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Contrastive Study of Passive Voice of Intransitive Verbs in English and German - based on the Construal Theory

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Abstract- English and German have not only similarities but also differences in many ways. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, either in English or German, the passive voice of intransitive verbs is a special language phenomenon. The Construal Theory of Langacker's cognitive grammar will be used to contrast and analyse the differences and cognitive reasons for the passive voice of intransitive verbs in English and German from different dimensions of construal. The purpose of this analysis and the contrastive outcome is to help trilingual learners comprehensively and profoundly understand the two languages.

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I. Introduction

English and German have many similarities and differences, which makes students draw comparison between German and English. Especially for English and German bilingual learners, because of the impact of language migration they inevitably have confusion when they are learning English and German.

Contrastive learning is an important method of language learning, which studies the synchronicity of two or more languages, and describes their similarities and differences, especially the differences (Xu Yulong 2010: 3). This method is of great benefit to the teaching or the learning of students. The passive sentences in the language have always been valued by grammar scholars. So this paper intends to analyze and explain the differences between the passive voice of intransitive verbs in English and German by means of Langacker's construal theory and the reasons of these differences, which helps the trilingual learners study comprehensively and profoundly.

II. Construal Theory

"Construal" is the relationship between the speaker (or the listener) and the conceptualized and depictive scenario (Langacker 1987: 487-488). The meaning of a language is not just the content of what it triggers, but also how the content is understood (Langacker 2008: 55). Langacker devided the construal into four dimensions: specificity, salience, focus and perspective.

Specificity refers to the level of detail described in the entity (Wu Xiaofang 2011: 58). It is also the degree of descripitive sophistication of the same scene or event, with macroscopic and microscopic description. Salience refers to the fact that the contents highlighted in language expressions are different. Some highlights the process while other highlights the result. Langacker (2008) discusses the salience from two aspects: the profile and the trajector / landmark. Both the trajector and the landmark can distinguish the differences of participants' status in the highlighted relationship of profile. The focus is expressed in the language through a cognitive structure "graphics / background" or "trajector / landmark". From the four specific dimensions of construal, there are different representations in Chinese and English. Langacker (1987) thinks that perspective has two main aspects, namely, viewpoint and focus. Perspective is the different language expressions produced by different observation angles in the process of scene construal. It is hidden in the semantic concept in many cases and is reflected through the semantic concept of expression by an overall analysis. In translation, the translator's understanding of the scene expressed in the original text will vary in degree, prominence and perspective in the process of construal.

III. Research Design

a) Research Question

What are the similarities and differences between passive voices of English and German intransitive verbs from the perspective of four dimensions of Construal Theory?

b) Research Subject

The author choose typical English and German unmarked and marked passive sentences of intransitive verbs from some grammatical books.

c) Research Procedure

In this study qualitative analysis is made. To be specific, in the process of analysis two aspects of passive voices in English and German intransitive verbs will be included, namely, marked and unmarked passive

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sentences. The results from the analysis of unmarked and marked passive voices in English and German intransitive verbs are used to answer the research question.

IV. Findings and Discussions

"Generally speaking, only transitive verbs have passive voices in English and German. However, some intransitive verbs have their own passive voices. The most representative passive voice is the impersonal passive in German (unperpönliches Passiv) and the English phrasal verb-passive"(Li Dongliang 2013: 159). Therefore, two representative languages the impersonal passive voice in German and the English phrasal verb-passive in this part will be analyzed. Then the similarities and differences between passive voices of English and German intransitive verbs from the perspective of four dimensions of Construal Theory will be given.

a) Marked passive sentence

Whether English active sentence or passive sentence has its subject acting as the trajector. There is impersonal passive sentence in German, that is, when the subject of the passive sentence in German is omitted, the whole sentence can exist independently and its' meaning is not affected. Therefore, in this part the marked passive sentence analysis is only for impersonal passive sentence in German.

