The English Translation of Chinese Passive Sentences: A Case Study based on CET-4 Translation Questions

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Chinese passive sentences from the CET-4 translation questions (2015–2025) from a comparative perspective between Chinese and English sentence structures. Through categorizing and examining passive sentences with explicit markers and those without passive markers-so-called notional passive constructions-this study outlines their typical equivalents in English translation. The research finds that passive sentences with markers generally correspond to explicit English passive constructions ("be + past participle"), though whether to retain the agent depends on the sentence semantics. For notional passives, it is essential to identify the passive focus in context and flexibly choose between passive or active forms in English to achieve functional equivalence. This paper also analyzes common translation errors from CET-4 responses and proposes specific strategies for improvement. The aim is to provide practical guidance for test takers and contribute empirical data to comparative studies of Chinese-English passive constructions.

Keywords

Chinese Passive Sentences; Translation Strategies; CET-4; Translation Error Analysis.

1. Introduction

Passive constructions are essential sentence types for expressing the "undergoer" role in both Chinese and English. However, significant structural and usage differences exist between the two languages. In English, the passive voice has standardized, fixed syntactic forms, while Chinese often employs flexible structures or relies on context to convey passive meaning. In recent years, CET-4 translation tasks have increasingly included content related to Chinese culture, social development, and national achievements, where passive expressions are frequently found.

For example, in passages describing policy outcomes, technological application, or cultural dissemination, source texts often contain passive sentences. However, many test-takers produce inaccurate translations due to insufficient awareness of structural differences or shifts in semantic focus. Errors include overuse of active constructions in place of Chinese notional passives, or misuse of the "by + agent" structure in English, which compromises fluency and accuracy.

To address these issues, this study analyzes representative passive constructions in CET-4 translation questions from 2015 to 2025. It systematically examines translation strategies based on contrastive linguistics and aims to provide empirical insights and practical approaches for translation instruction and exam preparation.

2. A Contrastive Study of Passive Voice in Chinese and English

From a typological perspective, Chinese and English represent two fundamentally different paradigms in their expression of passive voice. Chinese, as a topic-prominent and analytic language, tends to prioritize semantic coherence and contextual relevance over formal

grammatical markers. Passive meaning is often inferred through word order or context, even in the absence of explicit markers such as "被" or "受到"[1]. For instance, many Chinese sentences convey a passive meaning without using any overt passive indicator—these are referred to as notional passives.

In contrast, English is a form-oriented and syntactically explicit language, where passive meaning is typically encoded through a clear grammatical structure: "be + past participle." When the agent needs to be specified, it is usually introduced with the preposition "by" [2].

Chinese passive constructions not only express the reception of an action but may also carry additional semantic nuances, such as unexpectedness, negative evaluation, or emphasis on the outcome. For example, in "他被老板批评了" ("He was criticized by the boss"), the structure suggests not only the occurrence of criticism but may also imply disapproval or sympathy. Therefore, a mechanical application of English passive syntax in translation may result in semantic loss or distortion.

To achieve functional equivalence, translators must identify the sentence's semantic focus, agent-patient relationship, and contextual implications. This enables appropriate selection between passive, active, or neutral constructions in English, ensuring that the translation accurately reflects the intended meaning and communicative function of the original Chinese sentence.

3. Chinese Passive Sentences and Their English Translation Strategies

Chinese passive sentences can be broadly classified into two types: those with explicit passive markers and notional passive sentences without such markers[3].

3.1. Passive Sentences with Explicit Markers

Chinese passive sentences with explicit markers typically use functional words to clearly indicate that the subject is the receiver of an action. Common markers include "被" (bei), "受到" (shoudao), "由" (you), "为……所" (wei...suo), and "得到" (dedao). These markers usually appear between the subject and the verb, serving to introduce the agent or emphasize the result of the action. These constructions carry a strong passive meaning and are widely used in formal or result-focused contexts. In translation, they often correspond to the English passive voice using the structure "be + past participle."

3.1.1. "被" (bei)

a. 但此时酷热的天气并未完全结束，高温通常还会持续一段时间，被称为"秋老虎"。

But at this time, the hot weather is not completely ended，and the high temperature usually lasts for a period of time, which is called "autumn tiger".

b. 此后，他的羊再也没有被狼叼走。

From then on, his sheep were never carried away by wolves again.

c. 茅台是中国最有名的白酒，在新中国成立前夕，被选为国宴用酒。

Moutai, China's most renowned liquor, was designated as the state banquet libation on the eve of the People's Republic's founding.

3.1.2. "受到" (shoudao)

d. 因此，目前市场上推出的低脂、低糖、有机食品受到人们的普遍欢迎。

Therefore, low-fat, low-sugar, and organic foods currently available in the market are widely welcomed by people.

3.1.3. "为……所" (wei...suo)

近年来，越来越多的城市居民为农村的田园风光所吸引，利用节假日到乡村旅游。

In recent years, an increasing number of urban residents are attracted by rural idyllic scenery and take advantage of holidays to travel to the countryside.

