

The length of English and Chinese multinomials: A constructionist approach

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The term “multinomial” derives from the concept of “binomial”, which was first introduced by Malkiel (1959) as “the sequence of two words pertaining to the same form-class, placed on an identical level of syntactic hierarchy, and ordinarily connected by some kind of lexical link”. When there are three or more elements in the structure, it becomes a ‘multinomial’. Based on the number of the elements, multinomials are further classified into four sub-groups: trinomials (3 elements), quadrimomials (4 elements), quintuplets (5 elements) and lists (6 and more elements) (Sauer & Schwan, 2017). According to the Construction Grammar theory, constructions are defined as a symbolic, conventionalised pairing of form and meaning (Croft 2001; Goldberg 2006; Bybee 2013; etc.). Therefore, as a construction, the form of a multinomial can be summarized as “Element 1 + Element 2 + ... (Connector +) Element N”. The connector is usually a coordinating conjunction such as *and* or *or* and is placed before the last element, if not omitted. In addition, the semantic relationship between the elements is synonymy, antonymy or complementarity. This paper aims at exploring the differences in the use of Chinese and English multinomials, particularly the length of them.

The writer chooses two English translations of a Chinese Buddhist classic *The Lotus Sutra* as the source of data: one by Burton Watson (1993) and the other by Gene Reeves (2008). The reasons they are selected not only lie in the fact that they contain relatively large numbers of multinomials, but also with a source text, it is easier to separate the instances when the translators follow the source text from those when they choose not to, for instance, *biqiu, biqiuni, youposai, youpoyi* (‘monks, nuns, laymen [and] laywomen’) is translated as ‘monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen’ by Reeves, when it becomes two binomials instead of a quadrimomial. Methodology adopted in this paper is a comparative approach based on corpus texts, i.e., the multinomials in the two English translations and their corresponding Chinese texts. More specifically, the writer first compares the frequency of the multinomials in the English and Chinese texts and reaches quantitative conclusions regarding the distributions of the above-mentioned sub-groups of multinomials. The writer then analyses the cases when the form of the multinomial differs from its source text and discusses the features of English multinomials. A qualitative conclusion can finally be reached.

This study reflects the difference in Chinese and English in forming multinomials. Multinomials are more commonly used in Chinese while by English users they are more likely to be broken up into combinations of binomials. Among the sub-groups of multinomials, trinomials are the most frequently used in English and lists the least. The differences in such constructions reflect the different patterns of forming the language, thus the difference in ways of thinking by different language users.

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