

A Study on C-E Translation of Compound Sentences in Listed Companies' Fiscal Statements from the Perspective of Semantic Translation

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Abstract

This paper examines the Chinese-to-English translation of compound sentences in financial statements from the perspective of Semantic Translation, taking a statement published by Alibaba Group, a Chinese internet giant in China, as the example. Financial statements, characterized by their necessity for clarity, accuracy, relevance, completeness, and timeliness, often contain complex sentence structures. Accurate translation of these texts is crucial for maintaining the integrity of financial information. By analyzing Alibaba's financial reports, this study identifies common translation methods employed to handle compound sentences. These methods include maintaining the original sentence structure, modifying sentence structure, and adding or omitting words to achieve clarity and coherence in translation. The study underscores the importance of these strategies in ensuring faithfulness to the original text and complying with the standards of financial reporting. This paper highlights the value of Semantic Translation in financial text translation, as it prioritizes fidelity to the original text while considering cultural nuances and readability in the target language. This approach is essential for producing translations that are both accurate and accessible to international stakeholders.

Keywords

semantic translation, financial statements,

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Since the implementation of Reform and Opening-up policy, the number of multinational companies like Alibaba, Byte Dance and PDD in China has soaring. The Chinese multinationals have incorporated into the international systems of division of labor and cooperation, highlighting the importance of efficient communication. Enterprises, especially multinationals are becoming ever more conscious of the importance of global coordination as a source of competitive advantage, and language remains the ultimate barrier to aspirations of international harmonization (Feely & Harzing, 2003).

For showing the operational and financial conditions to the capital markets and investors, every public companies should display their financial statements at certain frequency to enable their shareholders and investors upgrade their judgments to the companies. A clearly-stated and unambiguous financial statement in any language is obviously important.

Financial statements are formal records of the financial activities and position of a business, person, or other entity (Kettunen, 2017). They are essential for stakeholders such as investors, creditors, and management to make informed decisions. Many analysts also have detected financial risks and predicted stock price movements by analyzing one listed company's financial report (Tsai & Wang, 2017). The financial statements should present a true and fair view of the financial position, performance, and cash flows of the entity. This includes ensuring that the statements comply with applicable accounting standards and regulatory requirements. For all these characteristics, it is common that a financial statement is teemed with compound sentences which are made up of various sentence fragments and are useful in ensuring a report's clarity and unambiguousness. The translation of which is also the key topic of the paper.

To accurately translate long and difficult sentences of financial statements, the author, under the guideline of Semantic Translation proposed by the American translation theorist Newmark, has diligently studied the characteristics of financial statements and compared two official versions of a statement published by Alibaba, finding that the translators are keen to use three translation methods to handle the compound sentences within the text :following the structure of a sentence in the original text, changing the structure of a sentence and omitting or adding words in a sentence. Using these methods can greatly maintain the accuracy, clarity and consistency of a financial statement while translating it into another language.

This paper, under the guideline of Semantic Translation, carefully analyzes characteristics and C-E translation of financial statements and displays different translation methods used in the translation of long sentences by showing examples from Alibaba's financial statement.

1.2 Literature Review

100 years ago, Yan fu, a Chinese translator, proposed his translation theory of Faithfulness, Expressiveness and Elegance, which has long been recognized as "Bible" in the translation field in China. Faithfulness, which is the key in Yan's translation theory, is also the core part of Semantic Translation. Semantic Translation theory, proposed by Peter Newmark, is a translation approach that emphasizes conveying the precise meaning of the source text while maintaining its form as closely as possible. This method focuses on the original context, intent, and nuances of the text, ensuring that the translated version reflects the same level of meaning, cultural connotations, and stylistic elements. He argued that translators should adopt different translation methods for different types of texts, striving to make the translated work produce an effect on the target audience that is as similar as possible to the effect of the original work on its original audience (Newmark, 1988).

Semantic translation pays close attention to the words, phrases, and structures used in the source text. Krishnamoorthy (2018) emphasized that semantic translation refers to using the semantics and syntactic structure of the language to reproduce the contextual meaning of the original text as faithfully as possible. It seeks to reproduce these elements in the target language as accurately as possible. While focusing on meaning, semantic translation also attaches importance to cultural differences and nuances. It aims to convey cultural references in a way that is understandable and relevant to the target audience without distorting the original meaning. Although semantic translation prioritizes fidelity to the original, it also strives for clarity and readability in the target language. The translated text should be understandable and natural sounding to the target audience.

The core thoughts of semantic translation are in line with the characteristics of financial statements which highlights faithfulness and narrowing misunderstanding for readers while reading. That's why the Semantic Translation theory is the most suitable to be as the guideline in the process of translating financial statements which prioritize accuracy, consistency and clarity.

There are various definitions of compound sentences. This study is based on the definition of compound sentences as provided in *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. In this book, a compound sentence consists of a main clause and one or more subordinate clauses (Randolph, 1985). Cheng (2017) defines compound sentences as sentences composed of a main clause and one or more subordinate clauses. The relationships between these clauses include nesting, coordination, and parallelism (Zheng, 2007).

