

## Influences of Thinking Differences Between English and Chinese People on English Writing

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### Abstract

There exist distinct differences between English and Chinese modes of thinking. These differences make negative influences to Chinese learners who learn English as a foreign language in their English writing. This paper points out these differences affecting English writing at the level of the word, sentence and discourse from different thinking modes: Such as linear vs. spiral thinking, analytic vs. synthetic thinking, abstract vs. concrete thinking. It aims to help Chinese learners have a better understanding of influences of thinking differences between English and Chinese on English writing and thus to find out corresponding ways to get rid of these negative influences to the minimum.

**Key words:** Influence; Thinking difference; English; Chinese; Writing

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### INTRODUCTION

Thinking and language are closely related to each other. Thinking is the backbone and soul of languages while a language is the carrier of the thinking. Thinking is

the abstract reflection of objective things which exists in human mind. Language, different from thinking, is “a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication” (Liu & Wen, 2006, p.8). It is natural that English people with an English way of thinking use English to express themselves and that Chinese people with a Chinese way of thinking use Chinese to communicate. With the widespread use of English in the world, writing ability becomes one of the most highly required skills. Either through teaching or researches, many scholars have found that the Chinese way of thinking inevitably affects English writing of Chinese learners. This paper mainly focuses on how each of these thinking differences affects English writing at the level of the word, sentence and discourse, in which ways they can provide Chinese learners a clearer instruction on English writing and explore some useful ways to reduce these negative influences.

### 1. LINEAR VS. SPIRAL THINKING AND ENGLISH WRITING

The saying of linear and spiral thinking pattern was first put forward by American linguist Robert B. Kaplan (1966). The main differences between linear and spiral thinking consist in the directness, which means how directly it refers to the object. This distinction is caused by different culture backgrounds. Chinese culture has been largely influenced by Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, so thinking activity mostly develops in a spiral way. In language expressions, sometimes, the development of Chinese discourse tends to adopt a roundabout way, rather than states the subject directly. Whereas, English linear thinking mode is the result of European cultural patterns which is also called the Aristotle's linear mode. In ancient Greece, people set up a logic system, which based on the Aristotle's logical argumentation. Aristotle summed up the discourse of the speech into four parts: to state the

introduction, raise a question, analysis the question and get to a conclusion, this form of development is a linear sequence. In a word, linear thinking leads to directness while spiral thinking brings about circuitousness. In English writing this difference shows as the following aspects.

### 1.1 Influence at the Level of the Word: Directness of Nouns

The differences between the English linear thinking and Chinese spiral thinking have influence on the degree of directness of some nouns. Here the degree of directness of nouns refers to how each noun is formed to convey its meaning. By comparison, the author finds that some English nouns are more direct to express its meaning whereas the corresponding Chinese nouns often more complicated. For example, in Chinese, people use “图书馆” to refer to a building in which collection of books, and it includes two factors: “图书”(books) and “馆”(building); While in English, people use “library”, just one single word to represent the same thing. From this aspect, English nouns are more direct than their corresponding Chinese nouns. Such examples are enormous, “wardrobe” & “衣橱”, “floor” & “地板”, etc.

This difference affects some Chinese learners when they choose words in English writing. For instance, when a dictionary is not handy but they have to use such a noun which they have never seen before, some of them may choose some other words to replace this word. At this moment, Chinese spiral thinking is likely to prevail and cause the impropriety in wording. For example, “wild meal”, instead of “picnic”, may be used to refer to “野餐”; “fast car”, rather than “express”, may be used to say “快车”.

### 1.2 Influence at the Level of Sentences: Sentence Pattern

Here a sentence pattern refers to the position of the central idea in the sentence. Under the influence of Chinese spiral thinking, Chinese sentences prefer to state the time, condition, reason or some other things rather than the result in the first place. On the contrary, the central idea is put either at the beginning or at the end of the English sentences. In fact, as it is more direct and straightforward, it is more popular among English writing of native people to put the central idea at the very beginning. The central idea in each of the following sentences has been underlined in both Chinese and English versions so that the contrast in the sentence pattern in each group can be clearly seen.

(1) He came in as I was going to bed.

我正要上床睡觉, 他进来了。

(2) He visited a lot of places while he was traveling.

他在旅行期间参观了许多地方。

(3) She didn't come to school because she was ill.

