

A Contrastive Study of English and Chinese Locative Words From the Perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics

Gangni Chen¹ Qiong Jia²

^{1,2} School of Foreign languages, Northwest University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China

¹ Corresponding author. Email: nini@nwu.edu.cn

ABSTRACT

Locative words are words or language expressions that indicate spatial direction or position. From the perspective of systemic functional linguistics, this paper makes a comparative study of the grammatical performance and functions of English and Chinese locative words. It is found that both English and Chinese locative words can be collocated with nouns or noun phrases in terms of grammatical performance, but there are differences in specific ways. As far as language functions are concerned, both English and Chinese locative words have ideational, interpersonal and textual functions. This study has some implications for vocabulary teaching, English-Chinese translation and dictionary compilation.

Keywords: *Locative words in English, Locative words in Chinese, Grammatical forms, Linguistic functions, Systemic and functional linguistics.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Locative words are words or linguistic expressions expressing spatial direction or position, which can be regarded as the basic meanings of locative words. Such words are common in both English and Chinese, but they are not categorized into the same word class in both languages. Most of the locatives in English belong to prepositions, some particles and some adjectives. There are different views on the word class of locative words in Chinese, some holds that locative words are adjectives, some nouns, some adverbs and so on. The attribution of the word class of locational words is related to grammar research, which is not included in this study. This paper focuses on the grammatical performance and functions or meanings of locative words. Although there are many researches on locative words at home and abroad, there are still some shortcomings. First, there is a lack of theoretical framework for semantic refinement which leads to the failure in the deep and systemic analysis of the functions of locative words. Second, the description of the meanings of locative words is based on quite limited number of instances, so it is not

representative. Based on this, this study will take systemic functional linguistics as the theoretical framework and analyze the grammatical performance and the functions of English and Chinese locative words on the basis of corpus, so as to make up for the shortcomings of previous studies. Specifically, the research corpus of this study mainly comes from the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Chinese corpus of Peking University.

2. THE GRAMMATICAL PERFORMANCE OF LOCATIVE WORDS IN BOTH ENGLISH AND CHINESE

In terms of the grammatical form, English Locatives, which typically fall into the category of prepositions, are usually collocated with nouns or noun phrases to form prepositional phrases which can function as place adverbials or time adverbials grammatically in a sentence, as illustrated by the following examples.

(1) The eldest brother was lying under the tree.
(FUB)

(2) I put it back in the box again. (KC1)

(3) The cat is behind the car. (J2K)

(4) If it's raining in the afternoon there will be a table tennis tournament. (AMD)

(5) Come Saturday morning we'd start at six o'clock. (H5G)

(6) Morrissey was worried the same thing would happen again on Sunday. (CH5)

Among the above examples, the first three phrases express the place where the event or thing is located, and the last three phrases denotes the time at which an event or action occurred. This indicates that locative words in the English language can not only represent place, but also time. And the latter meaning is derived from the former. At the same time, taken the perspective of cognitive linguistics, it shows that people rely on the relatively specific thing "space" to understand the abstract thing "time". In the other words, this understanding is motivated by the conceptual metaphor which can be stated as TIME IS SPACE [8].

In English, in addition to collocation with nouns representing place and time, locational prepositions can be collocated with some more abstract nouns which can be illustrated by the following examples:

(7) But the drama of the landscape had been beyond his understanding. (APU)

(8) There was no reason at all why these councils should have been regarded as above criticism. (C9S)

(9) My name is Laurence Woodward, and you will be under my control. (CML)

(10) In my talk with Alec he himself expressed grave doubts whether he wished to take it on. (HRG)

Of the above underlined collocations, the noun groups following the prepositions, his understanding, criticism, my control and my talk, do not deal with things, objects or entity. Instead, they convey an action or event, derived from verbs, although they are nouns both morphologically and syntactically. Within systemic function linguistics, this kind of phenomenon is nominalization [3][5]. Semantically in the first two collocations, the prepositions, beyond and above, means "cannot", therefore, they can be paraphrased as "cannot be understood by him" and "cannot be criticized" respectively. As for the last two collocations, "under my control" means "being controlled by me" and "in my talk" means "when I was talking". What should be worth noting at the same time is

that, all the nouns involved in these four instances are derived from their corresponding verbs, which indicates that ACTIONS ARE THINGS, a metaphorical understanding inherent in human's cognition.

So far, this study mainly focuses on English locative words under the heading of prepositions. Some English locative words belong to particles and they can be combined with a verb to form a phrase verb in which they serve as the subordinate units[6].

