

On English Translation of Serial Verb Constructions: A Case Study of “A Madman’s Diary”

Nianxi Yin^{1*}, Min Zhu¹

¹ College of Foreign Studies, Guilin University of Technology, Guilin, China

Email Address

abrilyin@outlook.com (Nianxi Yin), 496890818@qq.com (Min Zhu)

*Correspondence: abrilyin@outlook.com

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Abstract:

One of Lu Xun’s novels, “A Madman’s Diary”, stands for China’s first modern vernacular novel and holds a significant position in the history of Chinese literature. Therefore, the study of its English translations is of great importance. This article starts from the perspective of the unique sentence structure in Chinese, known as serial verb constructions. Within this framework, particular attention is accorded to the five semantic relationships encompassed therein: the objective relation, the manner relation, the sequential relation, the accompanying relation, and the relation of cause and effect. By comparing the translations by Yang Xianyi and Julia Lovell, this study attempts to explore the translation strategies employed for serial verb constructions, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of the novel.

Keywords:

Serial Verb Construction, A Madman’s Diary, Translation Strategies

1. Introduction

Lu Xun, revered as a foundational figure in modern Chinese literature, witnessed the translation of his works into over 50 languages between the 1920s and 1990s. His masterpiece, “A Madman’s Diary”, as the inaugural modern vernacular novel in China, occupies a paramount position in Chinese literature, signifying a transformative epoch in Chinese literature.

Preceding studies on the English translations of “A Madman’s Diary” can be classified into several analytical perspectives: First, many delve into different translations individually, primarily focusing on a textual level, dissecting translation strategies and narrative strategies. Second, a linguistic view scrutinizes the translation of metaphors. For example, Fu and Wang [1] meticulously examine metaphors across three translation versions from the perspectives of scriptural, lexical, syntactic, and contextual metaphors, elucidating that Lyell’s version most adeptly captures the writing style and metaphorical tenor of “A Madman’s Diary”. This lens substantially aids readers in apprehending Lu Xun’s stylistic nuances, though it tilts toward form at the expense of semantic understanding.

As discussed by Mi [2], he assessed biases and misconceptions inherent in the six English translations of “A Madman’s Diary”, based on the translators’ misinterpretations. It found misreading attributable to the absence of the contextual understanding of the original creation and to the translators’ imaginative misinterpretations. Lyell’s and Julia Lovell’s translations, wittingly or unwittingly, assimilate the Western biases ingrained from longstanding perceptions of China’s culture. This constitutes the third research perspective, focusing on the translator’s role within the translation process. Beyond misinterpretation theories, translator behavior critique also introduces an innovative analytical framework.

The fourth is innovative in methodology. Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches and incorporating empirical study, Zhu carried out corpora-based research, scrutinizing translator style across vocabulary, syntax, and discourse within two versions of the novella. [3]

The contrastive analysis of English and Chinese translations is also a crucial perspective in research. By comparing the translation strategies of the unique Chinese sentence structure named serial verb constructions, we can analyze how different translators handle languages and understand the main theme of the novel. However, this study area still entails more exploration. Therefore, this paper starts with the Chinese serial verb construction and conducts a contrastive analysis of the translations by Yang Xianyi and Lyell, aiming to explore the translation strategies employed in these two versions.

2. Serial Verb Constructions

Chinese is a paratactic language, constructing sentences based on semantics, unlike hypotactic languages such as English, which have various grammatical and structural limitations. In Chinese, verbs lack strict morphological changes and are relatively flexible and unconstrained. Multiple verbs often appear in a single sentence, and their logical relationships do not necessarily need explicit linguistic markers; instead, they are expressed through the interplay of linguistic context and internal relationships. In other words, as long as the semantics align logically, two or more verbs or verb phrases can be combined in the sequential order of actions to describe the subject. In these sentences, verbs and verb phrases hold equal status, with their order of appearance being the primary distinguishing factor. Consequently, complex meanings that might require convoluted expression in other languages can often be encapsulated within a single sentence in Chinese. This also highlights the fuzziness in Chinese’s language expression form.

Serial verb constructions exemplify a distinct structure within Chinese, also known as a serial predicate construction. Simply put, it involves a series of verbs as the predicate in a sentence. As pointed by Ning [4], the notable feature of this structure is the absence of traditional grammatical relationships between the verbs, like Subject-Predicate, Verb-Object, Verb-Complement, Modifier-Noun, and coordination. There are no conjunctions or pauses in speech; instead, the verbs are arranged in a logical sequence of meaning. English, on the other hand, places a greater emphasis on linguistic expression style and logical form, highlighting the precision of language and the coherence of logic.

