

Contrastive Study of Linguistic Complexity in English and Chinese

Yanru Yang, Ling Liu

Hubei University of Technology Wuhan, Hubei 430068

Abstract: This paper conducts a comparative analysis of the differences in sentence structure between English and Chinese, exploring the "complexity" feature of English and the "conciseness" feature of Chinese as well as their underlying causes. The study finds that English tends to employ multi-layered, nested complex sentence structures with explicit grammatical devices to connect sentence components, while Chinese prefers concise, short serial clauses that express logical relationships through word order and contextual cues. These differences stem from the distinct historical evolutionary paths, cognitive patterns, and socio-cultural backgrounds of the two languages. The research findings hold significant implications for translation practice, language teaching, and cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: English complexity; Chinese conciseness; Language comparison; Syntactic features; Cultural differences

DOI:10.12417/3029-2328.25.08.005

1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, the study of differences between English and Chinese, as the two most widely spoken languages, holds significant theoretical and practical importance. Language serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a reflection of cognitive patterns. The "complexity" of English and the "conciseness" of Chinese exemplify distinct cultural perceptions and expressions of the world. This research aims to systematically analyze the manifestations, underlying causes, and translational implications of these linguistic characteristics, thereby providing insights for language learning and cross-cultural communication. Through comparative analysis, we can gain deeper understanding of the relationship between linguistic structures and thought patterns, facilitating effective communication across diverse language cultures.

1.1 Research Background

As the two most widely spoken languages, hold significant theoretical and practical value in comparative studies. Linguists have long observed distinct differences in their syntactic structures: English sentences tend to be structurally complex and multi-layered, whereas Chinese sentences are typically concise and economical. These differences manifest not only in everyday communication but also across various genres, including literary works, academic papers, and official documents.

With China's growing influence on the global stage, English-Chinese communication has become increasingly frequent, making a deeper understanding of their fundamental differences ever more crucial. However, existing comparative studies have largely focused on lexical contrasts, with relatively insufficient systematic research on syntactic differences. In particular, the dimension of "complexity versus conciseness" lacks comprehensive analysis integrating linguistic theory with sociocultural context.

1.2 Research Significance

This study systematically examines the structural characteristics of sentences, contrasting the "complexity" of English with the "conciseness" of Chinese, which carries significant implications across multiple dimensions:

Theoretically, this research contributes to linguistic typology by offering fresh perspectives in English-Chinese comparative studies. By analyzing the fundamental syntactic differences between the two languages, it deepens our understanding of the interplay between language and cognition, as well as language and culture.

Practically, the findings have direct applications in translation and language pedagogy. In English-Chinese translation, the appropriate conversion of sentence structures has long been a persistent challenge. Through empirical analysis, this study provides translators with actionable methodological guidance. Additionally, the results can assist

learners of English or Chinese in better mastering the syntactic features of their target language, mitigating negative interference from their native language.

1.3 Literature Review

Research on English-Chinese linguistic differences has yielded substantial scholarly output, with numerous scholars approaching the topic from diverse perspectives. Regarding the specific dimension of "complexity versus conciseness," existing studies have primarily focused on two key aspects:

In terms of syntactic structure differences, Sun Aina (2015), in her analysis of complex sentence structures in English poetry, observed that English employs embedded clauses, non-finite verbs, and other devices to construct multi-layered semantic networks, forming a distinctive "architectural-style" framework. Liang Tianqin and Zhou Yanhong (2020), through a comparative study of *Rickshaw Boy* and its English translation, noted that translators frequently consolidate Chinese "run-on sentences" into complex English sentences while adding explicit logical connectors absent in the original text. This approach underscores English's demand for formal completeness and overt logical explicitness.

In terms of cognitive and thought patterns, Wei Aying and Liu Xue (2017), in their examination of English and Chinese nursery rhymes, found that English rhymes favor complex structures like relative clauses, whereas Chinese rhymes predominantly use parallel short sentences and repetitive patterns. They argue this reflects the contrast between Western analytical thinking and Chinese holistic cognition. Lü Ying (2014), in her study of *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Collection* and its translations, highlighted how Chinese "parataxis" allows implicit logical relations through word order and context, while English relies on formal markers to clarify syntactic relationships.

