

英语的“抽象”与汉语的“具体”

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英语的名词化往往导致表达的抽象化。G. M. Young 曾指出,“an excessive reliance on the noun at the expense of the verb will, in the end, detach the mind of the writer from the realities of here and now, from when and how and in what mood the thing was done, and insensibly induce a habit of abstraction, generalization and vagueness.”^①英语的抽象表达法(method of abstract diction)主要见于大量使用抽象名词。迷类名词涵义概括,指称笼统,覆盖面广,往往有一种“虚”、“泛”、“暗”、“曲”、“隐”的“魅力”,因而便于用来表达复杂思想和微妙的情绪。如:

1) The signs of the times point to the necessity of the modification of the system of administration. (“Times”) (=It is becoming clear that the administrative system must be modified) 管理体制需要改革,这已越来越清楚了。

2) There seems to have been an absence of attempt at conciliation between rival sects. (“Daily Telegraph”) (=The sects seem never even to have tried mutual conciliation) 对立的派别似乎从来就没有试图去进行和解。

抽象表达法在英语里使用得相当普遍,尤其常用于社会科学论著、官方文章、报刊评论、法律文书、商业信件等文体。这种表达法得以流行,还有以下几个主要原因:

一、抽象思维被认为是一种高级思维(superior mind),是文明人的一种象征(mark of civilized man)^②。随着科学技术的发达和文明社会的进步,原有的感性表达方式已不足以表达复杂的理性概念,因而需要借助于抽象、概括的方法。这正如 H. Jacobi 所说的:“abstract methods of diction were more and more needed as the sphere of ideas to be expressed became narrower and narrower.”^③此外,许多作者为了显耀其思想深奥而故弄玄虚、追随时尚,也嗜好抽象表达法。例如:

1) The absence of intelligence is an indication of satisfactory developments. (=No news is good news) 没有消息即表明有令人满意的进展。

2) Was this the realization of an anticipated liability? (=Did you expect you would have to do this?) 你有没有预料到你必需做这件事?

3) The actual date of the completion of the purchase should coincide with the availability of the new facilities. (=The purchase should not be completed until the new facilities are available) 必须等到有了这些新设备,才能购买这批货。

4) The lack of figures may prove to be an obstacle to the efficiency of the whole of the proposed statistical content of the exercise. (=Lack of figures may make it difficult to produce accurate statistics) 缺乏数据会使准确的统计变得很困难。

二、抽象词语意义模糊,便于掩饰作者含混(cloudy)或真实的思想,以迎合其某种表达的需要,因而也得以流行。E. Gowers 指出,“Unfortunately the very vagueness of abstract words is one of the reasons for their popularity. To express one's thoughts accurately is hard work, and to be precise is sometimes dangerous. We are tempted to prefer the safer obscurity of the abstract. It is the greatest vice of present-day writing.”^④这种不良的文风常常表现在过分使用涵义抽象、内容虚泛、语气庄严的大字眼(pompous words),有时简直到了装腔作势、难以捉摸的地步;试看一个英国人写的有关商业人士如何作出决策的一段文字:

Whereas the micro-economic neo-classical theory of distribution was based on a postulate of rationality suited to their static analysis and institutional assumptions, we are no longer justified in accepting this basis and are set the problem of discovering the value premises suited to the expectational analysis and the institutional nature of modern business. The neo-classical postulate of rationality and the concept of the entrepreneur as the profit maximizing individual, should, I think, be replaced by a sociological analysis of the goals of the firm in relation to its nature as an organization within the socio-political system.

滥用抽象词语在公文里已是司空见惯。加拿大国防部根据某些常用虚泛词语的搭配习惯,发明了一个“公式化套语生成表”,称之为“Russ-phrase Generator”。^⑤

Column 1	Column 2	Column 3
0. integrated	0. management	0. options
1. overall	1. organizational	1. flexibility
2. systematized	2. monitored	2. capability
3. parallel	3. reciprocal	3. mobility
4. functional	4. digital	4. programming
5. responsive	5. logistical	5. concept
6. optimal	6. transitional	6. time-phase
7. synchronized	7. incremental	7. projection
8. compatible	8. third-generation	8. hardware
9. balanced	9. policy	9. contingency

