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What's that got to do with anything? Coherence and the Translation of Relative Clauses

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ABSTRACT

Non-defining relative clauses in Chinese pose a particular problem for the translator. Employing a right-branching relative clause in English is almost never appropriate. Instead, connectives such as conjunctions have to be used to ensure the English is coherent. This article discusses how concepts of coherence and parataxis/hypotaxis can elucidate one way in which Chinese discourse differs from English.

KEYWORDS

Non-defining relative clauses; left-branching; right-branching; coherence; cohesive devices; conjunctions, hypotaxis; parataxis.

There is a new flowering of Chinese translation theory, as exemplified in the *Chinese Translation Journal* (published in Chinese) and numerous English-language papers—the *Translation Studies Abstracts/Bibliography of Translation Studies* has an extensive list of these. Yet there is still a lack of bottom-up articles which take as their starting point a particular translation problem. Of course, there are splendid exceptions to this rule: *An Encyclopaedia of Translation: Chinese-English, English-Chinese* has chapters on "Body Language in Chinese-English Translation" and "[Translating] Colour Terms," and the translation resources website *Paper Republic* includes articles on such topics as translating slang.

This article on relative clauses has a foot in both camps: it is inspired by my own practice, but also touches on theories of coherence. I hope, in so doing, to shed light on how Chinese "makes sense" in certain types of relative clauses.

Relative clauses in Chinese

The way relative clauses[1] are formed is one of the clearest differences between Chinese and English grammar. Relative clauses in English are right-branching, that is, follow the noun they qualify, whereas relative clauses in Chinese and Japanese are left-branching, that is, precede the noun. (Gass and Schachter 1989: 90).

> **Example 1:**
> <u>People who</u> meditate need to eat and drink a lot.
> 坐禅<u>的人</u>必须大吃大喝
> Literally: Meditate <u>de</u>/的 people need big eat big drink

The all-important <u>de</u>/的 is the glue which attaches the relative clause to the head word (*people*, in this case). Known as a clitic[2] , it is, according to Huang, (1989: 1) "… very likely the most often used and most versatile

form in the language." Similarly, Claudia Ross (1983: 216) says: "The Mandarin particle <u>de</u> is found in strings which are assigned very different structural descriptions in English… [including] possession…adjectival modification.. relative clause… [and] cleft sentence."

Relative clauses in English

In English, by contrast, relative clauses are formed by using who/which/that and come after the head noun. English distinguishes two types of relative clauses, defining and non-defining (also known as restrictive and non-restrictive).

<u>People who meditate</u> —above —is a defining clause where <u>who meditate</u> defines the noun, people, and answers the question "which people?"

<u>Dogs, which are pack animals, make good companions for humans</u>…. contains a non-defining clause, <u>which are pack animals</u>. Such clauses are always separated from the head noun by a comma and the sentence still makes sense if this clause is removed.

Chinese, on the other hand, makes no difference between defining and non-defining relative clauses [3] —they share the same structure and punctuation. In the example below, the writer has used both in the same sentence. I have marked them RC1 and RC2:

> **Example 2:**
> <u>阅读卡夫卡而激动不已的人</u>[RC1]不在少数，<u>刺激神经的我</u>[RC2]想并非是文学的优美，也非一般性的作品的可读，而是："原来写作还可以这样！"
> <u>People who read Kafka and find him extremely exciting</u> [RC1] are numerous. <u>I, who find him very stimulating</u>,[RC2] feel that it is not because of the beauty of his writings or its readability, but because it makes you realise that, yes, writing can be like that!

RC1 is a defining relative clause, necessary in order to define which people we are talking about; RC2 is a non-defining relative clause: it is not necessary to define "I" and the sentence makes sense if we take the clause out. But in each case, in the Chinese, the structure of the clause is identical. In fact the author seems to use their identical structure to create a symmetry in the two parts of the sentence:

> 阅读卡夫卡而激动不已的人 RC1
> Read Kafka and get very excited <u>de</u>/的 people
>
> 刺激神经的我 RC2
> Stimulate the spirit <u>de</u>/的 I/me

Ways of translating relative clauses

Defining relative clauses can normally be translated using the English who/which construction. The left-branching clause with <u>de</u>/ 的 below becomes the right-branching "people who" in the English:

坐禅<u>的人</u>必须大吃大喝
<u>People who</u> meditate need to eat and drink a lot.