In a broad sense, serial verb constructions refer to a sentence composed of two or more verbs or verb phrases without any grammatical markers indicating the structural relationship between these verbs or verb phrases, as discussed by Baker [5]. Scholars

commonly describe this structure in the form of NP-VP₁-VP₂. Chinese has a plethora of sentences conforming to this structure, each exhibiting distinct syntactic and semantic features. Currently, there is ongoing debate within academia regarding the definition of serial verb constructions. Relevant research primarily involves the types of sentences mentioned in (1-2):

(1) a. 张三拿刀切肉。

b. 张三买书看。

c. 张三去市场买菜。

d. 张三站起来发言。

(2) a. 张三端菜上来。

b. 张三教李四学英语。

c. 张三靠在门边抽烟。

d. 张三打断了李四的腿。

The sentences in Group (1) are undisputedly recognized as typical instances of serial verb constructions in academia. [5,6] However, there is still debate regarding whether the sentences in Group (2) fall under serial verb constructions.

In serial verb constructions, the semantic relationships between the verb phrases are an important point of research. These relationships are also among the criteria used to determine and identify serial verb constructions. First, the connected verb phrases can represent a series of successive actions. Second, these verb phrases not only exhibit a chronological order but also indicate that the preceding action serves as the means or manner for the subsequent action, with the subsequent action being the purpose of the preceding one. Third, while lacking a temporal order, the preceding action can serve as the means or manner for the subsequent one, which, in turn, serves as the purpose of the preceding action. Furthermore, even without a temporal or purposive connection, the preceding action can merely function as the means or manner for the subsequent action. Fifth, two verbs, when placed in sequence, present the same action from both positive and negative perspectives, creating a complementary relationship. Seventh, in a series of verb phrases, if the first verb is “有”, its object often refers to abstract concepts. Additionally, the first verb phrase can establish the condition or reason for the subsequent action. Tenth, if the verb phrases involve “来” or “去”, when these verbs are placed before the other verb, they indicate that the purpose comes after the action; however, when placed after the other verb, they indicate that the purpose comes before the action. [6,7]

Unlike Chinese, English is hypotactic. It constructs sentences according to strict grammatical rules, and semantics must adhere to linguistic forms. English forms sentences using a subject-verb structure. Except for compound sentences, even complex sentences typically have only one predicate verb, and this verb must undergo changes in person, number, and tense to agree with the subject. When expressing complex ideas involving multiple verbs in a sentence, apart from one verb becoming the predicate verb, other verbs are either transformed into non-predicate verb forms, or they are placed within clauses, prepositional phrases, or independent structures. The morphological changes of verbs in English are quite extensive.

Therefore, when translating serial verb constructions into English, it is crucial to start by grasping the syntactic meanings conveyed by serial verb constructions. This approach can facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the textual implications. [8] Chinese serial verb constructions convey intricate syntactic meanings, primarily encompassing the objective relation, the manner relation, the sequential relation, the accompanying relation, and the relation of cause and effect. This study primarily focuses on these five relations. This paper selects two representative translations, with Yang Xianyi's version (referred as "Yang" below) as the primary subject of study and Julia Lovell's translation published by Penguin Classics (referred as "Lovell" below) as a reference for comparison. The study investigates the translation strategies employed for serial verb constructions in "A Madman's Diary", summarizing the translation strategies for the five semantic relationships of serial verb constructions in Chinese-English translation.

3. Analysis of the Translation of Serial Verb Constructions

3.1 The Objectives Relation

Example 1: 适归故乡，迂道往访……

Yang: ...since I was going back to my old home I broke my journey to call on them.

Lovell: ...while on a visit home, I broke my journey to call on them.

In the serial-verb sentence mentioned here, both VP₁ and VP₂ represent an objective relation. When taking a detour on the way home, it is with the purpose of visiting a friend. Both translators have employed the strategy of using infinitive verb phrases to convey the purpose in their translations.

Example 2: 劳君远道来视，然已早愈，赴某地候补矣。

Yang: "I appreciate your coming such a long way to see us," he said, "but my brother recovered some time ago and has gone elsewhere to take up an official post."

Lovell: Thanking me for my concern, he informed me that his brother had long since made a full recovery and had left home to wait for an appropriate official post to fall vacant.

In this case, there are two instances of serial verb constructions. In each sentence, both VP₁ and VP₂ convey an objective relation. Interestingly, for the second serial verb constructions, both translators have employed the same strategy by using infinitive verb phrases. However, in the first one, Yang uses infinitives while Lovell opts for free translation, simplifying "远道而来" to "concern", directly conveying the emotions behind the words and enhancing readability. This approach also adds diversity to the sentence structure in English.