此表的用法很简单:只要从每栏内任取一词,按其顺序便可组成一个公式化的套语,如 405,即 functional management concept。这些套语,外行人听起来以为很重要,但实际上并无多大意义。作者用令人困惑的抽象词语(puzzling abstraction)把所要表达的意思隐蔽起来,读者只能“透过朦胧的玻璃”看出其大概的轮廓。这种模糊的“行话”其实是虚泛的空话,但却在政府、商业或技术等部门里甚为盛行,并成了时髦的术语(vogue terms)。

三、英语有丰富的词义虚化手段,这就大大方便了抽象表达法的使用。这些手段主要有:

1. 用虚化词缀构词。前缀和后缀都可以使词义虚化,其中以后缀数量最多、分布最广。

如:

前缀:

pan-泛;panorama;inter-相互;interplay;micro-微;microcosm;pro-先;prodrome。其他如:

trans-跨, crypt-隐性, circum-绕, contra-相反, intra-内, multi-多, retro-后。

后缀:

-ness 表示性质、状态、程度: oneness, disinterestedness, thoughtfulness, up-to-dateness

-tion 表示动作、状态、结果: agitation, occupation, realization, decoration, examination

-ity 表示性质、状态、程度: calamity, purity, alkalinity, modernity, liberality, formality

-ism 表示主义、学说、信仰、行为、行动、状态、特征、特性、病态: Marxism, atomism, criticism, vandalism, barbarism, colloquialism, alcoholism, fatalism, legalism

-sion 表示行为、状态、性质、结果: confusion, division, conversion, precision, decision

-ence 表示动作、性质、状态: emergence, reference, despondence

-ment 表示行为的结果、手段、工具、过程、状态、程度: entanglement, increment, entertainment, encampment, astonishment

-ance 表示性质、状况、行动、过程、总量、程度: perseverance, vigilance, attendance, conductance

-ship 表示情况、状态、性质、身份、职业、技巧、技能: hardship, friendship, apprenticeship, kingship, marksmanship, leadership

-hood 表示身份、资格、性质、状态: childhood, priesthood, falsehood

-ing 表示动作或动作的过程、结果、产物、对象、与某一事物有关的动作、与某一动作或概念有关的事物等: swimming, engraving, building, accounting, sewing, scaffolding, colouring, offing

英语大量的抽象名词源于拉丁语(Latinate abstracts)。O. Jespersen 指出,“Latin loan-words are extremely numerous and important in the English language. All educated people are well acquainted with those innumerable scientific, technical, and other Latin words which have been adopted during the last five centuries and which have stamped the English vocabulary in so peculiar a way”。④拉丁词(如以-tion, -ty, -ment, -ence 等结尾的名词)音节多,词义泛,在英语里到处可见。以下两例引自美国的一家教育杂志,抽象名词可谓充斥其中:

1) Merely to enumerate these five outstanding characteristics of an urban community, namely, chaotic stimulation, mechanization, impersonalization, commercialization, and complexity of organization, suggests many implications for the city education.

2) For most Americans, irrespective of party affiliation and predisposition, isolationism is defunct and participation and cooperation commonsensed and essential, in international relations.

2. 用介词表达比较虚泛的意义。介词本来就是虚词,在英语里十分活跃。介词可以构成各式各样的短语,其意义有时虚泛得难以捉摸,如:

1) If any mischief was going forward, Peter was sure to be in at it.

只要有什么恶作剧,总免不了有彼得在内。

2) I understand he's in for a job in the company.

我知道他在申请公司的一个职位。

3) When your mother sees your torn trousers, you'll be in for it.

要是你妈妈看到你的裤子撕破了,你准得吃苦头。

4) If there's any profit to be got out of the deal, I'm going to be *in on* it.

如果这次买卖可以赚到钱,我打算参加。

5) Bob *has it in for* George because George told the teacher that Bob cheated in the exam.

因为乔治向老师报告鲍勃考试作弊,鲍勃就对乔治怀恨在心。

一般说来,英语词义内涵比较广泛,词的用法比较灵活,一词多义、一词多用的现象非常普遍,这也有助于表达比较概括、笼统的意义。如 *service* 一词,可以作服务、上菜、服务机构、部门人员、军种、设施、维修、发球、送达、仪式等多种解释;*prower* 一词,可以作能力、体力、动力、权力、势力、电力、强国、有权力的人、有影响的机构等多种解释。

总之,英语有过分使用抽象表达法的倾向。不少文体学家提倡具体与抽象相结合的选词法,即“a mixture of long abstract Latin words with short concrete Anglo-Saxon words”,也就是 Aristotle 早在 2300 年前就主张的“mixed diction”:

The aim of style is to be clear but distinguished. For clarity, we need common, current words; but, used alone, these are commonplace, and as ephemeral as everyday talk. For distinction, we need words not heard every minute, unusual words, large words, foreign words, metaphors; but, used alone, these become bogs, vapors, or at worst, gibberish. What we need is a diction that weds the popular with the dignified, the clear current with the sedgy margins of language and thought.

