A Comparative Study on Time Expression System in Chinese and English

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Abstract: Previous scholars have conducted in-depth research on the time expression systems of Chinese and English, some focusing on macro perspective, some on detailed description, and some on mutual translation. In recent years, cognitive linguistics has emerged to explain the underlying differences and reasons behind this. From the perspective of cultural comparison between China and the West, this article intends to conduct a detailed examination of the similarities and differences in the tense and aspect in Chinese and English. Based on descriptive investigation, comprehensive analysis, the purpose is to find some differences and to provide some reference and inspiration for the teaching and learning of English as a second language, the teaching and learning of Chinese as a foreign language, and the mutual translation of the two languages.

1. Introduction

Chinese and English, as systematic and mature languages, adopt different means of expressing time. It is generally believed that Chinese is a paratactic language, with ideas as the main axis. It mainly uses tense and aspect markers such as "le", "zhe", "guo", "zai", "qilai", and "xiaqu" to indicate the time and state of actions, as well as the semantics of specific contexts. Specific verbs do not have any formal changes. English, on the other hand, is a hypotactic language that combines form and meaning, with rich morphological markers and changes. It expresses a total of sixteen tense meanings of four tenses and four aspect intersections through the morphological changes of verbs and auxiliary verbs. Nouns and adverbs only serve as auxiliary words.

Scholars have paid attention to the expression of time in Chinese, and generally believe that there are categories of tense and aspect in Chinese. According to the time of objective events, "time" can be divided into past, present, and future, which is the traditional "three time system" division. Li Tiegen (1999) [1] systematically examined the tense system of modern Chinese, distinguishing between the concepts of "absolute tense" and "relative tense". The tense with speaking time as the reference is absolute tense, while the tense with related time as the reference is relative tense. Tense and aspect are a pair of concepts that are both interrelated and distinct from each other. Tense focuses on the time an action occurs, while aspect focuses on what stage or state the action is in, corresponding to tense and aspect in English. Linguists have varying opinions on the classification of "aspect" in Chinese. Lv Shuxiang (1982) [2] believes that there are six types of "event phases" in

Chinese: initiating phase (using "qi" after the verb), Fangshi phase (using "zhe" after the verb), Jishi phase (using "xiaqu" after the verb), jishi phase (using "le" after the verb), Xianshi phase (using "qu" and "lai" to indicate that an action is about to occur), and Houshi phase (using "lai" and "lai zhe"). Wang Li (1985) [3] believes that there are several types of "appearances": starting appearance, continuing appearance, completing appearance, recent appearance, short-term appearance, and ordinary appearance. Gong Qianyan (1995) [4] believes that there are several "states": the progressive state, the initial state, the continuous state, the perfect state, the near experiential state, and the experiential state. Although there are different titles and classifications, there is a general consensus on the existence of "initial aspect", "progressive aspect", "continuous aspect", and "perfect aspect" in Chinese.

In English grammar, there is also a considerable emphasis on the study of "tense". Lattimore (1930) [5] distinguished 8 tenses, Curme (1935) [6] distinguished 6 tenses, Celce Murcia and Larsen Freeman (1999) [7] distinguished 3 tenses, and there are also statements of 12 tenses [8], 14 tenses [9], and 16 tenses [10]. It was not until modern times that grammarians distinguished the concept of "aspect" from the temporal expression system of English. Comrie (1976, 1985) [11-12] pointed out that "time" solves how one scene indicates another time, while "aspect" indicates the continuous influence of a certain moment on this scene.

2. Research Significance

The comparative study of time expression systems between Chinese and English is of great significance, mainly reflected in the following aspects:

It provides reference and inspiration for learners of English as a second language. Due to the significant differences in time expression systems between Chinese and English, native Chinese learners are often influenced by the negative transfer of their mother tongue, and often unconsciously misuse the rich tense and aspect changes in English. If a comparative study of time expression systems between two languages is conducted in detail, it can help English learners as a second language overcome their doubts and reduce their difficulty in acquiring English tense and aspect.

It provides reference for teaching Chinese as a foreign language. By utilizing the rich research results of the modern Chinese time expression system, we aim to clarify the expression methods of tense and aspect in modern Chinese, especially dynamic auxiliary words, time nouns and adverbs, word order, and other methods. This will provide valuable experience for Chinese language teachers and learners, and help them avoid detours.

It has a positive promoting significance for the development of Chinese English translation, especially Chinese English machine translation. Discovering the general rules of time expression systems in Chinese and English, such as finding commonly used translation paradigms for verb auxiliary words "zhe", "le", and "guo" in certain situations, it has positive promoting significance for both Chinese English translation and the development of machine translation.

