

A Comparative Study of *Yī Jiàn Xiǎo Shì* and *A Small Incident* Rendered by the Yangs*

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Lu Xun's short stories play a prominent role in the history of modern Chinese literature, and a number of Sinologists have studied them and published their English translations. This paper selects "*Yī Jiàn Xiǎo Shì*" in Lu Xun's collection "*Call to Arms*" as the object of study, taking hypotaxis and parataxis as the starting point, and compares the translation of Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang with the original version, studying the differences between the them in the process of C-E translation. It is hoped that some flexible conversion strategies in English-Chinese translation can be learned from the translation research.

Keywords: *Yī Jiàn Xiǎo Shì*, *A Small Incident* rendered by Yang Hsien-yi & Gladys Yang, hypotaxis and parataxis, comparative study

Introduction

Yī Jiàn Xiǎo Shì (《一件小事》), a short story written by Lu Xun, the founder of modern Chinese literature, is included in the short stories' collection "*Call to Arms*". It tells the story of a rickshaw man who accidentally knocks down an old woman. Though no one else sees the small incident, the rickshaw man chooses to lend a helping hand to the old woman in spite of running the risk of being blackmailed. From the perspective of the first person, the story praises the noble qualities of the rickshaw man, who is upright, kind, selfless, and responsible, through the narration of the changes in the thoughts and emotions "I." It demonstrates that "I" am brave in self-criticism and strict in criticizing my own spirit, and further reveals the profound social theme that intellectuals must learn from the working people. The whole story is short and concise, with a truthful and credible plot. Showcasing profound truths through small matters, it is a successful application of the writing technique of seeing the tremendous in the trivial. Of all Lu Xun's works, *Yī Jiàn Xiǎo Shì* is simple in plot, short in length, but thought-provoking.

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On CNKI, a search by the keywords “*Yī Jiàn Xiǎo Shì*” and “translation” as the title keywords, and only 18 pieces of relevant literature were found, including 1 master’s thesis and 17 academic papers. Si & Li (2011) compared and analyzed different translations from the perspective of transitivity theory, Li (2011) compared different translations from the perspective of functional equivalence, Zhang (2013) compared several translations from a corpus, and Huang & Gu (2015) used Julian House’s Translation Quality Assessment Model to study translations, while most scholars (Chen, 2010; Chen, 2016; Dong, 2021; Huang & Gu, 2015) compared and analyzed different cohesive devices between English and Chinese. It can be seen that when studying the translation of Lu Xun’s short stories *Yī Jiàn Xiǎo Shì*, scholars have adopted different research perspectives, but there has been no discussion from the perspective of hypotaxis and parataxis. Therefore, based on this theoretical foundation, the authors will conduct a comparative analysis of the translation by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (hereinafter referred to as the Yangs) with the original version.

Hypotaxis and Parataxis

Parataxis refers to the situation when the connection of words or sentences is achieved through the logical connections of their meanings, without the use of linguistic means; while hypotaxis refers to the use of linguistic forms (including lexical and morphological means) to connect words or sentences.

Background of Hypotaxis and Parataxis

Hypotaxis and parataxis are two opposing concepts in syntactic research, and are also important aspects in contrastive linguistics and translation studies between Chinese and English. This group of concepts first appeared in the 19th century, derived from the Greek words “parataxis” and “hypotaxis”. In linguistics, they describe two independent modes of connecting sentences: hypotaxis (a combination of subordinate structural elements) and parataxis (a combination of parallel structural elements). In the study of Chinese language, the concepts and terminology of “hypotaxis” and “parataxis” can be traced back to the 1940s. Famous linguist Wang Li elaborated on these two concepts in his works. Wang Li (1984) believed that compound sentences in China are a form of semantic grammar, and the use of conjunctions is optional, which is very uncommon in Western languages. Western languages often use formal grammar, and sentences without conjunctions cannot be organized. As long as Chinese is semantically and logically meaningful, various grammatical units can be connected together without considering form.

Grammar Level

The construction of English sentence structures is subject-predicate structure, with predicate verbs as the core, connecting other grammatical components of the sentence through participles, conjunctions, relative words, prepositions, and other connecting devices. Pronouns are widely used in English, but they can often be omitted in Chinese. For example, the pronoun “my” in “My wife and I” in English cannot be omitted, but it is rendered into Chinese counterpart, we normally say “我和妻子” rather than “我和我的妻子”, which is rather redundant, as it may appear slightly stiff and Europeanized. In English sentences, conjunctions appear frequently, but as for Chinese sentences, conjunctions are rarely used or almost unnecessary. For example, conjunctions in English sentences are like the sign of a skewer. Without this sign, meat cannot be strung.