与英语相比,汉语用词倾向于具体,常常以实的形式表达虚的概念,以具体的形象表达抽象的内容。这主要是因为汉语缺乏象英语那样的词缀虚化手段。汉语没有形态变化,形式相同的词可以是名词,也可以是动词,还可以是形容词或其他词。名词从形式上很难辨别出“具体”或“抽象”。王力曾经指出:

我们所谓名词,和英语所谓 noun,范围广狭稍有不同。我们的名词,就普通说,除了哲学上的名词之外,只能指称具体的东西,而且可以说是五官所能感触的。英文从形容词形成的抽象名词,如 *kindness, wisdom, humility, youth*, 从动词形成的抽象名词,如 *invitation, movement, choice, assistance, arrival discovery* 等,中国字典里可以说是没有一个词和它们相当的。在中国词的形式上,咱们辨别不出抽象名词的特征。它们是和形容词或动词完全同形的。我们在上文声明过,我们不赞成从职务上分别词类,因此我们就不能从“我喜欢他的聪明”一类的句子里,去证明“聪明”是一个抽象名词,也不能从“他费了长时间的选择”一类的句子里,去证明“选择”是一个抽象名词。我们如果从概念上去辨别,中国语里的“聪明”断然是一个形容词,因为它表示一种德性;“选择”断然是一个动词,因为它表示一种行为。……

“政府”,“议会”,“团体”,“政治”,“经济”一类的名词,它们所指称的东西是五官所不能感触的,然而大家都该承认,它们所指称的东西并不因此减少其具体性。它们实际上包含着许多极端具体的东西,咱们不能否认它们也是名词。

剩下来,只有哲学上的名词如“道”“德”“品”“性”等,才是真正抽象的。如果说中国有抽象名词的话,就只有这极少数的几个了。^②

然而,就是“性”、“品”、“化”、“度”、“主义”等这些所谓的抽象词尾也是一种“新兴的记号”,即欧化的结果。例如,“性”译自英语的 *-ty, -ness, -ce* 等(*necessity* 必要性, *correctness* 正

确性、dependence 依赖性),“化”译自英语的 -ization, -tion 等(modernization 现代化, abstraction 抽象化),“度”译自英语的 -th, -ty 等(length 长度, intensity 强度),“主义”译自英语的 -ism, -ness 等(patriotism 爱国主义, slavishness 奴隶主义),“品”则译自英语的某些含义较广的名词,如 commodity 商品, narcotics 毒品, daily necessities 日用品。现代汉语虽然可以从西文中引进这些抽象的记号,但其应用的范围仍然相当有限,如 Americanism 就不能译为“美国主义”,而应译为具体的词,如美国用语、美国发音、美国腔、美国习俗、美国方式、对美国的信仰或效忠等;realization 也不能译为“实现化”,而应译为具体的动词或名词,如实现、认识、认清、了解、体会、领悟、变卖、换取等。因此,严格说来,汉语并没有象英语那样的抽象名词。

由于汉语缺乏象英语那样的虚化手段,因而常常用比较具体的方式来表达抽象的意义。Rudolf Flesch 在 *The Art of Plain Talk* 一书中对汉语用词具体(concrete)、表达清晰(clear)、语言形象(picturesque)大加赞扬,并以此来批评英语那种措辞抽象(abstract)、含义晦涩(obscure)、词句冗长(long-winded)的不良文风。他曾作了如下生动的比较:

Chinese does more to you than just simplify your constructions. It simplifies your ideas. In other languages, the affixes are a splendid means of getting away from reality into vague generalities and abstractions. For instance, in English you have the simple word *sign*, meaning “a mark.” Now you add an affix to that word and you get *signify*, “to make a mark.” Next you add another affix, and you arrive at *significant*, “making a mark.” Now you add a prefix for a change, and you have *insignificant*, “making no mark.” Finally you add another suffix, and you come out with *insignificance*, “the making of no mark.” What did you do? You took a simple noun, and made it successively into a verb, an adjective, another adjective, and again a noun. You have added no meaning but just four empty syllables. Now you can be serious and philosophic and talk about the *insignificance of man*. A Chinese would say something about *Man no mark*. So, while you give in to the temptations of English affixes and fill your talk with masses of empty syllables and words, he keeps his feet on the ground and says everything in the most concrete, specific words. He has to; there are no other words in Chinese.

