

# On Translating English Attributive Clauses into Chinese

## DE LA TRADUCTION DE LA PROPOSITION ATTRIBUTIVE ANGLAISE EN CHINOIS

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**Abstract:** Translating English attributive clauses into Chinese is one of the most knotty tasks for translators. This paper compares the syntactic differences between English and Chinese, and explores the possible methods of translating English attributive clauses into Chinese. It is suggested that the translator should bear in mind the syntactic differences, correctly grasp the original meaning and conform to the Chinese expressing rules in translation.

**Key words:** English attributive clause, syntactic difference, translation

**Résumé:** la traduction de la proposition attributive anglaise en chinois est une des tâches les plus épineuses pour les traducteurs. Cet article compare les différences syntaxiques entre l'anglais et le chinois, et explore les méthodes possibles de la traduction de la proposition attributive anglaise en chinois. Il est suggéré que les traducteurs doivent porter en tête les différences syntaxiques, correctement saisir le sens original et conformé aux règles de l'expression chinoise dans la traduction.

**Mots-Clés:** proposition attributive anglaise, différence syntaxique, traduction

Attributive clauses, also known as “adjective clauses”, are widely used in English. They are always introduced by relatives, such as “who” “whose” “that” “which” “as” “when” “where” “why”. The function of the attributive clause is to modify, describe and add meaning to the headword.

The attributive clause is the most complicated in all English clauses, and causes many difficulties to translators. As is mentioned above, the attributive clause is used to modify a certain noun, but it confused a lot of translators in identifying the relationship between the antecedent and the attributive clause, and translators can hardly maintain the original form of the clause if they want to convey the meaning properly. That is why Zhou Fangzhu(2002) thinks “when talking about the translation of subordinate clauses, attributive clauses turn out to the most knottiest one of all”. In order to be faithful to the original meaning and be expressive in the target language, the translator must depend on his bi-lingual knowledge and logic inference, and adopt flexible translating skills.

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## 1. SYNTACTIC DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE AND ENGLISH

English and Chinese belong to different language families. English belongs to Indo-European and the Chinese belong to Sino-Tibetan, and each of them has its own special syntactic characteristics.

First, though attributive structures exist both in English and Chinese, the concept of adjective clause does not exist in Chinese syntax. The English attributive clause belongs to the adjective clause, i.e. a dependent clause takes the place of an adjective to modify a noun or pronoun, beginning with a relative pronoun or relative adverb. There are two types of attributive clauses in English, namely defining attributive clause and non-defining attributive clause. Chinese, on the other hand, often use individual words or phrases as attributive elements or other types of clauses to perform similar functions.

Second, the positions of the attributes in the two languages are different. The English attributive clause is usually put followed the head word (antecedent), there maybe an unlimited words in the form of attributive clause behind the modified word in English., which is called "Right Branching Direction"(RBD) of syntax; while a Chinese sentence allows only a limited amount of words behind the modified word, most of the time, Chinese attributes are put before the head word, which is called "Left Branching Direction"(LBD) of syntax(Zhao Guihua, 2003). So grammatically speaking, an English sentence may proceed endlessly followed by an unlimited number of attributive clauses following the modified word, while a Chinese sentence tends to be shorter and briefer for attributive words preceding the modified word couldn't be added without limits.

A third important linguistic distinction is the contrast between parataxis (the juxtaposition of clauses or phrases without the use of coordinating or subordinating conjunctions) and hypotaxis (The dependent or subordinate relationship of clauses with connectives.) Chinese has the advantage of parataxis and sentences are usually developed through the coherence of meaning, so the connectives between the main clause and its subordinate clause are often omitted. This is true especially in the ancient Chinese transcript which even do not have a punctuation system. The English connectives, which introduce the clause and also function inside the clause as a subject or object, however, can't be so frequently omitted as those of Chinese, for the English main clause and its subordinate ones are connected by means of hypotaxis (Zhou Fangzhu,2002).

Besides, English is subject-prominent while Chinese is topic-prominent. The English complex sentence contains only one subject and predicate and it is easy to recognize which is the main clause and which is the subordination; but in Chinese sometimes there are more than one subjects or verbs in a sentence, hence the clauses in a sentence are not so self-evident as those of English. In English-Chinese translations many subjects can be omitted and the clauses can be rearranged into a string of clauses led by a general topic.

