

AN INVESTIGATION INTO TOPIC-COMMENT STRUCTURES IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE AND SOME NEGATIVE TRANSFERS TO ENGLISH BY FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH MAJORS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DANANG, UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDIES

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Abstract - The concept of Topic - Comment sentence and the topic-comment structures have been a concern of linguists in Vietnam and in the world. According to Cao Xuan Hao (1991), Vietnamese people often express ideas in the way that they start to mention a topic and then say something about that topic or within the range of that topic. However, the structure has been proved to be a hindrance to the first-year English majors at the University of Foreign Languages Studies, the University of Danang when transferred into the English language. The paper investigates some commonly-used topic-comment structures in Vietnamese and their negative transfers to English by the first-year English majors at the University of Foreign Languages Studies, the University of Danang. On the basis of data analysis from a survey, the paper provides some suggestions to better English learners' translation of the structures.

Key words - topic; comment; structures; negative transfer; first-year English majors.

1. Introduction

The concept of topic-comment sentence (TCS) is one of the most controversial linguistic issues. It has been observed that in some Vietnamese sentence types, the subject, in terms of the obligatory subject-predicate structure in English, is rather confusing to the students. They find it difficult to locate the subject because Vietnamese sentences do not require a grammatical subject if it can be inferred from the context. For example, the following sentence is quite common in Vietnamese:

The following sentence is quite common in Vietnamese:			
(1) Nhà cửa	mua	thời điểm này	đắt lắm.
Houses	buy	now	expensive
TOPIC	COMMENT		
OBJECT OF THE VERB	PREDICATE		
It's expensive to buy houses at present.			

Sentences of this kind may place a burden to Vietnamese students and translators. Firstly, the topic is not the grammatical subject of the predicate. Rather, in terms of deep structure, it is the object of the verb. Therefore, the students and translators must go beyond the word level to make sense of the "topic" and "comment" in the topic-comment sentences (TCSs), and correctly identify the grammatical relationship between the predicate of the sentence and the existing topic, which functions as the object of the verb, and then express it as an object.

This paper investigates some commonly-used topic-comment structures in Vietnamese and their English equivalents. On the basis of data analysis, it is hoped that the paper can help to better learners' translation of the structure. Besides, the investigation is aimed at giving some suggestions for teachers in Vietnamese-English translation teaching.

2. Previous Studies Related to the Research

Recently, many scholars have been showing their great interest in studying issues related to topic-comment. Hockett (1958) made a distinction between topic and comment in a sentence, according to which "*the speaker announces a topic and then says something about it. In English and languages of Europe, topics are usually also subjects and comments are predicates*" [16, p.201].

Li and Thompson (1976) set up many criteria to distinguish the notion of subject and topic in their paper entitled "Subject and Topic: a New Typology of Language".

In Vietnam, many linguists have contributed to the study of topic-comment structures. In "Tiếng Việt - Sơ thảo ngữ pháp chức năng, tập 1" [Vietnamese language-preliminary of functional grammar, volume 1], Cao Xuan Hao explicitly stated that topic-comment is the basic structure. According to him, the way the Vietnamese express themselves is that "*when uttering a sentence, the speaker produces a topic and says something about that topic or within the frame of that topic*" [13: 79].

Language transfer has been a central issue in applied linguistics, second language acquisition and language learning (Odlin 11). In 1989, Odlin published "Language transfer: Cross-linguistic influence in language learning" and his book has laid a foundation for recent language transfer researches and studies. Different types and extents of cross-linguistic influence as well as errors were discussed.

3. Some Theoretical concepts

3.1. Definitions of Topic-Comment Sentences

Gundel (1988:210) defined *topic-comment* as a *pragmatic relation that holds relative to a discourse context*. According to him, an entity is the topic of a sentence, if in using the sentence the speaker intends to increase the addressee's knowledge about, request information about, or otherwise get the addressee to act with respect to that sentence.

The notion of *topic* and *comment* were prominently introduced into American linguistic thinking by Hockett (1958): "*The most general characterization of predicative constructions is suggested by the terms "topic" and "comment" [...]: The speaker announces a topic and then says something about it.*"

(2) *As for my siblings, my sister lives in Lithuania, and my brother lives in Armenia.*

Here, *As for my siblings* constitutes the general topic,

and *my sister* and *my brother* constitute subtopics. The comment to *as for my siblings* is the rest of the sentence, which itself consists of two topic/comment structures.

In his study, Hao stated: “when uttering a sentence, the speaker produces a topic and says something about that topic or within the range of that topic” (1991:79). That is to say, when re-organizing the reflected reality, thought divides it into two parts by choosing a point of departure for establishing the relationship between these two. He assumes that the part that is chosen as the point of departure functions as topic and the remainder as comment (1991:33-4).

3.2. Types of Topic-Comment Structures in English

There are four types of topic-comment structures to be discussed in this part.

The first type is a topic with a resumptive pronoun in the comment clause. The topic is the antecedent of a resumptive pronoun in the comment clause. The topic and the resumptive pronoun have a coreferential referent.