她由于生病没来上学。

Influenced by Chinese thinking mode, Chinese learners often choose to put the central idea at the end of

the sentence, which leads to the singleness of sentence structures. Take the following two translation versions for example. The first one is translated by one Chinese learner and the second one is the revised version which puts the main clause at the beginning, which reads more smoothly.

E.g. 他先前在南方参加某项工程建设。完工后, 就去乔治岛度假, 享受高加索的阳光。他是昨天回来的。

In the South he had been engaged in a construction job. After he completed the work he went to spend his vacation in Georgia. There he basked in Caucasian sun. And he had flown in just the day before.

He had flown in just the day before from Georgia where he had spent his vacation basking in Caucasian sun after the completion of the construction job in which he had been engaged in the South.

### 1.3 Influence at the Level of the Discourse: Paragraph Development

As to paragraph development, English paragraphs prefer to state the topic directly and use the rest part to illustrate and support it, just as what Brooks (1979, p.218) once said:

“A well-conceived and well-constructed paragraph is a unit, and often this unit is indicated by a key sentence—what is called the topic sentence. The topic sentence states the central thought, which the rest of the paragraph develops. We can think of the topic sentences as a kind of backbone, a spine, which supports the body of the paragraph and around which the rest of the structure is formed.”

Chinese spiral thinking mode leads Chinese learners to state their theme in a more roundabout way when they write. For instance, they would like to say something else as a foreshadowing, then introduce the central idea, and finally come to the conclusion through layer upon layer analysis and reasoning. Moreover, they think that any sentence, if it is related to the topic, can be put together to form one paragraph. However, it is difficult to understand the the writer's intentions if people do not read it to the end. The following paragraph is written by a Chinese learner who follows the spiral thinking mode.

“We do not live in an English speaking country, so we have no chance to be exposed to English. We learn a new word, but we seldom have opportunities to practise it in real life. Practice makes perfect whether we learn to swim or play the piano. As there are few opportunities, I must find them on campus to practise my oral and written English. So I think English is not easy to learn to a Chinese.”

In this paragraph, the theme is not obvious and the content lacks of uniformity, so the structure is cluttered. What is worse, the person appeared later does not conform to the former one. In fact, this is a common phenomenon existing in English paragraphs written by Chinese learners. Yet if put the topic sentence at the very beginning and make a little adjustment in other places,

this paragraph will be a good one just like the following paragraph, the first sentence is the topic sentence and all the rest are all used to support it.

“To a Chinese, English is not so easy to learn. As we do not live in an English-speaking country, we have no chance to be exposed to English. But nearly all language experts believe heavy exposure is an important factor to master a language. For example, to learn a new word and to memorize it we need to have more opportunities to practise it in real life. If we do not practise what we have learnt, we cannot memorize it. That can explain the difficulty many Chinese students feel in learning English.”(Cai, 2003, p.76-77)

## 2. ABSTRACT VS. CONCRETE THINKING AND ENGLISH WRITING

Generally speaking, the thinking mode of westerners tends to be abstract while Chinese thinking is always concrete. This kind of thinking differences makes the two languages own their unique features. Chinese thinking mode is visual, so Chinese tends to concrete in wording. What is more, Chinese usually use concrete images to express the abstract content. However, English thinking mode is abstract which is influenced by the ancient Greek philosophy. Thus English people are good at using the abstract notion to present specific things and the method of abstract diction is very common in English. This difference can be seen from English writing at all the three levels: the word, sentence and discourse.

### 2.1 Influence at the Level of Words: Usage of Nouns And Verbs

The concrete thinking of Chinese and the abstract thinking of English results in the different frequency of use for verbs and nouns. Chinese is dynamic while English wording tends to be static. Comparatively speaking, verbs are used a lot in Chinese than in English but nouns occur more frequently in English than in Chinese. Verbs are more concrete and straightforward to express the action whereas nouns usually need to depend on other words to express one idea. The following examples are listed to illustrate this point.

E.g. Nouns VS. Verbs

(1)The mastery of language is not easy and requires painstaking efforts.

语言不是随便就可以学好的, 非下苦功不可. (Noun: painstaking efforts vs. Verb: 下苦功)

(2) Realization of the importance of knowledge is crucial.

意识到知识的重要性很关键. (Noun: realization vs. Verb: 意识)

Influenced by Chinese mode of thinking, Chinese learners often fail to choose the concise words even make mistakes when writing sentences.

