

# An Empirical Study on Information Prominence Reflected in Sentence Structures of Chinese College EFL Argumentative Writing

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## Abstract

Prominence, as an important dimension of cognitive construal, refers to the capacity to evoke a certain substructure as the focus of attention, which can be materialized in a variety of semantic and grammatical expressions (Langacker, 1987). Subject of a sentence (Zhang, 2011) and specific sentence structures (Lin, 2013) can bring a substructure into salience by highlighting it in a specifically grammatical place. Accordingly, the place of subject or the specific sentence structures which are applied to emphasize certain information can reflect a writer's intention of prominence. Thus, this essay will take prominence of Langacker's cognitive construal as theoretical basis and has an empirical study on information prominence of 20 argumentative writing papers written by Chinese college EFL learners from Leshan Normal University. By categorizing the sentences of each sample into five types of structures—link verb sentence, active sentence, passive sentence, non-finite verbs as subject and the specific sentence patterns, and referring to the statistics of sentence structure application and the specific writing contents, it is found out that the writers are inclined to highlight subjective or static information, which leads to subjectivity and powerlessness of argumentation.

**Keywords:** EFL writing, cognitive construal, prominence, sentence structures, subjectivity

## 1. Introduction

EFL (English as Foreign Language) writing is a productive skill for college students, which can explicitly reflect learners' aptitude in thinking, organization and expression. As for Chinese college EFL learners, the task of writing appears in most English tests like CET-4 (College English Test-level 4) or CET-6 (College English Test-level 6), requiring them to express their opinions accurately and fluently (Cai, 2002). In terms of argumentative writing the author has noticed an interesting phenomenon that most of the writers can objectively illustrate a point in their native language with solid arguments but as for the same topic, their English writing seems subjective and powerless. Apparently apart from the shortage of objective and forceful supports, it seems that the biggest problem lies in their capacity to emphasize information in an objective manner, or prominence of objective information, which is primarily reflected in lexicon and sentence structures (Langacker, 1987: 107). Since the choice of lexicon is more elusive and random to be analyzed in a quantitative level, investigating the specific grammatical place of a sentence which highlights certain information means significantly for the information prominence in this study and for inspiration to advance EFL writing performance in the future.

## 2. Literature Review

The last decades have witnessed abundant studies on EFL writing in China, which are generally processed in three aspects: 1) the improvement of teaching EFL writing has been demonstrated in many studies. In the last decade, the research approach has been converted from applied linguistics to empirical studies (Du, 2001; Ye, 2002; Cai, 2005), enabling EFL writing to be analyzed in quantitative and qualitative levels (Wang, 2000). Such polybasic approaches as network and multimedia have been also applied to advance the teaching of EFL writing (Zhang et al., 2005; Yang & Zhang, 2006; Wu & Zheng, 2006). Since the development of cognitive linguistics, many studies have been conducted from this perspective. Zhang (2007) shows how such cognitive theories as prominence, perspective, figure-ground and iconicity are applied in writing class to improve EFL learners' writing performance; He (2008) illustrates the importance of imparting metaphor theory to EFL writers; Liang (2015) correlates various cognitive models with different rhetorical models, like schemata theory and figure-ground theory with narration, categorization and subcategorization theories with exposition, specificity

and basic-level categorization with argumentation, concluding that writing should be completed by substantializing abstract knowledge system. 2) The factors affecting EFL writing have attracted great interest, in which metacognition and the influence of native language are the most frequently studied. Meta-cognition includes knowledge about when and how to use particular strategies for learning or for problem solving (Metcalf & Shimamura, 1994). As Wu and Liu (2004) have noted, metacognition should consist of metacognition strategies and evaluations, both of which can help to improve EFL writing achievements. In the empirical study, Jiang and Che (2005) prove that EFL writers with higher scores possess higher metacognitive level. Liu and Gao (2011) relate metacognitive strategies with EFL writing performance, revealing the improvement of meta-awareness and overall language proficiency. With regard to the influence of native language, Guo and Liu (1997) state that the influence of L1 is more reflected in its effect on cognitive process during L2 output than merely in writers' linguistic results, serving as intermediary language in logic (meaning) reasoning processing, the formal monitoring in target language output and mutual retrieval of world conception and the target language. Li (2010) focuses on the negative language transfer in college English writing and illustrates its negative effect in terms of lexicon, syntax, discourse and pragmatics. 3) The studies have converted the target from writing texts to the writers' thinking and cognitive activities during writing. Wang Wenyu and Wen Qiufang (2002) take the methods of thinking-aloud, retrospecting and interviewing to record 16 Chinese college students' thinking activities, which are concluded as understanding topic, conceiving contents and structures and text outputting, and put forward an effective model for EFL writing.

These studies indicate the tendency to analyze EFL writing from the perspective of cognitive linguistics and the feature of empirical research, proving the feasibility and efficiency to improve EFL learners' writing performance. However, the theories applied in both teaching and writing analysis are mainly focused on metacognition, indicating the monotone and limitation. Thus, the study, which will analyze the usage of sentence structures in Chinese college EFL writing on a quantitative scale and probe into their cognitive activity of prominence, can contribute a different perspective to the existing studies. Prominence of cognitive construal has been applied in many previous studies. Tang Chaoju's essay (2005) analyzes how prominence determines the choice of sentences structures; He Linmao and He Zhi (2007), and Zhang (2014) illustrate how Chinese topic prominence is transferred in English writing. But these studies only focus on single sentences and are done on a general scale but not in a complete text. Thus, this essay will try to analyze specific writing samples and to study EFL learners' cognitive status during the writing process, exploring intangible cognitive problem by tangible linguistic expressions. It also values the study of process, which is highly advocated in the method of procedure dominating in western wiring theory (Ren & Luan, 2008).

