

## A COMPARISON OF WORD ORDER IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE

Li Li

*Nankai University, Tianjin*

1. Introduction: both have the same basic word order.

It is a well-known fact that both modern English and modern Chinese have the subject-verb-object (SVO) word order though the former belongs to the Indo-European language family whereas the latter is a member of the Chinese-Tibetan language family. Look at the following examples.

- (1) a. I have a computer.  
b. Wo you yige jisuanji.  
I have a computer
- (2) a. They are not engineers.  
b. Tamen bushi gongchengshi.  
they not be engineer
- (3) a. She has seen that film.  
b. Ta kan le nage dianying.  
she see (AM) that film (AM=Aspect Marker)
- (4) a. What did you say?  
b. Ni shuo shenmo?  
you say what
- (5) a. We saw them go.  
b. Women kanjian tamen zou le.  
we see them go (AM)
- (6) a. My brother did not come.  
b. Wo xiongdi meiyou lai.  
I brother not come

From the above six pairs of examples, we can see clearly that in (1) (3) (4) (5) both the English and the Chinese are of the SVO structure, in (2) both of the SVC

(complement) structure and in (6) both of the SV structure. In other words, we find no difference in the word order between English and Chinese in terms of the sentence elements S, V, O/C. In this case, we say that both languages are of the same basic word order: SVO. Then, what is it that makes them appear so different from each other that native speakers of one find it very difficult to learn the other as a foreign language and translators or interpreters of one are often in trouble in their translation work? The author of this paper has done some research and come up with a few results that will help the above learners, translators and other people concerned out of, at least, some of the trouble or difficulty that stands in their way.

## 2. Where do the differences lie?

Since she could not find any difference in the word order of the main elements of the sentence between English and Chinese, the author of this paper had to look elsewhere in her research. In the end, she has found that it is the secondary elements or the modifiers that make the two languages look so different from each other and therefore cause so much trouble for the people concerned. Specifically speaking, it is the *attributives* and the *adverbials* that have brought about the complexity with regard to word order in the two languages. This paper will examine some aspects of this complexity in the following. Regardless of differences in grammatical terminology in English and Chinese, on most occasions this paper uses the English concepts to cover the similar or roughly the same grammatical phenomena in both systems.

### 2.1. Positions of attributives

Attributives or elements that modify a noun or pronoun take different positions in English and Chinese. In the former, attributives are divided into two classes: those placed before the noun they modify – Quirk et al call this phenomenon premodification (1972: 902) – and those after the noun they modify – postmodification (1972: 860). For example:

- (7) I visited *his delightful* house. (premodification)  
 (8) *Half my first new* salary is spent. (premodification)  
 (9) He frightened the girl (*standing*) *in the corner*. (postmodification)  
 (10) That was the day *on which he left*. (postmodification)

In (7) and (8), the individual words *his*, *delightful*; *half*, *my*, *first*, *new* are premodifiers or attributives placed before *house* and *salary* respectively to qualify them. However, in (9) and (10), the participle phrase *standing in the corner*, the prepositional phrase *in the corner*, and the attributive clause *on which he left* are postmodifiers placed after *girl* and *day* respectively to qualify them. Just as these examples have shown, when the attributives of a noun are individual words, they are *usually* placed before it. If they are participle or prepositional phrases or clauses, they are *generally* placed after it (Xu Shizhen 1985: 136).

Chinese, however, is quite different. It has all its attributives before the noun they modify. For instance, if we turn the English in (7) through (10) into Chinese in (11) through (14) respectively, they will look something like:

- (11) Wo cangan le tade lingrenyuquaide fangzi. (premodification)  
 I visit (AM) his delightful house  
 (12) Wo diyici xinfade banshude gongzi hua wanle. (premodification)  
 I first newly issued half salary spend (AM)  
 (13) Ta xiahuai le zai nage jiao shang (zhanzhe) de guniang.  
 he frighten (AM) in that corner there (standing) (AtM) girl  
 (AtM=Attributive Marker)  
 (14) Na shi ta liqu de rizi. (premodification)  
 that be he leave (AtM) day

From the comparison of examples (7) and (8) and examples (11) and (12), we find no difference in the position of attributives of nouns between English and Chinese. All the attributives are in the form of individual words and take premodification in both languages. However, a careful look will lead to the difference between (9) and (10) and (13) and (14) in terms of the position of the attributives. The attributives in (9) and (10) have postmodification while the attributives in (13) and (14), just like those in (11) and (12), again have premodification.

