

On Chinese-English Translation Strategies of Null-subject Sentences

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Abstract: With the on-going globalization, foreign publicity, to which translation is indispensable, has served as a showcase for countries to demonstrate their soft power. The foreign publicity translation is now of greater significance as Covid-19 is still raging across the globe and the international landscape remains confusing and changing. The null-subject sentence is a sentence pattern, widely used, in Chinese, while there is no equivalence in English. Therefore, in terms of its translation, translators should adopt strategies in a flexible way. This paper summarizes four strategies frequently used in translating null-subject sentences in foreign publicity materials: to add a subject to the sentence, to change the sentence from active voice to passive voice, to change the subject of the sentence, and to use the imperative sentence. Besides, this paper analyzes the source and target texts in the report. It aims at providing reference for translation of null-subject sentences in foreign publicity materials.

Keywords: Foreign publicity materials, Null-subject sentences, Translation strategies.

1. Introduction

1.1. Null-subject Sentences in Chinese

In Chinese, there are two main sentence patterns: the subject-predicate sentence and the topic-comment sentence. The null-subject sentence in Chinese, referring to the sentence in which the subject is absent, is a special sentence pattern and belongs to the non-subject-predicate sentence. Dong Shaoke et al. (1996) and Ma Wenxi et al. (2004) pointed out that the null-subject sentences, usually composed of predicates or predicate phrases, are the ones in which subjects are too obscure to tell or unnecessary to be uncovered. From the ancient times to the present, the null-subject sentences have been widely used, ranging from traditional Chinese idioms [e.g. “吃一堑，长一智” (A fall into the pit, a gain in your wit)], to languages used in opening ceremonies [e.g. “预祝奥运会取得圆满成功” (Wish the Olympic Games to be successful)]. The null-subject sentences can deliver semantic meaning in a clear and complete way, even without being given a certain context.

1.2. Differences between Chinese and English

Chinese and English come from two language families, with the former a member of the Sino-Tibetan language family and the latter of the Indo-European language family, resulting in disparities in terms of building a sentence. Eugene A. Nida (1982) put forth that from the linguistic point of view, the most important difference between English and Chinese is the difference between hypotaxis and parataxis. As for Chinese, a semantic language, it focuses on coherence in meaning. In Chinese, the subject-predicate sentence pattern is not strictly organized by its grammar, and the topic-comment sentence pattern means the subject is not necessarily essential to a sentence. As for English, a morphological language, it stresses on cohesion in form. In English, the subject-predicate sentence structure is strictly ruled by its grammar. Zhang Zhenbang (2009) put forward in the book, *A New English Grammar Coursebook*, that there are five basic sentence patterns in English: SV [Subject+Verb (Intransitive)], SVC

[Subject+Verb (Linking) +Complement], SVO [Subject+Verb (Transitive) +Object], SVOO [Subject+Verb (Transitive) +Indirect Object+Direct Object] and SVOC [Subject+Verb (Complex Transitive) +Object+Complement]. Subject and verb are two elements that all these patterns share in common. That is, an English sentence must contain, at least, one subject and one verb.

The imperative sentences in English are not real “null-subject sentences” despite the fact that they tend to show the “null-subject” phenomenon. Xu Min (2005) suggested that in English, the “null-subject” phenomenon only appears when a subject, with the obvious pragmatic function, is omitted. In brief, the null-subject sentence is not an English-specific language phenomenon but a special language pattern in Chinese. When translating foreign publicity materials from Chinese into English, translators and interpreters need to concentrate on this sentence pattern and adopt various translation strategies and methods in a flexible manner. In this way, they can improve the translation quality, making China’s attitude, stance and stories clearer to foreign readers and listeners.

2. Chinese-English Translation Strategies of Null-subject Sentences in Foreign Publicity Materials: A Case Study on Report on the Work of the Government in 2021

Subject is the “action performer” or the element put in front of the predicate in a sentence. In Chinese null-subject sentence, there is no subject, while in English sentence, there is usually a clear and logical subject as English is a rigorously grammar-ruled language. Chinese is a verb-prominent language and the null-subject sentences can easily find their way to the publicity materials. In the C-E translation of publicity materials, adopting word-to-word translation method will prevent readers from thoroughly understanding what these materials try to convey for the translation readability, which is of importance to translation quality assessment, is undermined by a large margin. The author, on

the basis of research on the null-subject sentences in Chinese-English Report on the Work of the Government in 2021, concludes four strategies frequently used in translating null-subject sentences: to add a subject to the sentence, to change the sentence from active voice to passive voice, to change the subject of the sentence, and to use the imperative sentence.

