

A Comparative Study of Deixis in Chinese and English

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1. Introduction

Deixis are those words in a language that entirely depend on context (Fromkin et. al., 1991). Traditionally, deixis were divided into three categories - referring to people, place and time. By the 1980's, two more categories had been added – discourse and social deixis (Levinson, 1983).

There are many problems encountered when translating deixic terms between English and Chinese. “In some cases there are a greater number of deictic terms in Chinese, for example ‘I’ in English has two possible translations in Chinese; and conversely at other times there are more expressions in English, for example Chinese has no definite and indefinite article, *the* and *a* respectively” (Xiong, 2001).

Xiong (2001), also points out the contrast between the repetition of pronouns in English and their omission in Chinese. Therefore in many English translations, the appropriate deictic terms and articles have to be added. Below is a poem written by the Tang Dynasty poet, Li Bai with a translation by Arthur Cooper:

Chuang qian	ming-yue	guang		<i>Before <u>my</u> bed, there is bright moonlight</i>
Bed	front	bright moon	light	

Ning	shi di	shang	shuang	<i>So that <u>it</u> seems, like frost on <u>the</u> ground</i>
Congealed is	ground on	frost		

Ju	tou	wang	ming	yue	<i>Lifting <u>my</u> head, I watch <u>the</u> bright</i>
Raise head	look	bright moon			<i>moon,</i>

Di	tou	si	gu-xiang	<i>Lowering <u>my</u> head, I dream that I'm</i>
Low	head	thing	home town	<i>home.</i>

In the opinion of Xiong, “the lack of personal pronouns and articles gives the Chinese reader more freedom for interpretation”, however in English these have to be clarified.

In pragmatics, deixis are an important topic and according to Wei (2001), often the “meaning of a deictic term cannot be completely understood by knowing the context alone. Cultural connotations of a particular term also have to be understood”, which will be reflected in this paper. I will analyse the differences in pragmatic usage of place, person and time deixis in English and Chinese, while taking a brief look at the use of time deixis in the context of discourse deixis.

2. Person Deixis

This is divided into *first-*, *second-* and *third-person*, which “are largely consistent in translation between Chinese and English” (Wei, 2002). There are a few notable differences, for example English has subject and object form personal pronouns (Swan, 1995), where as Chinese does not. Below are two sentences adapted from Swan with the equivalent Chinese transliteration:

(1) I like dogs (subject form)
Wo xihuan gou

(2) Dogs like me (object form)
Gou xihuan wo

Sentences (1) and (2) show that that the subject and object form in English are the same in Chinese – the translation of both *I* and *me* is *wo*.

Another difference is the honorific second person *nin* in Chinese, “which is commonly used in formal situations” (Xiong, 2001). In translation to English, due to the lack of a similar honorific term, it is translated as *you*, which is pragmatically acceptable, however loses the semantic value of the honorific.

2.1 First Person

There are two first person deixis in Chinese - *wo* and *zan*. “*Zan* is far more colloquial, and is most commonly used in northern Chinese dialects” (Wei, 2002). Wei also points out that “*Zan* has a specific pragmatic function, and is normally used between friends. Used to show trust, it can therefore reduce social distance between the addresser and the addressee”.

(3) Yao shuo dang jingli, zan ge ye xing.
If say be manager, my brother also ok
“If you need someone to be manager, my brother could do it.”

In sentence (3), *zan* doesn't include the listener as the plural would (see 2.2 below), however it does display a relationship between the addresser and addressee. "The speaker, by using this form of person deixis hopes that the listener will feel complimented and accept his/her opinion, which in this case is that his/her brother would be a good manager" (Wei, 2002).

Zan is also used to express modesty, as in (4):

(4) zan na-r neng he ni bi-a?
I how can with you compare?
"How could I possibly be compared to you?"

"The speaker may believe s/he is actually better than the addressee, however, out of modesty and politeness, this form is used" (Wei, 2002).

In an interesting discussion, Wei (2002) suggests that differences of *Zan* and *I* relate to the tendency of Chinese thought towards "group consciousness", whereas *I* in English represents the importance of "self" and individuality.

2.2 Plural Personal Pronoun – "we"

In modern Chinese, plural personal pronouns are formed by the addition of the bound grammatical morpheme *-men* onto the singular personal pronouns (Li and Thompson, 1981), so there are also two translations for *we* - *women* and *zanmen*. "*Zanmen* is considered more colloquial, however the main difference is that it is inclusive of the speaker and the listener, where as *women* may or may not include the addressee" (Xiong, 2001).

Even though *women* is less colloquial, there are many other instances of different usages:

(5) women tongxuemen xiangyixiang , zenyang zuo
We students think like this do
neng chenggong ma?
Able success Q
"Now think, how could you be successful?"

This sentence is taken from a dialogue between a teacher and a class of students. "The

teacher here uses *women* to only refer to the listeners, in Chinese this shows that the speaker is being passionate and considerate” (Wei, 2002).

Women can also be used to refer to a single person – usually the writer of an article:

(6) zai zhe ben shu Zhong, women litu dadao yixia mudi
at this book in we aim to achieve below target
“In this book I aim to achieve the following targets.”

