

ERRORS IN THE TRANSLATION OF TOPIC-COMMENT STRUCTURES OF VIETNAMESE INTO ENGLISH

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Abstract

Previous research on the syntactic typology of Vietnamese has led to two controversial findings. One set of studies has claimed that the language is a subject-prominent language (Ly 1948, Chinh & Le 1973, Ban 1987, Thin 2001). The other set states that the basic structure of Vietnamese manifests a topic-comment relation rather than a subject-predicate relation (Thompson 1965, Dyvik 1984, Hao 1991, Anh 2000). This uncertainty between these two schools of thought has resulted in an undeniable inconsistency in the definitions and classification of different types of Vietnamese sentences among Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese scholars.

With the assumption that Vietnamese is a topic-prominent language, the aim of the study is to investigate to what extent the typological differences between the two languages influence the process of translating authentic Vietnamese sentences into English, through a preliminary report on an error analysis of the Vietnamese-English translations of Vietnamese EFL students. The subjects include 95 students from the first, second, third, and fourth years of the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The data will be the translation texts of about 95 students from the same source text. As a translation error may be attributable not only to a lack of linguistic competence but also to a lack of translation competence and a deficiency in comprehension ability of the source text, the study hopes to build up a taxonomy of specifically translation errors, especially in the field of translation into a second language. Hopefully this taxonomy will open up a possible way to prevent future errors from learners in translating the topic-comment structures of Vietnamese, as well as helping teachers in teaching Vietnamese-English Translation.

This study also suggests some practical guidelines in applying the techniques of error analysis into the teaching of Vietnamese-English translations, especially topic-comment structures of Vietnamese.

Introduction:

Although many studies have been carried out in error analysis and contrastive analysis in second language learning, language teaching and materials development, not much research has been done in the Vietnamese context with Vietnamese university students as informants. To illustrate, in a comprehensive bibliography by Spillner in the field of error analysis (1991), of the 2% (108) of studies focusing on translation out of a total of 5,398, none looked at the syntactic errors in Vietnamese-English translation. This study aims to fill this gap in the field of error analysis, especially errors in Vietnamese-English translation, with the hypothesis that the Vietnamese topic-comment structure

and its empty elements can cause some difficulty in the translation process. It is hoped that the present study will shed light on the most common types of errors by Vietnamese students in translation and that it will have implications for translation pedagogy.

Although these errors cannot be completely considered as translation errors as students do not receive official training in a four-year course specialising in translation, they are errors made during the course of studying translation. Therefore, any problems found from these errors can help the material designers and teachers to choose an appropriate method for their teaching. It is stressed that this study is more to serve the translation and language teaching rather than translation per se and the subjects are also advanced second language learners.

Literature Review

Error Analysis in Translation

Firstly, even excellent translators make mistakes in translations. Secondly, some errors are almost unavoidable given the fact that translators and interpreters inevitably have vocabulary and knowledge gaps. Neubert & Shreve (1995) describe a translation error in the following statement:

What rightly appears to be linguistically equivalent may very frequently qualify as 'translationally' nonequivalent. And this is so because the complex demands on adequacy in translation involve subject factors and transfer conventions that typically run counter to considerations about 'surface' linguistic equivalence (1995:415).

This statement partially describes the complication and difficulty in defining and identifying translation errors. Translation errors are different from errors that would occur in spontaneous native language production. In translation, working with a source text induces errors under the influence of source language morphology, whereas in spontaneous second language production, native morphological system of language learner tends to interfere with knowledge of the second language system. In the case of second language learners, identifying translation errors is tricky as translation errors may be mixed up with linguistic errors.

In the literature of translation training, many studies have been done to find out what types of errors translators/interpreters/student translators often committed in their process of rendering a certain structure from one language into another (Altman 1994, Coskun 1997, Dodds 1999, Gile 1994, Seguinot 1990). These studies are based on the premise that the insight into the act of making error can shed light to the psycholinguistic (mental process) of translators/interpreters/student translators and contribute to the training of translators.

Topic-Comment Structures in Vietnamese

Topic and Comment are the two concepts which have been constructed differently by various linguists. Different definitions on these two terms have existed, under a number of different names and guises: presupposition and focus (Chomsky 1971, Jackendoff 1972), theme and rheme (Firbas 1972) topic and comment (Gundel 1974, 1978) open proposition and focus (Ward 1985 and Prince 1986) and ground and focus (Vallduvi 1990). Despite of the difference in the details of these various descriptions, the concept of topic and comment are in general based on the intuitions that utterances we say are 'about' something (topic) linking up with information the speaker assumes the hearer is

aware of, and that utterances contain information the speaker is presenting as new relative to this topic (comment).

The topic of a sentence is basically what the sentence is about. It always appears at the very beginning of a sentence, referring to something that the speaker assumes the listener would have some knowledge. A topic does not equal to a subject of a sentence in that a subject must always have a direct semantic relationship with the verb as the one that performs the action or exists in the state indicated by the Verb, yet a topic need not. It can be followed optionally by a pause in speech or a comma in writing, showing what is being talked about, apart from the rest of the sentence.

