

# **A Contrastive Study of the English and Chinese Comparative Constructions**

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**Pan, Gui Xin. 2012. A Contrastive Study of the English and Chinese Comparative Constructions. SNU. *SNU Working Papers in English Linguistics and Language X*, XX-XX.** Comparison is a common feature of all natural languages. Therefore, it is of great importance to analyze different ways of comparison expressions in Chinese and English and then to find out the reasons that generate the differences. With the help of library and Internet, the present study will analyze comparison in three aspects: semantically, syntactically and then to analyze the reasons that generate the differences in order to help English learners in China gain a better insight into peculiarities of their mother language and English in comparison expressions so that it is possible for them to be more conscious of not making mistakes in English writing or daily communications. Furthermore, by way of a contrastive study of English and Chinese expressions of comparison systematically, it is hopeful to improve the English teaching and translation from English into Chinese and vice versa. **(Seoul National University)**

**Key words:** comparison expressions, more than, *bi*-clause, *meiyou*-clause

## **1. Introduction**

Comparative constructions are the common feature shared by all natural languages. It is not only an important part of grammar and rhetorical device, but also a vital way of thinking. According to Rodney Huddleston (2002), English has a rich system of specialized syntax and

morphology for the expressions of various types. Similarly, Chao Yuenren, a well-known Chinese linguist also realized that what so-called linguistic theory, in fact, is making contrast between different languages, a scientific research finding by a synthetically contrastive analysis of languages of various nationalities in the world. Thus, based on Huddleston's study of *Comparative Constructions* (2002), this paper will endeavor to conduct a contrastive study on the comparative constructions in Chinese and English.

To begin with, as in most occasions in English that *than* is the marker of comparative constructions, *bi*, on the other hand, is one of the most symbolic markers of the comparative constructions in Chinese as shown in example (1):

(1)	ta	bi	ni	(geng)	gao
	He/She	bi	you	more	tall
‘ He/She is taller than you.’					

With the marker of comparison *bi* as in (1), it can be understood that the first NP *ta*, the subject and the topic, has a higher degree on the comparing dimension *gao* “tall” than the second NP (Chung, 2006). The degree adverb *geng* is the head of the comparative construction and requires two complements to be the compared elements. In other words, the *bi*-clause can be assigned with respective semantic roles according to their syntactic structure as follows:

Theme [NP] + contrast [PP [bi]] + Head[AP] (Huang, Shih, Chen, 2004)

From the analysis above, it is obvious that comparative constructions in Chinese can be semantically and syntactically different from those in English. Therefore, this paper will concentrate on a contrastive study of the English and Chinese expressions of comparison in an attempt to

explore the similarities, particularly to explore the dissimilarities between these two languages. By a contrastive study, it can help English learners in China gain a better insight into peculiarities of their mother language and English in comparison expressions so that it is possible for them to be more conscious of not making mistakes in English writing or daily communications. Furthermore, by way of a contrastive study of English and Chinese comparative constructions systematically, it is hopeful to improve the English teaching and translation from English into Chinese and vice versa.

Generally, comparison expressions include positive degree, comparative degree and superlative degree. But the comparison discussed here will just cover the comparative degree. This paper will consist of four chapters. Chapter One is an introduction to the paper which briefly states the rationale for the study, aim of the study and the structure of the paper. Chapter Two is the literature review related to the study. In Chapter Three, how English comparative constructions are different from Chinese and the reasons that generate the differences will be analyzed. Finally, Chapter Four concludes the paper by providing a summary of the findings.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Analyses of the English and Chinese comparisons in semantic category**

In order to have a better understanding of the comparative constructions in both English and Chinese semantically, there will be general descriptions of comparison including the definition of comparison, semantic requirements, comparison word and semantic restrictions.

#### **2.1.1 Definition of comparison**

The first issue needed to deal with is the definition of ‘comparative construction’. According to Stassen (1985, p.24), in semantic or

cognitive terms, comparison can be defined as a mental act by which two objects are assigned a position on a predicative scale as shown in the following:

A construction in natural language counts as a comparative construction if that construction has the semantic function of assigning a graded (i.e. non-identical) position on a predicate scale to two (possibly complex) objects.