If you think, however, that Chinese has no way of expressing abstract ideas, you are wrong. Remember, the Chinese were talking and writing about religion and philosophy long before our own civilization started. If they had no exact word for an abstraction, they used the concrete word, or words, that came nearest to the idea. So, naturally, instead of using words like *institutionalization* or *antiprogressivism*, as our thinkers do, they formed the habit of expressing ideas by metaphors, similes, and allegories, in short, by every known device for making a thing plain by comparing it with something else. ⑥

R. Flesch 的这段话确实道出了汉语的一个重要特色:“实”、“明”、“直”、“显”、“形”、“象”的表达法,即措辞具体、涵义明确,叙述直接,常常借助于比喻和形象,因而比较平易、朴实(down-to-earth style)。具体说来,汉语往往采用如下的手段来表达英语的抽象词义:

一、用动词取代抽象名词。英语大量的行为抽象名词(action-nouns)表示行为或动作意义,由这类名词构成的短语往往相当于主谓结构或动宾结构。汉语若用相应的名词表达,往往显得不自然、不通顺。在英汉转换中,汉语可充分利用其动词优势,以动代静,以实代虚。如:

1) I marveled at the relentless *determination* of the rain. (N. Rigg)

雨无情地下个不停,我感到惊异。

2) He had surfaced with less *visibility* in the policy decisions. (B. Barnhart) 在决策过程中,他已经不那么抛头露面了。

3) High blood pressure is a *contraindication* for this drug.

高血压患者忌服此药。

4) The basilica is a *conglomeration* of contrary styles and periods. (C. Lucas)

这座王宫把不同时期的不同建筑风格融为一体。

二、用范畴词使抽象概念具体化。范畴词(category words)用来表示行为、现象、属性等概念所属的范畴,是汉语常用的特指手段。如:

1) He was described as impressed by Deng's *flexibility*. ("Time")

据说他对邓的灵活态度印象很深。

2) What they wanted most was an end of *uncertainties*. ("Betrayed Spring")

那时他们最渴望的就是结束这摇摆不定局面。

3) Both we and the Chinese approached that first opening toward each other with *caution*, *uncertainty*, even *trepidation*. (R. Nixon)

我们和中国人双方都是怀着谨慎、不安甚至是惶恐的心情来相互探讨这初次的接触的。

4) This is the day for our two peoples to rise to the heights of *greatness* which can build a new and a better world. (R. Nixon)

现在该是我们两国人民为缔造一个崭新的、更加美好的世界而攀登这一伟大境界高峰的时候了。

其他例子如: *complexity* 复杂性, *relativity* 相对论, *display* 显示器, *corrosive* 腐蚀剂, *jealousy* 嫉妒心(理), *arrogance* 傲慢态度, *eccentricity* 古怪行为, *lightheartedness* 轻松愉快的心情, *lithonephrotomy* 肾结石切除术, *gravity separation* 重力选矿法, 等等。

三、用具体的词语阐释抽象的词义。英语抽象词的涵义较笼统、概括、虚泛,在汉语里往往找不到对应的词来表达,这时常常要借助具体的词语来解释其抽象的词义,正如 Peter Newmark 所说的: "As a last resort, explanation is the translation." 例如:

1) No country should claim *infallibility*. ("The Sino-U. S. Joint Communiqué")

任何国家都不应自称一贯正确。

2) She wondered whether her *outspokenness* might be a *liability* to Franklin. ("The Glory and the Dream")

她怀疑自己那么心直口快,是否会成为弗兰克林的包袱。

3) On March 1, Nixon internationalized his *approach* to China.

3月1日,尼克松把他对中国问题的看法扩大到国际范围里了。

4) To the Chinese, theirs was not a *civilization*, but the *civilization*. (R. Nixon)

中国人认为他们的文化不是一种普通的文化,而是天下独有的文化。

5) A foretaste of the *seriousness* of *incivility* is suggested by what has been happening in Houston. (F. Trippett)

休斯顿所发生的情况预示:如果不讲文明,将会产生何种严重的后果。

四、用形象性词语使抽象意义具体化(figuration)。汉语虽较缺乏抽象词语,但形象性词语(如比喻、成语、谚语、歇后语等)却相当丰富。汉语常常借助这类生动具体的词语来表达英语抽象笼统的意义。如:

1) He was open now to charges of *wilful blindness*.