In linguistics, subordination is expressed as an asymmetric relationship, wherein the sentence and its subordinate clauses form a main- subordinate relationship. It is noteworthy that various relationships such as subordination and coordination may exist between the clauses.

There are two reasons considered while choosing Randolph Quirk's definition of compound sentences as the basis for this study. Firstly, Randolph Quirk, who was the Quain Professor of English Language and Literature at University College London and an authority in the field of linguistics, has developed grammatical theories that possess extensive applicability and depth, gaining widespread recognition and application within the academic community. Secondly, Quirk's clear and precise definition of compound sentences helps in accurately selecting and analyzing examples, thereby ensuring the accuracy and effectiveness of the research.

Texts of different genres have their own stylistic features. Alibaba's financial statement, as an informational text, aims to provide clear commercial information to the target audience. Through a literature review, the author found that most scholars, when studying the translation of compound sentences in annual reports, analyze and summarize their characteristics to aid in the analysis of specific translation strategies. For instance, Wu (2010) believes that the logical layers of compound sentences in annual reports are often intricate and complex, thus requiring contextual judgment. Additionally, longer insertions and modifiers add to the difficulty of translation. Zhu (2016) found that compound sentences in translation exhibit the following main characteristics: complex structure, numerous modifiers and frequent insertions. Li (2017) argues that the complex structure and frequent use of modifiers and insertions make handling compound sentences a significant challenge in translation.

Many scholars have proposed their opinions to the definition of compound sentences in a financial statement, but few propose targeted solutions to the difficulties in the translation of such texts. Therefore, with examples from Alibaba's recent financial statement, this paper will recommend some effective translation methods to solve the translation of compound sentences in financial statements.

2 Text characteristics and Translation Method

In this section, the characteristics of financial statements will be discussed, and translation methods used in the course of translating such texts will be summarized.

2.1 Characteristics of Financial statements

Newmark (1988) defined texts as three main categories: expressive functional texts, informative functional texts, and persuasive functional texts. Financial reports focus on conveying information and expressing facts, so they belong to the informative texts. Informative texts focus on transmitting knowledge, describing facts, and therefore use concise, professional, and accurate language, with an objective and formal tone.

Financial statements must be easy to understand, using clear and concise language and format so that users can quickly grasp the financial condition and operating results of the company. The data in financial statements must be truthful and reliable. Companies must strictly adhere to accounting standards and regulations to ensure the accuracy of the information in the reports, avoiding any fabrication or misleading statements. The information in financial statements should be relevant and comparable. The reports should reflect information related to the company's decision-making process and allow for comparisons between different companies or the same company over different periods, enabling users to make informed decisions.

Financial statements should be comprehensive and complete, covering aspects such as the company's assets, liabilities, equity, income, expenses, and cash flows, along with necessary notes and explanations, ensuring that users can fully understand the overall situation of the company.

When it comes to translate the texts, all characteristics should be carefully considered.

2.2 Translation Methods

There are some translation methods which can be used in translating compound sentences to maintain all key information of the original text without losing its accuracy, consistency and clarity.

2.2.1 Remain faithful to the structures of specific sentences

If the expression of compound sentences is basically consistent with Chinese expression in terms of chronological order and logical relationships, or if the narrative style of compound sentences is basically consistent with Chinese, then the author can follow the original expression order for translation (Li, 2019).

Example 1

ST: 我们正对具价格竞争力的商品供应、客户服务、会员体系权益和技术等领域加大战略性投入，旨在提升用户体验，从而提高消费者留存率，并提升购买频次。

TT: We are increasing strategic investment in areas such as price competitive product supplies, customer service, membership program benefits and technology, aiming to enhance user experience, which resulted in improved consumer retention and higher purchase frequency.

Analysis: We can know that all these actions such as **increasing investment** and **improve user experience** are made by one subject that is “we”, and the logic of the sentence is clear: we do these actions to improve user experience and all efforts we have done result in...., So while translating the sentence, the translator remained faithful to the structure of the original sentence and didn’t break a long sentence into two or three short ones, instead, he or she choose to use an attributive clause “which resulted in” to express the logic within the sentence. The translated text remains faithful to the order and logic relationships of the original text making the text understandable for target readers.

Example 2

ST: 净利润为人民币9.19亿元(1.27亿美元)，同比下降 96%或人民币210.77亿元，主要是由于我们所持有的上市公司股权投资按市值计价变动而产生的净亏损，而去年同期则为净收益所致。

TT: Net income was RMB 919 million (US\$127 million), a decrease of 96% or RMB21,077 million year-over-year, primarily attributable to a net loss from our investments in publicly-traded companies during the quarter, compared to a net gain in the same quarter last year, due to the mark-to-market changes.

