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# Chapter 1

## Language and Thinking

### 1.1 Introduction

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#### 1.1.1 Definition of language

There are over 2,790 languages in the world, with 7,000 to 8,000 dialects. Most people agree that there are about 210 important languages in today's world, while some languages are dying out.

Then, what is language?

Noah Webster, whose name became synonymous with “dictionary”, has this to say about language: “Language is not an abstract construction of the learned, or of dictionary makers, but is something arising out of the work, needs, ties, joys, affections, tastes, of long generations of humanity, and has its bases broad and low, close to the ground.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Now let us see some more academic definitions of “language”.

*The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines it as “the method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in an agreed way”.<sup>[2]</sup>

《中国大百科全书》 has this definition: 人类特有的一种符号系统。当作用于人与人的关系的时候，它是表达相互反应的中介；当作用于人和客观世界的关系的时候，它是认知事物的工具；当作用于文化的时候，它是文化信息的载体。<sup>[3]</sup>

So we can sum up: In essence, it is a special system of signs or codes; in function, it is a tool used by human beings to communicate; psychologically, it is the tool for thinking and reasoning; and concerning cognition, it is a carrier of culture.



## 2 汉英对比语言学

People communicate through language and think through language; therefore, language and thinking are closely related. In a sense language is both the medium and the result of the externalization of thinking. Some Western scholars think that language determines one's way of thinking and sense of logic; that is to say, language is the carrier and tool or medium of thinking, so all languages reflect the way their users think. On the other hand, however, language in a way determines and restricts how one thinks, as Whorf said, "The language that an individual speaks facilitates particular ways of thinking."<sup>[4]</sup> Thus, we hold that language and thinking are mutually interactive. There is a saying in Chinese: 言为心声. But in a sense we can say 心为言声. The structure of a language—including its vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, sentences, and even the structure of a text—reflects the mode of thinking of the person who speaks the language. That way of thinking greatly influences one's cognition vis-à-vis the world and thus shapes one's outlook. So we agree with the idea that language is a world outlook.

Thinking is a kind of mental activity, so in a sense, language is expression of such mental activity. Then, what is the essence of thinking? To put it briefly, thinking is one's reflection, deliberation, and view of the world. Some scholars say language is a system of codes representing the world. Code differs from sign in that a code implies a certain relation held as conventional among those who use the same code. But language reflects the world not as simply as a mirror or camera. Such reflection has been processed and recreated by one's brain, and in the process subjective elements are added. People use their sensory organs to feel and experience the objective world and then use language and reasoning to get to know the world—not the original objective world but the world in the mind, created by interpreting the objective world. Therefore, to really and fully understand language, we have to study the relationships or interactions between three different elements: 1) the objective world, 2) language as the medium of cognition about the world, and 3) the subjective perception on the part of people.

As systems of codes established and accepted by social communities, all languages share some universal characteristics, while each language also



has its own unique qualities. As two major languages with long histories and spoken by hundreds of millions of people, both Chinese and English are important languages. Comparison of and contrast between the two languages will help improve bilingual communication or translation.

### 1.1.2 Characteristics of language

We say languages have the following characteristics:

1. Every language is limited while the objective world is infinite, therefore, any item—lexical, syntactic, semantic or pragmatic—is employed to express more than one meaning.

2. Languages are generalized and, in a sense, abstract, but the objective world is concrete, rich and varied, so language is essentially fuzzy and vague. As a result, different people may have different interpretations of the same linguistic unit.

3. Languages are of one dimension—that is, linear—while the objective world is three-dimensional. Therefore, no language can truly reflect the objective world. A picture is two-dimensional, and thus the effect of reading a novel and that of watching a film are different. The latter is more reflective because two-dimensional media can better reflect the three-dimensional world. That is why film is often more effective and appealing than a novel. But this is beyond our discussion here.