The impersonal passive sentence in German can have complement with three case ot two case and adverbial and also can be without complement (Duden 2006: 552). E.g:

1. *Hier wird nicht (von den Menschen) gefischt.*
   =Fishing is not allowed here.
2. *An der forschung der Grammatik wird （von den Grammatikern）gearbeitet.*
   =The grammarian commit to the grammar study.
3. *Ihm wurde damals viel (von dem Lehrer) geholfen.*
   =The teacher helped him a lot.

The agentive phrase of the impersonal passive sentence in German is usually omitted, which leads a lower specificity than that of their active sentences.

There is no subject acting as the trajector in the sentence (1). "Hier" is a place adverb and cannot act as a landmark. At this time, the salience of the landmark is significantly improved. The sentence (2) also lacks the subject acting as the trajector. But the three case object "der Forschung der Grammatik" und "der Grammatiker" at this time are regarded as the landmarks.

b) Passive Sentences of English Phrasal Verbs

There are four types of passive phrases in English: verbs with prepositions, verbs with adverbs, verbs with nouns and prepositions, verbs with adverbs and prepositions. E.g:

1. *The power has been given up (by the politician) voluntarily.（Verb with an adverb)*
2. *The children are taken good care of (by the nurse)（Verb with noun and preposition）*
3. *He is depended on (by someone).(Verb with preposition)*
4. *Women were looked down upon (by many people) in the past.（Verb with adverb and preposition）*

First, after the supplement of agentive phrases, which is led by the preposition "by". the meaning of the four sentences is complete. The semantic concept of the English intransitive verbs' passive sentences is consistent with that of their corresponding active sentences, and the specificity is also the same. However, English sometimes omittes the agentive phrases, so the specificity will be changed. It can be seen from the above four sentences that the specificity of semantic concept in the sentence (3) and sentence (4) is lower than that in the sentence (1) and (2), and also the specificity of sentence (3) is higher than that of sentence (4). The specificities of "someone" and "many people" are lower than that of "politician" and "nurse".

The author uses Langacker's construal theory to analyze the passive voices of English intransitive verbs, and hier combines salience with focus to analyze them together. The words "power", "politician" and the relationship-"give up" are the foreground of the semantic concept in the sentence (1); the foreground of sentence(2) includes "children", "nurse" and the relationship——"take care of"; in the sentence(3) the words "he", "someone" and the relationship——"depend on" are placed in the foreground; "women", "many people" and the relationship——"look down upon" of sentence(4) are also the foreground. It can be seen from the perspective of the foreground and background of the selected conceptual content that the four passive sentences and their corresponding active sentence is the same. But the focus of the active sentences and passive sentences is different.

Because all the four sentences have their own trajector, which is the main focus "the power"(1), "the children" (2), "He" (3) and "Women" (4); and also have their own landmark, which is the subordinate focus "politician"(1), "nurse" (2), "someone" (3) and "many people" (4). The semantic concept expressed by the variant of English phrasal verb-passive not only maintains consistency in the foreground and background of the focus dimension, but also presents a process, which weakens the "agent" and strengthens "recipient" and highlights the process of the relationship itself. From the point of view of perspective, the English phrasal verb always has its' subject in the linear structure of passive sentences, and the concept of the relationship is complete.

Only the speaker chooses different viewpoint and focus. It also just reflects the subjectivity of the perspective in the construal theory.

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c) *Unmarked passive sentences in German*

In view of the fact that German impersonal passive voices are special, in order to easily understand, so in this part the author also discusses the unmarked active voices and passive voices.

5. *Der Student schuf die Hausaufgabe. → The student finished the homework.*
6. *Die Hausaufgabe wurde vom Studenten geschaffen.→ The homework was finished by the sudent.*
7. *Die Hausaufgabe wuurde geschaffen.→ The homework was finished.*

Sentence(6) and (7) are the two passive forms of the sentence(5). From the perspective of conceptual representation, the sentences (5) and (6) all relate to the relationship—"schaffen", the participants—"Student" and "Hausaufgabe". The specificities of two sentences are the same. The sentence (7) omittes the participant - "Student", compared to sentence (5) and sentence (6) the specificity of this sentence is much lower. The sentences (6) and (7) use passive voice, so their perspectives are consistent. However, the perspective of sentence (6) and sentence (7) is opposite to that of sentence (5). The sentence (5) is from the perspective of the agent, while the sentence (6) and sentence (7) are from the perspective of the recipient.