<u>Non-defining</u> clauses are more complex to translate. Sometimes the English relative clause is appropriate. For instance:

Example 3:
我想一条群居<u>的狗</u>的潜在的智力不见得会优于一头独居的长臂猿
I think a <u>dog, which</u> is a pack animal, is unlikely to be more intelligent than a <u>gibbon, which</u> is solitary.

In other cases, as my examples will show, using the English relative can sound at best awkward, at worst incoherent. It seems that when a generalisation is being made (as above), the English relative clause structure can be used. Not so when the head word is a pronoun or a proper noun and the information given is specific, not a generalisation.

The examples below have been taken from five book-length translations (both fiction and non-fiction) published between 2005 and 2009, with one additional example from an unpublished work. For each of the examples, a version with a right-branching relative clause, and a version using a different strategy (the one used in the eventual published translation) is provided. The examples are followed by an analysis of the different translation strategies used. For practical reasons, I have largely used my own work as a source for examples, and have limited my searches to non-defining relative clauses where the head words were the pronouns I/我 OR she/he/她/他.

Examples of Chinese non-defining relative clauses

Example 4:
说来也怪，看上去奄奄一息的他，几瓶盐水挂下去，立马药到病除，活转过来
With <u>who</u> clause:
Strangely, <u>he, who</u> looked to be at death's door, was rid of the illness and restored to health as soon as a couple of bottles of saline drip were poured into him….
Actual translation used:
Strangely, <u>even though he</u> looked to be at death's door, a couple of bottles of saline drip restored him immediately to health…

Example 5:
不料脸色突然阴沉的他，断然拒收："这点钱怎么行!上蜡的钱都不止这些!"
With <u>who</u> clause:
<u>He, whose face</u> <u>unexpectedly darkened</u>, rejected my offering curtly. "You crazy? That's not even enough to pay for the shoe polish!"
Actual translation used:
<u>However, to my surprise he scowled</u> and rejected my offering curtly. "You crazy? That's not even enough to pay for the shoe polish!"

Example 6:
直为进入调查现场而犯难的我，一时如释重负。
With <u>who</u> clause:
<u>I, who</u> had gone to some trouble to get straight to the region where I would do my field research, felt immediately relieved.
Actual translation used:
<u>Since I</u> had gone to some trouble to get straight to the area where I would do my field research, I felt immediately relieved.

Example 7:
受其盛情款待的我，望着剩余的酒菜，真是感激也不是，不感激也不是。
With <u>who</u> clause:
<u>I, who</u> had been the recipient of such generous hospitality, was torn between gratitude and disapproval as I looked at all the food and drink left over.
Actual translation used:
They had been exceptionally hospitable towards me, <u>but I</u> was torn between gratitude and disapproval as I looked at all the food and drink left over.

Example 8:
仁军转脸看了看拴在桌腿上的我。
With <u>who</u> clause:
Ren Jun turned to look at <u>me, who</u> was tied to the table leg.
 Actual translation used:
Ren Jun looked over to <u>where I</u> sat tied to the table leg.

We can see that in the above examples, the author is providing two pieces of information about the head noun. Both from the whole-text context and from direct observation of the sentence, we can make the following assertions:

1) The clauses are symmetrically balanced, one on either side of the head noun, and usually seem of equal importance, although one often precedes the other chronologically.

2) In terms of information content, they may remind the reader of something s/he already knows, or they may introduce new information. In both cases, the first sets the scene within which the subsequent action will take place.

3) It is conceivable, and this is just my subjective impression, that this physical arrangement allows the Chinese writer to insert more information into a single sentence than the English can comfortably handle. In English, with its right-branching relative clauses, a very long <u>who</u> clause can be confusing as it makes it hard for the reader to relate the main clause back to the head noun.

4) The clauses carry no emotional or declamatory overtones, unlike such structures which occur (rarely) in English. ("I, who had sworn to love and honor her…" was typical of examples which Cobuild Concordance provided.) Indeed, this structure in Chinese is neutral in emotional

register – in fact, it is often associated with dispassionate, precise description.

5) Most important of all, the relationship between the two pieces of information, one in the <u>de</u>/的 clause, one in the subsequent clause, is not made explicit to the reader. The author in example 4 writes:

> 看上去奄奄一息的他
> appear at death's door <u>de</u>/的 he.

