

TREATISE ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE  
TEACHING AND RESEARCH

# 外语教学 与研究论文集

主 编 姜治文  
副主编 陈治安 赵厚宪  
杨绍林 陈于忠

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## 前言

七月流火，山城的七月正值炎热的夏天，骄阳似火，热浪袭人。1997年的7月却是值得大书特书、载入史册的日子。香港回归，重庆直辖，佳音频传，双喜临门。我们外文学会出版了第二部论文集作为献给新重庆的一个小小的彩色花环。还记得我曾在该书的序言中写道：“当21世纪曙光初照时分，我们定会满怀丰收的喜悦，捧出另一部更有份量的新著。”

大江东去，岁月的步履匆匆。1998年8月，又一个炎夏来临，依然是骄阳似火，依然是热浪袭人。现在在我的书案上摆着外文学会的第三部论文集，46篇言之有物的文章，像46束金灿灿的谷穗，沉甸甸的，散发着阳光的气息，洋溢着泥土的芬芳，比我的预期整整提前了一年零六个月。

平心而论，一年一部论文集，不是薄薄的小册子，而是三四十万字的厚厚的大部头，真是谈何容易。这说明一年来重庆外语界同仁在外语教学与研究这片大有希望的田野上默默耕耘，辛勤劳作，取得了崭新的丰硕成果。

这部论文集和她的姊妹篇一样有血有肉，内涵丰富，言之成理，多彩多姿。不同的是除外国文学研究、外国语言研究、外语教学法研究这三个原有的专栏外，还新设了一个栏目：跨文化交际研究。集中遴选的文章，或英或中，或论或叙，有对新的语言理论的学术探讨，有对文学名著创作手法的中肯评价，有来自教学实践的经验总结。真可谓各抒己见，各有侧重，论述清晰，深中肯綮。

综览全书，也略感不足：谈论翻译教学，评说翻译方法的文章

只有一篇，凤毛麟角，硕果仅存，不能不算是一个遗憾。相信这种缺陷在编纂下一部论文集时会得到弥补。

行笔至此，我心中突然萌动着一个强烈的预感：明年岁末，当新世纪的钟声在我们耳边敲响的时候，令人耳目一新的第四卷论文集将会临盆面世，呱呱坠地。让我们张开双臂迎接她的诞生吧！

**杜承南**

1998年8月重大松林村

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## 一、外国语言研究



# **A Comparative Study of Word Order and Semantic Strategies in Sentence Comprehension**

Liao Fei (寮菲)

## **1. Introduction**

An issue that has evoked many discussions concerning sentence-level comprehension is that to what extent syntactic and semantic factors contribute to the comprehension. In this paper, I attempt to explore the issue by assessing the role of word order and semantic strategies that Chinese speakers use in processing Mandarin Chinese at the sentence-level. The subjects in my study are both native Chinese speakers and native English speakers who are, at present, learning Chinese. The sentences are constructed according to the sequence of two nouns and a transitive verb, and are presented in three possible orders of NVN, VNN, and NNV. Nouns are either animate (A) or inanimate (I) referents, and the pairs of nouns are either AA, IA, or AI.

Since the word order in English is believed to be SVO, I assume that native English speakers transfer their knowledge of English word order to the interpretation of Chinese sentences which may be or may not be in SVO order. My aim in this study is of two folds: first, by examining the results of the study, find

out whether or not word order and semantic strategies are actually used in processing Chinese sentences, and second, if they are used, find out to what extent these strategies are made use of by two different kinds of speakers in comprehending the same sentences. Since other variables will be controlled, the difference between the responses of native Chinese speakers and those of native English speakers will be attributed to the degree to which syntactic and semantic factors contribute to sentence-level comprehension of Mandarin Chinese.

## **2. Goal of Study and Hypothesis**

So far, little research has been done into the comprehension strategies among Chinese speakers. Thus, it is still unknown whether or not there is a difference between sentence comprehension strategies used by Chinese speakers and other language speakers, say, English speakers. Therefore, it is my goal in this study to investigate the role of word order and lexical meaning, and examine how these two factors interrelate when Chinese speakers interpret sentences in Mandarin. In order to find out the differences between the processing strategies adopted by two distinctive native speakers, i. e. , Chinese and English speakers in comprehending Mandarin sentences, I include both native Chinese speakers and native English speakers whose second language is Chinese. I shall compare the strategies used by them through examining the results of their interpretation of Mandarin sentences arranged into different word orders. My hypothesis is that native speakers tend to transfer their knowledge of structural sequence in English to

Mandarin sentence comprehension, and rely more on the word order strategies than the Chinese speakers who rely more on the semantic strategies in Mandarin sentence comprehension.