Example 3: 今撮录一篇，以供医家研究。

Yang: ...and I have copied out a part to serve as a subject for medical research.

Lovell: Below, I have extracted occasional flashes of coherence, in the hope they may be of use to medical research.

In this context, VP₁ refers to "供医家" and VP₂ refers to "研究", indicating an objective relation. Both Yang and Lovell have employed the strategy of switching part

of speech. Yang transforms VP₂ into a prepositional phrase “for medical research”, while Lovell transforms VP₂ into a prepositional phrase “to medical research”.

3.2 The Sequential Relation

Example 4: 持归阅一过，知所患盖“迫害狂”之类。

Yang: I took the diary away, read it through, and found that he had suffered from a form of persecution complex.

Lovell: Reading them back home, I discovered his brother had suffered from what is known as a ‘persecution complex’.

In this serial verb sentence, there are two verb phrases involved. VP₁ is “持归” and VP₂ is “阅一过”, signifying a sequential relation where first the diary is taken home, and then it is read. Yang’s approach involves transforming these into two coordinated predicate verb phrases, a structure that inherently exhibits a temporal progression in English. On the other hand, Lovell employs part-of-speech transformation. She turns VP₁ into an adverb serving as a temporal adverbial for VP₂, while simultaneously changing VP₁ into a present participle, functioning as a modifier adverbial phrase in the main clause. This demonstrates a more flexible change in forms.

Example 5: 几个人便挖出他的心肝来，用油煎炒了吃，可以壮壮胆子。

Yang: ...then some people had taken out his heart and liver, fried them in oil, and eaten them as a means of increasing their courage.

Lovell: ...and some of the villagers had dug out his heart and liver, then fried and eaten them, for courage.

In this sentence exist three verb phrases. VP₁ is “用油煎”, VP₂ is “炒了”, and VP₃ is “吃”, with VP₁ and VP₂ occurring before VP₃. Yang separates the three phrases into two groups, treating the first two as one group, and converts both groups into coordinated predicate phrases in the sentence. This approach is similar to what Yang did in the previous example. Similarly, Lovell employs the same strategy here, directly using several coordinated predicate verb phrases to represent a temporal progression in sequence.

3.3 The Manner Relation

Example 6: 拖我回家，家里的人都装作不认识我……

Yang: He dragged me home. The folk at home all pretended not to know me...

Lovell: To drag me home. Back home, though, everyone was pretending they didn’t know me...

VP₁, “装作”, and VP₂, “不认识我”, are related in a manner relation, where VP₁ describes the manner in which VP₂ occurs. Yang’s approach involves transforming them into an infinitive phrase, while Lovell’s strategy is to turn them into an object clause.

Example 7: 我翻开历史一查，这历史没有年代，歪斜斜的每叶上都写着“仁义道德”几个字。

Yang: I tried to look this up, but my history has no chronology and scrawled all over each page are the words: “Confucian Virtue and Morality.”

Lovell: When I flick through the history books, I find no dates, only those fine Confucian principles ‘benevolence, righteousness, morality’ snaking their way across each page.

In this case, VP₁ “翻开历史” and VP₂ “一查” are also related in a manner relation, where the action of flipping through history is the way in which the action of checking is conducted. Yang expresses this relationship using an infinitive verb phrase, while Lovell employs a strategy of omission, directly hiding the action of “一查” behind “flick through”. Moreover, Lovell combines VP₁ and VP₂ to form a temporal adverbial clause, showcasing a highly flexible transformation.

Example 8: 最可怜的是我的大哥，他也是人，何以毫不害怕；而且合伙吃我呢？

Yang: The most deplorable is my elder brother. He’s a man too, so why isn’t he afraid, why is he plotting with others to eat me?

Lovell: It’s my brother I feel sorry for. He’s only human: he must feel the dread of it, and yet still he conspires to eat me.

VP₁ is “合伙” and VP₂ is “吃我”，and they express the idea that the madman doesn’t understand why his elder brother joined forces with outsiders to “eat me”, reflecting the village community’s practice of consuming people. However, both translations use infinitive verbs, converting them into clauses that express purpose.

3.4 The Accompanying Relation

Example 9: 书上写着这许多字，佃户说了这许多话，却都笑吟吟的睁着怪眼睛看我。

Yang: All these words written in the book, all the words spoken by our tenant, eye me quizzically with an enigmatic smile.

Lovell: All these words—written in books, spoken by the farmer—stare strangely, smirkingly at me.