2.1. To Add a Subject to the Sentence

In March of each year, Report on the Work of the Government is delivered at the People's National Congress. The report often contains three major parts: a review of the government work in the past year, major tasks for this year, and the government self-construction. In the report are many sentences with “中国”(China), “中国政府”(the Chinese government) and “中华人民/中国人民”(the Chinese people/we) as their subjects. Therefore, in the C-E translation of null-subject sentences in the report, the translation strategy to add subjects can be adopted so that the English sentences are grammatically well-structure (with at least a subject and a verb). From the context, translators and interpreters can determine the implied subjects to be used in the C-E translation of null-subject sentences, especially the sentences concerning national policies, strategies and layouts. With an analysis of the C-E report, there are two main ways speaking of adding subjects: to add “China” as the subject and to add “We” as the subject. Examples and analysis are as follows:

2.1.1. To Add “China” as the Subject of the Sentence

Example (1)

Source Text: 推动区域全面经济伙伴关系协定签署。完成中欧投资协定谈判。

Target Text: China played an important role in the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, and it concluded negotiations on an investment agreement with the European Union.

Analysis: In the source text, “协定签署”(the signing of agreement) and “协定谈判”(negotiations on agreement) are activities related to countries or international organizations. In the target text, “China” is added as the subject and “it” also refers to “China”. In sentences about national policies, principles and tasks, their subjects can be a “government” or a “country”, making the amplification of “China” reasonable.

2.1.2. To Add “We” as the Subject of the Sentence

Example (2)

Source Text: (全国各族人民顽强拼搏)……疫情防控取得重大战略成果, 在全球主要经济体中唯一实现经济正增长。

Target Text: We achieved major strategic success in our response to Covid-19 and China was the world's only major economy to achieve growth.

Analysis: In the source text, there is a given context, that is, “全国各族人民顽强拼搏”(We the Chinese people of all ethnic groups responded with tremendous tenacity). In the target text, two subjects are added: “We” and “China”. “We” in the first half of text equals to “the Chinese people of all ethnic groups” in the given context, showing that all Chinese people, united as one, have played their part in the fight against Covid-19. In the second half of text, “China” instead of “We” is added as the subject because “We” cannot stand for “唯一全球主要经济体”(the world's only major economy) in the given context of the source text, while “China” itself can represent an economy. When adding subjects in the C-E translation of null-subject sentences, translators should put

the given context into account. In the C-E translation of foreign publicity materials, “We”, added as the subject, may refer to “the Chinese people”, “all officials in the government” or “the Chinese people of all ethnic groups”.

2.2. To Change the Sentence from Active Voice to Passive Voice

Tan Yilan (2019) put forward that technically speaking, in Chinese, there is no grammatical structure of passive voice; certain characters, phrases and sentences can be used to express the meaning of passive sentences. Due to the huge differences in thinking between the Chinese people and westerners, the Chinese people have a tendency to use active sentences, showing subjectivity; while the westerners have a tendency to use passive sentences, showing objectivity. Null-subject sentences describe actions or changes, usually in active voice. What the null-subject sentences in Report on the Work of the Government convey include the achievements in the past and prospects in the future. Wang Li (1985) put forth that subjects in Chinese sentences are sometimes not apparent and rather hard to tell. In the C-E translation, these sentences should be translated into the ones in passive voice and cases of incorrect subject amplification can be avoided. On top of that, Shu Na and Yu Xuanpu (2017) noted that the translation of foreign publicity materials should be featured by conciseness, precision and objectiveness. Therefore, using passive sentences can not only enrich the sentence patterns of the target text, but also ensure that the text is formal and objective. Examples and analysis are as follows:

Example (3)

Source Text: 交出一份人民满意、世界瞩目、可以载入史册的答卷。

Target Text: Indeed, our achievements, which have won the approval of our people and global recognition, will be remembered in history.