2.The "Complexity" of English: Characteristics and Underlying Causes

2.1 The Complexity of English

The "Complexity" of English manifests primarily in the multi-layered, nested, and expansive nature of its sentence structures. Specifically, this complexity is characterized by three core features:

The foremost characteristic of English complexity lies in its structural sophistication. Through various grammatical devices such as subordinate clauses, non-finite verbs, and prepositional phrases, English integrates multiple information units into a single sentence, creating multi-level structures of subordination or coordination. For instance: "After finishing her presentation, which lasted nearly an hour, she left the room quietly, hoping no one would notice her exhaustion." This sentence incorporates multiple components including a temporal adverbial ("After finishing her presentation"), a non-restrictive relative clause ("which lasted nearly an hour"), and a present participial phrase ("hoping no one would notice her exhaustion"), demonstrating exceptionally high information density.

Another key manifestation of English complexity is its logical precision. English relies on explicit grammatical markers such as relative pronouns (e.g., which, that) and conjunctions (e.g., because, although) to clarify logical relationships between components, ensuring unambiguous meaning. For example: "The book that you recommended, which was written by a Nobel Prize winner, inspired me to study harder." Here, the restrictive relative clause introduced by "that" and the non-restrictive relative clause introduced by "which" both modify the subject "The book," establishing clear hierarchical relationships through these relational markers.

The third characteristic is English's capacity for backward expansion. English sentences typically extend linearly, with secondary elements (e.g., modifiers, clauses) frequently positioned after their headwords, creating what is termed "end-weight." For example: "I find it difficult to understand why he refused the offer." This sentence employs "it" as a preparatory object anticipating the postposed actual object "to understand why he refused the offer," preventing a top-heavy structure and adhering to English's principle of end-focus.

2.2 The Underlying Causes of English

The intricate nature of English syntax stems from profound historical and cultural developments, primarily manifested in two key aspects:

The complexity of English finds its primary origin in its unique historical trajectory. While English originated as a Germanic language, the Norman Conquest of 1066 introduced massive French linguistic influence. French became the language of court and aristocracy, while Old English persisted among commoners, resulting in a dual lexicon: Germanic-based core vocabulary (e.g., "house") coexisting with Latinate/French-derived prestige terms (e.g., "mansion"). This linguistic layering created structural flexibility enabling sophisticated syntactic combinations.

The formal logic tradition serves as the ideological foundation for the syntactic complexity of English. Rooted in Western philosophical traditions that emphasize formal logic and rational analysis, this mode of thinking manifests linguistically through a rigorous pursuit of structural completeness and logical precision. English syntax typically demands full subject-predicate structures with explicitly marked relationships between components, inevitably leading to sentence complexity. The frequent use of embedded clauses and multiple modifiers in academic writing, for instance, directly corresponds to the requirement for demonstrative rigor. As Su Xinchun (2024) aptly observes, the intricate nature of English exhibits an intrinsic connection with the Western tradition of scientific rationality^[5].

3.The "Conciseness" Feature of Chinese and Its Causative Analysis

3.1 The "Conciseness" Feature of Chinese

The "brevity" characteristic of Chinese is primarily reflected in the concise, loose, and context-dependent nature of its sentence structure. In stark contrast to the complexity of English, Chinese brevity can be understood through the following three core features:

The "run-on sentence" structure is the most typical manifestation of Chinese brevity. Chinese sentences often consist of a series of short clauses arranged in sequence, like flowing water, with logical connectives frequently omitted between clauses. For example: "他起床, 刷牙, 吃饭, 出门。" These four verb phrases follow chronological order to describe a sequence of actions, yet form a complete chain of meaning naturally without any connecting words. This flowing syntax aligns with the Chinese cognitive habit of "simulating event sequences through temporal order," resulting in concise and lively expression.

Omission of sentence elements is extremely common in Chinese, constituting the second feature of brevity. Chinese often omits subjects, conjunctions, or even predicate verbs, relying on context to complete the meaning. For example: "下雨了, 带伞。" This sentence omits the subject "你" and the conjunction "如果" retaining only core information without hindering comprehension.

