A Study on The Theme Change in C-E Translation of Chinese Non-Subject Sentences in Political Discourse
--Taking The 2024 Government Work Report As An Example

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Abstract: The "Theme-Rheme" Theory is a part of the Metafunctions in System-functional linguistics, and the theory has great research value for translation practice and discourse analysis. The special sentence form of the non-subject clause, with its unique structure of missing the subject part but only the predicate part, is characterized by simplicity and conciseness, which is especially common in political discourse. Based on the perspective of the "Theme-Rheme", this study conducts a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the changes in the "Theme" from the original to the English version of the non-subject sentences in the 2024 Government Work Report.

The study reveals that the two most frequent changes of the "Theme" in the translation of political literature are adding Unmarked Theme such as "We", "China" and "the government" and changing "Theme" by translating into the passive voice that translates the original theme as the targeted theme or adds a new theme. Chinese non-subject sentences in political literature lack an operator as the subject. English sentences emphasize logic, the subject needs to be added to lead the whole sentence, to make the discourse more compact. To accurately convey the meaning of these sentences in English, they can be translated into passive voice and the subject adjusted as needed. Given the implicit nature of Chinese and the directness of English, the discipline of theme change aids effective communication. The study seeks to derive objective conclusions through detailed data analysis, offering a new perspective on understanding and appreciating the English translation of political and economic texts.

Keywords: Textual Function, Theme-Rheme Theory, Chinese Non-Subject Sentences, Political Discourse

I. Introduction

In recent years, the research results of Systemic Functional Linguistics have continued to grow with a wide range of applications in the fields of education, art, mathematical functions, and Artificial Intelligence language information processing for artificial intelligence. Applied research, discourse analysis, education, multi-modality, translation, and typology have developed rapidly [1].

As an essential part of China's political literature, the annual Government Work Report is an authoritative summary of the work and a blueprint for future work submitted by the Chinese government to the National People's Congress. Its language is characterized by rigor and simplicity, and its genre is an objective reporting text. A sentence without a subject lacks a clear subject and contains only predicate elements. In government documents, leaders' speeches, and government reports, non-subject sentences are widely used and important. At present, although the overall translation studies of Chinese political literature are quite rich, there is a lack of foreign translation studies on specific sentence types, especially on non-subjective sentences.

II. The Importance of External Translation of China's Political Literature

Xi [2] put forward the task of developing philosophical and social sciences with Chinese characteristics at the annual Philosophical and Social Sciences Work Symposium. We should actively use the approach of Chinese characteristics to address political challenges and enhance global influence. With the deepening of globalization, China has demonstrated significant international influence. The concepts of "the Belt and Road" and "A community with a shared future for mankind" have triggered global discussions, brought development opportunities, and gained widespread recognition. According to Xu and Ren [3], China's rise has made China's voice reverberate around the world, contributing to Chinese wisdom and power. China's diplomacy has made remarkable achievements, which cannot be separated from the wide dissemination of Chinese political thought. In this process, the importance of foreign translation of political literature, as a bridge to promote international exchange, is self-evident.

III. Literature Review

3.1 Research Status of Chinese Political Literature

Using econometric analysis, Liu and Li [4] studied the translation of domestic political literature from 2000 to 2021. The results show that the papers focus on four major themes: strategies and methods of external translation of political literature, the effectiveness of the application of translation theories to political literature, the translation of semantic content such as specific political terminology or distinctive vocabulary and political metaphors, as well as the relationship
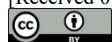
between the internal and external translation of political literature and its dissemination.

In addition to this, this study finds that there are not a few parallel textual comparative studies on quantitative analyses of specific political literature under the corpus and domestic and foreign official editions of Chinese political literature translated out of China. For example, Su and Wang [5] conducted an in-depth analysis of some of the original texts of the 19th National Congress Report and its translations based on the three principles of Purpose Theory, exploring ways to solve the problems and enriching and improving the theoretical research. Chen and Hu [6] analyze the logical dimension of international communication of academic translation needs to improve the understanding of its attributes, and the key elements include effective topic selection and planning, communicative translation and writing strategy, and international communication media platform. Si and Zhao [7] analyzed the keywords "China dream" or "Chinese dream" in English news reports in 2016, and explored the Chinese and foreign media's understanding of "Chinese dream" in terms of word cloud, source and content, and sentiment analysis.