### **2.1.2 Semantic requirements for comparison**

There are four semantic requirements for a comparative category as follows (Xie, 2006):

A. Objects of comparison --- the first comparative term and second comparative term.

The first semantic requirement for comparison is comparative objects which are the basis of comparison. As it is known to all, comparison is the process of comparing two or more people or things as illustrated in the following:

- (2)    a. I am taller than you.  
 b. Wo   bi   ni   gao.  
 I      bi   you   tall.  
 c. I made much more progress this term than last term.  
 d. Wo   zhe   ge   xue   qi   bi   shang   ge   xue   qi   jin   bu  
 I      this        term      bi        last        term      progress  
 duo   le.  
 much.

Apparently, whether it is in Chinese or in English, there must be two different comparative objects with one being the first comparative term and the other being the second comparative term.

B. Comparative content--- a comparative point and special comparative item.

According to Xie (2006), when two things are compared, it is impossible to compare all aspects of them. Therefore, there will be a comparative point which indicates in which aspect two things or people are compared. For examples:

(3) I have more books than you.

(4) Wo de pingguo meiyou ni de duo.  
My apples not your much  
'My apples are not more than yours'

From the examples above, it is not difficult to observe that both (3) and (4) are compared in a specific aspect called comparative content which in (3), the content of comparison between I and you is the quantity of books while in (4), the comparison content is the quantity of pingguo (apple). Therefore, when two things or people are compared, there is always a comparative content with reference to a specific aspect such as quantity, quality, size etc.

C. A comparative result

The superior/inferior distinction between two different compared objects is a comparative result as illustrated from examples (2) to (4) above (Xie, 2006). Therefore, in the examples above taller, *more progress*, and *more books* are the comparative result respectively. Meanwhile, the Chinese terms *gao*, *jinbu* and *duo* are the comparative result respectively.

D. Comparative words

In Chinese, *bi*, *zui* (most), and *he...yiyang* (as...as) are usually used as the comparative words while in English, there are *as*, *than* and *of*.

Moreover, in English, there are also several verbs that contain comparative elements themselves and can be used in comparison. They can be divided into two parts as follows:

First, verbs are formed based on their related adjectives which are defined as derivatives, for instance, *lengthen*, *shorten*, *enlarge*, *lessen*, *lower* and so on. For example:

- (5) We are going to enlarge the garden to grow more vegetables.  
(= We are going to make the vegetable garden larger.)
- (6) The time of meeting is lengthened in order to finish the negotiation. ('lengthen' means to make the time longer.)

Second, verbs express the changing of degree such as *exceed*, *increase*, *reduce*, *decline*, *diminish*, *abridge*, *maximize*, *minimize* and so on (Yin, 2008). For example:

- (7) a. You can minimize the dangers of driving by taking care to obey all the rules of the road. (= You can lessen the dangers to the smallest degree by taking care to obey all the rules of the road.)
- b. Demand exceeds supply. (=Demand is greater than supply.)

On the other hand, in Chinese, verbs like *yanshen* (lengthen), *pengzhang* (inflate), *tuo zhan* (expand), *yasuo* (compress), *fangda* (enlarge), *chaoyue* (surpass) that express the changing of degree can also be used as comparison as follows:

- (8) Zhi you    ya suo    ti ji,        cai neng    zhuang xia  
    Only        compress    volume,        can            load  
    suoyou    yifu.  
    all            clothes  
‘Only compress the volume, can it hope to load all clothes in it.’

## 2.2 Analyses of the English and Chinese comparisons in syntactic category

This part will enumerate the common used types of comparative constructions in Chinese and English in order to help language learners have a better understanding of the constructions of both Chinese and English comparison expressions.

### 2.2.1 Comparative constructions in Chinese

In Chinese, the way to express comparison can be extremely diversified, for there are no fixed words or form in comparison expressions. For example, when the Chinese want to convey the meaning that A is bigger than B, they can say: ‘A *bi* B *da* (big)’, ‘B *meiyou* A *da*’, or ‘B *buru* A *da*’ etc.. Generally, comparison expressions in Chinese can be sorted into three main sentence styles: bi-clause, meiyou-clause and buru-clause (Hu, 2005).