Example (4)

Source Text: 城镇新增就业 1186 万人。

Target Text: A total of 11.86 million urban jobs were added.

Analysis: In the source text of example (3), there is a verb-object structure, “交出答卷”(make achievements). If the text is translated into an active sentence with “we” or “China” as the subject, the readers or listeners might think that “we are” or “China is” bragging. Therefore, in its target text, the source text is translated into a passive sentence with the object “答卷”(achievements) of the verb-object structure “交出答卷”(make achievements) as the subject and a non-restrictive attributive clause to modify “achievements”, making the text more acceptable for foreign readers and listeners. In the source text of example (4), “城镇”(towns and townships) seems to be the subject of the sentence, but “城镇” here is the modifier of “新增就业”(new/newly-added jobs) so the source text is a null-subject sentence and “城镇” should be translated into “rural”. Besides, “towns and townships” cannot increase employment, which is illogical. Putting the source context into consideration fails to find a correct object. In its target text, the “1186 万人”(11.86 million people) in the source text is rendered into “11.86 million jobs”, used as the “subject” of the passive sentence, avoiding incorrect amplification of the subject and expressing the data in a more objective manner.

2.3. To Change the Subject of the Sentence

There stands a contrast between the Chinese and Western consciousness, with the former highlighting the subject consciousness and the latter highlighting the object conscientiousness. The Chinese people are apt to use animate/personal subjects while the westerners are apt to use inanimate/impersonal subjects. He Mingzhu (2003) pointed out that the inanimate subject sentence is a common sentence pattern and a special language phenomenon in written English, featuring subjectivity and vividness. In addition to adding subjects, the strategy of changing the subjects can be applied in the C-E translation of null-subject sentences. With an analysis of the C-E report, there are three main ways speaking of changing the subject to the sentence: to use the inanimate subject, to use the dummy subject “It”, and to use the sentence pattern of “There be ...”. Examples and analysis are as follows:

2.3.1. To Use the Inanimate Subject

Example (5)

Source Text: 对脱贫县从脱贫之日起设立 5 年过渡期, 保持主要帮扶政策总体稳定。

Target Text: For counties lifted out of poverty, a five-year transition period will apply from the date poverty in their locality was eradicated, during which major assistance policies will remain unchanged for them.

Analysis: In the source text, the subject is absent before the verb-object structure “设立过渡期”(establish the transition period). The performer of the structure could be “the central government”, “the local government”, “relevant authorities” and so on. So it is improper to apply the strategy of adding subjects. In the target text, the inanimate noun phrase “a five-year transition period” is used as the subject along with the animate verb “apply”, avoiding adding inappropriate subject. Adopting the strategy of using the inanimate subject and animate verb in this example can personify “period” and make the text both objective and vivid.

In the C-E translation of null-subject sentences in foreign publicity materials, sentences with “time” and other abstract nouns as their subjects can be translated into inanimate subject sentences with animate verbs, such as witness, see and experience, as their predicates. An example can be seen in Report on the Work of the Government in 2018:

Source Text: 去年还发生了多起公共安全事件和重大生产安全事故。

Target Text: Last year saw the occurrence of a number of public safety incidents and major workplace accidents.

2.3.2. To Use the Dummy Subject “It”

Example (6)

Source Text: 作为最大发展中国家, 在巨大冲击下能够保持就业大局稳定, 尤为难能可贵。

Target Text: It is truly remarkable that China, the largest developing country in the world, has kept overall employment stable in the face of such an enormous shock.

Analysis: In the source text, the given context “作为最大发展中国家”(the largest developing country) implies that the subject is “中国”(China). With “China” added as the subject, the source text could be translated into “That China, the largest developing country in the world, has kept overall employment stable in the face of such an enormous shock is truly remarkable.” However, this translation text with a lengthy subject clause is a front-weight sentence, more often than not unseen in English in that English is usually an end-weight language. In the target text, a dummy subject “it” is

used to replace the lengthy subject and the long subject in the source text is translated into a subject clause with the comment “truly remarkable” placed in the front of the sentence. The important information is often put front in English sentences and put back in Chinese ones. Therefore, the target text is a desirable translation for it is in line with the common position of the important information, which in this text is “truly remarkable”.