The widespread use of four-character phrases and idioms is another key aspect of Chinese brevity^[6]. Chinese employs numerous four-character idioms and fixed expressions that convey rich meanings with extreme conciseness. For example: "他做事总是雷厉风行。" Here, the idiom "雷厉风行" fully expresses the complex imagery of "acting as fiercely as thunder and as swiftly as wind" in just four characters—far more concise than a word-by-word explanation.

3.2 The Causes of Chinese

The concise nature of Chinese is deeply rooted in China's unique historical and cultural traditions, shaped primarily by two key factors:

The logographic writing system forms the material basis of Chinese brevity. Unlike alphabetic systems like English, Chinese characters are ideographic, each carrying independent meaning. For example, the single character "雨" can stand alone as a complete sentence, conveying a full meteorological concept, whereas English requires at least three words—"It is raining." This semantic density allows Chinese to shed formal constraints and prioritize direct meaning.

Parataxis—the reliance on context and word order rather than explicit grammatical markers—serves as the structural foundation of Chinese conciseness. Chinese grammar emphasizes semantic coherence over rigid syntax. For instance, the conditional statement "你去我就去" omits conjunctions like "如果...那么..." yet clearly expresses the logical relationship through word order alone. This paratactic tendency eliminates many grammatical markers obligatory in English.

4. Comparison of Complexity and Brevity in English and Chinese with Translation Strategies

4.1 Contrastive Analysis of Structural Expansion Patterns

There exists a fundamental difference in the direction of sentence expansion between English and Chinese, which directly influences the expressive patterns and information organization of the two languages. A deep understanding of this distinction holds significant importance for translation practice and cross-cultural communication.

The right-branching linear expansion is a distinctive structural feature of English. English sentences exhibit a "closed beginning, open ending" characteristic, where the basic information unit is positioned at the sentence head and continuously extended backward through relative clauses, adverbial clauses, and other means. For instance, the basic sentence "This is the farmer" can be extended backward to "that sowed the corn," then further to "that kept the cock that crowed in the morn," with such layered additions theoretically allowing infinite expansion. This branching pattern resembles tree growth—trunk first, branches later—aligning with English's "primary-to-secondary" information organization principle.

In contrast, Chinese demonstrates a completely different left-branching linear expansion pattern. Chinese sentences feature an "open beginning, contracted ending" structure, where modifiers typically precede the core word, which often appears at the sentence end. For example, the basic phrase "学术报告" can be expanded forward into "关于当代语言学研究动向的学术报告", then further into "李教授关于当代语言学研究动向的学术报告", and finally into a complete sentence: "你们去外国语学院听了李教授关于当代语言学研究动向的学术报告". This expansion resembles peeling an onion—layer by layer from the outside inward until the core is revealed.

It is worth noting that right-branching linear expansion is relatively challenging in Chinese due to its strict word order constraints. Unlike English, which employs rich formal markers, Chinese must rigidly adhere to the "modifier before head word" principle when expanding backward. For example, "学术报告的效果" cannot be phrased as "效果的学术报告," and "认真地写" requires the adverbial marker "地" to clarify the structural relationship. In multi-layered expansions, Chinese must avoid structural confusion—lengthy attributives like "我看见一个穿着红色衣服的戴着帽子的小女孩手里拿着气球" must be added layer by layer to ensure logical clarity.

4.2 Exploration of Translation Strategies

The fundamental differences in English-Chinese sentence structures necessitate structural transformations during translation, rather than literal word-for-word rendering. Appropriate translation strategies can effectively bridge linguistic gaps to achieve accurate meaning conveyance. Based on contrastive analysis of complexity versus simplicity between the two languages, we can summarize the following translation principles:

The sentence-splitting and restructuring principle for E-C translation serves as a key strategy for handling complex English sentences. When encountering lengthy English constructions, translators should first clarify their logical hierarchy before breaking them into multiple shorter clauses and reorganizing the information flow according to Chinese conventions^[7]. For instance, the English sentence "In the doorway lay at least twelve umbrellas of all sizes and colors" would sound unwieldy if literally translated as "门口放着至少有十二把五颜六色、大小不一的雨伞." A more idiomatic approach would be restructuring it as "门口放着一堆雨伞，少说也有十二把，五颜六色，大小不一."

