Translation Strategies for Long Sentences in Public Speech, Using a Chinese Translation of a Public Speech by President Obama as a Case Study

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In written language, English sentences are usually longer than Chinese sentences, while in the spoken language, people tend to prefer using short sentences in both languages. But how should long English sentences from public speeches be translated into spoken Chinese? This article will take some examples from a speech by US President Barack Obama as a case study. Firstly some characteristics of the English and Chinese languages will be compared and then three types of English sentences will be analyzed to see how they can be translated into Chinese.¹ The speech is from the Remarks by the President in State of Union Address delivered by Obama in 2010, which can be found on the official website of the White House.²

Subject-prominent vs. topic-prominent

English sentences are thought to be subject-prominent by some English-Chinese comparative grammarians, which means that in terms of grammar, each sentence is obliged to have its own subject and predicate (or copula), except in some imperative sentences or sentences with particular rhetorical purposes.³ A main clause can be followed by several subordinate clauses, which can make a single English sentence quite long. One way to conceptualize this sentence structure is with a tree model, complete with a trunk and branches. The main clause is the tree’s trunk and the subordinate clauses are the branches. In theory, the ‘tree’ can be infinitely long because the ‘branches’ can grow without limit. By contrast, Chinese is regarded as a topic-prominent language, which means a sentence usually focuses on expressing a topic or a meaning rather than on strict grammatical elements.⁴ Its grammar is much freer. Chinese sentences are short, comparatively speaking, and called ‘run-on sentences’, which means here that two or more independent clauses can be joined together with no explicit conjunction. Some clauses do not even have to have complete grammatical elements and they need to be interpreted through context by readers.

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² When there is Chinese, a gloss, or word-for-word translation will be provided in square brackets including punctuation.
⁵ Zhilong Shao, E-C Translation Studies: A Contrastive Approach (Shanghai: East China University of Science and Technology Press, 2005), p. 87.
Hypotaxis vs. parataxis

Like other European languages, English is a hypotactic language, whereas Chinese sentences are more paratactic. In English it is necessary for grammatical elements to be realized in some form and in a particular order, while Chinese is more flexible (for instance in the wh-movement, which is highly constrained in English but not constrained in Chinese). In English, necessary grammatical elements in one sentence cannot be left out, but Chinese sentences pay attention to implicit coherence of meaning instead of explicit grammatical elements – this is one of the biggest differences between English and Chinese.

Polysyllabic and alphabetic vs. monosyllabic and logographic

English is a polysyllabic language and in written form, it uses Latin script, which is an alphabetic writing system. One word can have several syllables. Each letter can have different phonemes and be pronounced differently in different words. Also, a combination of letters can create one phoneme. The phonemic system in English is quite flexible. So, in reading, English has the phenomena of liaison and omission. Words can be linked when a word ends in a consonant sound and the next word begins with a consonant which is in a similar position. These phenomena can make long English sentences sound smooth and fluent. For instance, the spelling of a sentence might read ‘I just didn’t get the chance’, but the pronunciation will be ‘I jussdidn’t ge(t)the chance’. There is always a difference between writing and speech. In speech we have one continuous stream of sounds, whilst the modern English writing system divides this stream up into units.

Chinese is a monosyllabic language and in its written form, Chinese uses its own characters, which are a logographic writing system. Each Chinese character represents only one syllable, which is a combination of several phonemes. Of course there are many characters which are polyphones (e.g. ‘重’, can be read as zhong or chong, meaning heavy or again), but in a specific context, the character’s phonemes are fixed. Different characters must be written or spoken individually. That is to say, the Chinese phonemic system is rather rigid. So, in reading, each character must be pronounced clearly, which is different to English. As each character carries a number of phonemes and they have already formed a combination, phonemes between different characters cannot easily create relationships. For example, in this verse, ‘床前明月光,疑是地上霜’ (read as chuang qian ming yue guang, yi shi di shang shuang, [Gloss: couch before the moon bright, doubt is ground on frost], meaning ‘Seeing the Moon before my couch so bright, I thought hoar frost had fallen from the night’), the last character of each line, ‘光’ (read as guang, meaning ‘bright’) and ‘霜’ (read as shuang, meaning ‘frost’), have several phonemes in pronunciation.

