

A Contrastive Study of Chinese and English Languages Based on Liu Mingjiu's English Translation of *My Uncle Jules*

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Abstract: This paper takes Guy de Maupassant's original text "*My Uncle Jules*" and Liu Mingjiu's English translation as its corpus. Following the four major research principles of contrastive linguistics, it conducts a Chinese-English contrastive analysis across lexical, grammatical and discourse dimensions. At the lexical level, it compares Chinese-English differences in word-formation, semantics and collocations, and distinguishes the features of isolating versus inflectional languages. At the grammatical level, centering on the contrast between parataxis and hypotaxis, it compares subject-predicate structures, word-order patterns and clausal characteristics. At the discourse level, it analyzes cohesive devices, narrative logic and writing styles to identify disparities in coherence and narrative modes between Chinese and English. The study reveals that hierarchical differences between Chinese and English stem from discrepancies in language typology as well as Chinese-Western modes of thinking and culture. Liu Mingjiu's translation conforms to idiomatic English usage, enables smooth shifts between Chinese and English thought patterns, and balances literary aesthetic value with linguistic norms. This research offers illustrative references for literary translation, second-language acquisition and Chinese-English contrastive teaching. It also notes the limitations of single-text-based research and looks ahead to future contrastive studies covering multiple translations and text genres.

Keywords: Contrastive linguistics; *My Uncle Jules*; Liu Mingjiu's English translation; Chinese-English language contrast

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1. Theoretical framework and research design

Contrastive Linguistics is a core discipline that explores the inherent differences between Chinese and English and guides translation practice and language teaching. Multidimensional contrasts at the lexical, syntactic and discourse levels can intuitively reveal the divergence between the underlying logic of Chinese and Western languages and their cultural thinking patterns ^[1]. Guy de Maupassant's *My Uncle Jules*

features a language that blends colloquial daily speech and literary narrative aesthetics, and encompasses diverse linguistic scenarios such as dialogues, psychological depictions, environment descriptions and plot development, making it a high-quality narrative text for bilingual contrastive research. Liu Mingjiu's translation faithfully reproduces the emotions and plots of the original work while strictly complying with modern English expression norms, endowing the corpus with remarkable authority and adaptability.

This paper adopts four research principles of contrastive linguistics: First, the Principle of Synchronic Equivalence. Focusing on modern standard Chinese written narrative language and the language of Liu Mingjiu's modern standard English translation, it delivers a comprehensive comparison across lexical levels, sentence patterns and discourse themes. Second, the Principle of Systematic Hierarchy. Following the progressive research logic from micro-level lexicon, to meso-level grammar, and to macro-level discourse, it constructs a complete bilingual contrastive system ranging from basic linguistic units to the full text, and from static linguistic rules to dynamic usage scenarios. Third, the Principle of Difference Explanation. It not only summarizes the superficial formal differences between Chinese and English, but also unpacks the underlying logic behind these differences by integrating the linguistic essence of inflectional and isolating languages as well as the disparities between Chinese and Western thinking patterns and cultures. Fourth, the Principle of Practical Application. All theoretical contrasts are grounded in the source text. Combined with translation transformation techniques, it summarizes applicable patterns to achieve the in-depth integration of theoretical research and practical application.

2. Contrastive study at the lexical level of Chinese and English

As the basic meaning-making unit of language, the lexicon presents core differences between Chinese and English in four major dimensions: morphological structure, semantic scope, collocation habits and emotional coloring ^[2]. *My Uncle Jules* focuses on the diverse aspects of daily life in an ordinary family. Its lexicon, consisting mainly of colloquial narrative vocabulary, character emotion words and scene descriptive terms, can intuitively reflect the essential differences between the lexical systems of the two languages.

