

CHAPTER 3

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CHINESE AND ENGLISH TOPIC STRUCTURES

In this chapter, I will first introduce the framework of comparative grammar in section 3.1. Then I will compare the topic structures in Chinese and English in section 3.2. Next in section 3.3 I will determine the topic structures under the current investigation based on the results of comparison. Finally this chapter will be summarized in section 3.3.

3.1 Comparative Grammar

As mentioned in chapter 2, Contrastive Analysis (CA) (Fries, 1945; Lado, 1957) has its drawbacks in that many errors are not induced by L1 transfer and that many predicted errors do not actually occur. Furthermore, this hypothesis is based on structurally and psychologically inadequate view of language——behaviorism. The comparison of surface structures is superficial and fails to reveal the underlying principles of interlanguage grammar governing the surface structures (Flynn, 1987). Moreover, the behaviorist approach has been replaced by mentalist approach (Yip, 1995a). Although this technique is still adopted in transfer research, it should be

complemented by cross-linguistic comparisons of learners from different L1s (Ellis, 1994).

On the other hand, the general abandonment of structuralism brings a subsequent focus on cognitivist and universal theories, and contrastive linguistics has largely been replaced by comparative grammar with equal emphasis on the similarities and the differences between languages based on well-defined principles (Yip, 1995a). For example, recent framework of Principles and Parameters is essentially comparative. Since parameters are the different values of universal principles, the description of them involves crosslinguistic comparison of different languages in terms of a set of linguistic features (p.10).

In the following section, I will adopt the framework of comparative grammar to describe the topic structures in Chinese and English.

3.2 Topic Structures in Chinese and English

According to Li and Thompson (1976, 1981), Chinese is a topic prominent (TP) language and English a subject prominent (SP) language. Tsao (1979) also claims that Chinese is a discourse-oriented language and English a sentence-oriented language. Therefore, the topic-comment structure is a basic syntactic unit in Chinese but rarely occurs in English (Huang, 1984a, b). Chu (1998) classifies Chinese topics as marked and unmarked ones. I will introduce the two types of topic structures (i.e.,

topic-comment structure) and determine if the corresponding structures occur in English in section 3.2.1 and 3.2.2 respectively.

3.2.1 Unmarked topics in Chinese and English

According to Chu (1998), unmarked topics are produced when topics are introduced and proceed without any morphological or syntactic marking. The formation of topics consists of three stages: (1) introduction, (2) pick-up and (3) continuation (p.261). They are not topics when they are first introduced, but become topics when they are “picked up” by a coreferential nominal, pronominal, or zero in a following clause, as shown in example (12).

(12) a) Luoyang you *ge ming genu* _i

Luoyang had M famous song-girl

b) \emptyset_i jiao Yang Zhuluo

called Yang Zhuluo

c) \emptyset_i conghui guo ren

intelligent surpass people

d) \emptyset_i yi yuyan jianqiao guan yu yishi

with language sharp-skillful top at the-time

‘In Luoyang, there was a famous female singer by the name of Yang Zhuluo. She was extremely intelligent and was tops for her quick wit.’

(Shen, 1987:85, cited from Chu, 1998:261)

In (12), the topic *ge ming genu* ‘a famous female singer’ is first introduced in (a) and is then picked up in (b) by zero (\emptyset) to become the unmarked topic, which continues with the \emptyset ’s in (c) and (d) (Chu, 1998:262). This structure is also called a ‘topic chain’, in which a topic extends its semantic domain over several sentences (Tsao, 1979). After introduced in the first sentence, the topic within a topic chain can

be omitted via a process of “topic NP deletion” (p.72). Namely, the first topic is the controller of the subsequent topic’s omission.

The unmarked topic in the form of zero is very common in Chinese, either in formal or informal, colloquial or written texts. However, the corresponding unmarked topics are only found in colloquial English, especially in informal style. An example is shown in (13).

- (13) a) You are older than *your husband* $_i$...
 b) *He* $_i$'s also very bright.
 c) \emptyset $_i$ Very knowledgeable about everything...
 (CNN interview text, 2002)

In (13), the topic *your husband* is first introduced in a), then picked up by *He* in b), and then continues with the \emptyset in c).¹ Despite the presence of it in colloquial English, the zero form of unmarked topic is forbidden and ungrammatical in formal written English.

In sum, unmarked topics in the form of zeros are common in Chinese, but they are forbidden in formal written English, only occurring in casual styles of colloquial English.

3.2.2 Marked topics in Chinese and English

In contrast to unmarked topics, the marked topics are marked morphologically or syntactically. With these morphological or syntactic markers which specify their

¹ Also, notice in (c) that not only the topic NP is missing, but also the tensed verb is missing.

status of given information, the marked topics do not need the general operation of topics (i.e., the three stages of topic formation) and can be identified with a clause or sentence without a larger context (Chu 1998). There are six types of marked topics, as listed in the following (pp.266-273):

Type I: Double-Nominal Construction: two nominals occurring one after the other at the beginning of a clause. Eg.

(14) *Zheke shu* _i, hua xiao, yezi da, Ø _i bu haokan.

