

# A study on the translation strategies of ancient Chinese cultural classics from the perspective of hypotaxis and parataxis--taking the *A Dream of Red Mansions* as an example

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**Abstract:** Translation serves as a bridge for telling Chinese stories and promotes the exchange of Chinese and foreign civilizations. By translating Chinese classics into foreign languages, it facilitates the international dissemination of Chinese culture and deepens the exchange and mutual learning of civilizations. As the first of China's four great classical novels, *A Dream of Red Mansions* is widely recognized for its literary value and achievements by scholars worldwide. From the early 19th century to the present, there have been over 100 translations into more than 30 languages. *A Dream of Red Mansions* represents the pinnacle of classical Chinese literature, involving complex terminology from various fields. In addition to translating ancient titles and food in the text, there are also extensive translations of ancient poems, all of which pose focal points and challenges in translation. By comparing various translations, this paper takes Hawkes' translation as an example to analyze the differences between English and Chinese in the translation of *A Dream of Red Mansions* from the perspectives of hypotaxis and parataxis, and expound the translation strategies in this type of translation.

**Key words:** *A Dream of Red Mansions*; English-Chinese comparison; hypotaxis and parataxis

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## 1 Introduction

With the progress of the times, the deepening exchange of Chinese and foreign cultures has made the comparison between English and Chinese a hot topic for scholars in both disciplines. By understanding the language expression habits, scholars from various countries can appreciate the cultural differences behind the language, promoting cultural exchange [1].

The text selected one of China's four classic novels--*A Dream of Red Mansions*. Also known as *The Story of the Stone*, this chapter-style novel was written by the Qing Dynasty author Cao Xueqin. The novel, with the rise and fall of the four major families of Jia, Shi, Wang, and Xue as its background, portrays the love and marriage tragedies of Jia Baoyu, Lin Daiyu, and Xue Baochai, depicting the various aspects of life of the women in the Twelve Beauties of Jinling, and showcasing the true beauty of human nature and tragic beauty, as well as depicting all aspects of 18th-century feudal Chinese society. There are many translations of it, among which the most influential in the world is the new translation by the Oxford University professor and sinologist, David Hawkes. Its greatest feature is flexibility, fully taking into account

the cultural differences, such as rendering "qiao xifu zuo bu chu mei mi de zhou" as "cannot make bread without flour", which has been warmly received by English readers and is considered one of the most influential English translations of *A Dream of Red Mansions* in the Western world [2].

This paper takes Hawkes' English translation as an example to analyze the English-Chinese differences in the translated text of *A Dream of Red Mansions* from the perspectives of hypotaxis and parataxis, and discuss the translation strategies in his translation.

## **2 General characteristics of English and Chinese**

English and Chinese belong to different language families, each with distinct linguistic features. Chinese is a member of the Sino-Tibetan family, while English is part of the Indo-European family. The cultural influences of these language families have shaped their grammatical and logical tendencies. European culture, with its emphasis on rational thought and scientific precision, has steered English towards prioritizing logical structures and complete forms for conveying meaning [3]. English utilizes a wide range of cohesive elements, such as conjunctions, prepositions, and pronouns, frequently employing multiple connecting methods to construct lengthy sentences that convey specific grammatical meanings and logical relationships.

In contrast, influenced by Confucian and Taoist philosophies, Chinese has historically valued "implicitness" and "acumen", striving for aesthetic elegance [4]. As a result, Chinese expression tends to be more "restrained", often implying rather than overtly expressing time, mood, and meanings, requiring readers to discern multiple layers of meaning. As we all know, Chinese thinking places greater emphasis on ideas, with sentences often understood through vocabulary, context, and intuition, rather than through a focus on sentence structure analysis. As a result, Chinese sentence structures prioritize clarity, coherence, and fluency, aiming for "dispersed form and concentrated spirit", with minimal use of formal cohesive elements. Instead, meanings are conveyed primarily through time and significance, demonstrated through concise sentences, fragmentary sentences, parallelism, repetition, and other rhetorical devices.