## 1.2 Comparison of English and Chinese

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### 1.2.1 Reason for contrastive studies between English and Chinese

Belonging to different language families and with different history of development, English and Chinese differ in many ways, from lexical to syntactic and to textual levels. This makes translation between the two languages a difficult task. There are many textbooks teaching various techniques of translation, such as addition and omission, conversion of parts



## 4 汉英对比语言学

of speech, rearrangement of word order, breaking-up and combining of sentences, etc., and many other accommodations. These are important techniques, but it is sometimes hard for learners to decide which technique they should adopt in actual translation. If they are told the reason or motivation behind such techniques, they would become more conscious to adopt proper techniques. It has become a common acknowledgement that a fairly good understanding of the similarities and differences between the two languages will play a decisive role here. Many books with the title of 英汉对比和翻译 and similar ones have been published (more than 20 books are listed in “Recommended Readings” at the end of this book).

English and Chinese do share many similarities, but it is the differences that pose as obstacles in translation, so contrastive studies between the two languages seem more important than simple comparison. People growing up in a specific language and cultural tradition look at the world in a way different from people growing up in other traditions.<sup>[5]</sup> So as a reflection of their cognition and expression, a language used by a people is different from another one used by another people. That is, the root that causes the differences between the two languages is the different ways of thinking and different world outlooks. So studies on the thinking behind language forms a major part of this book. But we do not think it is useful to provide too much theoretical analysis as most textbooks of linguistics do. So, instead of systematic theorization, this book discusses some outstanding differences between English and Chinese based on large numbers of examples, especially those of current usage, to drive at some tentative conclusions.

### 1.2.2 A preliminary comparison

There are at least the following differences between English and Chinese:

1. English speakers are good at abstract thinking while the Chinese are apt to think in terms of images. As a result, there are more explanatory words in English and more imagery words in Chinese. For example, Chinese has rich measure words (also called “classifiers”); English contains more abstract nouns, some of which have no equivalents in Chinese. We can thus say that





English has a higher degree of lexicalization than Chinese. Nouns and prepositions are used more frequently in English while verbs have a higher frequency and freer usage in Chinese; therefore, English tends to be stative while Chinese is more dynamic. The basic cause behind this is that the West emphasizes the “being” while East Asians stress the “becoming”.

2. English speakers prefer analytical thinking while the Chinese prefer comprehensive thinking. Consequently, we can find that the ways of expressing time and space are different in the two languages. English sentences and Chinese sentences have a different focus and word order: the English sentence puts important information straightforwardly—such as an assessment or conclusion—at the beginning while the Chinese sentence first deals with background and conditions before giving out the most important information. We can also see a remarkably different order of attributes and adverbials in the two languages.

3. English speakers think more in a linear way while the Chinese think more or less in a curving way. That is why most English paragraphs are of a linear structure while Chinese paragraphs are more likely to be of a typical spiral structure. In typical Confucian philosophy, people are far more important than objects, while Western philosophy stresses objectification and externalization; that is, English speaking people often think of and place much importance on the influence of the objective world on human beings. This difference in subjective and objective consciousness results in the fact that Chinese sentences make use of personal subjects more frequently while English more often uses impersonal subjects. Another result of this is that English uses far more passive sentences than Chinese. This difference of emphasis between subjectivity and objectivity is shown in many ways in the two languages.

4. Since ancient times, China had the theory of “five elements” and Yin and Yang, stressing the harmony of man with nature, and traditional Chinese aesthetics stresses perceptual comprehension. As a result, the Chinese language is often a flow of seemingly diffusive thoughts with covert grammar rules and few connectives—a typical hypotactic language. On the contrary, Western aesthetics has always stressed logical, rational thinking and formal demonstration; hence, the English language is very compact with

strict rules, making it a more paratactic language. English uses far more conjunctions and similar connectives than Chinese. Or in other words, Chinese does not need so many connectives to unite the different elements contained in a sentence.

The following two short dialogues are taken from a conversation textbook. Let us compare the Chinese and English.

1. ——他是谁? 来这里干什么?  
——我怎么会知道?  
—Who is he? What is he here for?  
—How can I know?
2. ——你好吗? 饿不饿? 我给你弄点吃的来吧。  
——我还行。倒是真饿了, 能吃他三五个馒头。  
—Are you all right? Feeling hungry? Shall I get you something to eat?  
—I'm OK, though quite hungry. I can do with three to five steamed buns.