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7 See the example from <http://www.5minuteenglish.com/nov5.htm> [accessed 09 Oct. 16].
which cannot be separated, or form a liaison with neighbouring characters. They can only be read out as a combination to produce the rhyme (here it is ‘uang’) of this poem.

Considering this, in the process of translating an English speech into Chinese, the translator must pay attention to the differences of language characteristics and reading and pronunciation habits between English and Chinese mentioned above, just as Gideon Toury believes that translation should reconstruct the features of source texts and try to conform to the literary requirements of the recipient culture.\(^8\) It is not only the text of the public speech that should be translated, but it should also be adapted to the reading habits of the Chinese audience. Otherwise, the translation may become tedious or too foreign to Chinese readers, who may give up reading. Wang argues that Chinese translation should try to express the manner of speaking to reach the effect of a public speech.\(^9\)

**Translation of the object clause**

Object clause means that a complete clause is used as the object of a sentence. For instance, the first sentence of Obama’s speech is, ‘Our Constitution declares that from time to time the President shall give to Congress information about the state of our union’. The part after ‘that’ is the object clause. It is quite long and contains a lot of information. If we translate it directly into ‘我国宪法要求总统需要定期向国会提供关于国家状况的相关信息’ [Gloss: Our Constitution declares President shall give from time to time to Congress providing about country state’s information], the translation is tedious, and not well-suited to Chinese reading habits. Considering that Chinese sentences are short and do not necessarily need a conjunction, we can separate the object clause from the main clause and translate them individually. The translation will become, ‘我国宪法规定，总统应该定期向国会通报我国的国情’ [Gloss: Our constitution declares, President should from time to time to the Congress shall give our country’s state information]. Each individual clause concisely expresses its own meaning and the information is well organized for the Chinese reader. The translation is clear and the audience can grasp the speaker’s ideas. More importantly, the clauses conform to the characteristics of Chinese ‘run-on sentences’.

Obama also says, ‘So tonight, I’m proposing that we take $30 billion of the money Wall Street banks have repaid and use it to help community banks give small businesses the credit they need to stay afloat.’ The original sentence is also too long to be translated and must be separated. The main clause ‘I’m proposing’ can be taken out and translated into, ‘我提议’ [Gloss: I propose]. ‘And’ in the object clause is actually used to express the purpose of using this sum of money. So, the object clause can also be separated and ‘用以帮助社区银行’ [Gloss: To help community banks] can express this purpose. In this rather complex sentence, there are also some attributive clauses, the translation strategies of which

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will be analyzed below. Then, the translation will be, ‘因此今晚，我提议，从华尔街偿还的款项中取出 300 亿美元，用以帮助社区银行，让它们给小企业提供贷款，维持企业运营 [Gloss: So tonight, I propose, from Wall Street repaid money taking $30 billion, to help community banks, let them for small businesses give credit, maintain their running].’

It can be found that the conjunction words in the English original text will usually mark a division where sentences are separated in the Chinese translation. By separating the original English sentences in this way, the next two long object clauses can be translated as follows:

Original sentence: (1) I know that some in my own party will argue that we cannot address the deficit or freeze government spending when so many are still hurting.
Translation: 我知道，民主党内会有人说，在这么多人仍在受苦时，我们无法解决财政赤字，或是冻结政府支出 [Gloss: I know, Democratic Party inside someone would say, when so many people are still suffering from hardships, we cannot address the deficit, or freeze government spending].

Original sentence: (2) And if the Republican leadership is going to insist that sixty votes in the Senate are required to do any business at all in this town, then the responsibility to govern is now yours as well.
Translation: 如果共和党领袖坚持认为，要在参议院获得六十席才可以在做事，那么治理国家的责任也是你们的了 [Gloss: If Republican leadership insists saying, requiring in the Senate sixty votes to do any business, then governing the country’s responsibility is also yours].