This-M tree, flower small, leave big, not good-looking

‘This tree, with small flowers and big leaves, is not good looking.’

(Adapted from Li and Thompson, 1981:94, cited in Chu, 1998:266)

The topic *Zheke shu* ‘this tree’ is marked by its syntactic position, i.e., as the first of the two adjacent nominals in the sentence-initial position. This construction is also called “double-subject construction” (Li and Thompson, 1981). However, this topic structure is not found in English.

Type II: Nominal Followed by a Pause Particle, Such As *Ya* or *Ne*. Eg.

(15) *Beijing chengli* ya, you ge Gu-Gong.

Beijing city-inside YA, exist M Old-Palace

‘Inside Beijing city, there is a Palace Museum.’

(Tsao, 1990:57, cited from Chu, 1998: 268)

The topic *Beijing chengli* ‘Inside of Beijing city’ is marked by a morphological marker *ya* which functions as a pause marker. However, this topic structure is not found in English.

Type III: Introduced by Prepositions Like *Zhiyu*, *Duiyu*, etc. Eg.

(16) Wo xianzai zhi xiang wancheng xueye. Zhiyu biye hou gan sheme,
I now only think-of finish study. as-for graduate after do what
wo hai mei kaolu

I yet not consider

‘Now I am thinking only of finishing my study. As to what I will do after graduation, I have no plan yet.’

(Ho, 1993:33, cited from Chu, 1998: 268)

The topic *biye hou gan sheme* ‘what to do after graduation’ is morphologically marked by a preposition *zhiyu* ‘as for’. This structure is also found in English, as suggested in the corresponding English translation.

Type IV: Comparison: in Chinese, what is being compared in a sentence is

considered a topic, and the comparison structure is a marker of topic. Eg.

(17) *Ta lai Taipei* bi wo qu Xianggang fangbian

he come Taipei compared-to I go Hon-Kong convenient

‘It is more convenient for him to come to Taipei than for me to go to Hong Kong.’

(Adapted from Li and Thompson, 1981:566, cited in Chu, 1998:269)

The two topics, *Ta lai Taipei* ‘he comes to Taipei’ and *wo qu Xianggang* ‘I go to Hong Kong’, are morpho-syntactically marked by the comparison structure created by *bi* ‘compared-to’. However, this topic structure is not found in English.

Type V: The ‘Lian...Dou/Ye’ Construction: to identify a case that is almost

impossible to meet the condition. Eg.

(18) Lao Zhang lian E Yu dou hui shuo

Old Zhang even Russian also know-how-to speak

‘Old Zhang even can speak Russian.’

(Tsao, 1990:277, cited in Chu, 1998:270)

E Yu ‘Russain’ is morpho-syntactically marked by a comparison structure created

by *lain...dou* ‘even...also’. However, this topic structure is not found in English.

Type VI: The Ba- and Bei-sentences: patient-topicalization devices.

(19) a) *Zhe yifan hua zhongyu ba ta shoufu le.*

This one-M talk finally BA him convince LE

‘He was finally convinced by his task.’

(Hsueh, 1989: 104, cited from Chu:1998:271)

b) *Ta bei ren da shang le.*

he BEI someone hit wound LE

‘He was hit and wounded by someone.’

(Tsao, 1990:108, cited from Chu, 1998:272)

The topic *ta* after *ba* in (a) and before *bei* in (b) is in the patient role, since *ba*

and *bei* are morphosyntactic markers of topics. However, the corresponding topic

structures do not occur in English.

In addition to the six types of marked topics proposed by Chu (1998), there are also two common types of marked topic in Chinese--fronted topics (topicalization) and left-dislocated topics, both being marked syntactically, i.e., in the sentence-initial position. The examples of these two structures are shown in (20)-(21).

(20) Fronted topics

Yazi_i wo xihuan t_i

duck I like

‘Ducks I like.’

(Yip, 1995a: 86)

(21) Left-dislocated topics

a) *wo jie, tamen bu shi yao qu Vancouver?*

I sister, they not is want go Vancouver?

‘?My sisters, they aren’t going to Vancouver? /Aren’t my sisters going to Vancouver?’

b) *Zhege CEO wo hai yao jiangli ta.*

this-CL CEO I still want reward it

‘?This CEO, I still want to reward it./ I still want to reward CEO’

(Huang, 2002:13)

The topic *Yazi* in (20) is formed by fronting it from the object position to the sentence-initial (preverbal) position, a place occupied by given information (Birner, 1994). On the other hand, the topics *wo jie* ‘my sister’ in (21a) and *Zhege CEO* ‘this CEO’ in (21b) are formed by putting them in the sentence-initial position, leaving a coreferential pronoun in the comment clause. The coreferential pronoun can serve as the subject of the comment clause such as *tamen* ‘they’ in (21a), or as the object in the comment clause such as *ta* ‘it’ in (21b). However, as the direct English translation shows, the corresponding topic structures in English are found only in colloquial style, particularly informal one, and they are ungrammatical and rarely found in written English (Biber et al, 1999).