Wei (2002) believes that this accepted practice is also a result of modesty in Chinese culture, taking the focus away from the individual.

(7) dezui women suan shenme a?
Offend us is what Q
“What does it matter offending someone like me?”

This is taken from Wei (2006) who concludes that “this is clearly only referring to the speaker”. This kind of usage is also common in some English dialects, for example in the midlands where I am from, the sentence “Give us a look” also only refers to the speaker.

“In comparison, *we* in English tends to have less idiomatic usages, its referent is normally quite clear, and may or may not include the addressee” (Wei, 2002). However, an interesting comparison is when *we* is used by the speaker to refer to the addressee as in the sentence below:

6. We should not do that again, Celia.

We is actually used as a second person singular pronoun, and in this case is used by a parent reprimanding a child. In contrast to the usage of *women* in (3), this usually carries a tone of persuasion or dissatisfaction.

3. Time Deixis

“English uses a complex tense system to express time in a given context, whereas in Chinese the concept of time within the grammar is less strict” (Xiong, 2001). In Chinese, aspect markers are used to indicate the state of an action (Li and Thompson, 1981). “Chinese differs from English in the order in which information is presented. In English, important information is made obvious early in a sentence, followed by

supplementary information. In Chinese, background information is put first and the focus of the sentence is reserved until the end” (Yang, 2001). An excellent example of this is the way in which time is expressed:

(7) 1998 nian 5-yue 22 ri xia-wu san dian
1998 Year, may, 22 day, afternoon, three o'clock
“3pm on the 22nd of May, 1998”

Therefore many problems in translating time deixis arise through differences in information flow. And “to Chinese learners of English, grasping the concept of time in English can be especially troublesome” (Yang, 2001). Many time deixis can however be translated directly. For example:

(8) Dao san ge yue yihou
To three [classifier] month after
“After three months”

Chinese and English time deixis do bear some similarities, for example “both languages have time deixis that refer to point and duration of time” (Yang, 2001). Chinese also has direct translations for time adverbials such as *already* and *suddenly*. Many deixis do not translate directly, and Wei (2006) states that the two main techniques for dealing with this kind of problem are either changing the point of reference for the time deictic (see sentence 9) or changing a given time into a duration (see sentence 10). These are best illustrated by the two examples below:

(9) Ta na qi tingtong, jiezhe jiu hanjiao qilai
He pick up receiver, next immediately yell start
“He picked up the receiver, before bursting out shouting”

(10) Jie-bu-tong, ban dian zhong yiqian jie-bu-tong
Connect-[NEG]-though, half an hour before connect-negative-through
“I can’t get through, I haven’t been able to get through for half an hour”

An interesting point is that *jiezhe* plays an important role in the Chinese sentence (9) by clarifying the order of events. However, in English, *before* is semantically less important, but does play a discourse role (see 3.1 below). Based on sentence (9) it is fair to say that time deixis in Chinese plays a more important role in defining the order of events in an utterance due to the lack of a clear tense system that does so.

3.1 Discourse deixis

“Many discourse deixis actually borrow time, place and person deixis, and are used to maintain the continuity of a text or utterance - so called *textual cohesion*” (Chen, 2001). Different languages achieve textual cohesion through the use of different deixis. For example in sentence (11), *it* is used in English to refer to a known subject, where as in Chinese there is no need.

(11) Ba fanqie qiecheng pian, bai zai xiao panzi shang
.. tomato cut slice put at small plate on
“Slice the tomato and place it on a dish”

The example below is taken from Chen (2001):

(12) Now I wander through my garden indecisively, trying to hold on to the last days of late summer.

According to Chen (2001), “the main use of *now* is not as a time deictic (which has been weakened here), but as a discourse tool used to announce the actions of the narrator”. Therefore, in her translation, Chen opted for the “zero translation” technique, whereby *now* is omitted. The back translation is as follows: “I wander in the garden, unable to make up my mind...”. Other time deixis such as *then* are also commonly used as discourse deixis.

4. Place deixis

Place and time deixis are similar concepts - just as time has no beginning or end, nor does space have any limits. According to my research, place deixis are the most extensively studied of all the deixis in Chinese linguistics, and are divided up into several sub-groups. Zheng (2001), based on the research of two famous Chinese linguists, He Ziran, and He Zhaoxiong, divides place deixis into two main types – *pragmatic* and *functional*. The former is then classified into *properties* and *forms*. *Properties*, defines a given term as deictic or non-deictic. *Pragmatic forms* are divided into four sub-groups, which are listed below:

(13) Gestural: “This finger hurts”

(14) Symbolic: “John lives opposite”

(15) Reference: “They broke a Chinese vase. That was careless.”

(16) Conventional: “There it is.”

Functional place deixis are also divided into sub-groups including place adverbials such as *here* and *near*; demonstrative pronouns such as *those* and *these* and directional verbs such as *come* and *go*.