In brief, the subject is obligatory in English, which will require that it is followed by an object for explanation and the object may be a long clause. However, Chinese does not have this requirement. Translators can make use of this to break up the original sentence to translate and each short Chinese clause can express a topic. The clauses can link with each other in a paratactic way. For instance, in the first example, the short clause ‘Democratic party inside someone would say’ , though not complete in grammar, is clear in meaning and suitable for reading in Chinese.

**Translation of the attributive clause**

An attributive clause modifies the noun or pronoun preceding it. In the speech, Obama says, ‘Our approach would preserve the right of Americans who have insurance to keep their doctor and their plan.’ The object of this sentence, ‘the right of Americans’, is followed by an attributive clause, ‘who have insurance…’, and we can translate it into, ‘我们的措施是使拥有保险的美国人继续享有他们的医生和医保计划 [Gloss: Our approach is let having insurance’s Americans continue enjoying their doctor and medical insurance plan]’. This translation is quite long and will not attract the attention of the audience. Reading closely, we can see that the main clause and the attributive clause have a hypothetical relationship, which means that the main clause is the result of ‘our approach’ and the attributive clause is
the realization of its prerequisite. Considering this, we can translate them individually, but it should be noted that in English, the sentence order is usually that the main clause is followed by the subordinate clause; while Chinese language pays attention to the sequence of events. The condition usually happens before the result, or main clause, so it is customary in Chinese to place the conditional clause in front and the main clause at the back. So, the translation will be: ‘如果美国人有保险继续就医，享有医保计划，我们的做法就是保留他们的权利 [Gloss: If Americans have insurance continuing having doctors, enjoying medical insurance plan, our approach would preserve their right].’

Obama also states, ‘As hard as it may be, as uncomfortable and contentious as the debates may be, it’s time to get serious about fixing the problems that are hampering our growth.’ If we translate the main clause into: ‘我们现在应该认真严肃地处理这些阻碍了我们的进步问题了 [Gloss: We now shall get serious fixing these hampering our growth’s problems].’ the relationship between the predicate (fixing) and the object (问题 [problems]) is loose and the meaning is obscure for readers, as the distance between them, or the attributive before the object ‘这些阻碍了我们的进步 [Gloss: these hampering our growth]’ is too long. A closer look at the sentence reveals a cause-effect relationship between the main and attributive clauses, which makes the sentence rather complicated. It will be easier to understand for target readers if we clarify this relationship. The attributive clause can be translated into an adverbial clause and the translation will become: ‘尽管困难重重，令人忧虑，讨论也极富争议，我们现在应该认真严肃地处理这些问题了，因为它们阻碍了我们的进步 [Gloss: Although hardships, uncomfortable, debates also contentious, we now shall get serious fixing these problems, because they hamper our growth].’

So some long attributive clauses actually function as adverbial clauses and have a logical relationship with the main clause. By separating the attributive clauses from the main clause, adding some additional words to indicate a logical relationship and restructuring the clausal order if necessary, the next two long attributive sentences can be translated as follows:

Original sentences: (1) But what frustrates the American people is a Washington where every day is Election Day.

Translation: 但是，如果华盛顿每天都是选举日，美国民众就会感到沮丧 [Gloss: But, if Washington every day is Election Day, American people will feel frustrated].

(2) I urge the Senate to follow the House and pass a bill that will revitalize our community colleges, which are a career pathway to the children of so many working families.

Translation: 我敦促参议院效仿众议院，通过这一将会为我们的社区大学重新注入活力的法案，因为这些社区大学是众多工薪家庭的孩子通往职场的必经之路 [Gloss: I urge Senate follow the House, pass this will make our community colleges revitalization’s bill, because these community colleges are many working families’ children’s career pathway].