He did not write this sentence, as he might have done, using the conjunction 虽然/although/even though. Instead, he allows us to infer the connection between the state of the patient before his treatment, and his rapid recovery afterwards. In English, however, we need to use a cohesive device – usually, though not always, a conjunction—to join the two pieces of information and make explicit the relationship between them. In every instance except the last one above, in order to convey the information contained in the non-defining relative clause in Chinese, I have used the following: <u>Even though</u>, <u>However</u>, <u>Since</u>, <u>But</u>, <u>And</u> (in other words, a selection of additive, adversative and causal conjunctions)*.*

While I have limited myself in this article to discussing examples drawn from three authors whom I have personally translated, I also called up examples of this structure from the CCL 语料库 (Centre for Chinese Linguistics, Peking University, Corpus of Modern Chinese). As above, for practical reasons, I restricted my search to <u>de</u>/的 clauses where the head word is a pronoun—either I/he/she (我/他/她)—as these clauses will necessarily be non-defining. See Appendix A for a sample screen-shot of the search results. Examining them bears out my observations above that a conjunction is usually necessary to translate the sentence into English. As in my examples above, these fall mainly into three categories:

1) Sentences where the two clauses can be linked with <u>and</u> or similar conjunction; (additive)

2) Sentences where the two clauses can be linked with <u>but</u> or similar conjunction; (adversative)

3) Sentences where the two clauses can be linked with <u>because</u> or similar conjunction (causal).

Coherence and <u>de</u>/的 relative clauses

> Each language has its own patterns to convey the interrelationship of persons and events; in no language may these patterns be ignored, if the translation is to be understood by its readers (Callow 1974: 30, quoted in Baker 1992: 180).

> The coherence of a text is a result of the interaction between knowledge presented in the text and the reader's own knowledge and experience of the world […] (Baker 1992: 219).

It is particularly important that sentences with relative clauses are coherent in translation, since by definition they contain at least two pieces of information which relate to each other. Much Western-based research has focused on how coherence is conveyed by cohesive devices such as conjunctions, which 'tell' the reader how to make sense of the information. Chinese researchers, however, have a different take on how Chinese texts achieve coherence. Yeh Chun-chun, for instance, examines both classical and modern Chinese texts, and shows how explicit cohesive devices, whether referential or conjunctive, are often absent. This forces readers to infer logical connections for themselves, based on their own knowledge and experience of life. "Different languages," she concludes "might have different systems of cohesive devices...the importance attached to various types of cohesive devices might be different. Some of them might be avoided in a particular language…" (Yeh 2004: 258).

Expressed another way, Chinese prefers parataxis (sequencing of elements in a sentence without connectives), English prefers hypotaxis, or using connectives. (The Chinese for these somewhat cumbersome grammatical terms is admirably expressive and direct: parataxis 意合, the combining of ideas; hypotaxis 形合, the combining of forms.) Chan Sin-wai explains the difference as follows:

> Conjunctions in English are used more frequently than in Chinese. This is because the clauses in a Chinese composite sentence are usually connected by parataxis, whereas those in an English complex or compound sentence are connected by hypotaxis….connectives are much less imperatively needed in a Chinese composite sentence. (Chan 2002: 308)

As we have seen, in the case of certain types of Chinese relative clauses, the translator has to ditch the relative clause structure and substitute a connective—a connective which exists in the Chinese source text by inference only, and is not explicit. In other words, the translator has to choose the appropriate conjunction based on his/her experience of the world.

In the example 7 above, the writer is upset that too much expensive food was wasted. The connection between the two clauses is therefore obviously **adversative**:

> They had been exceptionally hospitable towards me, <u>but</u> I was torn between gratitude and disapproval as I looked at all the food and drink left over.

It would not be coherent if it were **additive**:

> They had been exceptionally hospitable towards me, <u>and</u> I was torn between gratitude and disapproval as I looked at all the food and drink left over.

Nor would it make sense if it were **causal**:

> They had been exceptionally hospitable towards me, <u>because</u> I was torn between gratitude and disapproval as I looked at all the food and drink left over.

I have chosen one final example to illustrate how it is sometimes necessary to re-arrange the sentence completely, because leaving the <u>de</u>/的 clause in its original position infers a relationship, in English, which would be the wrong one:

> **Example 9:**
> 不过，那次第一个开口探听的，并不是以往对事事好奇的我，而是我的一位同事："老乡，您好，去哪儿？"
>
> *With <u>who</u> clause:*
> However, the first person to question [him] was not <u>I, who</u> had always been endlessly curious, but one of my colleagues: "Good evening. Where are you going?" He asked politely.
>
> *Actual translation used:*
> [Previous sentence…], <u>and I</u> have always been endlessly curious. However, it was not me who put the first question, but one of my colleagues: "Good evening. Where are you going?" He asked politely.

