

Chapter 6

A Learner Corpus Study of Attributive Clauses and Passive Voice in Student Translations

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ABSTRACT

This chapter centers on the nuisance caused by passive voice and attributive clauses in student translations. With the use of learner corpus, calculation, categorization, and annotation functions enable analysis of common linguistic features in student translators. The aim of this study is to correct learners' under-use, over-use, and misuse of terms and linguistic structures. By incorporating technology into teaching and by analyzing passive tense and attributive clauses in student translations with learner corpus, the following study can contribute in designing more effective curricula and teaching materials. The use of objective data to examine student translations provides student translators an autonomous learning environment and translation improvement opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

Of all translation errors made by student translators, errors in the translations of passive voices and attributive clauses are perhaps the most common and easily identifiable in English/Chinese translations. Sentences containing passive voices and attributive clauses are complicated in structure, and if not treated properly, obscure and literal translations are likely to occur. As these structures may appear in any type of text, knowing how to deconstruct and process passive voices and attributive clauses will reduce student frustrations and

ease the translation process. Passive voices and attributive clauses should, therefore, be greatly emphasized in the curriculum.

In this paper, I attempt to discuss the under-use, over-use, and misuse of terms and linguistic structures in passive tenses and attributive clauses in student translations. In the first part, I define and introduce the structure of passive voice and attributive clause in English and Chinese. I subsequently address the translation of passive voice and attributive clause. This is followed by an examination of a compilation of selected texts included in a learner corpus. Finally, I provide a

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general outlook on the translation of passive and attributive clause from the learner corpus and discuss possible pedagogical implications on how student translations can be improved.

The analytical part consists of two sections. First, the frequency of use of the passive voice in the source text and the target text is examined. This is followed by an analysis and discussion on the use of the passive form in translation: the passive translated into the passive form, the passive translated into the active form and the active translated into the passive form.

BACKGROUND

Passive markers play a decisive role in differentiating between the active and passive voices (Niu, 2003). The differences between the Chinese passive voice and the English passive voice in form, structure, tense, pragmatic meanings and so on, create obstacles to translators when translating passive voices. Likewise, as the most complicated clause in English, attributive clauses cause many difficulties to translators when identifying the relationship between the antecedent and the attributive clause. Zhou (2002) considers attributive clauses as the most difficult and the thorniest one of all when it comes to translating subordinate clauses. In order to convey the meaning properly, the original form of the clause can hardly be maintained.

Attributive clauses and the passive voice are of much concern to Chinese students who are doing translation for they want to get the translation right. Certainly, for North Americans there is a concern with the passive voice and when it should and should not be used. However, it was discovered that few English grammar books discuss attributive clauses. In what follows, a contrast in the passive voice and attributive clause in Chinese and English is discussed in order to prepare student translators a better understanding on the language structures.

PASSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE

To start with, English passives are used more frequently than Chinese passives (R. Xiao, 2007). The passive voice in English is often intentionally used to emphasize the patient; the agent becomes less important and defocused, and as a result, agentless passives are more frequently used than those with agents. Biber et al. (1999) refer to passives with an agent as “long passives” and to those without as “short passives”. Studies show that short passives are more frequently used than long passives in both written and spoken English. Short passives are also significantly more common in spoken than in written English (R. Xiao, 2007).

English passives are grammatically marked by the structure *be* + *past participle*. Since the passive meaning is expressed by past participles, the copular verb *be* can be replaced by other copular verbs such as *get*, *become*, *feel*, *look*, *remain* and *seem*. However, studies have shown that *be* passives are more frequent, especially in formal writing with abstract and technical content (Biber, 1988), such as official documents and academic prose (R. Xiao, McEnery, & Qian, 2006). They are used more so in informative than in imaginative writing (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985). Within the category of “informative prose”, passives are commonly found in scientific exposition, followed by the mass media in topical event coverage and editorials (Svartvik, 1966). Since the use of other passive constructions is limited by the lexical meanings of those semi-linking verbs, I confine my study to the *be* passive.

The Chinese language employs a wider range of devices to express passive meaning. The most important passive marker in Chinese is *bei*, which can mark passive constructions with or without an agent. It is also the most common passive marker in Chinese. Wu (2012) found 94 uses of the passive *bei* in the first 100 sentences when searching

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