3. Research Review

In recent years, many scholars have paid attention to the comparative study of Chinese and English tense and aspect, and the research results are mainly divided into the following aspects:

3.1 Comparing Chinese and English tense and aspect categories from a translation perspective

Gao Xiang (2000) [13] compared the similarities and differences of the perfect tense between

Chinese and English, pointed out the similarities and differences in the translation of the perfect tense between Chinese and English, and believed that in the specific translation process, one can seek differences from the same, take similarities from the differences, and use the customary forms of language expression to accurately express the meaning of discourse. Bao Caixia (2002) [14] elaborated in detail on how to accurately convert the expression of time reference according to the target language norms in the process of translating from Chinese to English. Qu Yunhua and Feng Zhiwei (2006) [15] analyzed the semantic features of Chinese tense and aspect, and based on this, formalized the semantic features using intermediate language to effectively solve the problem of tense and aspect processing in Chinese- English machine translation. Ni Jiaru (2011) [16] examined the application of the English present tense in Chinese-English literary translation from the perspective of literary translation criticism. Cui Hongye and Zheng Minfang (2015) [17] based on the corpus of Zhang Peiji's Chinese-English prose translation corpus, examined the English tense and aspect corresponding to the Chinese auxiliary word "le₁" after the verb from the perspective of tense and aspect meaning, providing a new method for the English translation research of the Chinese auxiliary word "le₁" that can be used for reference.

3.2 Studying the Differences in Tense and Aspect between Chinese and English from the Perspective of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

Ding Guixian (1990) [18], from the comparative perspective between Chinese and English, emphasized the corresponding expressions of the Chinese auxiliary word "le" and English. He compared "le₁" used as a dynamic auxiliary word and "le₂" used as a modal auxiliary word, and particularly pointed out the difficulties that foreigners should pay attention to when learning the auxiliary word "le". Yin Minghe (2003) [19] conducted a comparative analysis of Chinese and English languages in terms of tense, aspect, and word order, in order to deeply explore the grammar characteristics and application rules of Chinese and English language, and further reflect the principle and concept of unifying teaching content and methods in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Wu Wei (2008) [20] compared the similarities and differences in the past tense between Chinese and English, cited language materials from interlanguage between Chinese and English, and used error analysis methods to explain the types of past tense expression, the reasons for its occurrence, and the implications for teaching.

3.3 Using Western linguistic theories to describe and explain the differences in tense and aspect between Chinese and English

Zhang Sen (2004) [21] examined the similarities and differences in the tense and usage of predicate verbs between Chinese and English from the perspective of functional grammar. Shang Xin (2004) [22] used the Saliency Theory and its criteria for determining the saliency of verb based grammatical categories to argue that English is a language with tense saliency and Chinese is a language with aspect saliency. From both positive and negative aspects, it was proved that there is no systematic tense based grammatical category in Chinese, thus establishing the typological differences between English and Chinese in verb based categories. This is a new perspective and conclusion. Wang Meifang (2009) [23] compared the tense systems of Chinese and English languages from the perspective of Functionalism and Case Grammar, and believed that Chinese is mainly marked by time adverbs, while tense markers are more prominent in English. Meng Ruiling (2018) [24] analyzed the English translations of the perfect aspect marker "le₁" in the three English versions of "Dream of the Red Chamber", explaining the cognitive elements behind the differences in time representation between Chinese and English. The conclusion shows that the spatial nature of Chinese and the temporal nature of English can provide a relatively unified explanation for the

grammatical category asymmetry phenomenon of "le" in Chinese English translation.

3.4 The research is in-depth and meticulous, focusing on several dynamic auxiliary words "le", "zhe", and "guo" in Chinese

Gao Xia and Cao Xiaohong (2013, 2013, 2014) [25-27] have published a series of papers on the comparison of tense in Chinese and English, as well as the temporal expression of Chinese dynamic auxiliary words "zhe", "le", and "guo". They have examined the differences between these three dynamic auxiliary words and tense in English from the perspectives of semantic function and grammatical position, and analyzed them in detail. Pan Xiaoying (2016) [28] compared and analyzed the similarities and differences of the perfect aspect between English and Chinese, and based on a parallel corpus between Chinese and English, explored the tense preference of "le" in English translations.

It is worth mentioning that Wang Wenbin (2013a, 2013b) [29-30] et al. proposed that Chinese has spatial characteristics and English has temporal characteristics, and believed that these different characteristics of Chinese and English are reflected at the level of words, syntax, and discourse. The spatial characteristics of Chinese language are manifested at the syntactic level as blockiness, discreteness, and reversibility, while at the discourse level as the discreteness of thinking patterns and discourse coherence. The temporal nature of English is reflected in the mandatory feature of tense at the syntactic and discourse levels, and plays different functions in syntax and discourse (Yu Shanzhi, Wang Wenbin, 2014) [31]. The tense and temporal relationship in English reflect the linearization thinking characteristics of the English nation.