First of all, we can see all English sentences begin with a capital letter. There is no capitalization in Chinese, as Chinese characters do not have any morphological change.

Second, the word order of the questions is different. “他是谁?” is translated as “Who is he?”, not “He is who?”. “你好吗?” is translated as “Are you all right?”—the English version does not retain the interrogative word 吗. And a single character (or word) 好 is translated as two words “all right”.

Third, the English translation of “我怎么会知道?” has a different word order of the adverb 怎么 and “how”. “饿不饿?” is translated as “Feeling hungry?”—both are elliptical sentences but different parts are omitted. 饿 is an adjective and can serve as the predicate of the sentence such as 我饿 while in English one has to say “I am/feel hungry”, because only verbs can function as the predicate. English verbs have different morphological changes to form different tenses (“feeling” in the second dialogue is the elliptical of “are you feeling”).

Fourth, 能吃他三五个馒头 and its English version “I can do with three



to five steamed buns” have a number of differences: 1) the subject “I” is added; 2) 三五个馒头 is translated as “three to five steamed buns”; 3) the preposition “to” is added but there is no measure word equaling to 个 in English; 4) “steamed buns” has the marker -s for the plural; 5) 馒头 is culturally unique and a new term “steamed bun” is invented, though now it is also transliterated as “mantou”; 6) (我) 能吃 literally means “I can eat” but here it is liberally translated as “I can do with”, an idiomatic expression so as to faithfully convey the pragmatic meaning of the original. This example tells us a meaning is often expressed in the two languages in very different ways.

The above comparison reveals some basic differences between Chinese and English.

### Exercise

The following is the second paragraph of the first chapter of 《骆驼祥子》 by 老舍, one of the greatest masters of the Chinese language. The passage is of a colloquial style. Compare it carefully with the English version translated by 施晓菁 and see how many differences you can point out.

北平的洋车夫有许多派：年轻力壮，腿脚灵利的，讲究赁漂亮的车，拉“整天儿”，爱什么时候出车与收车都有自由；拉出车来，在固定的“车口”或宅门一放，专等坐快车的主儿；弄好了，也许一下子弄个一块两块的；碰巧了，也许白耗一天，连“车分儿”也没着落，但也不在乎。这一派哥儿们的希望大概有两个：或是拉包车；或是自己买上辆车，有了自己的车，再去拉包月或散座就没大关系了，反正车是自己的。

The rickshaw pullers of Beijing fall into many different categories. There are strong, fleet-footed young men who rent smart rickshaws and work round the clock, starting work or knocking off whenever they please. They pull their rickshaws to a rickshaw stand or the gate of some big house and wait for fares who want a fast runner. With luck, a single trip can net one or two silver dollars; but it may happen too that they spend the whole day idle, not even recouping their rickshaw rent. Still, they take all this in their stride. These fellows generally have two ambitions. One is to get a job on a monthly basis; the other is to buy their own rickshaw. For with their own vehicle, it

doesn't matter whether they have a monthly job or take odd fares; the rickshaw is their own property anyway.

Sometimes it seems that Chinese is very free, allowing the writer to make sentences in whatever manner that he likes. Can you imagine "The moon is extremely bright tonight" as the translation of 今天晚上, 很好的月光 (the first sentence in 《狂人日记》)? How would you re-translate the English sentence into "idiomatic" Chinese?

Now read the following passage. This is the beginning of Chapter 31 from 《红楼梦》 but has been rewritten by 思果<sup>16</sup> to mimic the way some people might have translated the English translation back into Chinese:

在看到她吐在地上的一口鲜血后, 袭人就有了一种半截都冷了的, 当她想着往日常听人家说, 一个年轻人如果吐血, 他的年月就不保了, 以及纵然活了一个较长的生命, 她也终是一个废人的时候, 她不觉就全灰了她的后来争荣夸耀的一种雄心了。在此同时, 她的眼中也不觉地滴下了泪来。当宝玉见她哭了的时候, 他也不觉心酸起来了。因之他问: "你心里觉得怎么样?" 她勉强地笑着答: "我好好地, 觉得怎么办呢?" ……林黛玉看见宝玉一副懒懒的样子, 只当他是因为得罪了宝钗的原故, 所以她心里也不自在, 也就显示出一种懒懒的情况。凤姐昨天晚上就由王夫人告诉了她宝玉金钗的事, 当她知道王夫人心里不自在的时候, 她如何敢说和笑, 也就作了一项决定, 随着王夫人的气色行事, 更露出一一种淡淡的神态。迎春姊妹, 在看见众人都觉得没意思中, 她们也觉得没有意思了。因之, 她们坐了一会儿, 就散了。

It sounds somewhat awkward though we can understand the meaning. Now let's compare it with the original:

话说袭人见了自己吐的鲜血在地, 也就冷了半截, 想着往日常听人说: "少年吐血, 年月不保, 纵然命长, 终是废人了。" 想起此言, 不觉将素日想着后来争荣夸耀之心尽皆灰了, 眼中不觉滴下泪来。宝玉见他哭了, 也不觉心酸起来, 因问道: "你心里觉的怎么样?" 袭人勉强笑道: "好好的, 觉怎么办呢!" ……林黛玉见



宝玉懒懒的，只当是他因为得罪了宝钗的原故，心中不自在，形容也就懒懒的。凤姐昨日晚间王夫人就告诉了他宝玉金钏的事，知道王夫人不自在，自己如何敢说笑，也就随着王夫人的气色行事，更觉淡淡的。贾迎春姊妹见众人无意思，也都无意思了。因之，大家坐了一坐就散了。

The following is David Hawkes' English version:

A cold fear came over Aroma when she saw the fresh blood on the floor. She had often heard people say that if you spat blood when you were young, you would die early, or at the very least be an invalid all your life; and remembering this now, she felt all her bright, ambitious hopes for the future turn into dust and ashes. Tears of misery ran down her cheeks. The sight of them made Bao-yu, too, distressed.

"What is it?" he asked her.

"It's nothing." She forced herself to smile. "I'm all right."

[...]

Dai-yu, seeing how morose Bao-yu looked assumed that it was because Bao-chai was offended with him and, feeling resentful that he should care, at once became as morose as he was.

Xi-feng, having been told all about Bao-yu and Golden the night before by Lady Wang, could scarcely be her usual laughing and joking self when she knew of her aunt's displeasure and, taking her cue from the latter, was if anything even more glacial than the others.

And Ying-chun, Tan-chun and Xi-chun, seeing everyone else so uncomfortable, soon began to feel just as uncomfortable themselves.

The result was that after sitting for only a very short time, the party broke up.

What's your conclusion after comparing these texts?

Here are some more passages in Chinese and their English translations for you to compare:

胡小姐当然不是什么“小姐”。她以前的丈夫或是离了，或是死了，反正不止一个。她深知“如花美眷，似水流年”，所以要及



## 10 汉英对比语言学

时找个永久的丈夫，做正式夫人。在她的境地，这并不容易。她已到了“小姐”之称听来不是滋味的年龄。她做夫人，是要以夫人的身份，享有她靠自己的本领和资格所得不到的种种。她的条件并不苛刻，只是很微妙。比如说，她要丈夫对她一片忠诚，倚头顺脑，一切听她驾驭。他却不能是草包饭桶，至少，在台面上要摆得出，够得上资格。他又不能是招人钦慕的才子，也不能太年轻、太漂亮，最好是一般女人看不上的。他又得像精明主妇雇用的老妈子，最好身无背累，心无挂牵。胡小姐觉得余楠具备她的各种条件。（杨绛《洗澡》）

Of course, Miss Hu wasn't exactly "Miss". Her former husbands had either divorced her or died, and anyway there were more than one. She knew very well that "Beauty is like a flower, but the years flow like water", so she wanted to find a permanent husband and become a bona fide wife before it was too late. Given her circumstances, this was no easy matter. She had already reached the age where "Miss" no longer sounded like music to the ear. If she wanted the status of a wife, it was in order to enjoy all the things her own skills and credentials couldn't secure. Her conditions weren't stringent, but they were subtle. For example, her husband had to be absolutely faithful and obedient; she must hold the reins. On the other hand, he couldn't be a fool; at the very least he must be presentable in society and have some qualifications. But neither could he be the sort of brilliant wit that invites admiration, and he shouldn't be too young or too handsome. Best would be someone other women wouldn't glance at twice. He should be like the maid a canny housekeeper hires, free of entanglements and free of worries. Miss Hu thought Yu Nan met each of her conditions perfectly.