3.2 This Study Under the Previous Studies

Previous studies on political non-subject sentences have mainly focused on translation skills. Based on the corpus of the Government Work Report, Lu and Yang [8] built a small parallel corpus of Chinese and English languages and adopted the corpus research method and the corpus-driven method for analysis. Through the analytical framework of image schema theory, the process of translation is figuratively compared to the force of a moving, changing spherical object. Hu [9] studied selected fragments from the 2011 Government Work Report, from which 20 non-subject sentences were selected. Thirty-two master's students from the researcher's university independently completed 32 translations at the specified time and place. Through the analysis of the self-built corpus, it is found that translators prefer to adopt complementary subject and passive voice in the translation process.

This study is committed to exploring the theme change of the translation of Chinese political literature. Compared with summarizing the translation strategy through the translation of statistics, this study pays more attention to the analysis of the change from the discourse level, aiming to accurately express the focus of the original text, so as to realize the purpose of political communication.

IV. Theoretical Framework

Mathesius mentioned "Theme" and "Rheme" in the Functional Sentence Perspective in 1939. The sentence structure was newly divided. In 2000, Halliday inherited and developed it, defining its function. The theme is the beginning of the sentence, laying down the main content of the clause; the Rheme is supplemented around the main position. The unmarked theme refers to the constituent that the subject of the clause acts as, and the marked theme refers to the other constituents of the clause. The theme and the rheme can be understood as given and new information respectively, and the clause can also be further analyzed for given and new information in the sentence under the Theme-Rheme Theory [10].

Based on the complexity of the theme structure itself, Halliday [11] explicitly classified themes into three categories, namely, Simple Theme, Multiple Theme, and Clause as Theme. Among them, Simple Theme refers to those Ideational components as defined by Halliday, without interpersonal and discourse components. Simple Themes are noun phrases, adverbial phrases, or prepositional phrases, and the number of these phrases can be single or multiple.

V. Research Methodology

Based on the theoretical framework of Theme-Rheme Theory, this study comprehensively comprehends and quantitatively analyses the changes in the Theme Structure of non-subjective clauses in the English version of the 2024 government work report. The objects of the study were selected from the official bilingual text of the 2024 Government Work Report released by the Xinhua News Agency, which contains 17,231 words in Chinese and 13,702 words in English. In the original text, there are around more than 380 Chinese non-subject sentences counted according to the sentence number; this study, through the comparative analysis of the non-subject clauses in the original text and the corresponding English versions, five cases of subject change are summarized, namely: adding an unmarked theme, a prepositional phrase as theme, changing the theme after translating into the passive voice, adding a zero subject after translating into the imperative sentence, and nominalization of the theme, while the other cases are neglected. Through the preliminary data statistics, the frequency of the other five cases in the 2024 Government Work Report is shown in Table 1.

The Theme Change	Adding an unmarked theme	A prepositional phrase as a theme	Changing the theme after translating into the passive voice	Adding a zero subject after translating into the imperative sentence	Nominalization of the theme
Frequency	337	24	55	2	4

Table 1: Theme changes statistics table of C-E translation of non-subject sentences

According to the data in the table, in the 2024 government work report, the theme changes in Chinese non-subject sentences in English translation show the following characteristics: Among them, the proportion of adding unmarked

subjects is the highest, followed by the change of passive voice. The frequency of adding the prepositional phrase as the theme is low, the use of the zero subject "Let us" is the lowest, occurring only twice. The latter study will analyze the purpose and significance of the change according to the case of the subject change.

VI. The role of theme changes of non-subject sentences in political literature

6.1 Avoiding "Chinese English" and Reflecting Static Language

The main distinction between Chinese and English lies in their linguistic structures: Chinese emphasizes meaning, whereas English prioritizes form. This is particularly evident in sentence construction, where Chinese often centers on themes with less emphasis on logical and syntactic relationships, whereas English focuses on the subject and strengthens these relationships. Therefore, when translating Chinese non-subject sentences into English, it is usually necessary to supplement the appropriate subject to maintain the integrity and logic of the sentence.[12] The unmarked theme usually serves as the subject of the clause, and the unmarked theme will often added according to the specific context when translating Chinese non-subject sentences into English.

Chinese	加大义务教育、基本养老、基本医疗等财政补助力度，扩大救助保障对象范围。
English	We increased subsidies for compulsory education, basic old-age insurance, and basic medical insurance and expanded the coverage of assistance and support.

Table2: Example 1

According to Table 2, the Chinese text directly addresses government actions in livelihood protection without subjective language. In English, we use the unmarked theme "We" to refer to the government departments as the logical subject, clarifying the sentence's starting point. This explicit action maker strengthens the sentence's structure. The rheme details specific measures, which are "increased subsidies for compulsory education, basic old-age insurance, and basic medical insurance and expanded the coverage of assistance and support". This structure aligns with English norms and effectively conveys the government's focus on livelihoods.

