

Syntactic Choice in Translation: A Hierarchical Three-Tier Framework for Cross-Linguistic Transfer

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Abstract: Syntax serves as the core mediating structure that connects the source and target texts in translation. The quality of syntactic choice directly determines whether a translation achieves the triple requirements of faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance. This paper systematically examines the internal logic of syntactic choice from three dimensions: the foundational requirement of semantic fidelity, the optimizing strategy of adaptation to the target language, and the ultimate goal of stylistic equivalence. The study proposes a hierarchical three-tier framework and argues that effective syntactic choice requires navigating between the two extremes of mechanical copying and excessive reinterpretation, achieving a three-dimensional balance among source meaning, target-language conventions, and original stylistic character. The ultimate goal is to produce translations that are accurate in meaning, natural in expression, and appropriate in stylistic tone. While the framework is language-pair-independent in principle, it is particularly well-suited to language pairs exhibiting strong typological asymmetry, such as the parataxis-hypotaxis divide that characterizes Chinese-English translation.

Keywords: Syntactic Choice In Translation; Semantic Fidelity; Target-Language Adaptation; Stylistic Equivalence; Hierarchical Framework; Cross-Linguistic Transfer

1. Introduction

Translation is never a word-for-word correspondence but a restructuring of syntactic patterns. Given the same source passage, different syntactic choices can produce target versions that differ dramatically in tone, rhythm, and expressive resonance. In practice, translators commonly fall into two types of error. One is

being overly constrained by the source structure, producing stilted and unnatural "translationese." The other is excessive free interpretation that deviates from the semantic and stylistic boundaries of the original. Drawing on the established findings of contrastive linguistics and translation theory, this paper unpacks the core principles governing syntactic choice and explores how to find the optimal balance between "preserving" and "transforming"—so that the translation remains faithful to the original while conforming to the expressive norms of the target language.

The framework developed here is, in principle, applicable to any language pair. However, its theoretical grounding draws substantially on contrastive studies between typologically distant languages—most notably the well-documented asymmetries between Chinese, a strongly paratactic language, and English, a strongly hypotactic one (Lian, 2001; Liu, 2009). These asymmetries render the stakes of syntactic choice particularly visible and thus provide a productive empirical backdrop against which to develop the three-tier model. The model itself, however, is designed to travel: its categories and evaluative logic can be applied to any translational context in which source and target languages differ in their preferred strategies for packaging information at the sentence level.

2. The Foundational Tier: Semantic Fidelity and Contextual Adaptation

Accurately conveying the conceptual content of the source text is the primary criterion for syntactic choice. Such fidelity does not mean mechanical reproduction of the source form; rather, it involves restructuring sentences appropriately while preserving core meaning, achieving unity between "semantic resemblance" and "spiritual resemblance."

2.1 Avoiding Two Extremes in Syntactic Choice

The most common deviations in translation stem from a one-sided understanding of "fidelity." One tendency is rigid adherence to the source structure, resulting in awkward and opaque syntax. When a long sentence with multiple embedded modifiers is translated into a language that favors short coordinate clauses, mechanically preserving the original modifying logic produces a cumbersome and stilted rendering. By contrast, breaking the long sentence into shorter units and placing the evaluative element in a separate independent clause captures both the meaning and the tone much more effectively, allowing the target reader to experience the same rhetorical thrust as the source reader.

The opposite tendency is excessive syntactic transformation, arbitrarily adding or reordering elements beyond what the source warrants. In narrative passages describing sequential actions, an unnecessarily complex temporal construction may obscure the chronological clarity of the original. A simpler structure that directly presents the temporal order preserves the sequence unambiguously. The lesson is that accuracy remains the soul of translation; all syntactic adjustments must be premised on not deviating from the original meaning.

2.2 From Conveyance to Evocation: Upgrading Syntactic Choice

Semantic fidelity is only the foundation; syntactic choice must also serve the transmission of the original's atmosphere and expressive spirit. A source sentence may use a parallel structure to convey a satirical effect—listing items of increasing personal significance in a grammatically identical pattern. If the translator reduces the parallelism to simple enumeration, the satirical force is lost. Recreating the parallel structure in the target language, using repeated grammatical frames to link the trivial with the profound, preserves not only the literal meaning but also the author's critical stance. This achieves a higher-order fidelity—fidelity to tone and intention rather than to individual words. Similarly, in passages depicting a character's urgent emotional state, the source may employ a vivid inverted structure or a condensed rhythmic pattern that conveys haste and longing. A translation that expands this into a fully grammaticalized, bookish sentence may be semantically complete but emotionally muted. A more economical structure—an inversion, a brief

exclamatory phrase—captures the character's raw immediacy and aligns with the target language's capacity for expressive brevity. Here, "spiritual resemblance" takes precedence over "formal resemblance."

2.3 Dynamic Adjustment Under Contextual Constraints

Syntactic choice must align with the narrative situation, scene, and character identity. In translating dialogue that occurs in a context imbued with social hierarchy or power asymmetry, the dynamics between speakers are encoded not only in lexical choice but also in syntactic patterns. A complete subject-predicate-object structure conveys a neutral, relatively polite tone. A fronted object with an omitted subject, rendered in a clipped and brief syntactic form, conveys abruptness and dismissiveness. Syntax carries social meaning: the choice between a full sentence and an elliptical one, between canonical word order and marked fronting, signals interpersonal distance, authority, and emotional attitude. Contextual appropriateness thus demands that syntactic decisions be calibrated to the specific sociolinguistic setting of the source.