Now, we may conclude that attributives in Chinese are always placed before the noun they modify whereas the attributives in English are usually placed before the noun they modify if they are individual words and are generally placed after the noun they modify when they are in the form of prepositional or participial phrases or the attributive clause. This conclusion may be formulated as follows:

- |              |                  |   |
|--------------|------------------|---|
| English NP – | 1. ATiw + N      |   |
|              | 2. N + ATph/ATcl | (where NP = Noun Phrase,<br>AT= Attributive,<br>iw = individual word,<br>N = Noun,<br>ph = phrase,<br>and cl = clause.) |

Chinese NP – AT + N

And it is exactly the difference between English NP2 and Chinese NP that constitutes one of the major factors that cause the two languages to appear so different from each other in word order, the other factor being the positions of adverbials to be dealt with in the next part of this article.

In this connection, the attributive clause in English complicates the matter to a great extent. The English language has a whole array of complicated system of such clauses (LI & LI 1994: 62-75). Of all the important features of the English clause, it

is postnominal, has a relative pronoun (*which, that, who, whom* or *whose*), which on proper occasions may be omitted, or a relative adverb (*when, where, how* or *why*) to introduce it, and has subject-verb agreement with a finite verb. For the same phenomenon, Chinese does not call it a clause but an attributive, which is prenominal, has no relative pronoun or adverb but a relative marker *de* to follow it, and no subject-verb agreement without any finite verb. For instance:

- (15) The book *that/which is on the desk* belongs to me.  
*Shuzhuo shang de shu shi wode.*  
 desk on (AtM) book be mine
- (16) The books *that/which are on the shelf* belong to her.  
*Shujia shang de shu shi tade.*  
 bookshelf on (AtM) book be hers
- (17) The person *who is speaking* is my brother.  
*zhengzai shuohua de nage ren shi wode gege.*  
 (AM) speak (AtM) that person be my brother
- (18) The people *who are speaking* are my teachers.  
*zhengzai shuohua de naxie ren shi wode laoshi.*  
 (AM) speak (AtM) those people be my teacher

Incidentally, when two or more attributives occur before the same noun, there are general rules for their relative order both in English and in Chinese. The following rules in English are based on Quirk et al (1972: 146, 925):

- A. Predeterminer + determiner + ordinal + cardinal/quantifier + open-class premodifier + noun head: one is followed by the next in that order.  
 (e.g. *half my first new salary/both these last two days/all the little English butter*)
- B. Determiners etc. + general + age + colour + participle + provenance + noun + denominal + noun head: one is followed by the next in that order.  
 (e.g.: *some intricate old interlocking Chinese designs/a grey crumbling Gothic church tower*)

In passing, the attributive comparison above does not include the non-restrictive attributive clause because in Chinese it will become two separate sentences. Look at the examples as follows.

- (19) My father, *who works in London*, has come back to see me.  
*Wo baba zai lundun gongzuo. Ta huilai kan wo le.*  
 I father in London work he back come see me (AM)
- (20) The City of Tianjin, *which is one of the biggest three cities in China*, is nice.  
*Tianjin shi hen piaoliang. Ta shi zhongguo san da chengshi zhi yi.*  
 Tianjin city very beautiful it is China three big city of one

## 2.2. Positions of adverbials

The adverbial "is an extremely complex area of English grammar" (Quirk et al, 1972: 40) and the author of this paper has no intention of trying to sound comprehensive. In terms of word order, the English adverbial may generally take three possible positions in a sentence: preposition, medial position and postposition, depending on various factors. It may be realized by adverbs, noun phrases, prepositional phrases, finite verb clauses, non-finite verbal phrases, and so on. Look at the following.

- (21) Tom *often goes to bed late* (medial and post position)  
 (22) *Making a lot of noise* they praised Tom. (preposition)  
 (23) Peter was playing *although he was very tired*. (postposition)  
 (24) *When they saw the report*, they were amused. (preposition)  
 (25) I'll stay with my aunt Julia *while in Boston though I may stay with a friend of mine*. (postposition)

In Chinese, however, the English adverbial is branched off into two different categories: the adverbial and the adverbial complement. The former is usually placed before the verb or adjective it modifies whereas the latter is usually placed after the verb or adjective it modifies. (Xu Shizhen 1985: 145) For example:

- (26) Yuehande fuqin *yu 1920 nian 5 yue 15 ri dansheng.*  
*John's father on year month day be born*  
 (adverbial; premodification)  
 Yuehande fuqin dansheng *yu 1920 nian 5 yue 15 ri.*  
 John's father be born on year month day  
 (adv complement; post)  
 John's father was born *on May 15, 1920.*  
 (adverbial of time; postmodification)
- (27) Tamen *zai wu qian zuozhe.*  
 they at house before be sitting (adverbial; premodification)  
 Tamen zuo *zai wu qian.*  
 they sit at house before (adv complement; postmodification)  
 They are sitting *before the house.* (adverbial of place; postmodification)
- (28) Tangmu shuohua *hen kuai.*  
 Tom speak very fast (adverbial; premodification)  
 Tangmu congmingde *hen.*  
 Tom clever very (adv complement; postmodification)  
 Tom is *very* clever. (adverbial of degree; premodification)