In the above example, the source text already contains one conjunction (不过/<u>however</u>). But the information given about the personality of the writer does not make sense unless an adversative conjunction is supplied in English. For example, I could have translated this coherently as:

> <u>However</u>, it was not me who put the first question, <u>although</u> I have always been endlessly curious, but one of my colleagues: "Good evening. Where are you going?" He asked politely.

In the event, I felt that this made the sentence too cumbersome, and I removed that clause to the previous sentence.

The first translation above, ("I, who had always been…") does not make sense because we would naturally infer not an adversative but a causal relationship: that is, we would expect the clause describing "I" to indicate why she was <u>not</u> the sort of person to ask nosy questions. For example, if the author has written the following, it would be coherent:

> The first person to question [him] was not <u>I, who had always been timid […].</u>

To summarise, we cannot normally translate paratactic Chinese sentences into coherent English sentences without adding connectives of one sort of another. In certain cases, we may also have to split or re-arrange sentences.

Of course, modern Chinese is not entirely paratactic – conjunctions are frequently used. In the same way, English is not entirely hypotactic. Example 6 above could have been translated paratactically, although

parataxis tends to be colloquial in English. The result, therefore, sounds more informal than the original (a sociology text) warrants:

> I felt immediately relieved. I had gone to some trouble to get straight to the area where I would do my field research.

Instead of:

> <u>Since I</u> had gone to some trouble to get straight to the area where I would do my field research, I felt immediately relieved.

Conclusion

We have seen that left-branching relative clauses are a very fertile construction in Chinese, capable of conveying precise information in various text genres, both fiction and non-fiction. We have also seen that this construction is paratactic: the relationship between the clauses in the sentence, while clear to the source text reader, is not explicit. It is noteworthy that the same construction can express relationships as radically different as adversative, additive or causal. This feature of Chinese can be linked to other structures, such as zero-pronoun, or lack of explicit subject, and derives from classical Chinese; the common element in these structures is that the reader is left to make inferences based on what Baker calls their "experience of the world."

English, however, is language where the coherence of a text relies heavily on cohesive devices such as conjunctions. This presents the translator with a number of challenges.

First, using a conjunction means re-organising the sentence—differently according to the conjunction chosen. Example 6 could be translated as:

> <u>Since I</u> had gone to some trouble to get straight to the area where I would do my field research, I felt immediately relieved […].
> Or:
> <u>I </u>had gone to some trouble to get straight to the area where I would do my field research, <u>so</u> I felt immediately relieved.

Secondly, conjunctions may be similar in meaning but may sound more or less academic or colloquial, for example, <u>but</u> and <u>however</u>, <u>also</u> and <u>moreover</u>, <u>so</u> and <u>therefore</u>. Again, if the translator mimics the parataxis of the original, and omits the connective, this may alter the register. The translator therefore has to choose not only a cohesive device but also the appropriate register.

Thirdly, re-organising the sentence can result in a shift in emphasis to a different part of it —for instance, example 8:

> Ren Jun turned to look at <u>me, who</u> was tied to the table leg.

The actual translation used—Ren Jun looked over to <u>where I</u> sat tied to the table leg—has resulted in the object (me) being 'lost' in the English translation.

Finally, the physical arrangement of <u>de</u>/的 clauses, on either side of the head noun, seems to make it easy to load a lot of information into one sentence—including both 'repeat/reminder' information and new information. The question of how to deal with an information-packed sentence is a tricky one—sometimes part of the sentence can be transferred to the previous sentence (my example 9) or even omitted.

Translators from Chinese have always instinctively known that, in order to produce a translation which is good, however they define that value-laden term, they have to take a bold approach. <u>De</u>/的 clauses are a prime example of the requirement for creative re-arrangement of the source text in translation. The challenge for the translator lies in making the English translation coherent while retaining the balance and tone of the text and avoiding information-overload.

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Biography

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[1] Also called by some linguists noun clauses or noun phrases.

[2] Clitics "are elements which share certain properties of fully-fledged words [… they] can't stand alone, but have to be attached phonologically to a host" (Spencer 2009: 350).

[3] See Mark Newbrook: "[Cantonese] does not systematically encode the semantic distinction [between restrictive and non-restrictive relatives] in any way." (Newbrook date unknown: 32). Note that Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese grammars are identical in this respect.