(3) *As for Mr. Li, I gave him five apples.* (Xu and Langendoen: 1985).

The second type of topic-comment structure is a topicalized clause. For this type of construction, the topic can be viewed as having been extracted from its original postverbal object position, leaving a gap in its original extraction site.

(4) *As for Mr. Li, I know.* (Xu and Langendoen: 1985).

The third type of topic-comment structure is double nominatives construction. The most typical types of semantic relationship between the two initial NPs in a double nominative construction are domain-subset or possess. In (4) the subject of the comment clause is considered to be a subset of the domain of the topic NP.

(5) *As for giraffes, their necks are long.* (Kroeger: 2004).

The fourth type of topic-comment structure is an adverbial phrase. Adverbial phrases are less common as topics, they nevertheless serve as the semantic frame and provide background information for the comment clause.

(6) *In Thailand, you can eat many kinds of fruit* (Xu and Langendoen: 1985).

3.3. Topic-Comment Constructions in Vietnamese

According to Rosen (1998)’s categorization, Vietnamese has the following kinds of topics:

a. Apparent long-distance dependencies

This kind of sentence has a gap in the comment which is understood as being filled by the topic. This structure is similar to the “topicalization” phenomenon in English where a noun phrase is moved to the initial position of the sentence. It leaves only an empty position in the rest of the sentence.

(7) Tôi	thì	e	không	ngủ	được
I	topic marker	empty	not	sleep	manage
As for me, (I) couldn’t sleep. (Emeneau, 1951:54)					

b. Noun phrase topics with coreferential noun phrase in comment clauses

This type of topic corresponds to a coreferential noun

phrase or pronoun, which can be an overt subject or an overt object in the comment.

(8) Tôi	thì	tôi	chỉ	muốn	về	Việt Nam
I	Topic Marker	I	only	wish	return	Vietnam
As for me, I only wish to return to Vietnam. (Chinh, 1970: 102)						

c. Noun Phrase with semantically related noun phrase in comment clause

The subject-predicate is embedded in topic-comment sentences (in Li and Thompson’s analysis, 1981:94).

(9) Cái	phòng	này	thì	cửa	đóng
Classifier	office	this	topic marker	door	closed
As for this office, the door is closed. (Li and Thompson: 1981)					

Rosen named this “semantically related” because she believed that the relationship between the noun phrase topic and the noun phrase in the comment clause is non-grammatical.

d. Noun phrase topics with no related noun phrase in comment clause

The noun phrase topic may not be related to any constituent either empty or overt in the comment. Here is an example:

(10) Sức	thì	hai	người	ngang	nhau
strength	Topic Marker	two	people	equal	together
As far as strength is concerned, these two people are equal. (Chinh, 1970:102)					

e. Verb phrase and clausal topic

Sometimes, the topic consists of only a one-word verb and it is repeated in the comment clause:

(10) Nói	thì	bà Ba	nói	rất	nhều
Talk	topic marker	Mrs. Ba	talk	very	much
As far as talking is concerned, Mrs. Ba talks very much. (Chinh, 1970:103)					

On the basis of theoretical background and its aims, the research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are some typical similarities and differences between topic-comment sentences in English and Vietnamese?
2. What are common negative transfers of TCSs from Vietnamese to English?
3. What are possible causes of the negative transfer?

4. Methods and Procedures

Data description is the main method in the thesis. In addition, qualitative and quantitative approaches were used. Data were collected from results of a Vietnamese - English translation task and responses to a questionnaire to find out the students’ negative transfers and the possible causes. Then statistics and tables were also carried out to clarify the data and support the descriptive information. Negative transfers were classified in terms of their possible sources.

A hundred first-year students from the University of Foreign Languages Studies, the University of Danang were randomly chosen to be the subjects of this study. All of them major in English, which means that they have already acquired certain knowledge of English. Those students were

asked to do a Vietnamese - English translation task with 14 TCSs of different types. 50 students who had negative transfer were asked to response to the questionnaire.

5. Findings and Discussion

In this section, the data collected from students' translation results and the questionnaire were analyzed, categorized and explained in order to solve the research questions.

5.1. Typical Similarities and Differences between Topic-Comment Sentences in English and Vietnamese

Although the types of Vietnamese topic-comment sentences in the corpus outnumber the English ones, they share many similarities, one of which is that the topic appears in the initial position and comment stands in the remaining part of the sentence in both languages.

The second common similarity lies in the relationship between the topic and the resumptive pronoun which have a coreferential referent. In other word, the NP in the topic appears again in the comment.

Another common feature is manifested in the semantic relationship between the two initial NPs in the TCS. Among this relationship; as Kroeger (2004) stated, the two most common are domain-subset or possess.

In terms of syntactic relations, beside the clear similarities mentioned, we can see that, not all sentence topics are NPs, and in both languages, topic can be a finite clause.

However, there are several important differences creating challenges to the transfer of TCSs from one language to the other.

