



A Study on Attributive Markers in Chinese, English, and French from the Perspective of Linguistic Typology

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Abstract

Chinese, English, and French language systems contain the grammatical component of attributive, but due to the differences in cultural background and expression habits, they often present different expression modes and orders in practical application. Attentive is a modification restriction component commonly used in Chinese, English, and French, so there are many definitions related to the attributive. However, they share one commonality: the attributive typically provides a definitive or updated function for nouns. Based on the perspective of typology, this article systematically compares the tagging patterns of the attribute between Chinese, English, and French. Using the Chinese attribute-head construction as a model, analyze the grammatical features of nouns, adjectives, and verbs as attributives in three languages. Research has found that Chinese uses “de” as the core marker to modify the noun; English and Chinese use adjective word order, verb participle, subordinate clause, and prepositional phrase to mark attributives; in the noun phrase, the modifier is in front of the noun in Chinese, while in English and French, it can be placed in front and behind, but English and French are flexible. The differences among the three languages stem from the characteristics of language types and cognitive strategies. Chinese emphasizes meaning and resemblance, while English and French emphasize form and disambiguation.

Keywords

Linguistic typology; Chinese; English; French; attributive

Introduction

Language typology is a branch of linguistics. Its main purpose is to study the differences in the basic structural forms of various languages in the world, classify the languages in the world according to these differences, and explore the internal laws of differences and try to explain them (Xu Yulong, 2010). This paper will analyze and compare the attribute-head construction of Chinese, English, and French from the perspective of linguistic typology.

In Chinese grammar, attributives play a crucial role as language elements that modify and restrict nouns, making the described person or thing more specific and explicit. The modifier center structure is one of the most fundamental and important structures in the language system, and attribute-head construction is a subclass of this structure. The attribute-head construction refers to a structure composed of an attributive and a central clause. From a cross-linguistic perspective, this structure can be a single word (such as a compound in English or Chinese) or a noun phrase. From the perspective of structural properties, the fixed center structure is a typical centripetal structure, in which the attributive can be a sentence (clause) or a lexical component. However, the introduction in this article is limited to

the latter. Below, we will introduce N-N (noun-noun) construction, A-N (adjective-noun) construction, and V-N (verb-noun) construction in order to compare and analyze the similarities and differences.

1. N-N construction

N-N construction is a composite concept composed of two referent concepts, and there is an implicit logical relationship between the two nouns. From a processing perspective, this structure, like other types of centering structures, involves semantic synthesis between two components. In languages such as English and Chinese, almost all nouns can be used as adjectives to modify another noun, forming a compound word or noun phrase. Using Chinese as a framework, it can be expressed as “N1 (de) N2”.

In the process of systematic classification of Attributives with attributive structure, the key is to understand the interaction between attributives and head words. This understanding is mainly based on two aspects: semantics and structure. The modifier function of attributive to the head word has a wide variety, which makes the semantic relationship between them extremely complicated. According to the semantic relationship between N1 and N2, in the process of systematically classifying attributives with definite structures, the key is to have a deep understanding of the interaction between attributives and the noun. This understanding is mainly based on two aspects: semantics and structure. The modifying effect of attributive on the central language has a wide diversity, which makes the semantic connections between them extremely complex. According to the semantic relationship between N1 and N2, Wen Zhenhui (1999) introduced the pragmatic standard, and used the “semantic pragmatic” standard to divide the internal semantic relationship of “N1 (de) N2” structure into two categories: possessive relationship and attribute relationship, taking “N1 has (own, possess, have) N2” as the identification framework: all that can enter this format are attributed to possessive relationship, and those that cannot enter are attributed to attribute relationship. Overall, most scholars tend to classify the internal semantic relationships of “N1(de)N2” into two categories: possessive and attributive. Below, we will use Chinese as a reference to analyze the centering marking patterns in English and French.

In the grammar systems of Chinese, English, and French, it is quite common for nouns to serve as attributive modifiers. Especially in Chinese, the use of nouns as attributive modifiers is particularly flexible and diverse. In contrast, English noun modifiers rely on prepositions such as ‘of’, while French noun modifiers typically rely on prepositions such as ‘de’, ‘en’, to complete their modifying function. Although there are differences in the use of noun attributives among the three languages, they can be classified into three categories in terms of meaning: the first is to identify the ownership, the second is to reveal the nature or category of the object, and the third is to indicate the material quality of the material.