(Translated by Judith M. Amory and Yaohua Shi)

In a way English speakers pay more attention to formal logic while the Chinese lay stress on dialectical thinking. That is why the English sentence is of a more close-knit logical structure like a bunch of grapes, and the Chinese sentence develops gradually in the sequence of logic or time order, like the sections of a bamboo. English verbs have rich morphological changes to express the tense, voice, and mood, but Chinese employs lexical means to express these notions. In a long sentence or a paragraph, Chinese



clauses or sentences are like a very loose chain whose links seem sporadic. You can hardly find any level of structure.

The following is a passage from *A History of Western Philosophy* by Bertrand Russell:

The Renaissance was not a period of great achievement in philosophy, but it did certain things which were essential preliminaries to the greatness of the seventeenth century. In the first place, it broke down the rigid scholastic system, which had become an intellectual strait jacket. It revived the study of Plato, and thereby demanded at least so much independent thought as was required for choosing between him and Aristotle. In regard to both, it promoted a genuine and first-hand knowledge, free from the glosses of Neoplatonists and Arabic commentators. More important still, it encouraged the habit of regarding intellectual activity as a delightful social adventure, not a cloistered meditation aiming at the preservation of a predetermined orthodoxy.

Professor 许国璋 translated the passage into Chinese—but not in the normal way of translation; instead he tried to bring out the meaning and spirit of the original passage by using natural Chinese<sup>71</sup>.

文艺复兴的哲学成就，殊不足道。但十七世纪之伟大成就，文艺复兴实开其先河。中古世纪，僵化的经院学派统治学术，学者头上，套有紧箍。文艺复兴破其成法，是其功绩，此其一。中古之时，不读柏拉图之书。及文艺复兴，柏拉图之学又兴，柏拉图与亚里士多德二人之间，何去何从，必须有充分的独立思考，方能作出判断。于是，相率读二氏之原作，究其立本之言，中古柏拉图学派的章句注释，阿拉伯学者之笺疏，悉加摒弃。尤有进者，以读书论学为乐事，成为社会风尚，与经院中密室冥思大异其趣。前者，探无涯之知，后者不过神道设教冀其不坠而已。

Most people agree that Chinese is essentially a semantic language, its grammar being implicit, with much flexibility and elasticity.

On the surface the sentence 君君臣臣，父父子子 seems to be just a juxtaposition of four sets of two characters each. But if you want to understand the meaning, you have to analyze it carefully. The eight



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characters are not parallel: each of the four characters is a noun in its first appearance, but their repetitions are verbs. The whole sentence means “(In the country) an emperor should behave properly like an emperor and an official should behave properly like an official; and (in the family) a father should behave properly like a father and a son should behave properly like a son”. The first half and the second half of the sentence are parallel in structure, but there is a semantic relation between the two. We know “country” is called 国家 in Chinese. It means 国 is a big 家, and a 家 is a small 国. The rules observed in a 国 should also be observed in a 家. This was a most basic moral rule in feudal China. The emperor was asked to establish a good example for the officials under him and govern well, and the officials should obey the emperor in kind. Accordingly, the relationship between the father and the son is just like that between the emperor and the officials. This means the father is the “emperor” in the family and his sons are his “officials”. Thus, the father should set a good example for his sons and the sons should obey him as the officials obey the emperor.