This structural approach adheres to English norms and effectively communicates the government's focus and actions on livelihood protection. The use of the unmarked theme "We" in English is a sensible reconstruction of the original text's information structure and a key to facilitating communication between Chinese and English, ensuring the translation aligns with English readers' expectations while preserving the original meaning.

Chinese	出台稳定工业经济运行、支持先进制造业举措，提高重点行业企业研发费用加计扣除比例，推动重点产业链高质量发展。
English	We took measures to ensure the stable performance of the industrial sector and support advanced manufacturing and increased the additional tax deductions for R&D expenses of enterprises in key industries. This helped promote the high-quality development of key industrial chains.

Table3: Example 2

According to Table 3, the Chinese text directly said the government's main task in 2024 is to study and implement the spirit of the 20th CPC National Congress and the 2nd Plenary Session, following the Central Committee's decisions. Its unmarked theme is "This", which in the English sentence "This helped promote high-quality development of key industrial chains" refers to the first three clauses in the Chinese text, indicating that the government will advance the high-quality development of key industrial chains through three specific tasks. The use of "This" clarifies the sequence and logic in English, integrating the given information with new details. This is in line with the norms of the English language and makes the logic of the English text more logical.

Chinese	积极参与和推动全球气候治理。
English	China actively participated in and promoted global climate governance.

Table 4: Example 3

According to Table 4, the non-subject sentence means that the Chinese government, by the guiding ideology and strategic planning of the Party, has been actively implementing the tasks and tasks set out by the Party Central Committee, and one of the important initiatives is to "actively participate in and promote global climate governance".In the English version, to make the main body of the action clear and in line with the English expression habit, we add the unmarked theme "China" to indicate that the implementer of the action is China. At the same time, the phrase "actively participate in and promote global climate governance" is used as a reference, which not only emphasizes the core content of this principle but also attracts readers' attention through the presentation of new information, aiming at attracting widespread attention and

concern. This rewriting not only retains the essence of the original text but also avoids the expression of "Chinese English", which is more in line with the characteristics of the English language.

6.2 Highlighting the passive voice, Focusing on the keynote

Hu Zhuanglin, Zhu Yongsheng, and other scholars point out in Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics that many schools of thought, such as Chomsky's transformational generative grammar, believe that the active sentence is not different from the corresponding passive sentence in terms of the core meaning of the expression. However, Systemic Functional Grammar further points out that although the two are consistent at the level of Ideational Function and Interpersonal Function when analyzed from the perspective of Textual Function, there is a significant difference in the focus of the speaker's emphasis. Specifically, active sentences tend to take the doer of the action as the subject and usually place it in the theme position as the starting point of the message, whereas passive sentences choose the mediator or the target as the subject and place it in the theme position of the clause, thus changing the focus of the message. Whether a sentence should "switch" from active to passive or vice versa is determined by its Textual Function.

This study analyses quantitatively the translation of the 2024 government work report into passive voice and finds that there are two cases: the first case is that the English version will add a new noun as the theme, weakening the strength of the action in the original text; the second case is that the English version will take the rheme of the original text as the theme, and will choose the appropriate focus in the English context.

Chinese	实施新一轮千亿斤粮食产能提升行动。
English	New initiatives were launched to increase grain production capacity by 50 million metric tons.

Table 5: Example 4

According to Table 5, in the original, the non-subject sentence is about specific measures. In the English version, the theme of the original is reconstructed as part of the English rheme, and the theme is replaced with the noun "New initiatives".This shift makes the whole sentence revolve around the core message of "New initiatives" and highlights "capacity enhancement" as the focus of the message. The non-subject sentence, with the verb "implement" as the theme in the active voice, has been changed to a noun as the theme in the English version, which not only reflects the adjustment of the Textual Function but also profoundly reflects the difference between Chinese and English in terms of linguistic characteristics: Chinese, as a dynamic language, prefers to take the performer of action as the subject of the sentence, while English, as a static language, prefers to take the performer of action as the subject of the sentence. The subject of the sentence; whereas English, as a static language, its subject is mostly in the form of a noun.

Chinese	出台建设全国统一大市场总体工作方案。
English	A master plan for building a unified national market was released.