In brief, English is a synthetic-analytic language while Chinese is an analytic language. English sentence is like a tree with its branches of clauses extending from the stem of main clause, and the Chinese sentence is enlarged according to the natural flowing of meaning, just as a bamboo grows with a upper piece continuing from a lower one(Xiao Liming & Lou Shengping, 2004). For instance:

He was at this time in his late fifties ,a tall ,elegant man with good features and thick dark hair only sufficiently graying to add to the distinction of his appearance.

他這時已是將近六旬的人，一表人才，高個兒，眉清目秀，頭髮又多又黑，略帶花白，恰好襯出他那堂堂的儀錶。

## 2. WAYS TO TRANSLATE ENGLISH ATTRIBUTIVE CLAUSES INTO CHINESE

Before talking about how to translating English attributive clauses into Chinese, it is necessary to make clear the conception of sentence types in both languages. English sentences can be classified into three types according to their construction—simple sentence, complex sentence(with dependent clauses) and compound sentence(with independent clauses); while Chinese consists in only two types—simple sentence and compound sentence. But Chinese compound sentences are divided into two types again—that containing subordinate clauses and those containing coordinate clauses, and the former is somehow equivalent to English complex sentences. So for the convenience of discussion, the author will use the English sentence types as the standard proper names for both languages.

Due to the syntactic differences between English and Chinese, English attributive clauses may be translated into various Chinese syntactic elements, such as attributes, simple sentences, adverbial clauses within complex sentences or independent clauses within compound sentences. But whatever method the translator chooses, he should bear in mind the following principals:

First, pay attention to the place of the attributive clause after translation, make the translated version sound syntactically natural and smooth.

Second, make sure the logic meaning of the attributive clause is conveyed correctly and avoid misunderstanding and unfaithful translation.

### 2.1 Being translated into Chinese attributes

When English attributive clauses are easy and short, they can be translated into Chinese attributes with “de(的)” before the words being modified. This method can also be called “prepositioning” which is the most common practice in translating the English restrictive attributive clause, and it is in accordance with the normal order of Chinese syntax, since Chinese prefers “left branch direction” in the usage of attributes (Xu Jianping, 2003).

e.g. A man who really knows how to learn will always be successful because when he has to do something new which he has never had to do before, he will rapidly teach himself how to do it in the best way. (一個真正懂得怎樣學習的人總是會獲得成功，因為他必須去做他從前不曾做過的工作時，他會很快掌握完成這項工作的最佳方法。)

We can also translate some simple and descriptive non restrictive attributive clause into Chinese attributes though it is not as commonly used as in restrictive attributive clause.

e. g .But Peter’s laugh, which was very infectious, break the silence. (但彼特的富有感染力的笑声打破了靜默。)

## 2.2 Being translated into simple sentences

Sometimes the translator can rearrange the order of the English complex sentence and change the attributive clause into the predicate of a simple sentence (Song Tianxi, 2005). This method is frequently adopted in translating English “there be” structure.

e.g. There are a man in the classroom who are waiting for you. (教室裏有人等。)

Besides “there be” structure, there are some other English sentences with attributive clauses, which can be melted into predicate elements of a Chinese sentence. In this case, the attributive clause is the emphasis of the sentence and is usually longer than the main clause.

e.g. we used a plane of which almost every part carried some indication of national identity 我們駕駛的飛機幾乎每一部分都有國籍的某些標誌。)

## 2.3 Being translated into adverbial clauses within complex sentences

Some English attributive clauses appear to modify the headword, but function as the adverbial in the complex sentences if analyzed semantically. This kind of attributive clause has a very close logic relationship with the main clause and indicating the cause, result, purpose, time, condition, and concession etc. of the main clause, thus classified by some scholars as “semi-adverbial attributive clauses.”. When translating such sentences the translator can render them into corresponding Chinese adverbial sentences. For example:

a). Translated into Chinese adverbial clause of cause

e.g. they are far more valuable endowments for a female than those fugitive charms which a few years will inevitably tarnish (對於一位女性來說，它們好看的相貌有價值得多了，因為紅顏難保，不過幾年便消退了。)

b). Translated into Chinese adverbial clause of time

e.g. The thief, who was about to escape, was caught by the policeman (小偷正要逃跑時，被員警抓住了。)

e.g. Electrical energy that is supplied to a lamp can be turned into light energy (當把電供給電燈，它就會變成光能。)

c). Translated into Chinese adverbial clause of condition.