For example, for the sentence in (1) “非下苦功不可”, some Chinese learners may express it as “it need to make effort”, where the verb “下苦功” is substituted by the noun phrase “painstaking efforts”. Another example is “他能吃能睡”, the saying “He is able to eat and sleep” is wrong while the correct one should be: “He is a good eater and sleeper.” (Liu & Zhou, 2004, p.108)The nouns “eater” and “sleeper” perfectly convey the original meaning. Therefore, the proper use of nouns in certain English sentences helps get rid of mistakes.

### 2.2 Influence at the Level of Sentences: Substitution and Repetition

English sentences usually adopt substitution to avoid the singleness of structures. “The process or result of replacing one word by another at a particular position in a structure is called substitution.”(Liu & Wen, 2006, p.176) To substitute is to use pronouns or synonyms to replace the word which appear before. This kind of substitution adds to the degree of abstractness. Contrastingly, when the same or similar part turns up in Chinese sentences, repetition is preferred, so as to achieve the effect of emphasis. Furthermore, repetition makes the sentence more directly perceived through the senses. Take the following sentence as an example.

Chinese version:我们提倡和平共处的原则, 这项原则目前正在世界上已越来越得人心了.

English version: We have advocated the principle of peaceful co-existence, which is now growing more and more popular in the world.

“原则” in the Chinese sentence is repeated while relative pronoun “which” in the English version is used to substitute the former “principle”. In terms of visual sense, using the word “原则” twice in the sentence is more concrete than using the word “principle” first and then the relative pronoun “which”.

However, some Chinese learners prefer to use the same word when they deal with English sentences, which often lead to redundancy.

(1)他摇摇头, 我也摇摇头.

He shook his head, and I did the same.

**Revised:** He shook his head, and I shook my head too.

(2)一个地方有一个地方的全局, 一个国家有一个国家的全局, 一个地球有一个地球的全局.

A locality has its own over-all interests, a nation has its own over-all interests and the earth has its own over-all interests.

**Revised:** A locality has its own over-all interests; a nation has another and the earth yet another.

### 2.3 Influences at the Level of the Discourse: Language Habit

The differences between Chinese concrete thinking and English abstract thinking can also be seen from the language habit. To some extent, Chinese discourse building often relies on some concrete images and

fantastic terms to drive up the atmosphere and express feelings. However, English people emphasize more on logics, so English discourses usually use a lot of abstract nouns which have abundant meaning to show complex rational concept. In addition, the language is concise and plain in English discourses. The two different ways of thinking lead to the differences of English and Chinese in language habit when people organize a discourse. This can be testified by the comparison of (《兰亭集序》) by Wang Xizhi and its English translation by the respected translation master Lin Yutang.

“.....此地有崇山峻岭，茂林修竹，又有清流激湍，映带左右，引以为流觞曲水.....”

It describes the beautiful environment of the party at that moment and gives the reader a feeling of the fairyland on earth. Professor Lin translated it as:

“.....In the background lie high peaks and deep forests, while a clear, gurgling brook catches the light to the right and to the left. ....”

Besides, another paragraph describes the fine weather and the author's happy feeling, e.g.

“是日也，天朗气清，惠风和畅。仰观宇宙之大，俯察品类之盛，所以游目骋怀，足以极视听之娱，信可乐也。”

The English version: “It is a clear spring day with a mild, caressing breeze. The vast universe, throbbing with life, lies spread before us, entertaining the eye and pleasing the spirit and all the senses. It is perfect.”

The translation by Lin Yutang is concise, natural and fluent, which not only meets westerner's thinking mode and language habit, but also keeps the original writing style. Therefore this kind of writing deserves us studying and learning from it. To write an authentic English passage requires the mastery of the language habit.

### 3. ANALYTIC VS. SYNTHETIC THINKING AND ENGLISH WRITING

English people are used to thinking in an analytic way and they pay more attention to specificity and to think analytically while Chinese prefer to focus more generality. In consequence, Chinese synthetic thinking mode inevitably affects Chinese learners' English writing at all the following levels.

#### 3.1 Influence at the Level of Words: Accuracy of Wording

The differences of thinking lead to the use of different words when people try to express themselves. The English prefer words with specific concepts, so that their wording is more accurate and exquisite. On the contrary, Chinese words are usually multi-purpose and some of them are often used in the general sense. For example, the word “说”, in English it has many expressions, such as whisper, grunt, shout, splutter, etc. The using of these words makes the language concise and accurate, and full of change.