Conversely, the sentence-combining principle for C-E translation addresses Chinese paratactic structures. Chinese "flowing-water" sentences often require merging into English hypotactic constructions with necessary

connectives^[8]. For example, the Chinese clauses "因为距离远, 又缺乏交通工具, 农村社会是与外界隔绝的。这种隔绝状态, 由于通讯工具不足, 就变得更加严重了。" could be synthesized as "The isolation of the rural world because of distance and the lack of transport facilities is compounded by the scarcity of information from the mass media." This restructuring aligns with English preferences for complex sentence architecture.

Equivalent translation of idioms also plays a crucial role in handling complexity-simplicity contrasts. Chinese, being highly condensed, often requires expansion in English - for instance, rendering "雷厉风行" as "act with thunder-like rapidity and wind-like swiftness" or the simplified version "take prompt and resolute action." Conversely, English idioms may find perfect Chinese counterparts, like translating "kill two birds with one stone" as "一箭双雕" or "一举两得." Such flexible approaches preserve source-language cultural flavors while conforming to target-language idiomaticity.

5. Conclusion

This study systematically compares the "complexity" of English and the "conciseness" of Chinese, revealing the fundamental differences in sentence structures between the two languages and their underlying causes. The research finds that English complexity manifests in structurally intricate constructions, rigorous logical cohesion, and post-positional expansion—features rooted in its historical evolution, social stratification, and formal-logical traditions. In contrast, Chinese conciseness is characterized by its "flowing-water" sentence patterns, frequent ellipsis, and prevalent use of four-character idioms, shaped by its pictographic writing system, paratactic grammar, and the Vernacular Movement.

A key divergence lies in their structural expansion directions: English develops linearly forward (right-branching), while Chinese sentences expand backward (left-branching). This fundamental distinction necessitates strategic adaptations in translation—either sentence-splitting and restructuring (for English-to-Chinese) or sentence-combining and reconfiguration (for Chinese-to-English)—to ensure accurate meaning transfer.

References:

- [1] Sun Aina. Clever Blend of Simplicity and Complexity——Imagination in Black William's Poetry[J]. *Academic Exploration*, 2015, (12): 127-131.
- [2] Liang Tianqin, Zhou Yanhong. Exploring the Complexity and Simplicity of English and Chinese through "Rickshaw Boy" and Its English Translation[J]. *Literary Education (Part 2)*, 2020, (08): 34-35.
- [3] Wei Aying, Liu Xue. The Complexity and Simplicity of English and Chinese Languages from the Perspective of English Chinese Nursery Songs[J]. *Science Popularization (Science Education)*, 2017, (03): 155-156.
- [4] Lv Ying. Complex Vs. Simplex: With Introduction to Anthology in Orchid Pavilion and its English Version as a Case[J]. *Journal of Qiqihar Junior Teachers' College*, 2014, (02): 78-79. 23-1534/z.2014.02.031.
- [5] Su Xinchun. Multi-attribute and Multi-function of Language and Dominance of Social Context[J]. *JOURNAL OF BEIHUA UNIVERSITY (Social Sciences)*, 2024, 25(03): 1-7+150.
- [6] Liu Jinping, Li Chao. From Sun Zhili's version of *Pride and Prejudice*, we can see the cognitive connection between the translator and the author[J]. *Journal of Changchun University of Science and Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*, 2023, 36(05): 156-161.
- [7] Wang Meng. The Influence of Language and Cultural Differences between China and Foreign Countries on Translation Strategies[J]. *International Public Relations*, 2025, (02): 89-91.
- [8] Ye Pei. Analysis of English Translation Techniques Based on Cultural Differences between China and Foreign Countries[C]//Hong Kong New Century Cultural Publishing House. *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Innovative Talent Cultivation and Sustainable Development in 2022 (Chinese)*. Xi'an Siyuan College; 2022: 144-146.