Topic is often defined in terms of its linguistic structures, either syntactic or phonetic. It has been defined in terms of linear order – as the first expression of the sentence (e.g. Halliday, 1967), in grammatical terms – as the subject (Gundel 1974) and in intonational terms – as the non-stressed expression (Chomsky 1971). However, the shortcomings of these definitions lie in their inability to answer the question related to the discourse conditions under which a given expression would count as topic.

In their seminar article ‘Subject and Topic: a New Typology of Language’, Li and Thompson (1976) have set up many criteria to distinguish the difference between the notion of subject and that of topic. The main difference, according to them, lies in the idea that while topic is a discourse-related notion, subject is more integrated into the syntax of the sentence. They also argued that topic should be treated as a basic rather than a derived category. The treatment of topic as one basic category will entail the classification of language into two different types: Subject-prominent language and Topic-prominent language.

Using Li and Thomspson’s (1976) argument as a theoretical standpoint, Hao (1991), a Vietnamese scholar, examines Vietnamese from a functional approach. According to Hao (1991), the way the Vietnamese express themselves is that ‘when uttering a sentence, the speaker produces a topic and says something about that topic or within the range of that topic’ (1991:79). That is to say, when re-organising the reflected reality, thought divides it into two parts by choosing a point of departure for establishing the relationship between these two. He assumes that the part that is chosen as the point of departure functions as topic and the remainder as comment (1991:33-4). In his opinion, the topic-comment structure in the Vietnamese sentence is a phenomenon which belongs to what he refers to as the ‘logico-discursive domain’.

In support of his claim that Topic-Comment is the dominant structure of Vietnamese, Hao provides two reasons. His first reason is derived from the result of the study by Li & Thompson (1976), who claimed that there are four main types of language: (i) languages that are subject-prominent (e.g., Indo-European, Niger-Congo, Fino-Ugric, etc), (ii) languages that are topic-prominent (e.g., Chinese, Lahu, Lisu etc), (iii) languages that are both subject-prominent and topic-prominent (e.g., Japanese, Korean, etc.), and (iv) languages that are neither subject-prominent nor topic-prominent (e.g., Tagalog, Illocano etc.). Hao (ibid.) claims that like Chinese, Vietnamese belongs to category (ii). The second reason comes from his reality of using Vietnamese. According to Hao’s calculations, only 30% of Vietnamese sentences are of Subject-Predicate type while about 70% of them are of Topic-Comment type.

However, this study will not use Hao’s definition of topic-comment for data analysis, mainly because his classification is still ambiguous and not facilitating. The present study will utilise the classification that Rosen (1998) has proved in her PhD thesis. According to her, topic-comment structures and empty elements are basic

constructions in Vietnamese language. There are five types of relations that may exist between a Noun Phrase topic and the comment in Vietnamese.

- (1) The topic may be understood as filling a gap in the comment.
- (2) The topic may be co-referential with a noun phrase or pronoun in the comment.
- (3) The topic may be semantically related to any specific constituent in the comment, its referent is simply what the comment is about.
- (4) The topic may not be related to any constituents, empty or overt, in the comment.
- (5) The topic may be a verb phrase, a clause or an embedded topic-comment construction.

Regarding the empty pronoun, there are four types in Vietnamese:

- (6) Empty pronouns in simple sentences
- (7) Empty pronouns in embedded clauses
- (8) Empty Pronouns in consecutive clauses
- (9) Empty Pronouns with indefinite reference

In the Elicitation Task of this study Sentence 1 has the empty pronoun in embedded clauses as stated in (7). The explanatory sentence at the end of Sentence 1 (inside the bracket), sentence 14, 15, 16 are examples of the empty pronouns in consecutive clauses as stated in (8). Sentence 2 and 13 are the examples of empty pronoun in simple sentences as stated in (6). Sentence 5 is the example of sentence where the topic is semantically related to a specific constituent in the comment, as stated in (3) (the topic is the object of the verb mentioned in the comment). Sentence 6 is the example where the topic is not related to any constituents, empty or overt, in the comment (the topic is the adverb of the comment) as stated in (4). Sentence 7, 8, 9, 10 are elliptical sentences. Sentence 17 consist of two comments, the first comment is an embedded topic-comment structure (leading to the so-called ‘double-subject construction’¹), the NP topic of which is co-referential with the main topic, as stated in (2). The second comment of sentence 17 is also an embedded topic-comment structure, the topic of which is semantically related to the main topic of the sentence, as stated in (3). Sentence 18 also has two comments: the first comment is an embedded topic-comment structure, the second one is an embedded one but there is a gap within this second comment which the main topic of the sentence fills up as stated in (3) [see Appendix A for numbered sentences in the Test and Appendix B for the analysis of topic-comment constructions and empty pronouns of 18 sentences)].

Research Questions

- a. Do Vietnamese students have problems in translating Vietnamese sentence types in which the Topic-Comment structure is more prominent than a Subject-Predicate one? What sort of errors do they make in translating this specific type of structure?

¹ Constructions have the basic form [NP1, [NP2 PREDICATE]]. NP1 has topic-like function with respect to NP2 and both noun phrases have some claim to being subjects.