From the above, we see that the adverbial in Chinese takes a very rigid position; it is always placed before the verb or adjective it modifies: premodification. The adverbial in English, however, may take various positions as mentioned above as the circumstances require. We may formulate this idea as follows:



In this part of the article (2.2.), we have been discussing the word order of the *attributive* and the *adverbial* in a sentence respectively and separately. Now if we put both elements together in the same sentence, we will find that the trouble that the difference between them causes in the two languages is even more serious. Look at the following pairs of sentences in English and Chinese:

- (36) [Time goes fast for one]<sup>1</sup>[who has a sense of beauty]<sup>2</sup>, [when there are pretty children in a pool and a young Diana on the edge, to receive with wonder anything you can catch]<sup>3</sup> (Zhang et al. 1980: 158)  
 [Dang ni gen keaide haizimen zhan zaichizili, you you ge nianqingde Diana zaichibian haoqide jieshou ni zhuoshanglaide renhe dongxi de shihou], [ruguo ni dongde shenme jiao mei de hua], [shijian shi guode henkuaide]<sup>2</sup>  
 (The translation into the *pinyin* Chinese is the author's.)
- (37) [And I take heart from the fact that the enemy]<sup>1</sup>, [which boasts that it can occupy the strategic point in a couple of hours]<sup>2</sup>, [has not yet been able to take even the outlying regions]<sup>3</sup>, [because of the stiff resistance that gets in the way.]<sup>4</sup>  
 (Zhang et al 1980: 159)  
 [Youyu shoudao wanqiang zudangzhe], [chuiyu neng zaijixiaoshinei jiu]<sup>4</sup>  
 [zhanling zhanlueyaodide diren shenzhi hanmeiyouneng zhanling waiwei didai],<sup>2</sup>  
 [zheyi shishi shiwo zengqiangle xinxin.]<sup>3</sup>  
 (The translation into the *pinyin* Chinese is the author's.)

### 3. Summary

The basic word order in modern English and modern Chinese is similar to each other. Both languages have the same word order SVO just as section 2.1. of this paper has clearly shown. However, these two languages often appear so different from each other in word order. A careful look has led to a very significant discovery that it is the two elements of the *attributive* and the *adverbial* that make English and Chinese look so different in the word order. This analysis will provide fresh insights into further studies of the two languages and give some help to those who have been puz-

zled by the complexity of the word order in learning, studying or translating one language into the other. Of course, there are other differences between these two languages in word order, such as those in questions, inversions, etc., but it takes another article or more articles to satisfy that purpose.

### REFERENCES

- Bolinger, D. 1975. *Aspects of language*. New York: Harcourt, Bracc, Jovanovich.  
 Bryson, B. 1990. *The mother tongue*. New York: William Morrow.  
 Celce-Murcia, M. and Larsen-Freeman, D. 1983. *The grammar book*. Rowley: Newbury House Publishers.  
 Huang, B. 1991. *Xian Dai Han Yu*. (Modern Chinese). Beijing: Higher Learning Education Press.  
 Keenan, E. L. 1987. *Universal grammar*. London: Croom Helm  
 Li, C. and Li, L. 1994. "Relativization in English and Chinese". *PSiCL* 29: 61-75.  
 Liu, Y., Li, D. Cheng, M. and Lu, X. 1987. *An intensive course of Chinese*. Beijing: Languages Institute Press.  
 Ma, Z. 1981. *Concise applied Chinese grammar*. Beijing: Beijing University Press.  
*Oxford advanced learner's dictionary*. 4th edition. 1989. London: OUP.  
 Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G. and Svartvik, J. 1972. *A grammar of contemporary English*. London: Longman.  
 Tomlin, R. S. 1986. *Basic word order: Functional principles*. London: Croom Helm.  
 Xong, W. 1996. "Positions of attributes, adverbials and objects in English and Chinese". [In Chinese]. *Chinese Teaching In The World* 4. 69-73.  
 Xu, S. 1985. *Comparison between English and Chinese*. Kaifeng: Henan Education Press.  
 Zhang, P., Yu, Y., Li, Z. and Peng, M. 1980. *A course in English-Chinese translation*. Shanghai: Foreign Language Education Press.