Therefore, the form-based sentences in English and the meaning-based sentences in Chinese require the use of multiple translation strategies to ensure the readability of the translated text.

## **3 Hypotaxis and parataxis**

Lian Shuneng mentioned in her book that hypotaxis refers to the use of linguistic forms such as conjunctions to connect words or phrases, expressing grammatical meaning and logical relationships. English sentences mainly adopt the hypotaxis.

Parataxis refers to the connection of words or components without the use of linguistic forms or means, where the grammatical meaning and logical relationships are expressed through the meaning of words or phrases. Chinese sentence construction mainly adopts the parataxis [5]. Translation strategies such as zero transformation, shift of topic, and sentence restructuring are commonly used to convert between hypotaxis and parataxis during translation.

## **4 Comparison of hypotaxis and parataxis in the translation of classical Chinese texts**

Hypotaxis and parataxis represent a prominent contrast at the macro level between the English and Chinese languages, exerting significant influence on the translation of various literary styles. They frequently appear in the comparative study of English and Chinese texts, forming a hot topic for modern linguistic scholars. Both are dialectically unified and complementary; seeking isolated specific corresponding rules between the two languages and neglecting contextual differences in the discourse may lead to semantic loss in the source language. In addition, to prevent absolute generalization, careful attention should be given to the pragmatic meaning of language, ensuring that the translation maintains both formal resemblance and substantive equivalence, serving as a bridge between the two languages.

Therefore, in the translation, translators must not rigidly adhere to the original text but should transcend the constraints of the source language, utilizing their subjectivity to break down differences, analyze deeply, and comprehend the profound meaning of the original text, thus better serving as the main storyteller and promoting the dissemination of ancient Chinese culture.

Classical Chinese, known as literary or classical prose, features concise language and elegant style, reflecting the unique historical and cultural heritage of the Chinese nation. In the translation of classical Chinese texts, the translation process is influenced by various factors such as culture, social context, translator's subjectivity, and grammatical structures of the text. From a linguistic perspective, interlingual translation is mostly adopted for this cross-cultural conversion of different languages. This requires a clear understanding of the differences between Chinese "hypotaxis" and English "parataxis" in order to fully comprehend the "meaning" of the original text. Appropriate translation strategies are then applied to connect the subject, verb, and object in the original text, and link other structures to the main clause as subordinate or coordinate clauses [6]. By using explicit linking words, amplification, and sentence restructuring, the translation can naturally and effectively convey the meaning in line with the conventions of the target language, abandoning overly literal translation and Eurocentric Chinese, and making it more accessible to foreign readers while striving to better showcase the national culture.

In conclusion, when translating, the objective representation of hypotaxis and parataxis requires translators to adopt a dialectical and unified approach in viewing the original text and the translated work [7]. Based on this understanding, translators should first perform intralingual transformation on the classical Chinese text, followed by interlingual conversion between Chinese and English, while considering the differences in form cohesion and meaning cohesion, aiming to maintain lexical, syntactic coherence, and logical connections consistently, thus effectively conveying the accurate information of the texts.

## **5 Analysis of hypotaxis and parataxis in *A Dream of Red Mansions* and Hawkes' translation**

### 5.1 Gathering parts into a whole

Chinese tends to express meanings in implicit and vague forms, without explicit connectives between sentences, yet it can perfectly convey the intended artistic mood at the time, reflecting a language that emphasizes understanding and artistic charm. When transforming syntactic structures, Chinese clauses can be integrated into English subordinate clauses, forming a set of sentences with subject-verb structures.

Example 1:

ST: Ban ye zhong, huo qi yin yao xiao jie, bian jiang ying lian fang zai yi jia men lan shang zuo zhe. Dai ta xiao jie wan le, lai bao shi, na you ying lian de zong ying?

TT: It was near midnight when Calamity, feeling an urgent need to relieve his bladder, put Yinglian down on someone's doorstep while he went about his business, only to find, on his return, that the child was nowhere to be seen.