2.1. Comparison of morphological structure

As an isolating language, Chinese is characterized by zero morphological changes as its core trait. All Chinese characters and words have fixed forms. No matter what tense, voice, number or context they are adapted to, the character form and structure of words remain unchanged, and semantic variations are realized entirely through word order, function words and context. As an inflectional language, English boasts a complete system of inflectional changes. Changes in noun number, verb tense and voice, and the gradation of adjectives and adverbs are all realized through fixed morphological alterations. Morphological changes directly carry semantic information, which is the core ideographic feature of English vocabulary ^[3].

(1) Case 1

ST: 我们全家大大小小都盼望这趟旅行。

TT: All the members of our family had been looking forward to this trip.

In Chinese, words such as “全家” (the whole family) and “旅行” (trip) undergo no morphological changes, with no markers for number or tense. In English, the core verb adopts the past perfect continuous tense “had been looking”, which accurately conveys the temporal meaning of “having been looking forward for a long time” through superimposed morphological changes. Meanwhile, the noun “members” realizes plural inflection via the suffix “-s”, conveying the concept of plurality. Chinese does not rely on morphological changes, and only expresses temporal and quantitative meanings through context.

(2) Case 2

ST: 孩子们好奇地望着海边的船只。

TT: The children stared curiously at the ships on the sea.

In Chinese, “孩子” (children) and “船只” (ships) have no plural forms, and their referential number is judged based on common sense and context. In English, “children” is an irregular plural noun, and “ships” is a regular plural noun. Such fixed morphological changes clarify the category of quantity, rendering semantic expression more explicit and precise.

2.2. Comparison of semantic features

Chinese vocabulary features one meaning applicable to multiple contexts and inclusive semantics. A single word can adapt to various scenarios and emotions with blurred semantic boundaries, and its specific meaning is refined by context. In contrast, English vocabulary has fine-grained semantics and clear boundaries. Within the same semantic category, independent words are differentiated according to scenario, degree, emotion and state, with one word corresponding precisely to one context ^[4].

(1) Case 3

ST: 父亲看着海面，神色落寞。

TT: My father gazed at the sea with a lonely look.

ST: 我们惊讶地看着那个穷苦的老人。

TT: We stared at the poor old man in surprise.

ST: 母亲偷偷看了一眼周围的人。

TT: My mother glanced secretly at the people around.

In Chinese, the general word “看” (look) is used uniformly, without distinguishing the duration, expression or emotion of the action. In English, the action is precisely differentiated into “gaze” (a long steady look), “stare” (a direct look of surprise) and “glance” (a quick brief look) according to its characteristics. With clear semantic boundaries and precise contextual collocation, this conforms well to the fine-grained features of English vocabulary.

(2) Case 4

ST: 得知于勒落魄，全家心里难过。

TT: Our family felt distressed at the news of Uncle Jules's poverty.

ST: 父亲为自己的虚荣感到难过。

TT: My father felt regretful for his vanity.

In Chinese, the single word “难过” (sad) covers two different emotions: sympathy for others' hardship and self-remorse. In English, distressed (grief caused by others' difficult situation) and regretful (remorse caused by one's own fault) are precisely distinguished, with a much higher degree of semantic granularity than Chinese.

2.3. Comparison of lexical collocation

Chinese lexical collocation follows the principles of concrete thinking and image adaptation. It is flexible and unconstrained, and combinations can be formed on the basis of sensory cognition and semantic smoothness without rigid fixed paradigms. By contrast, English lexical collocation is conventional, fixed and exclusive. It constitutes a fixed paradigm shaped by long-term language use, where words cannot be randomly replaced or collocation patterns altered arbitrarily ^[5].

(1) Case 5

ST: 海风很大，海水很凉。

TT: The sea wind was strong and the seawater was cold.

In Chinese, collocations such as “风大” and “水凉” follow concrete sensory perception, with straightforward logic and flexible collocation. In English, they are fixed conventional collocations: wind is invariably paired with strong, and water with cold. Expressions like “big wind” or “cool water” are never used, which reflects the rigid rules governing English collocations.

(2) Case 6

ST: 怀着满心的期待，我们踏上了旅途。 TT: We embarked on the journey with full anticipation.

