

Exploiting the Babel English-Chinese Parallel Corpus for existential constructions

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The study is motivated by Mona Baker's observation that it is almost impossible to find a grammatical category which can be expressed uniformly and regularly across languages. The aim of the present study is twofold: (i) to verify Baker's claim by investigating existential sentences from an English-Chinese contrastive perspective; (ii) to examine the extent to which the two languages differ. The data was taken from the Babel English-Chinese Parallel Corpus which is part-of-speech tagged and aligned at sentence level. Variation in the verbs used in English and Chinese existential clauses is discussed, and patterns of notional subjects (i.e. the noun phrase following the existential verb) and how they are translated are considered. The present study amply confirms Baker's treatment of a grammatical construction cross-linguistically, and shows that the means of expressing the same grammatical construction may vary greatly depending on the particular language, in spite of superficial similarities.

The use of corpus has made it possible to map correspondences between the two languages in great detail. To name but a few, it was found that:

- (i) over 80% of the English existential *be* corresponds to the verb *you* 'have' in Chinese, in support of what traditional grammars have said;
- (ii) place and time adverbials are consistently placed in initial position by the translator while in English originals they typically appear sentence-initially;
- (iii) there is no straightforward correspondence between English and Chinese extended existential clauses with notional subjects postmodified by a relative clause.

The paper also looks into the applicability of Halliday's theme-rheme approach to studying Chinese existentials and proposes that the topic-prominence analysis offers a more cogent account for the findings reported here.