Table 6: Example 5

According to Table 6, in addition to adding a new noun as the theme, there is another case in which the theme in the original non-subjective sentence is completely changed into the rheme in the English version, and the rheme in the original non-subjective sentence is changed into the theme in the English version. In this case, the English version becomes a passive voice, and according to the specific situation, we need to highlight those actions and behaviors of the government at this moment, so we change the theme to the noun "A master plan for building a unified national market", highlighting the action "introduced".So the subject is changed to the noun "A master plan for building a unified national market", highlighting the action "introduced", reflecting the government's determination to introduce the relevant measures to build a unified national market.

6.3 Adding articulation and coherence to carry on the previous and the next

Chinese political literature is characterized by its precision, using short, metaphor-rich sentences often without clear logical connectors. This is particularly evident in objective statements. To translate this into English, it's important to clarify logical connections to suit the target audience's reading habits and communication preferences. Prepositional phrases at the start of sentences can specify the predicate's context, such as situation, time, or manner, effectively conveying logical relationships.

Chinese	坚持把政治建设摆在首位，全面提高政府履职能力。
English	With top priority given to political advancement, we enhanced the government's capacity to perform its duties in all areas.

Table 7: Example 6

According to Table 7, the original non-subject sentence reads: According to Table 7, the original non-subject sentence reads: In the face of the severe challenges and many complex problems at home and abroad, the Chinese government should take corresponding measures to actively respond to the challenges. In the English version, by using the prepositional phrase "With top priority given to political advancement" as the theme, it shows out the internal logic of these two short sentences. The prepositional phrase "With top priority given to political advancement" serves as the theme, shows that because the Chinese government gives top priority to political construction, it can better fulfill its government responsibilities. The theme and the rheme are causal relations, and the theme guides the expansion of the sentence.

Although the logic relation is not directly visible in the original text, the English version is closer to the English expression that tends to connect explicitly, thus enhancing the logical coherence and overall fluency between the preceding and following texts.

Chinese	围绕扩大内需、优化结构、提振信心、防范化解风险，延续优化一批阶段性政策，及时推出一批新政策，打出有力有效的政策组合拳。
English	To expand domestic demand, improve the economic structure, bolster confidence, and prevent and defuse risks, we adopted a full range of robust and effective policies, namely, extending and improving several time-limited policies and rolling out a new batch of timely policies.

Table 8: Example 7

According to Table 8, the content expressed in the original non-subjective sentence is listed as an important item of the government's specific work in 2024. In the English version, the theme "To expand domestic demand, improve the economic structure, bolster confidence, and prevent and defuse risks" is in the form of a prepositional phrase. In the English version, the subject "To expand domestic demand, improve the economic structure, bolster confidence, and prevent and defuse risks" is in the form of prepositional phrase, which points out the purpose of the government's implementation of a series of initiatives, i.e., to expand domestic demand, optimize the economic structure, bolster confidence, and prevent and defuse risks, and several interrelated clauses in the original text are presented in English with an explicit logical relationship, which makes the implicit logic of the Chinese language more obvious and more in line with the English language's habit of expression. Such a way of translation makes the purpose the theme position, which naturally leads to the rheme position: the specific initiatives taken by the government to achieve these goals, thus highlighting more the efforts and contributions made by the government in specific areas.

6.4 Using "Let us" to appeal and express determination.

Imperative sentences are used for commands, requests, or suggestions, typically using the base form of the verb without a stated subject. They are common in political and economic texts to propose actions, give orders, or provide instructions. In English, the subject is often omitted, similar to Chinese sentences without subjects. Types include sentences with subjects, non-subject sentences, negative imperatives, those with "Let," and those used for emphasis. [13]

Quirk et al. noted that in non-subject imperatives, the verb occupies the core position[14]. Some argue that these imperatives imply a "you" to the listener, suggesting a zero subject representing the implied addressee. Quirk's theory holds that the entire imperative sentence is new information, guiding focus to the rheme. Others view the theme of an English imperative as a zero subject "you," with the rheme including all other components. Adding "you" explicitly softens the tone and makes instructions more polite. However, due to the rigorous and authoritative nature of political and economic texts, this study suggests following Quirk et al.'s delineation of the theme position in English versions.

Chinese	坚定信心、开拓进取，努力完成全年经济社会发展目标任务，为以中国式现代化全面推进强国建设、民族复兴伟业不懈奋斗！
English	Let us forge ahead in full confidence and in a pioneering spirit to accomplish the objectives and tasks for this year's economic and social development. Let us strive to build a great country and advance national rejuvenation on all fronts through Chinese modernization.