In Chinese, “怀着期待” is an imagery-driven verb-object collocation that aligns with Chinese thinking patterns. In English, embark on the journey with full anticipation is a set collocation in literary texts, representing a language-specific conventional paradigm in English that cannot be arbitrarily adapted.

3. Contrastive Study at the Grammatical Level of Chinese and English

The opposition between hypotaxis and parataxis at the grammatical level is the core and most fundamental grammatical difference between Chinese and English, which runs through all sentence structures in the text. As a paratactic language, Chinese has no mandatory grammatical form constraints. It connects clauses by means of semantics, word order and context, with a flexible and loose structure. As a hypotactic language, English achieves explicit cohesion through conjunctions, prepositions, relative pronouns and grammatical morphology. It features rigorous sentence structure, explicit logic, and a rigid and complete subject-predicate framework^[6].

3.1. Characteristics of sentence structures

The core distinction between parataxis and hypotaxis lies in whether logical relations are realized through explicit grammatical forms.

(1) Case 7

ST: 天色已晚，海风渐冷，我们准备返航。

TT: As the sky grew dark and the sea wind turned cold, we prepared to return.

In Chinese, the three short clauses include no connectives whatsoever. They are naturally connected purely by the semantic logic of “sky, sea wind and action”, with the logical relationship implicitly internalized — a typical paratactic sentence pattern in Chinese. In English, by contrast, the subordinating conjunction *as* and the coordinating conjunction *and* must be added. Through explicit grammatical devices, the temporal and parallel logical relations are externalized, yielding a complete sentence structure and clear logic in strict compliance with English hypotactic rules.

(2) Case 8

ST: 于勒年轻时挥霍家产，远赴海外谋生，多年杳无音信，家人对他又盼又怨。

TT: Having squandered the family property in his youth, Jules went overseas to make a living. He had no news for many years, so his family felt both hopeful and resentful towards him.

Chinese adopts a typical running sentence structure: four short clauses are stacked in parallel without explicit cohesion, with meaning progressing layer by layer and no constraints from grammatical form. English breaks down the lengthy running sentence and restructures it via nonfinite verbs, coordinating

conjunctions and causal conjunctions, converting implicit semantic logic into explicit formal logic — in line with the hypotactic features of English.

3.2. Comparison of subject-predicate structures

English sentences abide by the rigid principle of subject-predicate completeness: every complete sentence must contain the core subject-predicate components, and a formal subject must be added to fill the structure for subjectless clauses. Chinese follows the flexible principle of semantic priority: the subject can be freely omitted according to context, and subjectless and elliptical sentences are normal sentence patterns^[7].

(1) Case 9

ST: 终于等到了归来的船只。

TT: We finally waited for the returning ship.

In Chinese, the subject is omitted while the meaning remains clear. In English, the subject *must be supplied; otherwise*, the sentence would be grammatically incomplete and inconsistent with linguistic norms.

(2) Case 10

ST: (家人) 曾经痛恨于勒的荒唐, (家人) 如今期盼于勒的富贵。

TT: The family once hated Jules' absurdity and now expects his prosperity.

In Chinese, the repeated subject is dropped through anaphoric reference, yielding a concise and flexible expression. In English, the subject must be retained throughout, and subject-predicate agreement is maintained via parallel structure — the subject cannot be arbitrarily omitted.

(3) Case 11

ST: 我们惊讶地发现, 那个乞丐竟是我们的叔叔于勒。

TT: It was surprising for us to find that the beggar was our Uncle Jules.

English uses the formal subject *it*, which bears no actual semantic meaning and exists solely to satisfy the grammatical rule of subject-predicate completeness. Chinese has no notion of a formal subject; it starts directly with the semantic subject, presenting a concise and natural sentence structure.

3.3. Comparison of word order structures

In Chinese, all modifiers are preposed and the core information is postposed; in English, modifiers are flexibly postposed and the core information is preposed.