Chinese paratactic sentences are not so particular about form, but rather start with flowing sentences and lay them out layer by layer, emphasizing the narrative order in order to convey meaning. From the above metaphor, it can be seen that although there is no skewer in Chinese sentences, it does not affect people's ability to eat meat. It can also be expressed in other ways, that is, the grammatical meaning and logical relationships of Chinese are often expressed through the meaning of words or clauses, and are often hidden between lines.

Cultural Level

The difference between hypotaxis and parataxis is also closely related to the differences between English and Chinese. English is the lingua franca of European and American countries, and Westerners advocate individual and rational thinking. In terms of communication, they tend to be straight-forward and not beat around the bush. This is reflected in the fact that English must also be connected with explicit symbols such as conjunctions in syntax, so the sentence structure is very rigorous; Chinese culture, however, emphasizes the importance of being vivid, and Eastern people are more reserved when communicating with others. Sometimes, considering the listener's emotions, they adopt the strategy of dropping a hint, which can also be reflected at the syntactic level. Chinese sentences are often concise and clear, with meaning as the main focus, and are unfolded according to temporal relationships, spatial relationships, causal relationships, etc. They will convey the logical relationships they want to express in a way that is consistent with their intended meaning.

A Comparison Between the Original Version and the Translated Version

In order to study the comparison of hypotaxis and parataxis at the sentence level between Chinese and English, this paper intends to compare Lu Xun's "《一件小事》" with the Yangs' translation "A Small Incident", and explore the transformation of hypotaxis and parataxis in Chinese English translation through the following examples.

Explicitation of the Subject

Example (1): 老实说，便是教我一天比一天的看不起人。

The Yangs' Version: Frankly speaking, they taught me to take a poorer view of people every day.

As we know, English is a hypotaxis language and Chinese is a parataxis language. Therefore, there are often no subjects, conjunctions, and pronouns in Chinese, but English sentences usually have subject predicate parts. Therefore, this sentence adds the subject "they" according to the logical relationship.

Example (2): 一路几乎遇不见人，好容易才雇定了一辆人力车，教他拉到S门去。

The Yangs' Version: I met scarcely a soul on the road, but eventually managed to hire a rickshaw to take me to S-Gate.

This sentence is similar to the previous sentence, highlighting the subject "I".

Example (3): 车夫听了这老女人的话，却毫不踌躇，仍然搀着伊的臂膊，便一步一步的向前走。

The Yangs' Version: But the rickshaw man did not hesitate for a minute after hearing the old woman's answer. Still holding her arm, he helped her slowly forward.

The translator rendered the two short Chinese sentences "仍然搀着伊的臂膊，便一步一步的向前走。" into one sentence in English, thus highlighting the subject "he" (the rickshaw man).

Explicitation of the Meaning

Example (4): 这是民国六年的冬天，大北风刮得正猛，我因为生计关系，不得不一早在路上走。

The Yangs' Version: It was the winter of 1917, a strong north wind was blustering, but the exigencies of earning my living forced me to be up and out early.

In 1911, the Xinhai Revolution overthrew the monarchy, and on New Year's Day 1912, the Republic of China was established in Nanjing, which was a major event in Chinese history. The first year of the Republic of China was 1912, and the “民国六年” was the sixth year after the founding of the Republic of China, which was 1917. If we literally translated “民国六年” into “the sixth year of the Republic,” it is obviously difficult for Westerners to understand the period of history when they may not necessarily be interested in. Therefore, it is very reasonable to translate “民国六年” into 1917 explicitly.

Example (5): “你怎么啦？” “我摔坏了。”

The Yangs' Version: “Are you all right?” he asked. “I hurt myself falling.”

The dialogue between the rickshaw man and the old woman who he knocked into. If we translate “你怎么啦？” into “What's the matter with you?” it is not in line with the situation, so it is translated as “Are you all right?” according to the context.

Example (6): 几年来的文治武功，在我早如幼小时候所读过的“子曰诗云”一般，背不上半句了。

The Yangs' Version: The politics and the fighting of those years have slipped my mind as completely as the classics I read as a child.