As a written language with a history of over five thousand years, many Chinese words contain abundant cultural sediment. As a result, the meanings of some words may be abstract and sometimes subtle. For example, it is difficult to describe the exact meaning of the word 秀 or 秀气, not to mention compound words like 秀美, 清秀, 秀丽, 挺秀, 娟秀, etc. We can list numerous similar words like 俊, 娟, 俏, 丽, 雅, 媚, 娇, 艳, 妍, 标致, 靡曼, 婀娜, 袅娜, 婷婷, 窈窕, etc. They all make sense to us in Chinese, but it is almost impossible to find so many words with such subtle differences in English. The repeated parts in phrases like 亭亭玉立, 楚楚动人, 娓娓而谈, 款款而来, 栩栩如生, 翩翩起舞, 历历在目, 姗姗来迟, etc. seem redundant but are actually indispensable and hard to translate. As a matter of fact, such repetition provides a sense of motion, as we can never describe a stature as 亭亭玉立. Chinese is a language that stresses the spirit, and Chinese writers have always been seeking for artistic conception and ambience in their works. The wording is quite often very abstract and vague but carries a special literary grace and artistic mood. This also reflects the special aesthetic standard of Chinese culture. This causes much difficulty in translating from Chinese to English, and it is often found that much is helplessly lost in the





English version.

For example, 湖光山色 is a very common saying, but the characters 光 and 色 offer far more than *light* and *color*; a picture rises in the reader's mind like a traditional Chinese painting. Chinese-English dictionaries give such translations: 1) a landscape of lakes and mountains; 2) the natural beauty of lakes and mountains; and 3) beautiful scenery of lakes and mountains. For 湖光山色, 交相辉映, we get this translation: "The lake and hills add radiance and beauty to each other." And the English translation of 园内轩窗四启, (庄徵君) 看着湖光山色, 真如仙境 (《儒林外史》) is "Zhuang's house had large windows on every side from which he could enjoy the lakeside scenery, as enchanting as fairyland." 湖光山色 in Chinese gives people a kind of hazy but graceful serene feeling, but the English version sounds empty and hollow. This is because Chinese is often implicit while English stresses preciseness. In a sense, Chinese is very "soft", giving people a kind of hidden and latent feeling.

In describing a scene, Chinese often uses words like 青翠欲滴 and 烟波浩渺. They are translated into "green and luxuriant" and "a wide expanse of mist-covered waters". The word 欲 is very vivid but almost impossible to translate, and there is simply no corresponding English word for 浩渺 at all. Hangzhou is poetically described as 千峰凝翠, 洞壑幽深, but the English version is simply "green hills and deep caves of enchanting beauty"!

Let's see some more examples and compare the two languages:

1. 她(黄河) 奔腾不息, 勇往直前, 忽而惊涛裂岸, 势不可挡, 使群山动容; 忽而安如处子, 风平浪静, 波光潋滟, 气象万千。

It (the Yellow River) tears and boils along turbulently through the mountains and, at some place, flows on quietly with a sedate appearance and glistening ripples.

2. 舟窗尽落, 清风徐来, 绒扇罗衫, 剖瓜解暑。少焉霞映桥红, 烟笼柳暗, 银蟾欲上, 渔火满江矣。(《浮生六记》)

And we let down all the windows to allow the river breeze to come in, and there, dressed in light silk and holding a silk fan, we sliced a melon to cool ourselves. Soon the evening glow was casting a red hue over the bridge, and the distant haze enveloped the willow trees

in twilight. The moon was then coming up, and all along the river we saw a stretch of lights coming from the fishing boats.

3. 雾笼罩着江面，气象森严。十二时，“江津”号启碇顺流而下了。在长江与嘉陵江汇合后，江面突然开阔，天穹顿觉低垂。浓浓的黄雾，渐渐把重庆隐去。一刻钟后，船又在两面碧森森的悬崖陡壁之间的狭窄的江面上行驶了。（刘白羽《长江三日》）

Mist wraps the river, lending majesty to the scene. At noon the S.S. Jiangjin starts downstream. Once the Jialing River merges with the Yangtze, the river fans out abruptly and the sky seems to hang low. Chongqing disappears gradually in the thick yellowish mist. A quarter of an hour later, the boat is steaming along a narrow stretch of river again between sheer darkly green.