(1) Case 12

ST: 那个衣衫褴褛、面容憔悴、在海边乞讨的老人, 就是我们日夜期盼的叔叔于勒。

TT: The old man in ragged clothes with a haggard face begging by the seaside was our Uncle Jules, whom we had been looking forward to day and night.

In Chinese, all the modifiers — *in ragged clothes, with a haggard face, begging by the seaside* and *whom we had been looking forward to day and night* — are placed entirely before the nouns they modify. The core subject “the old man” and the core object “Uncle Jules” come after the descriptive elements, with background laid out first and the core meaning revealed last. In English, by contrast, the main clause *The old man was our Uncle Jules* is positioned upfront as the core framework. All attributive modifiers — *in ragged clothes, with a haggard face, begging by the seaside* and *whom we had been looking forward to* — are fully postposed to the nouns they modify. Core information leads and description follows, which perfectly aligns with English word order conventions.

3.4. Comparison of sentence structural forms

Chinese lacks a clause system. Complex semantic meanings are realized through the stacking of short clauses and the juxtaposition of running sentences, featuring a flat sentence structure and a brisk rhythm. English, by contrast, achieves multi-layer semantic embedding via attributive clauses, adverbial clauses, nominal clauses and non-finite structures, presenting a hierarchical, three-dimensional and full-bodied sentence pattern^[8].

(1) Case 13

ST: 我们原本以为发了财的于勒会归来接济全家，改变我们清贫的生活，可眼前的残酷现实彻底击碎了我们所有的幻想。

TT: We originally thought that Jules, who had made a fortune, would come back to support our family and change our poor life, but the cruel reality completely shattered all our fantasies.

In Chinese, the sentence is composed of four independent short clauses in parallel, with a flat structure free of hierarchical embedding. In English, built around the main subject-predicate clause, it embeds an object clause and an attributive clause to achieve multi-layer semantic superposition. The sentence structure boasts clear layers and rigorous logic, fully reflecting the structural advantage of English complex sentences.

4. Contrastive study at the textual level of Chinese and English

A text is a complete semantic unit that extends beyond individual sentences. As a full narrative short story, *My Uncle Jules* features consistent narrative logic, textual structure and cohesion patterns, which can intuitively reflect the macro differences between Chinese and English in terms of textual cohesion, logical coherence, narrative structure and writing paradigms.

4.1. Comparison of textual cohesion

Textual cohesion is the core guarantee of textual coherence. Chinese texts take implicit cohesion as their core feature, with very few cohesive markers employed. Coherence is realized through semantic echo between paragraphs, topic continuity and contextual relevance. English texts, by contrast, center on explicit cohesion. They rely on markers such as conjunctions, reference, substitution, and lexical repetition to string together inter-sentential and inter-paragraph logic, rendering cohesive relations visible^[9].

(1) Case 14

ST: 我小时候，家住勒阿弗尔。家里并不富裕，勉强维持生计。父亲辛苦做工，收入微薄。母亲勤俭持家，日子过得拮据。家里有两个姐姐，婚嫁开支是全家最大的心事。

TT: When I was a child, my family lived in Le Havre. We were not wealthy and could only make ends meet. My father worked hard but earned little money, while my mother managed the household frugally, so we always lived in straitened circumstances. Besides, my two elder sisters' marriage expenses were the biggest worry of our family.

The four sentences in the Chinese paragraph contain no connectives whatsoever. Coherence is naturally sustained throughout by the core topic of “living in poverty”, with all inter-sentential causal and progressive relations rendered entirely implicit, resulting in smooth and spontaneous writing. The English paragraph, by contrast, is furnished with a host of explicit cohesive markers: the temporal conjunction *when*, the coordinating conjunction *and*, the adversative conjunction *but*, the comparative conjunction *while*, the causal conjunction *so* and the additive conjunction *besides*. All inter-sentential logic is explicitly externalized, giving rise to a well-structured paragraph with a clear logical hierarchy.