From the point of view of the focus, there are two participants "Student" and "Hausaufgabe" and the relationship——"schaffen" in the sentence (5) and sentence (6), so the conceptual content of the foreground is consistent. In the sentence (7), the participant "Student" does not appear in conceptual content of the foreground. From the perspective of trajector/landmark of salience, "Student" is the subject of the sentence (5) and the trajector, which is the main focus in the relationship of profile. And "Hausaufgabe" is the object of the sentence (5) and the landmark, which is the subordinate focus in the relationship of profile. "Hausaufgabe" is the subject in the sentence (6), and "Student" is used as the dativ object in the agentive phrase. At this time, their relations between main and secondary focus (trajector and landmark) are transformed. In the sentence (7) the agentive phrase is directly omitted. "Hausaufgabe" at this time is viewed as a trajector and the only focus in the relationship of profile. Compared with the sentence (6) sentence (7) has a better highlighting effect.

The sentence (5), sentence (6) and (7) are different in specificity, focus, salience and perspective. And they are used in different contexts and serve different communication purposes. Such language phenomenon is in line with the commonality of human's construal.

d) *Marked passive sentences*

i. *Impersonal passive sentence in German*

The impersonal passive sentence in German has not the subject acting as the trajector. The sentence(10) identifies this. The three case object "Ihm" serves as the landmark. The agent subject "Lehrer" is also a landmark, but its salient degree is not as important as the main landmark "Ihm", so then "Lehrer" acts as the secondary landmark. The sentence (10) lacks of subject, so there is no trajector, which is viewed as the main focus.

From the unmarked passive sentences to the marked passive sentences the analysis of passive voices in German shows a process of gradual change, which is changing from weakening the "agent" and strengthening the "recipient" to weakening the "agent" and weakening the "recipient", and even omitting both the "agent" and the "recipient" and only highlighting the relationship itself.

Finally, from the standpoint of perspective dimension in the construal theory, it can be seen that the impersonal passive voice in German, although its' passive voice lacks of subject in the linear structure of sentence, does not affect the understanding of the relationship. But the passive voice of German verbs, which lacks of subject and other components, can indirectly reflect the perspective behind the expression. The form that the impersonal passive voice in German, which is a special grammatical phenomenon, regards the intransitive relationship as the transitive relationship, presents a kind of clear subjective color and shows the perspective of subjectivity.

V. Conclusion

In this paper, the author uses the four analytical dimensions of construal theory in Langacker's cognitive grammar to explore the English phrasal verb-passive and the impersonal passive voice in German. By interpreting the respective characteristics, the following results are obtained: Firslyt, the passive voices of English and German intransitive verbs are presented in the same specificity. Both of them can rovide more forms of content expression to the speaker or user. Secondly, from the perspective of salience and focus, the English phrasal verb-passive voice maintains consistency in the foreground and background of the focus dimension, and in the salience dimension it also presents a form, which weakens the "agent" and strengthens the "recipient". The characteristics of German impersonal passive voice are consistent with that of English phrasal verb in the focus dimension. However, compared with he English phrasal verb-passive, it shows a richer choice in the salience dimension and a gradual salient process, which changes from weakening the "agent" and strengthening the "recipient" to weakening the "agent" and the

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"recipient", and even omitting the "agent" and the "recipient". Finally, the passive voice of English and German intransitive verbs both represent the perspective of subjectivity of speakers or users in the perspective dimension.

The language shows our entire mental activity from the subjective behavior (Borsche 1990: 141). Through the passive voices of English and German intransitive verbs, which are a kind of special linguistic facts in their languages, we can glimpse the unique cognitive patterns of the nations behind these linguistic phenomena. By contrasting the passive voices of English and German intransitive verbs the confusion of the learners who learn English and German at the same time can be eliminated, as they use such passive voices. In addition, it can also enrich the means of the language users' expressions and serve language communication more flexibly and diversely.

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