In sum, syntactically marked topics include double nominal construction, fronted topics, and left-dislocated topics; morphologically marked topics include those marked by pause markers and those marked by prepositions; morphosyntactically marked topics include those marked by comparison markers such as *bi* ‘compared-to’ and *lian...dou* ‘even...also’, and those marked by patient-topicalization devices such as *ba* or *bei*. Among these marked topic structures, only one occurs in English—the topic structure which is morphologically marked by prepositions. Syntactically marked structures---fronted topics, left-dislocated topics, and double nominal construction- are not grammatical in formal written English, although the first two

are present in the casual spoken English.

The results of comparison with respect to marked and unmarked topics in Chinese and English are outlined in table 4.

Table 4: the results of comparison between Chinese and English topic structures

1. Unmarked topics	Chinese	English
Pronoun form	v	v
Coreferential nominal	v	v
Zero form	v	?
2. Marked topics	Chinese	English
Morphologically marked	v	v
Syntactically marked	v	?
Morphosyntactically marked	v	?

The thesis focuses on the formal written grammar, and thus ignores the colloquial style of spoken English. In terms of unmarked topics, Chinese and English are different in the presence of the topic in the zero form. In terms of marked topics, Chinese and English are different in the presence of syntactically marked topics, which include syntactically and morphosyntactically marked topics.

3.3 Topic Structures of the Current Investigation

Based on the comparison of topic structures in the previous section, only one corresponding topic structure is found grammatically correct in English—the topic morphologically marked by prepositions. Syntactically marked topics and unmarked topics in the zero form are not grammatically correct in English. Thus, there are two cases when Chinese L1 forms a superset of English L2, as illustrated in figure 5-6.

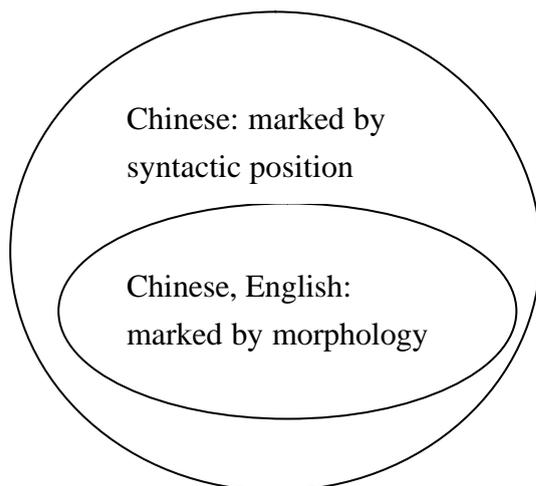


Figure 5: Marked topics

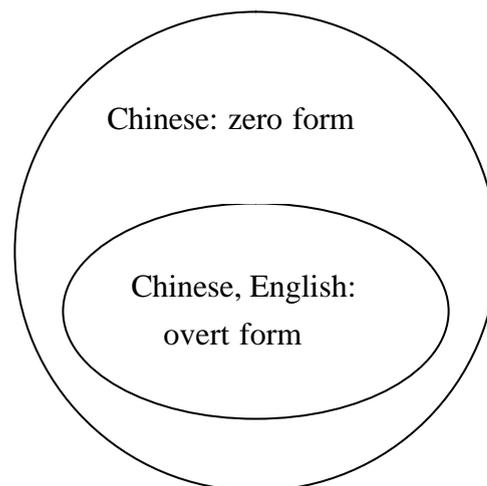


Figure 6: Unmarked topics

According to my theoretical framework of the operation of interlanguage system in 2.2.4, L1 as a superset of L2 is a condition of L1 transfer. Thus, I choose the three syntactically marked topics—double nominal construction, fronted topic, and left-dislocated topics—and the unmarked topics in the form of zero as the focus of investigation. I adopt the following terminologies to name these structures—double-subject (DS), topicalization (TOP), left-dislocation (LD), and drop (DP). The interlanguage outputs of these topic structures elicited in the pilot study are shown in (22)-(25).

(22) double-subject construction (DS):

*The girl, eyes are big.

(23) topicalization (TOP):

*That book, I read last week.

(24) left-dislocation (LD):

a) LD(S): **My daddy, he* plays basketball every day.

b) LD(O): **The guy*, Mary saw *him* last week.

(25) drop (DP):

a) DP(S): *I have *a girl friend*_i. \emptyset _i Very beautiful.

b) DP(O): **That restaurant*_i is cheap and has good food, so we like \emptyset _i very much.

3.4 Summary of Chapter 3

In section 3.1 I have described the reasons for my adoption of comparative grammar in place of the traditional CA framework, since CA's power of error-prediction is limited and its theoretical backgrounds are inadequate. In section 3.2 I have compared the Chinese and English topic structures, and found that only one topic structure is grammatical in English—the topic morphologically marked by prepositions—and that syntactically marked topics together with unmarked topics in the zero form are ungrammatical in formal written English. In section 3.3 I have introduced the four target topic structures under my investigation of interlanguage grammar-- drop (DP), double-subject (DS), topicalization (TOP), and left-dislocation (LD)--and shown the interlanguage outputs of these structures.