4. 曲曲折折的荷塘上面，弥望的是田田的叶子。叶子出水很高，像亭亭的舞女的裙。层层叶子中间，零星地点缀着些白花，有袅娜地开着的，有羞涩地打着朵儿的；正如一粒粒的明珠，又如碧天里的星星，又如刚出浴的美人。微风过处，送来缕缕清香，仿佛远处高楼上渺茫的歌声似的。这时候叶子与花也有一丝的颤动，像闪电般，霎时传过荷塘的那边去了。叶子本是肩并肩密密地挨着，这便宛然有了一道凝碧的波痕。叶子底下是脉脉的流水，遮住了，不能见一些颜色；而叶子却更见风致了。（朱自清《荷塘月色》）

All over this winding stretch of water, what meets the eye is a silken field of leaves, reaching rather high above the surface, like the skirts of dancing girls in all their grace. Here and there, layers of leaves are dotted with white lotus blossoms, some in demure bloom, others in shy bud, like scattering pearls, or twinkling stars, or beauties just out of the bath. A breeze stirs, sending over breaths of fragrance, like faint singing drifting from a distant building. At this moment, a tiny thrill shoots through the leaves and flowers, like a streak of lightning, straight across the forest of lotuses. The leaves, which have been standing shoulder to shoulder, are caught trembling in an emerald heave of the pond. Underneath, the exquisite water is covered from view, and none can tell its color; yet the leaves on top project themselves all the more attractively.



We can see the differences between Chinese and English in their wording, rhythm, use of images, sentence structure, language flow, and even punctuation marks.

### Exercise

1. How would you analyze the sentence 春风风人，夏雨雨人？
2. Try to make your own comment on the translation of 弥望，田田的，亭亭的，袅娜地，渺茫的，凝碧的，and 脉脉的.
3. In the national college entrance examination held in 2001, an examinee named 蒋昕捷 wrote a composition entitled 赤兔之死 in classical Chinese. Part of it goes like this:

赤兔马泣曰：“吾尝慕不食周粟之伯夷、叔齐之高义。玉可碎而不可损其白，竹可破而不可毁其节。士为知己而死，人因诚信而存，吾安肯食吴粟而苟活于世间？”言罢，伏地而亡。

Some people have translated it into English:

Chitu the horse then said woefully, “I have long admired the noble Bo Yi and Shu Qi, who refused food from their enemy, and I have learned that a jade, even when shattered, will never lose its purity, and likewise, a bamboo, even when cleaved, will remain straight. Since a noble man chooses to die for his bosom friend, and a common man chooses to live for the virtue of honesty, how can I lick from my enemy’s finger and live an undeserved life?” With these words it dropped to the ground and closed its eyes.

Give your comment on this passage in Chinese and its translation.

Now let us borrow a classical example from Chomsky. See the following pair of sentences:

Colorless green ideas sleep furiously. (Grammatical)

Furiously sleep ideas green colorless. (Ungrammatical)

There are several possible ways to arrange the line in Chinese:

无色绿念头狂怒睡觉。

狂怒睡觉无色绿念头。



无色绿思狂怒睡。  
怒睡念头绿无色。

These lines actually sound quite poetic. We can hardly judge if they are grammatically correct. We can try to paraphrase it into modern Chinese:

无色的绿色的念头在狂怒地睡觉。(grammatical)  
狂怒地睡觉念头(是)绿色的无色的。(somewhat illogical)

The above discussion concerns only grammar without considering semantic logic. Now let's see something more meaningful. The following are two typical palindromes that can be read either from the beginning or in reverse from the last character backward:

1. 池莲照晓月，幔锦拂朝风。  
风朝拂锦幔，月晓照莲池。  
(王融)

2. 夫妻互忆  
枯眼望遥山隔水，往来曾几见心知。  
壶空怕酌一杯酒，笔下难成和韵诗。  
途路阻人离别久，讯音无雁寄回迟。  
孤灯夜守长寥寂，夫忆妻兮父忆儿。  
(李禺)

Chinese is considered an “isolating language”, as its words do not undergo morphological change when serving different grammatical functions. There is no tense, aspect, voice, mood, gender, number or case. But as German linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt said, “With fewer external grammar rules the Chinese language has, the more internal grammar rules it has.”<sup>[8]</sup>

Chinese is an analytical language, which mainly use lexical means rather than morphological changes to describe and express various ideas; English, on the other hand, is more of a comprehensive language that requires grammatical means and morphological changes. Now most scholars agree the Chinese language has the following four grammatical characteristics:



- 1) Chinese has rich function words. They in great part express grammatical meaning;
- 2) Word order is very important to the Chinese sentence. A shift in word order will correspondingly cause much change in meaning;
- 3) The part of speech of a word does not correspond to its function in the sentence;
- 4) Compound words, phrases, and sentences have similar structures.