But Chinese people often choose the general word. For instance, the verb “say” frequently appears in their writing wherever they want to express the action “说”. However, if the word “say” is replaced by the words which are given in the above paragraph according to different situation, the English expression will be proper and vivid. The following two sentences will describe the state better if the word “say” substituted by the words in the brackets.

E.g. (1) Parents were sound asleep. I said (whispered) to my brother, “Be quiet.”

(2) The policeman said (shouted) to the criminal, “Hands up!”

#### 3.2 Influence at the Level of Sentences: Interconnection

Interconnection here refers to cohesion by means of conjunction. In English compound sentences usually use conjunctions to link the coordinate clauses together. The conjunctive word directly shows the relation between clauses, which actually helps analyze the sentence. However, many Chinese sentences often lack this kind of interconnection. They only rely on the chance of the word sequence, context and illocutionary logic to realize the understanding of the idea. As a result, they may leave readers themselves to synthesize the intended meaning. That is, the differences between English and Chinese sentences in the terms of interconnection can be concluded as overt cohesion vs. covert cohesion. English is a rational analytic language, so sentence stresses hypotaxis and its external form. But Chinese is an integrated language which neglects grammar in most cases and sentences pay more attention to parataxis and the inner logic. Thus its cohesion is implicit. The following sentences clearly illustrate this point.

(1) 跑的了和尚，跑不了庙。

The monks may run away, *but* the temple cannot run away with them. (Liu & Zhou, 2004, p.109)

The conjunctive word “but” connects the two parts in the sentence and expresses the turn of tone and the contrast of meaning. However, the Chinese version, which lacks this kind of conjunctive word, implies the relation.

(2) 他打开门走进了房间。

He opened the door *and* came in the room.

The conjunctive word “and” functions similarly as “but” in (1), whereas it connects the two actions and shows the order of the actions. There is no such a word in the Chinese version, but people can still sense it and catch the meaning correctly.

Chinese students are easy to forget conjunctions, which leads to grammatical mistakes in English sentences,

(1) 他病了，没来上课。

He was ill, he was absent today.

**Revised:** He was ill, *so* he was absent today.

已经晚了，我们回去吧。

It is late, let's go home.

**Revised:** Let's go home, *as* it is late.

### 3.3 Influence at the Level of the Discourse: Paragraph Cohesion

“For English and Chinese, perhaps one of the most important linguistic distinctions is the contrast between hypotaxis and parataxis.” as Eugene Nida (1982, p16) points out. Westerners advocate ethics and they focus on the analytic thinking. Thus an English paragraph usually has strong logic as it is reflected in the writing. Guided by Chinese synthetic thinking, Chinese expressions try to omit the linking words so as to achieve to the prominent effect which seem to be not so rigorous and often cause ambiguity. In another word, hypotaxis emphasizes on the analytical form while parataxis on the synthesis of the meaning. These differences can be seen from the aspect of paragraph cohesion.

Cohesion is a concept to do with discourse or text rather than with syntax, it refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and defines it as a text. Discoursal/ textual cohesiveness can be realized by employing various cohesive devices: conjunction, ellipsis, lexical collocation, lexical repetition, reference, substitution, etc. (Hu, 2006, p103) Paragraph cohesion can be clearly shown by using these devices so that English paragraphs are usually logically structured and organized. Contrastingly, Chinese paragraphs emphasize more on the unity of meaning and less on the form of connection. Besides, there are many short sentences in Chinese while English usually use long and compound sentences in writing. As a result, the structure of a paragraph written by Chinese learners is easy to be loose and to lack necessary connection. Take the following paragraph written by one Chinese student as an example.

“A series of valves is opened; this allows the chemicals to mix, produce steam. The turbines start running.”

However, if this paragraph is revised with some cohesive devices and it will be better. Through reading the revised version below, people can see how cohesive devices make a difference. The revised parts are underlined.

“A series of valves is opened and this allows the chemicals to mix and produce steam. As a result, the turbines start running.”

### CONCLUSION

Language is closely related to thinking. To learn English well, especially to write English passages well, Chinese

learners should understand the thinking differences between English and Chinese and these two languages have many distinctions at the level of word, sentence and discourse. Moreover, Chinese learners had better to overcome the negative transfer from the mother tongue and get into the habit of thinking in English. General suggestions are: first of all, Chinese learners should be involved in more English writing training and exercises, through which they will know little by little how to choose words, to write sentences and to organize texts and thus gradually improve their writing in English; secondly, a great deal of English reading is necessary since reading help develop the sense of language in English and the acquisition of organize texts.

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