#### 1. Bi-clause

Li and Thompson (1981) have generalized a formula for comparative construction in bi-clause, in which there are two compared items to be linked by a comparison word and then followed by the predicate that expresses the dimension along which two items are compared. That is:

A + comparison word + B + (adverb) + dimension (Li and Thompson, 1981)

In this formula, A must be the subject or the topic of the verb phrase that expresses the dimension, and B must be understood as the standard of comparison (Chung, 2006). Based on this formula, it can generate ten styles of bi-clause with different kinds of complements (Liu, 2000).

Style 1. A *bi* B+ Adj.

- (10)      wo      bi      ta      nian qing.  
           I      bi      he      young  
           ‘I am younger than he.’

A is the subject while “*bi B*” acts as the adverbial adjunct. The adjective *nianqing* (young) here is the predicate which acts not only as the comparative result but also the comparative point.

#### Style 2. A bi B + Adj.+ de duo (duo le, yi dian er, yi xie)/ number

- (11) a. Zhe ge      fang jian      bi      na ge      da      duo le.  
           This      room      bi      that one      big      much  
           ‘This room is much bigger than that one.’
- b. ta      bi      wo      xiao      9      sui.  
           He      bi      I      young      9      years.  
           ‘He is 9 years younger than me.’

In this style, similar to style 1 which the adjective acts as the predicate, there is also complement that indicates the degree of difference between the comparative terms such as: *duo le* (more), *de duo* (much more), *yi dian er* (a little), *yi xie* (some) etc. or specific number.

#### Style 3. A bi B + V. + number

- (12) wo men      xue xiao de      wai guo      xuesheng      bi      qu nian  
           Our      school’s      foreign      students      bi      last year  
           zeng jia le      10      ren.  
           increase      10      people  
           ‘Our school’s foreign students have increased 10 people  
           compared with last year.’

Verbs in this sentence style always contain a meaning that something is to change from one side to its opposite, for example, *duo* (many) – *shao* (few) (in terms of the amount), *gao* (high)—*di* (low) ((in terms of

degree), *zao* (early)—*wan* (late) (in terms of the time) etc. Besides, *zeng jia* (increase), *jian shao* (reduce), *ti gao* (raise), *jiang di* (lower), *ti qian* (advance), *tui chi* (postpone), *yan chang* (extend), *suo duan* (shorten) are some words that are frequently used in this kind of sentence style and usually there is a specific number behind them to further explain the degree of this change.

Style 4. A bi B + duo (shao) / zao (wan) / nan (yi) etc. + V. + number

(13) *jin tian , ta bi wo zao lai le 5 fen zhong.*

Today, he bi I early 5 minutes.

‘Today, he came 5 minutes earlier than me.’

In this style, there is always adjectives like *duo* (much), *shao* (little), *zao* (early), *wan* (late), *nan* (difficult), *yi* (easy) etc. in front of the verb. And after the verb, there usually comes along with the complements or objects that indicate the amount such as *yi xie* (some), *yi dian er* ( a little), *yi xie* (some) or specific number etc.

Style 5. A bi B+ Verb+ de+ Adj.(de duo/yi xie /yi dian er)

(14) a. *Ta chang de bi ni hao duo le.*

He sings de bi you good much

‘He sings much better than you.’

In this style of bi-clauses, the predicate is usually a verb and the adjective at back serves as a complement indicating the degree. After the adjective, there can be words that indicate the amount, such as *de duo* (much more), *yi xie* (some), *yi dian er* (a little), but no specific number is allowed. For example, we cannot say:

(15) \**Ta shui de bi wo wan ban ge xiao shi.*

He sleep de bi I late half of an hour

‘He sleeps half of an hour later than me.’

## Style 6. A bi B+ hai/geng (much)/dou (all)+ Adj./V.

- (16) Dao le guan jian shi ke, nv ren bi nan ren  
 At critical time, women bi man  
 geng zhen jing.  
 much calm.

‘At critical time, women are calmer than men.’