The attributive structure can also be called a phrasal possessive structure when it represents the possessive relationship. This phrase is a new language unit composed of a noun representing the possessor X and another noun representing the possessor Y through specific morphological and syntactic operations. It is abbreviated as a possessive phrase. In the Chinese grammar system, when a noun serves as an attributive, whether it is used to express the material, affiliation, or property characteristics or categorical attributes of an object, it is usually placed before the noun, forming the “N1 (de) N2” structure. The situation in English and French is more complex: when expressing possessive relationships, attributives can be divided into two categories: one is pronouns, and the other is nouns. When attributives are pronouns, the word order in Chinese, English, and French is the same, and attributives are placed before the center language. Both English and French use restrictive adjectives to mark this relationship. When the attributive is a noun, there are two patterns in English, namely “N1 (noun)’s N2” (N1 is generally a living thing) and “N2 of N1” (N1 is generally a lifeless thing). There is only one type of structure in French as “N2 de N1”. From this, we can see that French requires the preposition ‘de’ to introduce ‘possessor’, while Chinese and English need to mark ‘possessor’.

When expressing attributes, the Chinese generally use the “N1N2” mode, such as a noun phrase “automobile factory”, “French teacher”, “history book”, “metal chair”, etc. Both Chinese and English mark patterns are “N1 N2”, but in French, it’s “N2 de N1”. There is no article before French N1 in the attribute sense, and there is an article in the sense of possession to avoid ambiguity. When the attribute indicates the material of the noun, there is a similar structure in English expression to that in Chinese, that is, N1 is directly in front of N2 without markers, but there are also corresponding adjectives in English to indicate the material of the object, such as “wooden table” and “gold brace”. There is no corresponding adjective in French, and prepositional markers are required in language structure. Generally, the preposition “en” is used after the central word N2 to form the “N2 en N1” structure.

2. A-N (adjective-noun) construction

Adjectives are words that represent the nature or state of people and things. The categories of adjectives in Chinese, English, and French are relatively complex, with Chinese and English adjectives equivalent to French quality adjectives. French adjectives can generally be divided into two categories: qualitative adjectives and non-qualitative adjectives. Among them, non-quality adjectives include main adjectives, indicative adjectives, interrogative and exclamatory adjectives, numerical adjectives, and general adjectives. From the perspective of the grammatical functions of adjectives, Chinese adjectives can serve as predicates, attributive modifiers, adverbial modifiers, and complements in sentences, while English adjectives can serve as predicate modifiers, complements, and adverbial modifiers. In contrast, French quality adjectives can only serve as attributive modifiers and predicate modifiers. One of the main syntactic functions of adjectives in these three languages is to act as attributives and present certain similarities (Gao Wei, 2022). However, due to the influence of the language type characteristics of the three languages, as well as the structure and semantics of adjectives in the three languages, there are differences.

When Chinese adjectives are used as attributives, they are generally placed before the noun they modify. When English adjectives are used as attributive modifiers, most adjectives are placed before the noun, some specific adjectives need to be placed after them, such as “involved”, “concerned”, “available”, “imaginable”, “possible”, etc. French adjectives are used as attributives, a small portion of them need to be placed before the noun, such as “beau” (beautiful), “bon” (good), “jeune” (young), “long” (long), “joli” (beautiful), “petit” (small), etc. Most adjectives are placed after the noun they modify, especially those that express the characteristics and colors of the object. But some adjectives can be placed before or after a noun, but their meanings are different, such as: “une maison ancienne (old house)”, “mon ancienne maison (my previous house)”, etc.

In English, there are also a few adjectives with different meanings before and after nouns, such as the adjective “present” in these phrases: there were 200 people present at the meeting, the present owner of the house is Jim. In English, there are also cases where adjectives can only be placed after nouns, such as “there’s something wrong with the TV”. The adjective “wrong” is placed after “something”. According to English grammar, if the noun is an indefinite pronoun composed of some, any, no, every, etc., its modifier must be placed after it. In French, adjectives are required to be placed after the noun and add “de” when modifying generic pronouns, such as “voilà quelque chose de Nouveau”. French generic pronouns are equivalent to English indefinite pronouns in meaning, and their attributive relationship marking patterns are also similar. English and French, both of which belong to the Indo-European language family, have other similarities when adjectives modify nouns. For example, in English and French, there are adjectives with a generic meaning, and the marking mode of modifying nouns is “generic Adjective+article+noun”. For example, “all the flowers”, the corresponding French is “toutes les fleurs”.

In the A-N (adjective-noun) construction, French adjectives are mostly postpositional, while English adjectives are mostly prepositional; In French, there are a few adjectives that need to be placed before nouns, while in English, there are a few adjectives that need to be placed after nouns; There are situations in both English and French where adjectives have different meanings before and after nouns; Some fixed expressions in English and French have the same structural pattern.