4. Unsolved issues in the previous studies

4.1 Different names and unclear concepts

From the current research, we can see that although the research on the categories of tense and aspect in Chinese started early and linguists have long noticed the existence of a time expression system in Chinese, until today, is there a category of tense and aspect in Chinese? Does the time expression system distinguish between time and aspect? If distinguished, what is the specific name? Is it a time system? Phase? Tense? Are functional words such as "le", "zhe", and "guo" dynamic auxiliary words? Time marker words? Or grammaticalized markers? These issues are still controversial, and each party holds their own views, making it difficult to reach a consensus. This is certainly related to the characteristics of our Chinese language. As a paratactic language, Chinese does not have rich morphological markers and changes like English. The expression of time in Chinese is diverse and flexible, which can be expressed through function words, word order, time nouns and adverbs, as well as context. In short, the expression of time in Chinese cannot correspond one-to-one with the tense and aspect in English. They have similarities and differences, are different from each other, and intersect with each other. We need to pay attention to clarifying concepts in future research, adopt widely accepted names, and further compare the temporal expression methods of the two languages.

4.2 Emphasis on description and translation comparative research, with little explanation

The comparative research on time expression systems between Chinese and English has yielded fruitful results. The research on dynamic auxiliary words such as "le", "zhe", "guo", "zai", "qi", "xia", and so on is very in-depth and meticulous. Some scholars have carefully sorted out the classification of individual dynamic auxiliary words from the semantic and grammatical positions,

with over a dozen classifications. This is difficult for us as native speakers of Chinese to understand and remember, let alone Chinese as a second language learner? Many research achievements are from the perspective of translation, mapping the time expression systems of Chinese and English, attempting to find a bridge like medium to connect them. Of course, this is very beneficial for the development of machine translation. However, due to the maturity and systematicity of Chinese and English languages, as well as the complexity and diversity of time expression, it is not easy to find a bridge that is once and for all! In the specific translation process, it is not only necessary to consider the consistency of time and style, but also to pay more attention to the stylistic elements, connect with the context, and flexibly translate in order to achieve better results.

Scholars attempt to provide a deeper understanding of the differences in time expression systems between Chinese and English, whether from a systemic functional grammar perspective or a cognitive perspective, but often limited to a single dynamic auxiliary word, with few systematic macro discussions. With the development of cognitive linguistics and corpus research, applying its latest research findings to the study of temporal expression systems in two languages, emphasizing both detailed descriptions and exploring their underlying generative mechanisms, requires both scientific corpus data support and rigorous analysis and summary, and should become one of the directions for future research.

4.3 Lack of comprehensive and specialized discussion on the comparative study of Chinese and English time expression systems

The study of tense and aspect in Chinese, especially the description, classification, and English translation of "le", "zhe", and "guo", has yielded numerous research results. Gong Qianyan, Li Tiegen, Dai Yaojing, and others have also made specialized and comprehensive discussions on the tense and aspect systems in modern Chinese, but the comparative study of the two languages has not flourished with the study of the tense and aspect systems in modern Chinese. Comparative research between English and Chinese is an important direction for original research in the field of foreign language studies. In recent years, it has shown a rapid development trend. We should also use the rich research results of the modern Chinese time expression system to expand the research field of tense aspect comparison between the two languages, expand the research scope, explore similarities and differences from multiple perspectives, and systematize and specialize the study of Chinese English time expression systems.

5. Future research directions

The author believes that although many investigations and studies have been conducted on the issue of tense and aspect in Chinese and English, we predict that future research can continue to explore and reveal the essence of the problem in the following aspects, providing further reference and inspiration for English as a second language teaching and learning, teaching and learning Chinese as a foreign language, and mutual translation between the two languages.

Researchers may clarify concepts and organize time expression systems in both Chinese and English. Through careful review of the research achievements on tense and aspect in both Chinese and English, providing a sufficient description and summary of the time expression system in both languages, researchers may use the widely accepted terminology to clarify the connotation and extension of the concept of tense and aspect.

Researchers may combine recent findings in cognitive linguistics and corpus linguistics to explain the differences in time expression systems between the two languages. We should elaborately select typical English translations of modern Chinese texts, further sort, analyze, and summarize the English translations of dynamic auxiliary words in modern Chinese, in order to

discover the general rules of the English translation of Chinese time expression systems. Through comparing the similarities and differences of Chinese and English time expression systems, hopefully we will find a reasonable explanation from a cognitive perspective.

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