From the examples above, we can see that *geng*, *hai*, *dou* etc. can be put before the adjective, verb or verb phrase to indicate the degree. Also, some words containing the meaning of small amount such as *yi xie* (some), *yi dian er* (a little) can be put after the adjective or verb as a complement. But words like *de duo* (much more), *duo le* (more) or some specific number are forbidden. And ‘*A bi B hai/geng X* (*X* is the comparative point)’ also suggests that “*B hen (very) X*”, for example:

- (17) Ta bi wo geng gao/hai gao.  
 He bi I much tall/ rather tall.  
 ‘He is much taller than me.’

It indicates that I am very tall.

## Style 7. Subject +A bi B ( as an adverbial adjunct ) + predicate

Generally, ‘bi B’ serves as an adverbial adjunct or attribute in bi-clauses, but there is also an occasion that ‘A bi B’ is regarded as adverbial adjunct. Such kind of sentences is usually applied to show the changes of a certain object in different periods or different situations and sometimes A can be omitted. For example:

- (18) Ta (xian zai) bi yi qian jin bu duo le.  
 He (now) bi before progress much  
 ‘He now makes much more progress than before.’

## Style 8. A bi B+ model verb + V ( + complement )

- (19) yi qian de ren bi xian zai de ren neng  
 In the past people bi nowadays people can  
 chi ku (yi xie).  
 bear the hardship (a little).  
 ‘People in the past can bear the hardship better than people  
 nowadays.’

In Chinese, ‘model verb + verb’ is regarded as a fixed phrase and no other element can be inserted into it. Behind it, we can attach *yi xie* (some) or *duo* (much) to it as the complement.

## Style 9. A bi B+ rang (let)/jiao (make)/shi /ling+ noun (personal) + verb/adjective

- (20) Dui Liuxiang lai shuo, meiyou shen me bi bu neng  
 For Liuxiang, nothing bi cannot  
 can jia 08 Beijing ao yun hui geng  
 take part in 08 Beijing Olympic Games more  
 rang ta tong xin le  
 make he painful  
 ‘For Liuxiang, nothing is more painful than that he can’t  
 take part in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.’

## Style 10. A bi B hai (more)...

- (21) Ta bi a Q hai a Q.  
 He bi Q more Q.

In this sentence style, we have to pay attention that the features of B should be quite well-known, for example, the spirit of “a Q” is moral victory which is commonly known to Chinese people.

The ten sentence styles above are all common ways of expressing bi-clauses. However, bi-clause is only one of Chinese many ways of

comparison expressions, and there are still others ways of expressing comparison.

## 2. Meiyou-clause

Apart from *bi*, *meiyou* is also usually used to compare one object or action against another. Semantically, there are two meaning of *meiyou* in Chinese: one is inferior to and the other is not enough. Stative verbs and the complement of degree (*de*) are usually used in this construction. Combined with different complements, meiyou-clause which *meiyou* means inferior to can be sorted into five kinds of sentence styles (Liu, 2000).

### Style 1. A meiyou B+ adjective

- (22) Ta hai meiyou zhuo zi gao ne!  
 He        meiyou      desk        tall  
 ‘He is no taller than the desk.’

### Style 2. A meiyou B+ V.+ de+ Adj. Or A+ V. + de+ meiyou +B+ Adj.

- (23) ta meiyou wo pao de kuai.  
 He        meiyou    I    run     de    fast.  
 ‘He does not run faster than me.’

### Style 3. A meiyou B+ adjective phrase

- (24) wo men dou meiyou ta neng li qiang.  
 We        all        meiyou    she    ability        powerful  
 ‘We are all not so powerful as her.’

### Style 4. A meiyou B+ you + noun

- (25) shang yi nian de han guo wen hua jie meiyou  
 Last year’s            Korean culture festival    meiyou  
 jin nian de you yi si.  
 this year’s    interesting

‘Last year’s Korean culture festival is not more interesting than this year’s.’

In Chinese, ‘you+noun’ together serves as an adjective.

Style 5. A meiyou B+ modal verb + V. / N.

- (26) ta    meiyou    jie jie    hui    mai dong xi.  
 She    meiyou    sister    good at    shopping  
 ‘She is not better than her sister in shopping.’