According to Zheng (2001), “non-deictic usages are defined as terms whose deictic centre is not at the speaker, something which only functions as a general reference, or is an idiomatic usage”. Below are examples of non deictic usages:

(17) “People come and go hurriedly for a living” (Deictic centre not at speaker)

(18) “The children are all in the playground” (General reference)

(19) “There, there, there. Don’t cry dear.” (Idiomatic)

In the analysis of Zheng, many prepositional constructions are also non-deictic, additionally the information that Chinese prepositions convey, tends to be less clear than English, which is due to English having many more prepositions than Chinese. For example, the phrase “zai shan shang” could be translated as on / up / over / above the mountain.

In this article, I have decided to limit my study to a comparison of this (*zhe*), that (*na*), here (*zhe*) and there (*nali*). Both languages have the same near and far referring demonstrative pronouns, and do not have terms that denote middle distance as languages such as Turkish do (GL, Lecture 10 notes).

4.1 Here and there.

There in English is also used in existence sentences, whereas in Chinese the verb *you* (to have) is used (Li and Thompson, 1981). Sentence (20) demonstrates this and also compounds how information in Chinese flows from known to unknown (opposite to English):

(20) Hu shang you yi sao chuan
Lake on exist one [classifier] boat
“There is a boat on the lake”

Here and *there* can often be directly translated into their Chinese equivalent, however

in some instances, they do have slightly different connotations. This is illustrated in the sentence below:

(21) “I immediately wheeled my machine to the side and sat down on a style... just sitting there wrapped in contemplation of the vast ocean”

The back translation of the Chinese translation is as follows:

(22) “...now I am sitting here, relaxed and absorbed in my daydream of the endless ocean.”

The translator uses *here* instead of *there* – “a common technique in Chinese literature used to draw the reader in” (Yang, 2001). From this example, we can therefore see that the selection of *here* or *there* in Chinese may not simply depend on actual distance in space or time. “Psychological distance is also an important factor in narration of Chinese stories and indeed within the culture as a whole” (Xiong, 2001). Of course, *there* in English can also have similar connotations, however according to Xiong, this is much more pronounced in Chinese.

4.2 This and That

“In narrations using free indirect speech or thought, *this* and *that* may also be manipulated in a similar way” (Wu, 2003):

(23) “I picked up an apple and took a big bite out of it. ... could this be a make believe apple?”

“By using a near reference place deixis to refer to a past event, in other words by making a deictic readjustment, the narrator takes the reader to that time. This is known as *deictic centre shift* which results in what is known as the *empathy effect*” (Wu, 2003). In his analysis, Wu also states that in this case, the Chinese translation would use the same technique.

There are also significant pragmatic differences between *this* and *that*, and *zhe* and *na*. One difference is a process called “*deictic insertion* in Chinese, which is the use of *zhe* or *na* to express subjectivity” (Wu, 2003). According to the research of Wu, there are four ways in which this can be achieved: 1. In topic-comment constructions, *na* is used to introduce the second clause, thereby topicalising the first clause and clearly connecting them together; 2. In conditional clauses *na* is used to introduce the listener

to the conclusion, which therefore topicalises the condition of the sentence; 3. *na* or *zhe* can be used as an exclamation, expressing the speaker's surprise in a given context; 4. *zhe-ge* or *na-ge* can be added to personal pronouns. For example, “wo zhe-ge ren” glosses as *I, this person*, which would appear to be a repetition. However, “pragmatically it carries a milder tone, while at the same time expressing a certain amount of self satisfaction and certainty” (Wu, 2003).

“In these four types of deictic insertion, *na* and *zhe* are not grammatically required, however, pragmatically they express the speaker's feelings, opinions, or attitude, i.e. subjectivity” (Wu, 2003).

English does not have this mechanism for expressing subjectivity (Wu, 2003). However, it is possible using another technique, as sentence (24) shows:

(24) “Well, that's funny,” he thought. “I wonder what that bang was. I couldn't have made such a noise falling down. And where's my balloon? And what's that small piece of damp rag doing?”
(Winnie the Pooh, p75)

In this excerpt, the *bang* was Winnie's balloon, and the damp rag is the remains of the balloon, which is beside him. The use of *that* expresses alienation and dislike, therefore trying to distance himself from it. Wu (2003) also shows through other excerpts from *Winnie the Pooh*, that *that* can be used to express disappointment and unfamiliarity, all of which are examples of deictic readjustment. Wu (2003) therefore shows this to be a mechanism in English using deixis to express subjectivity.

5. Conclusion

This discussion has shown that Chinese and English deixis do bear some similarities. For example first-, second- and third-person are largely consistent, and there are many direct translations for English time and place deixis in Chinese.

The main differences discussed in this article are the lack of subject and object forms in Chinese personal pronouns, the honorific second person pronoun and the two first-person pronouns in Chinese. Even though there are many time deixis that are functionally equivalent in both Chinese and English, this article has shown that English time deixis, while important, can sometimes be semantically weakened and used as discourse deixis, where as in Chinese time deixis are much more relevant in establishing the sequence of events. The place deixis *this* and *that*, *zhe* and *na* while

largely consistent, have also been shown to be important in expressing the subjectivity of the speaker, via deictic insertion (Chinese) and deictic readjustment (English).

6. References:

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