Does higher proficiency affect translation? A corpus-based analysis of Chinese-English translation of tense and aspect markers

Translating from tenseless languages like Chinese into English, which obligatorily encodes tense and aspect morphologically, presents persistent challenges for second language (L2) learners (Lu, 2019). While prior studies have explored tense-aspect use in Chinese-English translation (e.g. Tsai, 2023), few have examined how learners' proficiency influences their choice of tense and aspect, especially when several grammatically acceptable but pragmatically distinct options are available. Addressing this gap offers insight into how increased proficiency may enhance learners' ability to interpret temporal meanings in the source language and encode them appropriately in the target language.

This study addresses this gap by investigating whether tense-aspect use in Chinese-English translations vary with English proficiency level and how much variation manifests in specific tense-aspect choices. We analysed Chinese-English written translations from the Parallel Corpus of Chinese EFL Learners (PACCEL) (Wen & Wang, 2008), focusing on texts with clear tense-aspect distinctions. Participants were third- and fourth-year English majors whose first language (L1) is Chinese, who provided their Test for English Majors Band 4 (TEM4) scores, a standardized measure of English proficiency in China.

Translations were coded into tense-aspect categories (e.g. the Simple Past, Simple Present, Present Perfect). For example, the same Chinese sentence, 经济全球化使南北差距进一步扩大, was variously translated as: a) Economic globalization widened the South-North gap [SimPast]; b) Economic globalization enlarges the gap between South and North. [SimPres]; and c) Economic globalization has widened the South-North gap. [PresPerf].

A Bayesian multinomial logistic regression model was used to examine the relationship between proficiency and tense-aspect use. Results showed that higher proficiency was associated with increased use of the Simple Past and decreased reliance on the Simple Present. While the Past Tense Default Hypothesis (PTDH) (Salaberry, 1999) suggested that learners may overly rely on the Simple Past at lower proficiency levels, our findings instead showed lower proficiency learners' intensive use of the Simple Present, which challenges the PTDH and points to more nuanced development patterns. Moreover, the reliance on the Simple Present at the lower proficiency levels may reflect early dependence on formulaic structures, potentially shaped by instruction (Alexopoulou et al., 2025). With increasing proficiency, learners shifted toward interpretable forms like the Simple Past, consistent with the Interpretability Hypothesis (Tsimpli & Dimitrakopoulou, 2007). These findings highlight the need for translation training that emphasizes analysing source texts' tense-aspect structures and ensuring consistency in target-language tense-aspect selection. It should be noted, however, that the results need to be confirmed by further research using a larger corpus.

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Word count: 418