(11) It helps the receiver to move up a scale in their involvement level. (HD5)

(12) The three teenagers crouched high amidst the rubbish and looked down on the body of the middle-aged woman. (GW0)

In the above two examples, there are two particles, up and down, which are collocated with two verbs move and look respectively. In spite of their being subordinate to the verbs, they are the inseparable components of the phrasal verbs. Once being removed from the phrasal verbs, the meanings of the original expressions will be changed.

Besides those locatives in the categories of prepositions and particles, there are few locatives which fall into adjectives.

(13) For ten days they hid in the upper room. (HDD)

(14) The result is that the gents can drink, but it's forbidden to the lower classes. (A64)

The above instances shows that the locatives within adjectives can be combined with nouns, as a result of which, there form the nominal groups in which the nouns function as head and the locative as modifier. In this sense, they are subordinate to the nouns in nominal groups in terms of syntax, just like the particle locatives in phrasal verbs, as the latter also enjoys a subordinate status.

In terms of Chinese locative words, they can occur with other word classes to indicate a place or a time, but their grammatical performance, or the way they occur with other word class is different from that of English locative words. To be specific, there are two ways in which a locative word is combined with other word classes in Chinese to express place.

The first way can be represented by the formula "noun group + locative word", as is shown by the following examples:

- (15) 教室里有不规则摆放着的四五个方块。
(16) 木条钉成的课桌下,伸出的是一双双光脚丫。
(17) 天亮了,房子外有脚步和马蹄的声音。

In the above instances, the underlined are the locative words, 里, 下 and 外 respectively with the preceding nouns being 教室, 课桌和房子. If these locative words are taken as prepositions, then they obviously belong to postposition[2] as they appear after the nouns.

The second way is a structure of "在/从 + noun group + locative words" and it is different from the first way in that the structure is headed by a preposition 从 or 在 which is a compulsory element in the whole structure. Here are some examples.

(18) 张忠强让人把那60多面锦旗全部从墙上摘下来,换上"实事求是"4个大字。

(19) 我们在大学的房间就在游泳池旁,我们可以在水里泡很长时间。

If the above underlined prepositions 从 and 在 are removed from the sentence, the sentences may sound odd and can not be accepted. This well proves that in some situations, 从 and 在 are necessary when locative words co-occur with noun groups.

When forming phrases to express time, the way Chinese locative words are combined with other word classes can be represented as "locative words + nouns", such as 上周, 下周, 上一年, 下一年, 上个月, 下个月, 上旬, 下旬, 上一分钟, 下一分钟, 上一秒, 下一秒. However, not all Chinese locative words have this kind of use. Among all Chinese locative words, only 上 and 下 can be used in this way. Meanwhile, the collocation ability of 上 and 下 is also very strong, for they can be collocated with almost all units of time. Behind this collocation, people actually refer to the current or present speech events when they get to know time, and regard the past time as the top and the future time as the bottom, that is, such linguistic expressions are motivated by the conceptual metaphor TIME IS SPACE[9].

At the same time, although 上 and 下 can be collocated with all the time units, there are also differences in the collocations. The two expressions, 月 (month) and 星期 (week), can be taken as examples, they can be directly combined with 上 and 下 to form 上月" and "下周. However, when combined with 年 (year), 分 (minute) and 秒 (second), they need to insert a numeral in the middle to form expressions such as 上一年 (last

year), 上一分钟 (one minute ago), 下一年 (next year) and (next second). It is difficult to accept the lack of numerals between the locative words and the time units.

3. FUNCTIONS OF LOCATIVE WORDS IN BOTH ENGLISH AND CHINESE

Different linguists hold different views on the function of language[12]. According to the viewpoint of systemic functional linguistics, language has three major functions, namely, ideational, interpersonal and textual functions[4][7].

3.1 Ideational Function

Ideational function includes experiential and logical function. The former indicates that language can be used to express various experiences of people in the real world (including the inner world of people). In other words, it reflects what happens in the objective world and the subjective world, the people and things involved, and the time, place and other environmental factors related to it. The latter refers to the expression of logical relationship between two or more meaning units by language [12].

In terms of commonalities, both English and Chinese locative words can express indefiniteness in terms of quantity. The English "over" and Chinese 上 can well illustrate this point. Both of them can express "more than" in quantity, while "under" and 下, which have opposite meanings, can both express "less than" or 少于 in quantity, such as under fifty and 下五十. Each of the locative words can be illustrated by the following examples.