e.g. we maintain that no peace situation is permanent which does not take into account the legitimate wishes of the majority of any country. (我們認為，如果不尊重一個國家大多數人民的正當願望，任何和平局面都是不會持久的。)

e.g. men became desperate for work, any work, which will help them to keep alive their families (人們極其迫切地要求工作，不管什麼工作，只要能維持一家人的生活就行)

d). Translated into Chinese adverbial clause of purpose.

e.g. Private school in the United States has a wide range of programs that are offered to meet the needs of certain student's (美國私立學校課程種類繁多，以滿足某些學生的不同要求。)

e). Translated into Chinese adverbial clause of concession.

e.g. My assistant, who had carefully read through the instructions before doing his experiment could not obtain satisfactory results because he followed them mechanically (雖

CHEN Qimin, *KE Qunsheng/Canadian Social Science* Vol.4 No.6 2008 35-40  
然我的助手在做實驗之前已從頭到尾仔細閱讀過說明書，但由於他死搬硬套，所以不能得到滿意的結果。)

## 2.4 Being translated into independent clauses within a compound sentence

If a English attributive clause is translated into independent clauses within a compound sentence, this method is call “division” and takes various forms.

### 2.4.1 Repeating the English antecedent

Sometimes an English sentence with a restrictive attributive clause is too long or too complicated for the translator to take as a whole, so the translator may divide it and place the attributive clause after the main clause to conform to the Chinese usage of repeating the antecedent being modified (Xu Jianping, 2003).

a). repeating directly the antecedent

e.g. They are striving for the ideal which is close to the heart of every Chinese and for which, in the past, many Chinese have laid down their lives. (他们正在为实现一个理想而努力，这个理想是每个中国人所珍爱的，在过去，许多中国人曾为了这个理想而牺牲了自己的生命)

b). repeating the antecedent by using pronouns

e.g. AIDS is a life-threatening sickness that attacks the body’s natural defense system against disease, (愛滋病是一種威脅生命的疾病，它侵襲人體內的自然免疫系統。)

e.g. Anybody’s better than Matt, who has neither honor, nor ability, nor capital. (誰都比麥特強，他既沒有名譽，又沒有能力，也沒有資金。)

e.g. He managed to raise a crop of 200miracle tomatoes that weighed up to two pound each (他居然種出了兩百個奇跡般的番茄，每個重達兩磅。)

Sometimes instead of modifying one element of a sentence, the attributive clause modifies the whole sentence, just giving more conclusion and explanation to the whole sentence, then it can be translated into an independent clause by rendering the English relatives “that”, “ which” into “這”，“那”，“這些”，“那些” etc.

e.g. Isabel was a tall girl with the oval face, straight nose, fine eyes and full month that appeared to be characteristic of the family. (伊沙貝爾是個身材高挑、橢圓臉、直鼻樑、眉清目秀、嘴巴豐滿的姑娘，這一切看來都是他家族的特徵。)

### 2.4.2 Omitting the English antecedent

As a paratactic language, Chinese emphasizes the conveyance of meaning while the linguistic form may be rather flexible, and contextual coherence is more important than linguistic cohesion. When there is no need to mention the antecedent, the translator can omit it.

e.g. It is he who receive the letter that announced the death of your uncle  
是他接到那封信，說你的叔叔去世了。

### 3. CONCLUSION

Since English and Chinese belong to different language families, often having different expressing ways to describe the world, and the omnipresent English attributive clause find no equivalent syntactic unit in Chinese, the translators must have a good awareness of this syntax difference, adopt flexible translating methods and avoid word-for-word translation most of the time. Translating process consist in two main stages – understanding and expressing. The translator should first study carefully the surface structure and logic relationship between the modifier and modified, grasp the deep meaning of the source text. Then in the process of expressing, he should conform to the Chinese habit of organizing language, arrange the word order when necessary, and change attributive clauses into functionally similar linguistic units in the target language, getting the translation closer to the ideal of “being faithful, expressive and elegant”.

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