4.2. Comparison of textual logic

Chinese narrative texts adhere to a foreshadowing-oriented logic. They conventionally progress from the superficial to the in-depth, from scene portrayal to emotional expression, and from background to core meaning, with the central theme articulated only after layers of elaboration. This yields a leisurely pace and a rich aesthetic conception. English narrative texts, by contrast, follow a declarative logic. They lay out the core message and address the main theme right at the outset, and all subsequent content unfolds around this core. This features focused logic and a tight narrative rhythm^[10].

The original Chinese text first depicts the family's poverty, then describes the whole family's anticipation of Jules's return, and lays the groundwork for Jules's past experiences. Finally, it presents the chance encounter with the destitute Jules and reveals the theme, advancing step by step through layers of foreshadowing. The English translation, by contrast, states straight at the outset that "Our family pinned all hopes on Uncle Jules", putting forward the core conflict right away. Subsequent episodes — the family's financial situation, Jules's past and the chance encounter — all serve to corroborate the core argument, featuring focused logic and a theme-first structure.

Chinese holistic figurative thinking emphasizes process and foreshadowing, while Western logical thinking prioritizes core focus. This fundamental difference directly shapes the divergent writing patterns of the two languages at the textual level.

4.3. Comparison of textual structure

My Uncle Jules integrates narrative storytelling with psychological depiction, and the two languages present notable differences in narrative style at the textual level. Chinese texts emphasize the blending of scene and emotion as well as the unity of sense and sensibility, infusing subjective feelings and atmospheric rendering into the narrative. English texts, by contrast, prioritize objective and logical realism. They strip away redundant emotional foreshadowing and center on objective narration and precise description.

(1) Case 15

ST: 海风萧瑟，暮色沉沉。望着那个衣衫破旧、弯腰乞讨的老人，往日所有的期盼、憧憬与虚荣，瞬间化为泡影，心底只剩无尽的悲凉与失望。

TT: The sea wind was bleak and the twilight was deep. Looking at the shabby old beggar bending over to ask for alms, all our past expectations, dreams and vanity vanished instantly, leaving only endless sorrow and disappointment in our hearts.

Chinese employs imagery-charged expressions such as 萧瑟 (bleak), 沉沉 (gloomy) and 化为泡影 (vanish like bubbles) to heighten the desolate mood, merging scene and sentiment with a strong subjective atmosphere. English simplifies the rendering of poetic ambiance and focuses on the realistic portrayal of objective scenery, actions, and psychology. Its language is restrained and precise, which aligns with the objective realism feature of English discourse.

5. Conclusion

Taking Liu Mingjiu's English translation of *My Uncle Jules* as the core research corpus, this paper conducts a theoretical and applied contrastive study of Chinese and English from three dimensions — micro-level lexis, meso-level grammar and macro-level discourse — based on the core principles and research methods of contrastive linguistics. Drawing on a wealth of typical bilingual cases throughout the text, it summarizes the

features of cross-language differences, analyzes the underlying causes of textual characteristics, and sums up practical rules for translation conversion.

The lexical differences between Chinese and English lie in the presence versus absence of morphological changes, precision versus generality of meaning, and rigidity versus flexibility of collocation. The grammatical differences are embodied in explicit hypotaxis versus implicit parataxis, rigid subject-predicate structure versus flexible semantic orientation, and hierarchical embedding versus linear short-clause sequencing. The discourse differences consist of explicit cohesion versus implicit coherence, theme-first presentation versus progressive foreshadowing, and objective realism versus scene-emotion integration. These three layers of differences progress step by step and are interrelated. In essence, they reflect the typological distinctions between inflectional and isolating languages, and more importantly, serve as the linguistic embodiment of the thinking and cultural differences between China and the West.

The strength of Liu Mingjiu's English translation lies in its precise grasp of the multi-dimensional differences between Chinese and English. While remaining faithful to the original narrative style, character emotions and core theme, it fully realizes the conversion from Chinese paratactic thinking to English hypotactic thinking, and from Chinese inclusive semantics to English precise semantics. It avoids translationese and pragmatic errors, and achieves the unity of literariness and normative standardization.

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