SENTENCE STRUCTURE
DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CHINESE AND ENGLISH

English and Chinese are two different languages, there are quite differences when expressing, it will have some positive effects if we understand the difference when translating, and how to minimize the negative effect caused by these differences in translation, by analyzing a lot of examples. English and Chinese belong to entirely different language systems (Indo-European vs. Sino-Tibetan). Not surprisingly, there are vast differences between the two. Sentence structure is one of the areas in which great differences exist. This paper examines and analyzes these differences from the following four prospectives, then proposals are offered as to how to bridge the gap in the above aspects in translation (mainly from English into Traditional Chinese).

1. Chinese (Topic-Prominent language), English (Subject-Prominent language)

Let’s start from the first few sentences

1. What happened when I was crying, I can’t remember clearly.

2. The book I have already read.

3. The job I took up this summer vacation I like very much.

Even if the words, grammar haven’t the obvious problems, but it’s not so authentic when we read. Obviously, the three sentences above are not in
line with the general English expression, but why such sentences appeared? That’s because our people influenced by mother tongue when writing. Chinese is a Topic oriented language (Topic-Prominent language), while English is a subject oriented language (Subject-Prominent language)

This means the “subject” are mostly related with topics in Chinese sentences. The role of the predicate is to make narrative comments about the topic. Due to our expression habit, here comes out sentence 1, sentence 2, sentence 3. So how to modify to meet the English language expression way? We can amend the sentences as follows

● I can’t remember clearly what happened when I was crying.
● I have already read the book.
● I like the job I took up this summer vacation.

2. English is form (hypotactic) language, Chinese is consensual (paratactic) language

“Nida” American translation theorist once said: “The most important difference between Chinese and English is the contrast between form and consensual.” So-called “form language” refers to the use of conjunctions (coordinating conjunction and, but, or other, or subordinating conjunction that, who, when, if, etc.) to express the logical relationship between sentence elements or sentences; while “consensual” refers to use context to reflect the logical relationship between sentences not by conjunctions.

For example: “You come, and I left.”, Translated into English is “If you come, I’ll go.” Or “When you come, I’ll go” and so on. Here English
sentence expressed the logic relationship using conjunction which hiding in Chinese.

So we should express the hidden logical relationship between sentence components or sentence when translate Chinese to English, herein to mater the conjunction becomes particularly important.

3. The objective and subjective tend between English and Chinese

We always use a alive person or animal as the subject in Chinese, obviously there was a clear subjective tendency by using active voice. English often use inanimate things as subject, so passive voice become dominant. When we write the English articles, we usually follow the tendency of Chinese subjective tendency thinking way, we often use “I think”, “we must”, “someone says”, a expression of subjective tendency, but less using inanimate nouns as subject and passive voice.

For example, translate the following sentence into English:

我们应该采取适当的措施限制外国旅游者的数量,努力保护当地环境和历史不受国际旅游业的不利影响。

e.g1. We must take proper measures to limit the number of foreign tourists and we should make great efforts to protect local environment and history from the harmful effects of international tourism.

e.g2. Proper measures must be taken to limit the number of foreign tourists and the great efforts should be made to protect local environment and history from the harmful effects of international tourism.

We can easily tell which one is better.
So we should try to use the inanimate nouns as the subject and the passive voice when translating, and get rid of our Chinese speaking habit.

4. As to content, English focus on the start, Chinese focus on the rear

English nation tend to express their views, feelings and attitudes directly, therefore, they always put the important information at the beginning of the sentence, while Chinese handle in an opposite way. This comparison between English and Chinese is mainly reflected in three aspects: In the complex sentence

In English, the main clause is the important information, and secondary information in the subordinate clause. The main clauses are often placed before the secondary clause, that is the focus on the start. The Chinese is generally as per the logical and chronological order, the important information are put on the back, that is the focus on the rear. So while writing the English sentence, remember to put the important information should be placed before the secondary information, try to avoid the interference of Chinese characteristics.