Analysis: Actually, it is hard to not to break such a long sentence into two shorter sentences while translating. Especially “而去年同期则为净收益所致” (compared to a net gain in the same quarter last year.), it is hard for translators to accurately express the meaning of the part without trying to translate it as a sentence. But the translator of the text used “compared to” to show the logic of the sentence, accurately remaining all information of the text without breaking the structure. The translator also put the reason of causing “net loss” and “net gain”——“market to market changes” in the end of the text to simplify the structure and highlight the logic. Such translation is frequent and natural to English readers while reading.

2.2.2 Change the voice of the sentence

Unlike Chinese, the passive voice is commonly used in English when the agent of the action is either unnecessary to mention or cannot be specified, or when emphasis is placed on the receiver of the action. In contrast, passive voice is less frequent in Chinese, as verbs themselves often carry passive meanings. (Wang & Lu, 2008).

Example 1

ST: 2024 财年，我们已回购125亿美元股份，同时董事会已批准 2024 财年派发股息40亿美元。

TT: During fiscal year 2024, US\$12.5 billion of shares were repurchased by us and US \$ 4 billion dividends have been approved by our board of directors for fiscal year 2024.

Analysis: Using the passive voice emphasizes the subject and results rather than the subject performing the actions can help highlight key financial activities and decisions (e.g., share repurchases and dividend approvals), which are often more important to the readers than the entity performing them, in the context of financial statements. Translating the original active voice into the passive voice in English enhances the emphasis on financial actions and outcomes, maintains a formal and neutral tone, and aligns with standard financial reporting practices. This approach ensures that the critical financial information is presented clearly and professionally to stakeholders.

Example 2

ST: 企业的支出有收益性支出和资本性支出之分, 资本性支出是指企业单位发生的, 其效益涉及于两个或两个以上会计年度的各项支出。

TT: The business spending can be divided into revenue expenditure and capital expenditure which refers to the expenses incurred by an enterprise that provide benefits extending over two or more accounting periods.

Analysis: In English, passive voice is often used to present general statements or classifications more clearly and objectively. By using passive voice, "The business spending can be divided into revenue expenditure and capital expenditure," the sentence focuses on the classification itself rather than the entity performing the action. This emphasizes the classification of expenditures as the key information, making the sentence more precise and straightforward for the reader. Additionally, passive voice is commonly used in definitions and explanations, aligning with the conventions of financial and business writing in English.

2.2.3 Change the structure of a sentence

In English, it is customary to highlight key words or main ideas, often placing important information at the beginning of the sentence and using a linear structure to extend and elaborate on the sentence progressively. In contrast, Chinese sentences typically feature an open beginning and a contracted ending (Lian, 2010).

Example 1

ST: 本季度, 我们的线上GMV及订单量实现同比双位数增长, 由购买人数及购买频次的强劲增长所带动。

TT: Driven by strong increase in the number of purchases and purchase frequency, we achieved double-digit online GMV and order growth year-over-year during this quarter.

Analysis: In English, placing the cause or reason at the beginning of the sentence emphasizes the causal relationship. By starting with "由购买人数即购买频次的强劲增长所带动 (Driven by strong increase in the number of purchases and purchase frequency)" the translation immediately highlights the driving factors behind the growth, making it clear what led to the double-digit growth. This approach aligns with English rhetorical practices, which often prioritize cause-effect clarity. English sentences often adopt a linear progression, starting with the most relevant information and then expanding. By beginning with the cause, the sentence flows logically into the effect, making the overall structure straightforward and easier to follow for English readers. This linearity contrasts with Chinese, where sentences can have more flexible structures with the main idea often introduced later.

Example 2

ST: 通过聚焦用户体验, 国内和国际电商业务的GMV均实现双位数同比增长。

TT: Our China and international commerce businesses realized double-digit year-over-year GMV growth through our focus on the customer experience.

Analysis: The primary message in this context is the double-digit year-over-year GMV growth, which is the key point for the investors and shareholders to pay attention to. Starting with this information highlights the significant achievement upfront. Placing the cause or method at the end of the sentence (in this case, "through our focus on the customer experience") aligns with the natural tendency in English to explain the "how" or "why" after the main statement. This order ensures that the sentence builds logically from the result to the reason, maintaining clarity and coherence.

3. Conclusion

In summary, the paper has explored the intricate process of translating compound sentences in financial statements, specifically focusing on Alibaba's financial statement. The research has been conducted under the guidance of Semantic Translation theory, emphasizing the need for accuracy, clarity, and consistency in financial translations.

To in line with the characteristics of financial statements, three primary translation methods were

highlighted: remaining faithful to the original sentence structure, changing the voice of the sentence, and altering the sentence structure. Each method was demonstrated through examples from Alibaba's financial statements, showing how they effectively handle the complexity and length of compound sentences without losing essential information or clarity.

In conclusion, the study affirms that a nuanced approach to translation, guided by the principles of Semantic Translation, is essential for maintaining the integrity of financial statements. By adopting the identified methods, translators can produce accurate, clear, and reliable translations that effectively communicate the financial realities of companies like Alibaba to a global investors and shareholders. This not only supports better decision-making by stakeholders but also enhances the transparency and credibility of financial reporting across different languages and cultural contexts.

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