(20) Amaranth, who was over 5 feet 8 inches in height, had her eye on someone taller. (HNK)

(21) 这座房子终蒋之身总共住过六、七次,最长一次也住不上两个月。

(22) How do a young couple like Geoffrey and Elaine Springer, with three children under 10, come to be living in that exclusive locality. (AKU)

(23) 星系的形成机制对星系形成机制的猜测有不下50种解释,但最主要的是星云说和超密说。

When it comes to differences, Chinese locative words can express the closeness and alienation of interpersonal relationships. For example, 外人 does not mean that a person is outside of a certain place, but that he is not in close relationship with a person concerned, or not in a group of people. The

corresponding English locative word "outside" does not have this derivative meaning. Another example is that the locational words 左 and 右 in Chinese can sometime express a person's identity or status, with the former enjoying a higher social status or identity and the latter a lower status. In contrast the English words "left" and "right" have nothing to do with identity.

In addition, both English and Chinese locative words can express tense meaning, which is an important aspect of experiential function. However, there are differences in specific aspects. For example, the location word 上 in Chinese indicates that an event or action has begun, which can be illustrated by instance (24), but it has no such meaning for the corresponding English locative words, such as "above", "on" and "over".

(24) 那是一星期前就做上的了。选肥大些的鸭肝，煮熟，泡盐水里。

What should be noted is that although the English locative word "on" does not mean an action has already started, it is related to tense meaning. To be specific, it means that an action or event is about to occur, that is, "on" in English is related to future tense. The following is such an example.

(25) She is on the verge of tears.[1]

In addition, the English locative word "in" indicates that the event is going on, for example, "she is in the middle conversation with her mother"[1] indicates that she is talking with her mother, and the event is happening or going on, while the corresponding Chinese locative word 在...里 has nothing to do with the temporal meaning of "being in progress".

3.2 *The Interpersonal Function of Locative Words*

Interpersonal function is related to the interaction of language and it emphasizes that language can be used not only to convey information, but also to express the speaker's identity, status, attitude and motivation so as to establish and maintain social relations with others. In this article, for the convenience of describing the interpersonal meanings of locatives in a more specific sense, the appraisal theory is adopted, which is the extension of Halliday's interpersonal function and classifies the interpersonal function into three categories, namely Attitude, Graduation and Engagement. As far as the corpus is concerned, the interpersonal function Chinese and English

locatives can convey mainly deals with attitude and graduation.

Attitude means the speaker or the writer's attitude towards people, object or emotional state[10][11]. In the following two Chinese examples, the Chinese locative 上 occurs with another word 品, which, as a whole, shows the speaker's positive evaluation of the good quality of seaweed. Correspondingly, 下 indicates the speaker's negative evaluation of the bad quality of the translation.

(26) 海带以褐色为上品，黄色稍差。

(27) 译作有上品下品之分，译美有春兰秋菊之殊。

Although the English prepositional locatives "up" and "down" have nothing to do with the speaker's evaluation of objects, the adjective locatives "low" and "high" can do the same. Besides they can demonstrate a person's emotion. The former can be illustrated by (27) and (28), while the latter by (29) and (30).

(28) Goods which are generally of low quality generate low expectations. (J7D)

(29) We're in the business of providing money to deliver high quality services to the people of Wiltshire. (J1G)

(30) During the first visit he was in such low spirits. (B0R)

(31) As they went down, the two married ladies were in high spirits. (APW)

Graduation means language can express the speaker's comments on the different degrees of quality of action. In Chinese the locatives can also convey graduation only when they appear in the reduplicated form of AABB with both of A and B representing an individual locative, but in a relation of antonymy. The following is such an example.

(32) 她敏捷的灰眼睛上上下下打量了我一遍，然后她咧着嘴笑了。

In the above example, the underlined expression 上上下下 contains two locatives 上 and 下 which constitute a pair of antonyms. As a whole, the expression means that "she looked at me up and down with a great care". In the other words, the reduplicated form is to modify the verbal phrase "looked at me" specifying the way in which "she" looked at me. In this sense, the underlined part is related to the writer's evaluation of her action of looking at me, hence it conveys Graduation meaning. In contrast, the corresponding English

words of Chinese 上 and 下, "up" and "down" can not be combined reduplicatedly together as "up up down down".

3.3 Textual Meaning of Locatives in Both Chinese and English

Both English and Chinese Locatives have textual functions, which refer to the way people organize information when using language. It shows the relationship between one piece of information and another, as well as the relationship between the transmission of information and the communicative context in which the speaker is located. In other words, textual meaning refers to the function of language's capacity of organizing the text and making it coherent.

According to the English corpus, the locative words that express the textual function are mainly "above". For example, the linguistic expression "the above has mentioned..." indicates the information mentioned above, while its corresponding antonym "under" does not have this function. When indicating the information mentioned that is going to talk, people are not likely to use "under", but follow. For example, the following paragraph will..., in which following is to express the meaning of "bottom (surface)", Just because under in English is a preposition, it cannot be used as a pre modifier of other nouns in grammar, while above can be used as an adjective. At the same time, in order to show cohesion with the following, the use of following in English shows that the English language users regard inanimate and non actionable texts or texts as a living body with actionability.