### 3. Method of Study

#### 3.1 Subjects

Eighteen adults participated in the experiment. Nine were native Chinese speakers (five female and four male), and nine native English speakers (three female and six male Americans) who were attending Chinese class at the time.

#### 3.2 Task

Subjects listened to a series of simple utterances composed of two nouns and one verb; no articles, prepositions or other words were introduced. In total, there were 13 words used in the utterances. Among them five were animate nouns, four were inanimate nouns, and four were transitive verbs (Refer to Table 1 for 13 words introduced).

**Table 1 Thirteen Words Used in Test Utterances**

animate Nouns	Inanimate Nouns	Transitive Verbs	
teacher (lao shi)	Mandarin (han yu)	drive	(kai)
student (xue sheng)	recording (lu yin)	read/see	(kan)
man (ren)	book (shu)	learn	(xue)
teddy bear (wan ju xiong)	car (che)	listen	(ting)

The utterances were divided into three types, each reflecting a different word order: Noun—Verb—Noun (NVN), Verb—Noun—Noun (VNN), and Noun—Noun—Verb (NNV). The two nouns in each type were combined in three ways: 1) both animate nouns (AA); 2) one animate noun and one inanimate noun (AI); and 3) one inanimate noun and one animate noun (IA). Thus, nine types of utterances were constructed and their examples are shown in Table 2. The sample English sentences are literally translated from Mandarin.

**Table 2 Nine Utterance Types with Examples**

Type	Example
AVA	xue sheng ting lao shi (Student listen teacher)
AVI	ren kai che (Man drive car)
IVA	lu yin ting wan ju xiong (Recording listen teddy bear)
VAA	ting xue sheng lao shi (Listen student teacher)
VAI	kan xue sheng shu (Read student book)
VIA	ting lu yin wan ju xiong (Listen recording teddy bear)
AAV	lao shi xue sheng xue (Teacher student learn)
AIV	xue sheng han yu xue (Student Mandarin learn)
IAV	shu xue sheng kan (Book student read)

Thirty three utterances were randomly selected from nine types of sentence construction illustrated in Table 2, and the utterances per type were randomly sequenced. The sentences were read to the students in Mandarin with a flat tone at a slower rate than normal without stress. Each sentence was read three times with a pause of about five seconds in between. The subjects were given flash cards with Chinese pinyin on, and were required to show the words on the cards which they interpreted

as the subjects (agents) of the utterances.

### 3.3 Results

First, I examined the responses of both native Chinese speakers and native English speakers, concerning which noun the subjects chose as the agent in the sentence. The results are illustrated as follows:

In NVN sequence, all the subjects chose the first noun as the agent from AVA and AVI types. However, for IVA type, only 26% of Chinese subjects' responses were the first noun chosen as the agent while 67% of American subjects' responses were the first noun chosen as the agent.

In VNN sequence, if the first noun is inanimate (VIA) all the Chinese subjects assigned the agent relation to the second noun while 33% of American subjects' responses were the first noun chosen as the agent. In VAA type there was no clear tendency to assign first or second noun as the agent from either Chinese or American subjects. For VAI type, 16% of the Chinese subjects' responses assigned the first noun as the agent. On the other hand, the responses from the American subjects indicated 83% of the first noun choice.

In NNV sequence, the Chinese subjects showed a strong tendency in choosing the second noun as the agent (84%) in AAV utterances. In contrast, the American subjects showed a strong tendency in choosing the first noun as the agent (83%). As for IVA utterances, only 5% of the Chinese subjects' responses were attributed to the first noun choice whereas 45% of the American subjects' responses showed a preference of the first noun choice. Both Chinese and American subjects chose the



first noun as the agent in AIV utterances. However, Chinese subjects tended to interpret the sentence as Ba-construction without switching the position of the patient, e. g. xue sheng ba lu yin ting.

The percentages of first noun choice in Chinese subjects and American subjects are listed respectively in Table 3 and Table 4 below.

**Table 3 Percentage of First Noun Choice  
in Chinese Subjects**

Type of utterance	NVN	VNN	NNV	Mean
AA1	100%	42%	16%	53%
AI	100%	16%	84%	67%
IA	26%	/	5%	10%
Total	75%	19%	35%	

**Table 4 Percentage of First Noun Choice  
in American Subjects**

Type of utterance	NVN	VNN	NNV	Mean
AA	100%	58%	83%	80%
AI	100%	83%	92%	91%
IA	67%	33%	45%	48%
Total	89%	58%	73%	

By examining the results listed in Table 3, we can see that Chinese subjects chose the first noun as the agent in NVN sequence on the average of 75% of the times; VNN 19% and NNV 35%. This shows that they chose the first noun as the agent more in NVN utterance than VNN or NNV. They interpreted most NVN utterances as Agent-Action-Patient