### 3. Buru-clause

Buru-clause is quite similar to meiyou-clause, so it will not be introduced here again. In fact, bi-clause, buru-clause and meiyou-clause are just the major categories of comparison expressions in Chinese and there are also other ways of comparison expression that without *bi* or *meiyou* or *buru*, for example:

- (30) ta men    ye dou    meiyou    shen me    da gai bian,  
 They    all    no    any    changes,  
 dan shi    lao    le    xie  
 only    old    a little  
 ‘They do not change a lot but only get a little older.’

The comparative construction in this sentence is in latter part, that is ‘*dan shi lao le xie*’ which is without *bi*, *buru* or *meiyou*. Therefore, it is the example that expresses comparison but does not belong to the main categories we have mentioned previously.

#### 2.2.2 Comparative constructions in English

Comparative constructions can be classified into two intersecting dimensions of contrast which yield four types of comparative constructions shown in (31) (Huddleston, 1984):

- |      |          |            |
|------|----------|------------|
| (31) | EQUALITY | INEQUALITY |
|------|----------|------------|

SCALAR Kim is as old as Pat. Kim is older than Pat.

NON-SCALAR I took the same bus as last time. I took a different bus from last time.

But in this part, as mentioned previously, we will just focus on the scalar inequality.

### 2.2.2.1 Common comparative constructions in English

As discussed above, the formula for comparison of scalar inequality are *more...than* construction and *less...than* construction in English. Therefore, the basic construction for comparison of scalar inequality can be illustrated as ‘A+ W + than + B’, for example (Zhang, 1997):

(32) I am older than your (are).  
 A W than B

As shown in example (32), A and B stand for the first comparative term and the second comparative term respectively with W representing the comparative result. In this construction, W can be modified by such degree or quantitative modifiers as *a bit, much, many, far, even, still, a lot, a great deal, slightly, somewhat, twice, two inches* and so on, as illustrated in (Xie, 2006):

- (33) a. This question is much more difficult than that one.
- b. It is a bit colder today than yesterday.
- c. This swimming pool is twice larger than that one.

With the pattern for comparison of superiority is *more...than...* and that for comparison of inferiority is *less...than...* in English, the negation of the former is *not more...than...* or *no more...than...* and that of the latter is *not less...than...* or *no less...than...*, as shown below (Xie, 2006):

- (34) a. Richard is not cleverer than Peter.

- b. Richard is no cleverer than Peter.
- c. The daughter is not less beautiful than her mother.
- d. The daughter is no less beautiful than her mother.

### **2.2.2.2 Special words with comparative meaning**

Besides the sentences styles that with the basic comparative structure of ‘A+ W + than + B’, there are still some special words or phrases that themselves have the comparative meaning. For example, *senior* and *prefer to*.

Adjectives that end with ‘-ior’ such as *superior*, *senior*, *junior*, *prior*, *posterior* have the comparative meaning themselves and usually collocates with ‘to’ to lead out the other comparing subject. For example:

- (35) In the United States, the white always think they are superior to the black.

*Prefer (to)* is another way of comparison expression without the basic comparison structure. For example:

- (36) They prefer to death to surrender in their struggle against the enemy.

### **2.2.2.3 Sentences with ‘more than’ but not belonging to the comparative construction**

We should also pay attention that though there are sentences with “more than”, yet they still do not belong to the comparison expressions.

Style 1. more + AP/NP+ than + AP/NP

- (37) a. Ed is more old than middle-aged.  
 b. She is more a friend than a teacher.

In example (37a), it states that Ed is more properly described as old man than as middle-aged. Such sentences are called metalinguistic comparison because it is concerned not with segments on the age scale but with the relative applicability of the linguistic expressions old and middle-age (Huddleston,2002). Syntactically, metalinguistic expressions differ from ordinary comparison in that it allows only analytic comparative forms.

Style 2. ‘more than + number’ without the subordinate clause of *than*

- (38) More than 1,000 people attended the meeting in Beijing last month.

Style 3. “more than” which conveys the meaning of “not only”

- (39) She is more than clever.

## 2.3 Summary

According to the elaboration of both Chinese and English ways of comparison expression, it can be concluded though there are many similarities between the English and Chinese comparison expressions semantically and syntactically, yet there are more differences between them. Based on the theories introduced above, the following chapter will try to analyze how the Chinese and English comparison expressions are different from each other and the reasons that generate the differences.