The monosyllabic adjectives in English and French can hardly be used interchangeably, but some monosyllabic adjectives in Chinese can be used interchangeably to form the “AA” form, which is mainly descriptive and represents a certain state of things, and is a state adjective. Such as “big”, “tall”, “red”, etc.

3. V-N (verb-noun) construction

In Chinese expression, when verbs, verb phrases, or subject-predicate structures serve as attributive roles, they are habitually placed before the center word. In the grammatical structure of Chinese, verbs can be transformed into attributive modifiers by adding the particle “de”, thereby modifying the center word. Form a sentence structure of “verb/verb phrase/subject verb structure+object+center word”, which intuitively reveals the relationship between the attributive and center word.

In contrast, in the grammatical structures of English and French, the verb prototype cannot directly assume the role of an attributive before a noun, which is significantly different from the usage in Chinese. In English and French, verb-modifying nouns can generally be divided into three types: present participle form, past participle form, and infinitive form.

The present participle of the English verb can serve as a premodifier for nouns, such as “a walking stick”, “a

sleeping bag”, indicating the function of the central word, i.e., “a stick for walking”, “a bag for sleeping”. For example, in “a walking dictionary”, verbs have metaphorical meanings, while in “a concerning person”, there is a subject-verb relationship between verbs and nouns. When the Present participle is used as a post modifier, its function is equivalent to a restrictive attributive clause, for example, “the man writing reports is my classmate” is equivalent to “the man who wrote /writes /is writing reports is my classmate”, but the present participle of a static verb as a post modifier doesn’t have a progressive meaning, such as “this is a fruit with a taste resembling that of Vinegar”.

When the past participle in English is used as an attributive, the action it represents usually occurs before the action represented by the predicate, indicating a passive, completed action or a state. The past participle in English can be used as both a premodifier and a postmodifier. The past participle from transitive verbs is often used as a premodifier to indicate passive and complete meanings, such as “the retired professor”, “the fall magazine”. The function of the past participle as a postpositive attributive is similar to that of the past participle, serving as a restrictive attributive clause. However, in terms of voice, the past participle is related to the passive voice, while the present participle is related to the active voice. I spent my food money on the car repair by a mechanic.

In the French grammar system, present participles and past participles often play the role of attributives, similar in function to verbs or verb phrases used as attributives in Chinese. When the French participle form is used as an attributive, it will immediately follow the modified noun, forming a construction of “noun+postpositive attributive (present participle/past participle)”. On the contrary, in Chinese, the attributive is usually located before the central noun, forming a sentence structure of “prepositional attributive (verb+central noun)”. The past participle in French, when used as an attributive, is located after the center word, indicating a passive meaning, such as “le travail finit par Pierre”; The present participle in French serves as an attributive after a noun, replacing relative clauses guided by “qui”. For example, “on recrute des traducteurs connaissant l’anglais”, this phrase can also be expressed as “on recrute des traducteurs qui connaissent l’anglais”.

When the infinitive of an English verb is used as a postpositive modifier, the center word can serve as an indefinite subject, object, adverb, or even a time complement, such as: Morris may be the man to help her, I’m going to get something to eat, In French, the infinitive of a verb modifies a noun, which we call a noun complement, indicating that it supplements and modifies the preceding noun. In French, this structure is usually guided by prepositions such as “de”, “en”, and is followed by an infinitive or noun. For example: “breathing space” and “l’heure de se reposer”, “The child wearing a shirt is Charles.” and “L’enfant en chemise est Charles.”

4. Conclusion

The attribute-head construction is one of the most common and complex structures in natural language. Among the three types of attribute-head construction, the “N-N construction” has the most complex semantics, representing both possessive relationships and attribute meanings. In Chinese, the “N-N construction” is marked as “N1 (de) N2”, in English as “N1’s N2”, “N2 of N1”, and “N1 N2” patterns; In French the “N-N construction” is marked as “N2 de N1” and “N2 en N1” patterns. The “A-N construction” is the most typical centering structure. In Chinese, adjectives modify nouns before nouns, while in French and English, there are both prepositional and postpositional phenomena. In English, prepositional adjectives make up the majority, while in French, postpositive adjectives make up the majority. In both languages, there are a few cases where the meaning of adjectives before and after is different. Verbs serving as attributive modifiers in Chinese usually use “de” and place them before nouns. In English, verbs serving as attributive modifiers are usually placed before or after the noun in the form of participles, while in French, there is only one situation where they are placed after. Both languages have the phenomenon of infinitives serving as attributive modifiers, and when infinitives serve as attributive modifiers, they are generally placed after nouns. Both English and French require prepositions to form these structures.

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