Firstly, when the noun phrases (NP) in the topic and the subject in the comment are co-referential, the subject can be omitted in Vietnamese. However, it is impossible to omit the subject in English. It is also noted that the NP in the topic and in the comment is unchanged in Vietnamese sentences while according to the grammatical norm, there is a difference in terms of part of speech of the two NPs in the English sentence. The topic marker "as for" must be followed by an object and this object is turned into a subject pronoun in the comment. In Vietnamese, the topic marker does not change the form of the NPs but the English topic marker may do, as in the following examples:

Vietnamese	English
Nói, thì Bà Ba nói rất nhiều.	As far as <u>talking</u> is concerned, Mrs. Ba <u>talks</u> a lot.

5.2. Common Negative Transfers of Sentence Topic-Comment structures from Vietnamese to English

The following description summarizes the main types of negative transfer found in the participants' performance. The categorization of negative topic-comment structures may be subjective, as it is based on the judgment of the researchers. Yet, due to the fact that all of the sentences used in the translation task were composed on the basis of the classification in the theoretical background, it was believed that the findings would contribute to the attainment of the research's aims.

Table 1. List and Frequency of Negative Transfer of Sentence Topic-Comment Structure Across 14 Sentences

Negative Transfer Type	Frequency	Percentage
Omission of Topic	57	19.8%
Identification of Topic and Subject	62	21.6%
Inaccurate Choice between Topic and Object in Comment	41	14.4%
Too Free Translation of Topic when Topic coincides with the Main Verb in the Comment	63	22%
Literal Translation of Unmarked Topic in Existential Sentences	25	8.7%
Changing of Topic for a Prepositional Phrase in Comment	39	13.5%
TOTAL	287	100 %

Table 1 reveals the fact that a large number of students felt confused with the topic constructions and as a result, they were not able to transfer STCSs from Vietnamese to English. As can be seen, more than a half of the students attending the research omitted the topic or identified the topic with the subject when translating it into English. As we have predicted, TCSs are still a big challenge to Vietnamese translators. Hence, 63 out of the 100 subjects translated the structures freely:

Vietnamese sentence	Negative transfer into English	Suggested transfer
Đi Sài Gòn thì tôi đi mỗi tuần ba lần.	1. Go to Sai Gon, I go three times a week. 2. Going to Sai Gon, I go three times a week.	As for going to Saigon, I go three times every week.

5.3. Possible Causes of Negative Transfers

Table 2. Distribution of Causes of Negative Transfers from the questionnaire

Causes	Frequency	%
It is different from Vietnamese syntactic structures.	50	14.5
I don't practice frequently.	29	8.5
I cannot understand the source sentences.	43	12.5
I am influenced by the Vietnamese language.	61	17.8
I forgot the rule.	27	7.8
I cannot apply the knowledge of English when translating the sentences.	39	11.3
The structure has not been taught yet.	83	24.1

Very surprisingly, the answer that accounted for the highest percentage (24.1%) is choice 7: "The structure has not been taught yet". This suggests the fact that sentence topic-comment structures are not concerned in English classrooms.

This does not mean that the structures are not used but they are not fully focused and emphasized by the teachers. The Vietnamese language has a deep influence on the negative transfer proved by the second highest choice (17.8%) of the students. This can explain the third highest choice (14.5%): “It is different from Vietnamese syntactic structures”.

5.4. Findings

After underlining and analyzing the six types of negative transfer made by the first-year English majors and possible causes, some findings are presented as follows:

Finding 1. Students with a high level of linguistic competence still had difficulties in dealing with topic-comment structures at sentential level. The high number of negative transfers indicates that the students focused mainly on accessing words, rather than the sentence.

Finding 2. Among all types of negative transfer, free translation of the topic when the topic coincides with the main verb in the comment ranked the highest (22%). This pinpointed one important fact: verbs in Vietnamese sentences are not always present or easily identified. What is more, Vietnamese language does not have the so-called derivation like English.

Finding 3. Most of the negative transfer types are related to the topic more than the comment and the problems lie mainly in the inability to apply a suitable structure to form a proper topic structure for each sentence. The task will be simpler if Vietnamese students have opportunity to get familiar with topic-comment structures in both Vietnamese and English.

6. Conclusion

The results of the translation task revealed the popular habit of word-by-word translation among the students. Furthermore, a large number of students blamed their errors on the teaching at school: they had not been taught or introduced the so-called topic-comment structures at school before. Some students who had a chance to study the structures before admitted that their lack of practice prevented them from translating successfully.

As a common structure in information structure system and in communication, STCSs cannot be ignored in the

learning and teaching of both English and Vietnamese.

Learners should be equipped with different types of TCSs in Vietnamese and in English. What is more, the topic markers should be pointed out and taught so that students can recognize and apply to transferring process from this language to the other. Besides, people use TCSs with different intentions. Therefore, understanding these structures profoundly will develop their translation and speaking skills as well.

When teaching Vietnamese students how to translate Vietnamese TCSs into English, some specific contents should be emphasized to students, including the syntactic features of TCSs of the two languages and how to translate different types of topic-comment structures of Vietnamese.

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