3.1.4. "得到" (dedao)

e. 目前，这项技术已经在许多国家得到广泛应用，为全球粮食安全做出了重大贡献。

At present, this technology has been widely applied in many countries and has made significant contributions to global food security.

f. 改革开放以来，中国人民生活水平不断提高，这在人们的饮食变化上得到充分体现。

Since the reform and opening up, the living standard of the Chinese people has been continuously improved, which is fully reflected in the changes in people's diet.

g. 从此，它在中国的许多地方得到了普及。

Since then, it has been popularized in many parts of China.

3.1.5. "由" (you)

h. 坎儿井是新疆干旱地区的一种水利系统，由地下渠道将水井连接而成。

Karez is a water conservancy system in arid areas of Xinjiang, which is connected by underground channels.

Research has shown that if translators overlook the semantic focus or evaluative nuance in the source sentence, translation inaccuracies may arise—especially in expressions of emotion or attitude [4]. For example, while "他被表扬了" ("He was praised") and "他被处罚了" ("He was punished") share the same syntactic form, they convey distinct emotional tones and communicative intentions. Translators must assess the context to decide whether to retain the agent, soften the tone, or use euphemistic structures. This reinforces the idea that passive sentence translation should not be handled mechanically but must consider stylistic and pragmatic appropriateness.

3.2. Notional Passive Sentences without Explicit Markers

In Chinese, many sentences convey passive meaning implicitly, without any formal markers. These are referred to as notional passive constructions. Although they appear to be in the active voice structurally, the subject is semantically the recipient of the action. Such structures are common in idiomatic and topic-prominent discourse.

In English translation, these notional passives often need to be rendered using the passive voice to preserve the semantic focus and information structure. For instance:

a. 农历起源于数千年前的中国，根据太阳和月亮的运行规律制定。

The lunar calendar originated thousands of years ago in China and was formulated according to the laws of the sun and moon.

b. 四合院是中国一种传统的住宅建筑，其特点是房屋建造在一个院子的四周，将院子合围在中间。

Siheyuan is a traditional type of residential building in China. Its characteristic is that the houses are built around a courtyard, enclosing the courtyard in the middle.

c. 戏曲是一种中国传统的艺术形式，可以追溯到唐朝。

Opera is a traditional Chinese art form that can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty.

d. 大运河始建于公元前4世纪，公元13世纪末建成。

The Grand Canal was first built in the 4th century BC and completed in the late 13th century AD.

e. 龙井茶常手工制作。

Longjing tea is often made by hand.

4. Common Translation Errors in CET-4 Passive Sentence Rendering

In CET-4 translation tasks, passive constructions frequently appear in contexts related to technological achievements, cultural preservation, and social contributions. However, many students make common errors due to misjudging context or failing to align syntactic structure with semantic focus.

Huang & Gao emphasize that blindly converting a passive construction in the source language into an active structure in the target language can weaken the original information focus and compromise the discourse function[5]. Similarly, when translating Chinese passive sentences into English, it is essential to preserve the information structure and communicative intent. This is particularly important in texts highlighting policy outcomes or scientific progress, where the passive voice can emphasize results and recipients, aligning with the formal tone of English academic or official discourse.

Based on analysis of CET-4 questions, the most common types of translation errors include:

4.1. Error Type 1: Overuse of "by"-phrases, Causing Unnatural Expressions

Original: 这项技术已经在许多国家得到广泛应用。

Incorrect: This technology has been widely applied by many countries.

Analysis: While grammatically correct, the use of "by many countries" is unnecessary and sounds unnatural due to interference from Chinese word order and logic.

Revised: This technology has been widely applied in many countries.

4.2. Error Type 2: Ignoring Passive Meaning, Resulting in Active Voice

Original: 低脂、低糖、有机食品受到人们的普遍欢迎。

Incorrect: People generally welcome low-fat and organic foods.

Analysis: The translation shifts focus from the products to the people, which weakens the passive emphasis.

Revised: Low-fat, low-sugar, and organic foods are widely welcomed by consumers.

4.3. Error Type 3: Incorrect Application of Passive Voice

Original: 新能源汽车的发展为全球新能源利用做出积极贡献。

Incorrect: The development of new energy vehicles has not only promoted domestic economy, but also is contributed to global energy use.

Analysis: Incorrect passive structure "is contributed" should be revised to the active form.

Revised: The development of new energy vehicles has not only promoted domestic economic growth but also contributed positively to the global use of new energy.

4.4. Error Type 4: Redundant Passive Constructions

Original:莫高窟数字展示中心于2014年开放启用。

Incorrect: The Digital Exhibition Center of the Mogao Grottoes was opened and was put into use in 2014.

Analysis: Using two passive verbs in succession creates redundancy.

Revised: The Digital Exhibition Center of the Mogao Grottoes opened and was put into use in 2014.

5. Conclusion

Translating Chinese passive sentences into English involves more than syntactic conversion-it requires semantic restructuring and contextual adaptation. Effective translation depends on

accurately identifying the passive structure, matching English expression norms, and balancing naturalness with informational accuracy. By analyzing actual CET-4 translation tasks, this study reveals that understanding the grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic dimensions of passive constructions is key to successful translation.

The findings provide practical guidance for improving learners' translation skills and offer empirical data for teaching strategies and further research in Chinese-English contrastive linguistics.

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