflection of the Chinese people’s information encoding process.

4. Conclusion

Under the framework of cognitive linguistics, this paper made a contrastive study of the motivations of English and Chinese ESs. It is found that the syntactic structure of the ESs in both English and Chinese are closely related to people's cognition mode. Still much has to be done to give a more powerful and convincing explanation of the word 'there' in English ESs and the ES's obvious violation of the 'principle of end focus' in the functionalist theories.

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