Now look at some tongue twister sentences:

1. 张大嘴有张大嘴。

The first 张大嘴 is the nickname of a person with the surname of Zhang, but it is meaningless to interpret it as “张大嘴 has himself”. Actually the second 张大嘴 is a noun phrase, in which 张 is a quantifier (量词) and preceding it should normally be a numeral 一, but it has been omitted. The sentence means “Zhang the Big Mouth has a big mouth”.

2. 张大嘴有张大嘴的想法。

The auxiliary 的 is crucial in the sentence as it turns 张大嘴的 into possessive case meaning “of 张大嘴”. The sentence means “Zhang the Big Mouth has his own ideas”.

3. 张大嘴张大嘴那可真是张大嘴!

The second 张大嘴 in Sentence 3 is a verb phrase and the character 张 in the third 张大嘴 is again a quantifier. The sentence means “When Zhang the Big Mouth opens his big mouth / opens his mouth big, that is a real big mouth / there you see a really big mouth”.

4. 张大嘴，张大嘴，那可真是张大嘴!

Sentence 4 has two more commas than Sentence 3, but the meaning is very different. It becomes a kind of exclamation: “Oh, Zhang the Big Mouth, that is the real Zhang the Big Mouth / that shows the real personality of Zhang the Big Mouth!”

These sentences show that we have to analyze carefully to get the meaning of the sentence. That is why we say Chinese is an analytic language.

### Exercise

1. The following is the famous couplet in the scenic spot in Shanhaiguan Pass. How do you interpret it?

海水朝朝朝朝朝朝朝落

浮云长长长长长长消

2. How would you interpret this poem?

池塘生春草，园柳变鸣禽。(谢灵运《登池上楼》)

Is it right to translate the first part as “Spring grass grows out of the pond”?

3. Why do the following two sentences have the same meaning?

中国队大胜美国队。/ 中国队大败美国队。

4. Compare the following paragraph and its English translation and analyze their differences.

午后便步行至鹊华桥边，雇了一只小船，荡起双桨。朝北不远，便到历下亭前。止船进去，入了大门，便是一个亭子，油漆已大半剥蚀。亭子上悬了一副对联，写的是：“历下此亭古，济南名士多。”

(刘鹗《老残游记》)

After lunch he walked to the Sparrow Flower Bridge where he hired a small boat and paddled along towards the north. Soon he reached the Lixia Pavilion. Then he stepped ashore and went in, and when he entered the gate he saw a pavilion, the paint of which was practically all worn away, and on it were hanging two scrolls on which was written: “The Pavilion is ancient as history; many are the scholars of Jinan.”

### Notes

- [1] Tim Glynne-Jones, *The Book of Words*, Arcturus Publishing Ltd., 2008: 57
- [2] *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, ninth edition, Oxford University Press, 1995: 764



- [3] 《中国大百科全书·语言文字卷》，中国大百科全书出版社，1988：475
- [4] Indirectly quoted from: Peter Woolfson, Language, Thought, and Culture, in Virginia Clark, ed. *Language: Introductory Readings*, third edition, St Martin's Press, 1981: 45
- [5] 伍铁平，《模糊语言学》，上海外语教育出版社，1999
- [6] 思果，《翻译研究》，中国对外翻译出版公司，2001: 145-147
- [7] 许国璋，《许国璋论语言》，外语教学与研究出版社，1991
- [8] Indirectly quoted from 姚小平，《洪堡特——人文研究和语言研究》，外语教学与研究出版社，1995: 98