Analysis: The Chinese passage is composed of many small clauses, while Hawkes' translation consists of only one long and complex sentence. The other small clauses have been transformed into non-finite subordinate clauses, with a series of actions involving the use of while-clauses as temporal adverbial clauses, present participle phrases as adverbials, and a string of verb infinitives. Finally, an emphasis structure is used to combine the scattered small clauses in the Chinese text, not only emphasizing the central theme of the passage "In the middle of the night, Yinglian disappeared", but also expressing objectivity with "it" as the subject in English. The entire translation is meticulous, smooth, natural, and the logical relationships are clear at a glance.

Example 2:

ST: Bu xiang zhe ri san yue shi wu, hu lu miao zhong zha gong, na he shang bu jia xiao xin, zhi shi you guo huo yi, bian shao zhao chuang zhi.

TT: Then, on the fifteenth of the third month, while frying cakes for an offering, the monk of Bottle-gourd Temple carelessly allowed the oil to catch alight, which set fire to the paper window.

Analysis: The original Chinese text lacks connective words and forms paragraphs based on logical relationships, with multiple short sentences in each paragraph, each having a different subject. It begins with the temple, then moves to the monks, and finally to the oil pan and window paper, shifting the perspective with the change of subjects. In Hawkes' translation, while-clauses, conjunctions, and non-restrictive relative clauses are used to articulate the logical connections between sentences. This consolidates the fragmented information into cohesive units, transforming the subclauses in Chinese into single sentences with a subject-verb structure, thereby embodying the "structural cohesion" feature of English.

## 5.2 Changing the subject and restructuring sentences

Chinese is a topic-prominent language, emphasizing semantic structure, with the basic sentence structure being "topic-semantic", focusing on conveying logic through topics. In contrast, English emphasizes the subject-verb relationship, focusing on grammar structure, with the basic sentence structure being "subject-verb", tending to convey logic at the sentence level. Translating classical Chinese presents an additional layer of difficulty, mainly manifested in the compactness and brevity of classical Chinese, with an abundance of short sentences [8]. This often results in the lack of a clear subject in the sentence, an excess of imperative sentences, and a prevalence of passive constructions. Multiple topics may appear within the same sentence. When translating this content, the approach may involve first rendering the meaning in Chinese, and then unifying the subject, or breaking and reorganizing the sentences to uncover hidden logical relationships, ensuring a natural and flowing translation.

### Example 1:

ST: Dao le ci ri yi zao, bao yu yin xin li ji gua zhe zhe shi, yi ye mei hao sheng de shui, tian liang jiu pa qi lai. Xian kai zhang zi yi kan, sui men chuang shang yan, zhi jian chuang shang guang hui duo mu, nei xin zao chou chu qi lai, mai yuan ding shi qing le, ri guang yi chu.

TT: At first next morning Bao-yu, who in excited anticipation of the day ahead had barely slept all night, crawled from the doors and lifted up a corner of the bed-curtain to inspect the weather. Although the doors and windows were still fastened, there was an ominous brightness about the latter which led him to conclude inwardly groaning with disappointment that the snow must have cleared and the sun through the glass.

Analysis: As seen in Example 1, the Chinese sentence has only one subject, "Baoyu", and the narrative unfolds based on the sequence of actions. Although the second half of the sentence, "the doors and windows were still closed, only the dazzling light on the window could be seen" does not directly connect with the subject "Baoyu", the overall meaning can be inferred based on the semantics, reflecting the pragmatic influence in Chinese. However, Hawkes' translation restructures the Chinese sentence, using a nominal subject in the second half without a human subject, to convey how objective things affect human perception. This also demonstrates the transformation between nominal and personal subjects in the process of English-Chinese translation, aligning the translation with the expressiveness of the target language while maintaining the original text's expressive power.

### Example 2:

ST: Shi yin song yu cun qu hou, hui fang yi jiao, zhi zhi hong ri san gan fang xing. Yin si zuo ye zhi shi, yi yu zai xie liang feng jian shu, yu yu cun dai zhi shen du, shi yu cun tou ye ge shi huan zhi jia, wei ji zu zhi di.