In short, the hypotactic nature of English makes two sentences join together to form an attributive clause. This type of sentence structure has no Chinese equivalent, so it will not be suitable for reading if we translate it directly into Chinese. When we divide them up and add markers for a logical relationship (for example the causal one in the second example) the sentences will be shorter and easier to read in Chinese.

**Translation of sentences using parallelism**

Parallelism in sentences, which is usually regarded as a kind of rhetorical device, uses the same words in different and usually successive sentences to amplify the impact of the message. The repeated, but not monotonous parts can impress the audience deeply. For example, in the history of public speaking, moments featuring parallelism can become classic; for example the repetition of ‘I have a dream’ in the speech delivered by Martin Luther King, Jr and late US President John F. Kennedy’s use of ‘let both sides [...]’.

How then should parallelism be translated? Since Eugene Nida proposed the theory of ‘dynamic equivalence’, which means ‘the quality of a translation in which the message of the original text has been so transported into the receptor language that the response of the receptor is essentially like that of the original receptor’, many people regard unfaithful translation as ‘dynamic equivalence’ and do not care about the language form. This is a misreading of Nida’s work. In fact, Nida wanted to emphasize the effect translation produced; he did not mean to distinguish language form from content. Under some circumstances, the form also matters. For translators, translating not only means translating meaning; translating form is also important. So the rhetorical device of parallelism should also be translated in order to preserve the manner of speaking. If in original English sentences, identical words are repeated to achieve the effect of parallelism, then, in Chinese translations the same characters should be repeated to echo this effect.

President Obama uses ‘talk to’ as an example of parallelism when he says

Talk to the small business in Phoenix that will triple its workforce because of the Recovery Act.
Talk to the window manufacturer in Philadelphia who said he used to be skeptical about the Recovery Act, until he had to add two more work shifts just because of the business it created.
Talk to the single teacher raising two kids who was told by her principal in the last week of school that because of the Recovery Act, she wouldn’t be laid off after all.

We can see that having been elected, President Obama’s words are more pragmatic. In 2009 the U.S. met the worst economic crisis since the 1940s and people cared deeply about the economic condition and its recovery. This part centers on the *Recovery Act*. ‘Talk to’ is repeated to become an example of parallelism.

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Translation Strategies for Long Sentences in Public Speech

To preserve the parallelism, the words ‘和…谈谈吧 (with…talk to, echoing ‘talk to’ in the original)’ are repeated and this section can be translated into:

和菲尼克斯的小企业主谈谈吧，他们会告诉你，由于《复兴法案》，他们的员工将增加两倍。和费城的玻璃制造商谈谈吧，他们过去对《复兴法案》持怀疑态度，但随后他们不得不增加两趟轮班，以应对法案带来的更多的生意。和抚养两个孩子的单身教师谈谈吧，上周，校长告诉她，由于《复兴法案》的出台，她不会被解雇了 [Gloss: With Phoenix’s small business talk to, they would tell you, because of Recovery Act, their workforce will triple. With Philadelphia’s window manufacturer talk to, they used to be sceptical about the Recovery Act, but afterwards they had to add two more work shifts, to deal with this act’s bring more businesses. With raising two kids’ single teacher talk to, last week, the principal told her, because of the Recovery Act, she wouldn’t be laid off].

So, translators need to note structural devices like parallelism in public speeches and pay attention to this kind of language form. The following three extracts can be translated as follows:

Original sentence: (1) We cannot afford another so-called economic ‘expansion’ like the one from last decade – what some call the ‘lost decade’ – where jobs grew more slowly than during any prior expansion; where the income of the average American household declined while the cost of health care and tuition reached record highs; where prosperity was built on a housing bubble and financial speculation.