3. The Optimizing Tier: Target-Language Adaptation and Inter-Sentential Cohesion

The naturalness and fluency of a translation depend on whether its syntactic patterns conform to target-language conventions and whether sentences form a coherent logical progression. This is the critical step from "correct" translation to "idiomatic" translation.

3.1 Aligning with Target-Language Syntactic Preferences

Different languages exhibit different syntactic logics. English is hypotaxis-oriented, favoring subordinate clauses and explicit connectives to construct tightly reasoned hierarchies. Languages such as Chinese, by contrast, are parataxis-oriented, favoring short, coordinate clauses arranged in narrative sequence (Lian, 2001). When translating from a hypotactic into a paratactic language, a long sentence with multiple embedded modifiers must be broken into shorter units, each presenting a discrete piece of information, linked by implicit rather than explicit logical markers. Descriptions that in a hypotactic language are packaged into a single noun phrase with appositive and relative

clauses become, in a paratactic language, a series of predicative statements, which not only conforms to target syntactic norms but also enhances readability.

Conversely, when translating from a paratactic language into a hypotactic one, structures that rely on verb serialization or topic-comment organization must be recast into subject-predicate frames with appropriate connective devices. A passive construction in the source may be transformed into an active structure in the target, avoiding awkward passivization and achieving a more natural rhythm. The translator's judgment lies in knowing which structural features of the source are mandatory and which are optional, and in adapting accordingly.

3.2 Managing Coherence in Inter-Sentential Connection

A single sentence may read smoothly in isolation, yet the full text may still lack fluency if the connections between sentences are not properly managed. Syntactic choice must take into account the logical relationships across sentence boundaries. When a source text presents two consecutive sentences—the first describing a state of physical or psychological suspension, the second introducing an imposing external image—the translator must decide how to link them. A literal rendering preserves two separate subjects and two distinct clauses, creating a loose conjunction. An alternative rendering adds a verb of psychological compulsion, transforming the external object from a mere visual image into an inescapable presence. This small syntactic addition creates a logical chain from "state" to "response," enhancing the coherence of the entire passage. The principle is that sentence-level naturalness must be supplemented by discourse-level integration.

4. The Sublimating Tier: Stylistic Equivalence and Cultural Transmission

Faithfully recreating the style of the original is the highest pursuit in translation. Style is not an isolated technique but the holistic manifestation of the author's artistic individuality. It must be achieved through systematic syntactic choices that produce equivalent artistic effects.

4.1 Style as a Systemic Whole

The premise of stylistic recreation is a precise analysis of the original style, not mechanical imitation of its surface form. The translator must

adopt a concept of "effect equivalence": when the stylistic features of the source language cannot be directly transplanted, compensation can be achieved across different linguistic levels—lexical, rhythmic, or syntactic—to restore balance elsewhere (Harvey, 1995). As has often been said in literary translation, the task is not to copy the words of the original but to recreate its vitality.

4.2 Compensatory Strategies Across Levels

Consider a passage with a deliberately poetic quality, in which a key verb is repeated multiple times within a short span to create a hypnotic, dreamlike effect. The source author's repetition is semantically significant—it suggests a state suspended between sleep and wakefulness, between stillness and the barest tremor of life. A direct translation that preserves the exact repetition may, in the target language, read as tedious or monotonous rather than poetic. The translator may therefore abandon mechanical repetition and instead adopt other target-language devices that produce an equivalent aesthetic effect: idiomatic phrases that convey classical elegance, a parallel sequence of short clauses that creates rhythmic balance, and a carefully chosen chain of vivid verbs that moves from static to dynamic. Although the formal device—repetition—is not preserved, the overall poetic mood, the delicate observation, and the philosophical undertone are fully transmitted. This is the essence of compensation: sacrificing a specific formal feature to preserve the broader aesthetic whole.

4.3 The Translator as Stylistic Analyst

Effective stylistic transmission depends on the translator's ability to analyze the source style accurately. This requires distinguishing between stylistically significant features and those that are merely language-specific conventions. The translator must determine what the author is doing with a given syntactic pattern, what effect it is producing on the reader, and whether that effect is achievable through equivalent means in the target language. These questions cannot be answered by formula; they demand literary sensitivity, reading experience, and an understanding of both source and target aesthetic traditions.

5. Pedagogical Implications

The three-tier framework has direct applications

in translation teaching and assessment. Traditional translation exercises often ask students to produce a single "correct" target text, leaving the rationale for syntactic choices implicit. The hierarchical model makes these rationales explicit and evaluable.

Tier-I assessment asks: Does the sentence accurately convey the source proposition? Are there additions, omissions, or distortions?

Tier-II assessment asks: Does the sentence read naturally in the target language? Are information flow and inter-sentential cohesion maintained?

Tier-III assessment asks: Does the sentence reflect the stylistic register and aesthetic design of the source? Where formal correspondence is impossible, has compensation been attempted?

This granular approach enables instructors to diagnose not merely that a translation is "wrong" but precisely at which hierarchical level the breakdown occurs—and what kind of revision is required.

6. Conclusion

Syntactic choice in translation is a layered and dynamic process. The foundational tier anchors semantic fidelity by avoiding mechanical copying on one hand and excessive reinterpretation on the other. The optimizing tier aligns with target-language conventions and achieves natural fluency in inter-sentential cohesion. The sublimating tier focuses on

stylistic equivalence and transmits the artistic spirit of the original through compensatory strategies across linguistic levels. These three tiers are mutually supporting and jointly serve the overall translation goal of "accuracy, naturalness, and expressive vitality." For the translator, the essence of syntactic choice lies in finding, within the constraints of the source text and the possibilities of the target language, the expression that most fully recreates the original text's living force.

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