这时人们指责他装聋作哑。

2) He waited for her arrival with a *frenzied agitation*.

他等着她来,急得象热锅上的蚂蚁。

3) I talked to him with *brutal frankness*.

我对他讲的话,虽然逆耳,却是忠言。

4) When young he quitted his home and travelled to the metropolis, which he reached in a *state of almost utter destitution*.

年青时代,他背井离乡,徒步来到首都,几乎身无分文。

5) I ask gentleman, sir, what means this *martial array*, if its purpose be not to force us to submission? (P. Henry)

请问诸位先生,摆出这种张牙舞爪的阵势,如果不是为了使我们屈服,还有什么目的呢?

6) All the critical twiddle-twaddle about style and form is *mere impertinence and mostly dull jargon*.

所有这此有关文体和体裁的蠢话,只是些风马牛不相及的胡扯,多半是枯燥无味、玩弄术语的评论。

英译汉时,这种“化虚为实”的方法往往可以通行文、添文采,增加译文的可读性;汉译英时,“化实为虚”的方法则常常可以化症结、消梗滞,提高转换的可译性,如:

1) 他这一阵心头如同十五个吊桶打水,七上八下,老是宁静不下来。(周而复:《上海的早晨》)

His mind was in a turmoil these days and he was quite unable to think straight.

2) 茗烟又嘱咐道:“不可拿进园去,叫人知道了,我就‘吃不了兜着走’了。”(曹雪芹:《红楼梦》)

“Don't take them into the Garden,” Ming-ye warned him. “If they were found I'd be in serious trouble.”

3) 唉,那是客臣的井蛙之见喽,所谓“情人眼里出西施”啦。(郭沫若:《屈原》)

Alas, that was owing to my ignorance, that is what is called partiality.

4) 允跪而言曰:“百姓有倒悬之危,君臣有危卵之急,非汝不能救也。”(罗贯中:《三国演义》)

Wang Yun knelt saying, "The people are *on the brink of destruction*, the prince and his officers are *in jeopardy*, and you, you are the only saviour."

许多形象性词语有很强的民族色彩或特定的文化涵义。这类词语往往难以对应翻译,因而不得不借助于虚化手段,英汉互译都有这种情况。这也正如 H. Sweet 所指出的: "Often in speaking a foreign language we seek in vain for a precise equivalent for some native word or idiom, and find that there is not any definite equivalent, and that we must content ourselves with a vague periphrasis."^⑥不过,这种虚化方法会冲淡甚至丧失原文的形象色彩,使翻译成了一种“令人遗憾的艺术。”

注:

①E. Gowers; *The Complete Plain Words*, p. 79, Penguin Books Ltd, England, 1987.

②O. Jespersen 也认为, "The more advanced a language is, the more developed is its power of expressing abstract or general ideas." 参见 *Language, its Nature, Development and Origin*, p. 429; George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1954.

③O. Jespersen; *The Philosophy of Grammar*, p. 139, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1951.

④同①, p. 78.

⑤同①, p. 89.

⑥O. Jespersen; "The History of English in Relation to Other Subjects" (*Selected Writings of Otto Jespersen*; P. 679, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London), 1908.

⑦王力,《中国语法理论》(《王力文集》第一卷,第21—22页,山东教育出版社,1984年)。

⑧R. Flesch; *The Art of Plain Talk*, pp. 15—16, Harper & Brothers Publishers, New York, 1946.

⑨H. Sweet; *The History of Language*, p. 137, Aldine House, London, 1920.

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“黑桃皇后”无任何标注,还有如“掏槽”这一采矿业专门用语。“热电偶”这一电工类专门用语都没加学科标注。

3)校对欠仔细,有一些印刷错误。如“肯定的”俄文应为 утвердительный,但《词典》中没有了“н”,“幸运的”一词应是 счастливый,《词典》中漏了“т”;“悄悄地”бесшумный 中的“с”错印成了“з”,这是令人遗憾的。

尽管《词典》存在着这些美中不足之处,但其使用价值不可低估,由于它本身的特点——简明、实用,相信定会受到广大俄语工作者,尤其是外经外贸、文化科技翻译人员的欢迎。