TT: After seeing Yu-cun off, Shi-yin went to bed and slept without a break until the sun was high in the sky next

morning. When he awoke, his mind was still running on the conversation of the previous night. He thought he would write a couple of introductory letters for Yu-cun to take with him to the capital, and arrange for him to call on the family of an official he was acquainted with who might be able to put him up.

Analysis: In example 2, the original text features only one main theme, "Shiyin", presented in two consecutive sentences, with the subsequent action unfolding seamlessly. In contrast, Hawkes' translation breaks the last sentence, using "his mind" as the subject to convey the objective fact. Additionally, words such as "Yu-cun" and "who" are added for conciseness, resulting in a clear hierarchical structure in the translation. Overall, the process of translating from Chinese to English involves identifying the subject first, then reordering the sentence structure according to English expression, and finally constructing the sentence hierarchy before translation.

### 5.3 Impliciting logical relationships

Example 1:

ST: Na shi yin fu fu, jian nv er yi ye bu gui, bian zhi you xie bu tuo, zai shi ji ren qu xun zhao, hui lai jie yun lian yin xiang jie wu.

TT: Shi-yin and his wife knew that something must be wrong when their little girl failed to return home all night. Then a search was made; but all those sent out were obliged in the end to report that no trace of her could be found.

Analysis: The original text is typical of Chinese sentence structure, with multiple coordinated subclauses sharing the same subject. Therefore, in the absence of clear subjects in subsequent sentences, understanding relies heavily on the meaning inferred from the Chinese text. Furthermore, the original text lacks close coherence between clauses and does not feature explicit logical or chronological markers. In Hawkes' translation, time adverbial clauses introduced by "when" have been added to establish temporal logic, and connectives like "then" and "but" have been inserted to clearly delineate and explicate the logical relationships between the events. Additionally, the sentences have been broken up and the subject has been switched to using "it" or "they", making the logical sequence and contextual threads more explicit.

Example 2:

ST: Shei zhi ci shi zi jing duan lian zhi hou, ling xing yi tong, yin jian zhong shi ju de bu tian, du zi ji wu cai bu kan ru xuan, sui zi yuan zi tan, ri ye bei hao can kui.

TT: Now this block of stone, having undergone the melting and moulding of a goddess, possessed magic powers. It could move about at will and could grow or shrink to any size it wanted. Observing that all the other blocks had been used for celestial repairs and that it was the only one to have been rejected as unworthy, it became filled with shame and resentment and passed its days in sorrow and lamentation.

Analysis: In Hawkes' translation, the addition of the sentence "It could move about at will and could grow or shrink to any size it wanted" serves to explain the underlying meaning of "lingxing" in the original text. Due to differences in language and cultural background, the Chinese concept of "lingxing" does not have a direct equivalent in English. In English, "lingxing" is typically understood as "spirituality" or "psyche", referring to the mind or spirit, which is quite different from the intended meaning of "lingxing" in this context. The author here is trying to convey the idea that the stone, like a celestial being, has acquired extraordinary martial prowess. Therefore, Hawkes' addition of this sentence is particularly important as it takes into account the sensibilities of English-speaking readers, making the translation more accessible [9].

## 6 Conclusion

The difference between hypotaxis and parataxis exists objectively in both Chinese and English languages. Influenced by various factors such as culture, Chinese language expression tends to emphasize "meaning", with the logical and

sequential structure of the text hidden within the writing, placing more emphasis on understanding [10]. On the other hand, English tends to favor explicit listing and clear sentence structure, explicitly stating the logical connections between sentences. Therefore, in the practice of translation, especially for translating classical texts, it is important to bear in mind this difference and constantly remind ourselves to be particularly attentive to the differences between Chinese and English sentences in order to carry out translation practice more effectively. This article also provides three translation strategies for reference by translators, encouraging them to internalize these strategies in order to produce translations that are better and more easily accepted by both Chinese and Western readers.

### **Conflicts of interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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