2.3.3. To Use the Sentence Pattern of “There be ...”

Example (7)

Source Text: 国内疫情防控仍有薄弱环节。

Target Text: Domestically, there are still weak links in our work to control Covid-19.

Example (8)

Source Text: 机遇和挑战都有新的发展变化

Target Text: There are changes in both the opportunities and challenges we face.

Analysis: In the source text of Example (7), it is a topic-comment sentence so “国内疫情防控”(in the domestic work to control Covid-19) can not function as a subject but an adverbial phrase, making it a null-subject sentence. The source text is a “有字句”(a sentence pattern expressing there is something in somewhere or sometime). In its target text, “There be ...” sentence pattern is used and expresses the same meaning of “有字句”(the Chinese sentence pattern). The same holds true for the Example (8). In Example (8), “机遇和挑战” is translated into an adverbial phrase “in both opportunities and challenges we face” for the source text is also a topic-comment sentence and “机遇和挑战” is not the subject. In the C-E translation of null-subject sentences, which express there is something in somewhere, know as “有字句” in Chinese, “There be ...” sentence pattern can be used, especially when it is difficult to define the subject according to the given context, which helps translators and interpreters avoid choosing incorrect subjects and causing the incoherence of the subject in the context.

2.4. To Use the Imperative Sentence

Peter Newmark (1988) proposed that according to the language functions, texts can be classified into three types: informative text, expressive text, and vocative text. In line with its language functions, Report on the Work of the Government is a mixed text, with some paragraphs (usually at its ending part) exerting the function of vocative text. When it comes to the translation of vocative text, priority should be given to put readers and listeners first and recreate the vocative function of the source text. In English, the imperative sentence is a sentence pattern that expresses a command or request to do or not to do something, usually with “you” as the “hidden subject”. In Chinese, the null-subject sentences can also used to call for actions and emotional resonance. Therefore, when the null-subject sentences function as vocative text, it is acceptable to use the imperative sentence in the C-E translation as both sentence structures deliver the same meaning and function, and share in common the sentence structure with “predicates” put front. Examples and analysis are as follows:

Example (9)

Source Text: 让我们更加紧密地团结在以习近平总书记为核心的党中央周围。

Target Text: Let us rally more closely around the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core.

Example (10)

Source Text: 为把我国建设成为富强民主文明和谐美丽的社会主义现代化强国、实现中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦不懈奋斗!

Target Text: Let each and every of us keep making tireless efforts to build China into a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful, and fulfill the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation.

Analysis: The source texts of Example (9) and Example (10) are found at the ending part of the report, with both expressing strong vocative function. In the source text of Example (9), “让我们...” is often put in the front of a Chinese sentence to call on people to do something together, which is an equal to the English fixed collocation “let us do something”. So in its target text, this collocation is used to translate “让我们更加紧密地团结...” into “Let us rally more closely ...”, fully expressing the vocative function of the source text. In the source text of Example (10), the core meaning part is delivered by “为...不懈奋斗”(keep making tireless efforts to do ...) and the long part “把我国建设成为富强民主文明和谐美丽的社会主义现代化强国、实现中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦” is the adverbial phrase of purpose. If “the Chinese people” is added as the sentence subject, its translation will be “We should keep making tireless efforts to build China into a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful, and fulfill the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation.” But this translation text fails to convey the vocative function of the source text. In the target text of Example (10), the imperative sentence is used to express both its semantic meaning and vocative function, and few adjustments are made in the C-E translation of null-subject sentences featuring vocative function.

3. Conclusion

As the null-subject sentence is a special sentence pattern in Chinese and often appears in China’s foreign publicity materials, it is of necessity to pay attention to the translation of this sentence pattern for there is no equivalence in English. A research into Report on the Work of the Government (Chinese and English Edition) in 2021 concludes four mainly-used strategies in the C-E translation of null-subject sentences, which include: to add a subject to the sentence, to change the sentence from active voice to passive voice, to change the subject of the sentence, and to use the imperative sentence. In

the translation of null-subject sentences in foreign publicity materials, translators and interpreters can, based on the given context and the features of the source language, apply the strategies above so that a better translation can be achieved, thus better telling China’s stories and promoting international interactions by removing misunderstandings.

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