Translation: 我们不能忍受另一个像过去十年那种所谓的经济“扩张”——有些人称这十年是“失去的十年”——在这些十年中，就业增长比之前任何一次扩张时期都慢；在这些十年中，普通美国家庭收入下降，而医疗成本与学费达到历史新高；在这些十年中，经济繁荣建立在房地产泡沫和金融投机之上 [Gloss: We cannot bear another like past ten year’s so-called economic ‘expansion’ – some people called these ten years’ ‘lost ten years’ – in these ten years, jobs grew than previous any expansion period more slowly; in these ten years, average American household’s income declined, but health cost and tuition reached record highs; in these ten years, economic prosperity built on housing bubble and financial speculation].

Original sentence: (2) Rather than fight the same tired battles that have dominated Washington for decades, it’s time to try something new. Let’s invest in our people without leaving them a mountain of debt. Let’s meet our responsibility to the citizens who sent us here. Let’s try common sense.

Translation: 我们不要再重复过去几十年间在华盛顿盛行的斗争了，这很无聊，我们该尝试些新鲜的东西了。让我们为民众投资，不要让他们负债累累。让我们履行民众派我们到这儿的义务。让我们共同行动 [Gloss: We not again repeat past decades’ in Washington’s battles, these were tired, we should try some new things. Let us for people invest,
not letting them heavy debt. **Let us** meet citizens sent us here’s responsibilities. **Let us** act together].

Original sentence: (3) It lives on in the struggling small business owner who wrote to me of his company: ‘None of us,’ he said, ‘...are willing to consider, even slightly, that we might fail.’ It lives on in the woman who said that even though she and her neighbors have felt the pain of recession: ‘We are strong. We are resilient. We are American.’ It lives on in the 8-year old boy in Louisiana, who just sent me his allowance and asked if I would give it to the people of Haiti. And it lives on in all the Americans who’ve dropped everything to go some place they’ve never been and pull people they’ve never known from rubble, prompting chants of ’U.S.A.! U.S.A.! U.S.A!’ when another life was saved.

Translation: 这种精神让一位举步维艰的小企业主在给我的信中这样写道，“我们从没有人考虑过我们会失败，即使是小小的失败。”这种精神让一位妇女表示，即使她和她的邻居感受到经济衰退的阵痛，但“我们很强壮，我们会振作，我们是美国人。”

这种精神让路易斯安那州一个八岁小孩把他的零用钱寄给我，问我可不可以把钱交给海地人民。这种精神让无数美国人放下一切，来到从未到过的地方，从碎石瓦砾中解救素昧平生的人，当一个生命得到拯救后，他会高喊“美国！美国！美国！

**Gloss:** This spirit let struggling small business owner in giving me’ letter write, ‘we never consider we would fail, even small failures.’ This spirit let a woman say, even though she and her neighbours have felt economic recession’s pain, but ‘we are strong, we are resilient, we are American.’ This spirit let Louisiana’s a 8-year-old boy send his allowance to me, ask me whether can giving money to Haiti people. This spirit let numerous American people drop everything, come to never been place, from rubble pull never known people, when a life saved after, he would chant ‘U.S.A! U.S.A! U.S.A!’].

In brief, parallelism across sentences is a common practice in English and Chinese public speeches. Translations can preserve the forms of parallelism, repeating and echoing the original parts.

**Conclusion**

To summarize, this paper selected, analysed and proposed translation strategies for three kinds of long sentences. This can be regarded as an initial attempt towards a Chinese translation strategy for English public speeches. The principle is that, in reading, each Chinese character must be pronounced clearly. Chinese uses short sentences more often than English. In translating, the translator needs to express the speaking manner of the speaker and echo the original text to conform to Chinese reading habits; otherwise, Chinese readers will probably lose interest in reading. When there is an object clause, translators need to locate the conjunction and consider separating the sentence to translate it. As for an attributive clause, attention can be paid to seeing whether there is logical relationship between main and attributive clause or not. If so, the attributive clause can be translated into an adverbial clause, however, it
is unlikely that all attributive clauses can be treated in this way. Future work might consider other types of attributive clauses. When it comes to parallelism, the language form must be kept in the target texts. These are just a few features of long English sentences in public speech and I’d like to explore more in a future article.
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