Table 9: Example 8

According to Table 9, the original Chinese non-subjective sentence is the concluding part of the 2024 Government Work Report calls on delegates to remember their mission and work tirelessly to shape the future. This is meant to motivate them to innovate and dedicate themselves to the nation's rejuvenation. The translation should preserve the speaker's passion and expectations to accurately convey their firm stance and inspire the audience to join in creating a bright future. By adding the theme position "Let us" and placing the core proposal of the original text on the rheme position, we not only strengthen the focus of the appeal but also stimulate the strong motivation of all delegates to be united and move forward, thus realizing the profound connotation and wide impact of linguistic communication. The structure of the discourse advances layer by layer, forming a prose sentence. It reflects the speaker's determination and perseverance in calling on all participants to work together. At the same time, it makes the discourse more regular and formal, which is in line with the language characteristics and writing features of official government documents.

VII Translation strategies for the law of theme change

The 2024 Government Work Report data indicates that the most common theme change in translating Chinese non-subjective sentences into English is adding an unmarked theme, followed by changing the theme into passive voice. The use of "Let us" as a zero subject in imperative sentences is less common, appearing only twice. This reflects the fundamental differences between Chinese and English and is linked to the Theme-Rheme Theory within the Textual Function framework. This study examines the frequency of these changes and their practical significance through case analysis. Based on the case analysis, we can derive the corresponding translation strategies.

7.1 Adding the unmarked theme according to the context

The characteristic of Chinese political non-subject sentences is that there is no subject, but the English language usually requires an "Action initiator", the subject of the sentence, to guide the English sentence. English logic is rigorous and is in line with the characteristics of Chinese political texts. Therefore, when there is no main sentence in English-translated Chinese language, the unmarked main position is directly added to serve as the subject in English sentences.

7.2 Adding an unmarked theme or changing the original theme into the targeted rheme under the passive voice

This study finds the translation of the 2024 Government Work Report into passive voice, identifying two scenarios: firstly, where the English version introduces a new noun as the theme, thereby diminishing the action's intensity in the original text; secondly, where the English version retains the rheme of the original text as the theme while selecting an appropriate focus within the English linguistic context.

When examining language use, it's crucial to understand the distinctions and relationships between active and passive sentences. Each type has a unique semantic nuance and functional purpose, and they cannot be used interchangeably. The choice of sentence structure reflects the speaker's careful planning and creativity, which is essential for maintaining coherence and logic in discourse. In Chinese political literature, passive voice is often used to translate non-subjective sentences, but this requires careful analysis of the original context.

7.3 Using the preposition phrase to be the theme, translating explicitly the invisible logic in non-subject sentences

This study finds a significant feature: in the 2024 Government Work Report, the reporter tended to use three or more non-subject sentences when explaining the specific measures taken by the Chinese government. There is no obvious logical connection between these main sentences. Given this situation, in the English translation, the translator needs to add appropriate prepositional phrases as the theme. These prepositional phrases can be "with", "to", "to", etc., whose purpose is to clearly express the implicit logical relationship within the original non-subject sentences in the translation process. In this way, the translation can not only maintain the meaning of the original text but also make it easier for English readers to understand the logical connection between the sentences, to improve the accuracy and readability of the translation.

VIII. Summary

This study concludes through quantitative and qualitative analyses of the research that when translating Chinese political literature, the theme position change of non-subjective sentences is mainly reflected in two situations: adding an unmarked theme and changing the theme after translating into the passive voice. The need to ensure the logical coherence of the discourse sometimes leads to the introduction of prepositional phrases, noun phrases, or sentences to connect two non-subject sentences. The theme's position as a prepositional phrase can make the English translation logically explicit. As for the nominalization of the theme, both grammatical and lexical articulation devices are closely related to the noun phrase[15]. With Lexical Cohesion, it can make the whole discourse more coherent and fluent. In political literature, when there is a need to appeal to the audience, "Let us" is usually used as the subject to express the urgent feelings and wishes of the speaker. In Chinese political literature, the use of non-subjective clauses is crucial, which gives political texts a sense of rigor, coherence, and rhythm. Therefore, it is especially crucial to translate non-subject sentences from political literature into English. Adjusting the position of the subject of the sentence or changing the active voice to the passive voice when necessary, while maintaining the English expression, can make the translation more natural and appropriate, and effectively convey China's position and influence.

Under the current trend of globalization, with the increasing influence of China, the choice of English translation strategies for Chinese political texts is particularly crucial. The English translation of Chinese political texts is not only an important way to disseminate China's philosophy of governance, but also an important bridge to promote international mutual understanding and communication. In this process, as an indispensable part of political texts, the importance of English translation of Chinese non-subject sentences should not be neglected. The English translation of political texts should strive to achieve the leap from "understanding the world" to "letting the world understand China" from a global perspective [16].

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