If “文治武功” and “子曰诗云” were rigidly translated, it would make it difficult for people who do not understand Chinese culture. This being the case, the Yangs translated into “the politics and the fighting” and “the classics”.

Explicitation of Conjunctions and Prepositions

Example (7): 我料定这老女人并没有伤，又没有别人看见，便很怪他多事，要自己惹出是非，也误了我的路。

The Yangs' Version: As I did not believe the old woman was hurt and as no one else had seen us, I thought this halt of his uncalled for, liable to land him trouble and hold me up.

Due to the fact that English belongs to the hypotaxis language, the conjunctions “As” and “and” have been added to this sentence to make it more natural.

Example (8): 大风之后，外面也不见人。

The Yangs' Version: Because of the high wind, there was no one outside.

In this sentence, there are two short sentences in Chinese, but the translation is combined into one sentence. At the same time, according to the logical relationship, “大风之后” is translated as “Because of the high wind”, a prepositional phrase.

Example (9): 风全住了，路上还很静。我走着，一面想，几乎怕敢想到自己。

The Yangs' Version: The wind had dropped completely, but the road was still quiet. As I walked along thinking, I hardly dared to think about myself.

The original Chinese sentence consists of five small sentences, and the translation consists of two sentences, with the addition of “but” and “As” according to the logical relationship.

Reorganization of Sentences

Example (10): 有一件小事，却于我有意义，将我从坏脾气里拖开，使我至今忘记不得。

The Yangs' Version: One small incident, however, which struck me as significant and jolted me out of my irritability, remains fixed even now in my memory.

We all know that there are many small sentences in Chinese, while there are many long sentences in English, so the translator translates the four short sentences in Chinese into one English sentence.

Example (11): 独有这一件小事，却总是浮在我眼前，有时反更分明，教我惭愧，催我自新，并且增长我的勇气和希望。

The Yangs' Version: Yet this small incident keeps coming back to me, often more vivid than in actual life, teaching me shame, spurring me on to reform, and imbuing me with fresh courage and fresh hope.

This example is the same as the previous one, where the translator translates six small sentences in Chinese into one sentence.

Example (12): 我这时突然感到一种异样的感觉，觉得他满身灰尘的后影，刹时高大了，而且愈走愈大，须仰视才见。

The Yangs' Version: Suddenly I had the strange sensation that his dusty retreating figure had in that instant grown larger. Indeed, the further he walked the larger he loomed, until I had to look up to him.

When translating this short paragraph, the translator reorganized the given five small sentences into two English sentences, and added “Indeed” and “until” to make the translation logically orderly.

Conclusion

Small incident as it is, it reflects the warmth and coldness of the world and the desolation of the world. In contemporary society, similar events occur frequently, and the protagonist may be you or me. How many people can boldly expose their own lowliness and selfishness, and dare to expose them to the naked eye of the world. Through a comparative study of Chinese and English translations of “A Small Incident”, we hope to provide reference for translators in translating similar texts: the purpose of translation determines the form and content of the translated text. In addition, the purposes of translation vary in different periods, which is why the same translator may revise or retranslate his version many years later. In addition, “A Small Incident”, which taught me shame, urged me to reform, and increased my courage and hope, taught everyone a lesson and conveyed positive social energy. Everyone is required to remind themselves at all times, think from different perspectives, and strive to “Do not avoid doing a good deed even if it seems trivial, and do not commit an evil act even if it seems small.” Perhaps this is precisely the original intention of Mr. Lu Xun’s creation.”

Hypotaxis and parataxis are the most obvious differences in syntactic structure between Chinese and English. English forms explicit cohesion through conjunctions, prepositions, relative words, and tense changes. Long sentences are mostly used to convey meaning through form, and the structure is clear and complete; Chinese uses less conjunction because there are not many relative pronouns, adverbs, and conjunctions in Chinese. Instead, implicit coherence is formed through word order, comprehensive rhetoric, condensed sentences,

and four character structures. Sentences are often short and concise, often in the form of semantic verbs, commonly known as “meaning.”

Of course, English hypotaxis and Chinese parataxis are not absolute, they are actually dialectical. There are a smaller number of parataxis sentences in English and a smaller number of hypotaxis sentences in Chinese. In English, parataxis is expressed by using different expressions to refer to the center word, because English does not often repeat, but when translated into Chinese, it requires the use of repeated nouns to express it, which is a Chinese hypotaxis sentence pattern.

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