## 3. Reasons for the differences between English and Chinese comparison expressions

Based on the fact that there are many similarities and differences between the English and Chinese comparative constructions, this part will endeavor to explore how the comparison expressions in English are

different from those in Chinese, and the reasons for generating those differences.

According to Lian Shuneng (1993), a leading authority in linguistics, once came up with ten pairs of features of Chinese and English, including Synthetic vs. Analytic, Rigid vs. Supple, Hypotactic vs. Paratactic, Complex vs. Simplex, Impersonal vs. Personal, Passive vs. Active, Static vs. Dynamic, Abstract vs. Concrete, Indirect vs. Direct, Substitutive vs. Repetitive. From the study above, it is found that one of the main reasons for the differences in comparison expressions between Chinese and English lies on ‘Synthetic vs. Analytic’ and ‘Hypotactic vs. Paratactic’. In other words, modern English is a synthetic-analytic language while Chinese is a typical analytic language (Lian, 1993). A synthetic language is characterized by frequent and systematic use of inflected forms to express grammatical relationships. By contrast, an analytic language is marked by a relatively frequent use of function words, auxiliary verbs, and changes in word order to express syntactic relations, rather than by inflected forms. Chinese (of all varieties) is perhaps the best-known analytic language. To illustrate:

- (40) Wo bi ni duo san ben shu.  
 I bi you more three book(s)  
 ‘I have three books more than you.’

As can be seen, each syllable (or sometimes two) corresponds to a single concept; in addition, it gives an idea of the syntactical rules that dominate the grammars of such languages. Comparing the Chinese version with the English translation, it can be seen that while English itself is fairly analytic, it contains some agglutinative features, such as the bound morpheme *-s* to mark either possession (in the form of a clitic) or number (in the form of a suffix) (Jia, 2001).

On the other hand, according to Halliday's (1994) explication, it is apparent that English is a hypotaxis-prominent language, while Chinese is parataxis-prominent. On the whole, hypotaxis is the dependent or subordinate construction clauses with connectives, for example, *I shall despair if you don't come*. On the contrary, parataxis is the arranging of clauses one after the other without connectives showing the relation between them, for example, *The rain fell*. Detailed speaking, English is formalized with obvious symbols, such as *-er/* or *than* while Chinese is not. Chinese sentences focus much on the content, whose meaning should be understood through context. This is one of the reasons why the English sentences are subject-prominent, while the Chinese sentences are topic-prominent.

That is, English is a language with Subject-predicate structure and its modifier for comparison always modifies the noun (Zhao, 1986). However, Chinese is a language with theme structure and its theme is illustrated by the modifiers for comparison which is at the end of the sentence. Since some Chinese students have little knowledge about the differences in comparison structures between Chinese and English, they often make mistakes in English writing, such as putting the modifier of comparison in the wrong place. For example:

- (41) \*Nowadays people begin to read books less and less, while they surf on the internet more and more.

For the reason that Chinese and English are influenced by a different culture and have different features themselves, for example modern English is a synthetic-analytic and hypotaxis language while Chinese is a typical analytic and paratactic language, it is doomed that comparison expressions of Chinese and English are different from each other. From the analysis above, it can also be seen that there are various ways of comparison expressions in both languages and therefore, our expressions could be more varied if we are aware of the many different

ways of comparison expressions.

## 4. Conclusion

For the reason that English and Chinese belong to two different language families which English is a member of Indo-European language family, and Chinese is a member of Indo-Zang language family, though there are many similarities between the English and Chinese in comparison expressions in both semantic and syntactic aspect, yet their differences outweigh their similarities. Furthermore, from the analysis above, it can also be seen that there are various ways of comparison expressions in both languages and therefore, our expressions could be more varied if we are aware of the many different ways to express comparisons. Finally, by a contrastive study, it is hoped that it can help English learners in China gain a better insight into peculiarities of their mother language and English in comparison expressions so as to avoid mistakes in English writing or daily communications and to improve the English teaching and translation from English into Chinese and vice versa.

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