In this sentence, VP₁ is “笑吟吟的睁着怪眼睛” and VP₂ is “看我”. Both actions occur simultaneously without dependency or subordination. Both translations treat VP₂ as the head, translating it as “eye me” or “stare at me” respectively. Then, they transform VP₁ into a prepositional phrase or an adverb, respectively, using an accompanying adverbial to modify the action. The approaches taken by both translations are similar due to the nature of the original sentence.

Example 10: 他满眼凶光，怕我看出，只是低头向着地，从眼镜横边暗暗看我。

Yang: There was a murderous gleam in his eyes, and fearing that I would see it he lowered his head, stealing side-glances at me from behind his glasses.

Lovell: My visitor approached slowly, head bowed, afraid I would catch the savagery in his eyes, sneaking glances at me through his spectacles.

VP₁ is “低头” and VP₂ is “向着地”. Both translations have employed the same strategy of omission. Both translators have omitted VP₂. Yang directly uses the verb phrase “lower his head”, while Lovell employs the independent structure “head bowed”. Both translations emphasize the action of lowering the head, which inherently implies that the face is directed towards the ground.

Example 11: 我忍不住，便放声大笑起来，十分快活。

Yang: I couldn’t help it, I nearly split my sides, I was so amused.

Lovell: Indeed, I burst into uncontrollable roars of mirth—a laughter that rang with righteous courage.

Here VP₁ is “放声” and VP₂ is “大笑起来”. These two actions are almost inseparable and happen simultaneously, indicating an accompanying relation. Yang integrates the two into the idiom “split my sides”, which vividly conveys the degree of laughter. On the other hand, Lovell employs an omission strategy by omitting “放声” and enhances VP₂ with additional translation, expressing the underlying idea of uncontrollable feelings through the phrase “uncontrollable roars”.

3.5 The Relation of Cause and Effect

Example 12: 否则惊吓忧愁死了, 虽则略瘦, 也还可以首肯几下。

Yang: On the other hand, if a man is frightened or worried to death, though that makes him rather thin, they still nod in approval.

Lovell: Failing that, I could always pine away, of melancholy or nerves. Though my corpse would have less fat on it, it would still be a corpse.

In this sentence, there are three verb phrases involved. VP₁ is “是惊吓”, VP₂ is “忧愁”, and VP₃ is “死了”. The relationship between VP₁ and VP₂ jointly constitutes the cause for VP₃, making VP₃ the result. Therefore, these three verb phrases belong to the relation of cause and effect. Yang’s approach involves part-of-speech transformation by turning them into adjectives and adding infinitive verbs to express the result. On the other hand, Lovell takes VP₃ as the predicate core and transforms VP₁ and VP₂ into nouns, using prepositional phrases with “of” to create adverbial clauses of cause. Thus, Yang’s translation emphasizes the result, while Lovell’s translation emphasizes the cause.

4. Conclusions

Through the analysis of this paper, it is observed that the most frequent types of serial verb constructions found in the novel “A Madman’s Diary” are those the objective relation and the manner relation. In terms of translation strategies, the objective relation often involves transforming VP₂ into infinitive verb phrases or changing the part of speech. For the sequential relation, the common strategy is to translate both VP₁ and VP₂ directly as coordinate predicate verb phrases to convey temporal progression. The manner relation often utilizes infinitive verb phrases or transform sentence structures into object clauses or adverbial clauses. The accompanying relation is generally handled by converting VP₂ verbs into adverbs or participles, serving as modifier adverbial phrases, or through the strategy of omission. Last, for the relation of cause and effect, the most frequent strategy also lies in infinitive verbs phrase which expresses result adverbials, or using prepositional phrases to denote causal adverbials.

Yang’s version mostly adopts a translation strategy that aligns with the semantic relationships in the source text, with minimal changes in sentence structure, more faithful to the original text. On the other hand, Lovell’s version exhibits relatively flexible sentence structures with a variety of categories and a mix of long and short sentences, which better caters to the habits of the target language readers.

Although the logical relationships between verbs or verb phrases in Chinese serial verb constructions might not be explicitly marked at a surface structural level, rendering these intrinsic relationships overtly in English translation becomes a rigid

requirement of English grammar rules. Therefore, it is crucial during translation to establish the logical relationships between verbs or verb phrases. Once the semantic logical relationships are determined, appropriate translation strategies can be applied accordingly in the translation of “A Madman’s Diary”.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: Nianxi Yin; Methodology: Nianxi Yin; Formal analysis: Nianxi Yin; Investigation: Nianxi Yin; Writing – original draft preparation: Nianxi Yin; Writing – review and editing: Min Zhu, Nianxi Yin; Supervision: Min Zhu.

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