Unlike the English locative words "above" and "under", the corresponding Chinese locative words 上 and 下 have textual functions, such as 如上文所述, 上述要求, 下面提及的将会..., 欲知后事, 请看下回 and etc. It can be seen from the above instances both in English and Chinese that a discourse or text is regarded as an entity with a vertical spatial orientation in people's cognition, an understanding shared by both Chinese people and English-speakers. However, it is worth noting that other locative words in English and Chinese have nothing to do with the textual function, such as beside, in, out of, in the front of, behind, "inside", "outside", "beside" and "behind", "里", "外", "旁边", "后面"等.

In a word, both English and Chinese locative words have ideational, interpersonal and textual functions, but there are some differences in specific aspects in expressing these three functions. Our

data statistics show that among all English and Chinese locative words, "above" and "under" in English and 上 and 下 in Chinese, which have opposite meanings, can express the most meanings, that is, they are related to all three meanings, while the other locative words can only express relatively limited meanings.

4. THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study investigated into the similarities and differences between English and Chinese locative in terms of grammatical forms and functions on the basis of corpus. It has some implications for vocabulary teaching, English-Chinese translation and dictionary compilation.

First of all, it has an implication for vocabulary teaching. Traditional vocabulary teaching mainly focuses on the basic meaning expressed by words. When the locative words are taught, their meanings are explained as related to the position and location of an object or a thing which actually is the ideational meaning of locative words. As a matter of fact, the locative words may also express interpersonal and textual meanings besides the ideational meaning, which, however, is often ignored by teachers. Therefore this study on polysemy of locative words can undoubtedly fill the gap in this respect, and make teachers realize that other meanings of locative words are also part of vocabulary teaching, which must be given equal attention in the teaching practice. Meanwhile, this study also makes people realize that attention should be paid to the specific context in which locational words appear, that is, locational words must satisfy the grammatical requirements when they coexist with other linguistic items in both Chinese and English.

Second, it provides some help for English-Chinese translation. In addition to indicating the location and position of entities or objects, locational words, as a word class with polysemy, also convey interpersonal and textual meanings. Therefore, in English-Chinese translation, only when the different meanings contained in the source language are translated into the target language with the same meaning, can the translation be said to be accurate and meet the principle of "faithfulness", one of the three translation principles proposed by Chinese translator Yan Fu with the other two ones being expressiveness and elegance. For example, the Chinese linguistic item 上上下下 in 上上下下打量他

has interpersonal meaning in this case. It is concerned with the speaker's evaluation of his looking at him, which shows that this action is very careful and serious. Only when the translator translates the interpersonal meaning of this evaluation, can it be an accurate and appropriate translation.

Third, it may somehow guide the compilation of dictionaries. In the past when the compilers list the meanings of a word, especially the meanings of locative words, most of them mainly pay attention to the location, direction and position expressed by locatives. This kind of meaning is the basic meaning of locational words, namely ideational meaning. The other meanings, such as interpersonal and textual meanings are actually derived from their basic meanings, hence often termed as derivative meanings. Generally speaking, the basic meanings are specific and the derivative ones are abstract. In the process of compiling dictionaries in the future, the compilers should include the derivative meanings in the meanings of locative words. When it comes to the question of which meaning should be listed first, the compilers are expected to follow the principle of basic meanings preceding the derivative meaning as this conforms to people's cognitive law of from concrete to abstract when acquiring the meanings of words.

5. CONCLUSION

Locative words, as a word class, exist in both English and Chinese. Although English and Chinese locative words belong to different word classes, they have the same basic meaning, that is, to express place and location. Based on the actual data from BNC corpus and Chinese corpus of Peking University, this paper analyzes the grammatical performance and functions of English and Chinese locatives. The results show that, in terms of grammatical performance, locational words in both English and Chinese can be combined with nouns or noun phrases. When they are combined with concrete nouns, they represent spatial places or positions, but when they are combined with abstract nouns, they represent non-positional meanings. In terms of language function, English and Chinese locational words can express ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings, but there are differences in specific aspects. However, due to the limitation of corpus, some specific differences in language functions between English and Chinese locative words have not been further

explained. In the future research, the author will discuss this issue in depth.¹

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Gangni Chen is responsible for writing the manuscript, and Qiong Jia contributed to revising and editing.

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1. In the field of cognitive linguistics, all concepts, metaphors and metonymies are expressed in capital letters, such as IDEAS ARE THINGS, PRODUCTION FOR PRODUCT, which is a written convention. And the article follows this convention.

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