### 3. Theoretical Basis

#### 3.1 Prominence of Cognitive Construal

Cognitive construal, as a foundational concept in cognitive grammar, is defined by Taylor (2002) as “[t]he process by which a given state is structured by a language-user for purposes of its linguistic expression”, indicating that situations can be constructed by means of alternate grammatical images that reflect “qualitatively different mental experiences” of the same phenomenon (Langacker, 1987). Prominence, as an important dimension of cognitive construal, indicates that “all linguistic expressions profile something. The profile/base distinction is, however, not objectively given, but a matter of experience and knowledge of conventional usage” (Langacker, 1990). As people tend to perceive the outside world in different perspective and focus attention on different aspects, their linguistic expressions must reflect corresponding prominence. The same situation perceived in different ways is realized in different expressions.

Prominence can be reflected in Lexicon (Lin, 2013), for example, “the soldier was killed”, which indicates that a soldier died not of committing suicide but of being killed by others. If we want to emphasize the information that the soldier was killed by a deliberate plan, the word “murdered” should be applied. Furthermore, if we want to emphasize the speaker's respect to the soldier or his political view, the word “assassinated” seems a better option. For another instance, the two sentences “Tom lent a book to Mary” and “Mary borrowed a book from Tom” express the same meaning but with different prominence. The first sentence emphasizes Tom's action and implies his generousness while the second sentence focuses on Mary's situation that she owes Tom something. The choice of different verbs converts the readers' attention to different agent of the action. These examples indicate that for the same situation, different choice of words directs the readers' attention to different perspective and highlight different information.

Prominence can be also manifested in sentence structures (Lin, 2013). For example,

1) He bought the book yesterday.

2) It is the book that he bought yesterday.

3) It is yesterday that he bought the book.

The first sentence is unmarked, which just states a natural situation of someone buying something in a specific time. The object “book” of the second sentence is highlighted in the emphatic pattern, which indicates the information that there were a lot of choices for him to buy but he only chose a book. In the third sentence, the time “yesterday” attracts all the attention, intentionally implying that he could buy the book anytime but he deliberately chose yesterday to buy it.

It seems that selecting a word is a feasible way to put the emphasis on the information which needs attention or to clarify the perspective of the speaker, but the choice of words are too elusive and random to be analyzed in a study. Hence, this study will focus on the application of sentence structures.

### 3.2 Prominence and sentence Structures

As for Quirk’s (1972) categorization of sentence structures, a sentence is compactly constructed by “subject + predicate+ complement” with the sequence of subject in the front while predicate and complement in the back (Li, 2014). As for a normal sentence, subject is the focus of attention and thus it can naturally make the information in prominent place (Zhang, 2011).

As for the information prominence realized by taking the place of subject, if object of an action is needed to be highlighted, the object should be moved to the place of subject and the active sentence is transferred into passive sentence. For example, “this factory produces machine tool”. In this active sentence, “this factory” occupying the place of subject attracts attention, which emphasizes that the function of the factory is to produce machine tool. But if the object “machine tools” is removed to the place of subject, the active sentence is turned into passive sentence and the information focus is directed to the resources of machines tools.

If an action needs highlighting, the predicate verb should be changed into non-finite verbs according to grammar rules and then put in the place of subject (sometimes “it” is added as formal subject), for example, “everyone should protect the environment and take it as his duty”. In this sentence, everyone as subject becomes the focus of attention, which emphasizes the natural process of agent acting on an object and highlights the initiative of people. But if the significance of action needs highlighting, the verb should be turned into non-finite verb and the sentence is transferred into “to protect/protecting the environment is everyone’s duty” (or it is everyone’s duty to protect the environment).

If the prominence of the complement (time, space, way, degree, consequences, cause and effect, identity etc.) is needed, special sentence structures can help realize the purpose, for example, inverted sentence, cleft sentence, pseudo-cleft sentence or left-dislocation construction. For instance, the following sentences convey the same meaning but with different salience:

- 1) He found his happiness in that city (active sentence).
- 2) It was in that city that he found his happiness (cleft sentence).
- 3) Where he found his happiness was in that city (pseudo-cleft sentence).
- 4) Happiness, he found it in that city (left-dislocation construction).
- 5) Happiness, he found in that city (inverted sentence).

By applying special sentence structures, sentences 2) and 3) are intended to direct attention to the location where he found his happiness while the last two to something important that he found.

Besides, the structure of “there be” is a special structure to highlight subject (Feng, 2012). For example, in the sentence “there is seriously air pollution in this city”, in which the subject “air pollution” naturally attracts attention. Besides, an interrogative question can focus the reader’s attention on something requiring serious consideration (Liu Jixin, Liu Cheng & Liu Ci, 1994). For instance, the sentence “what causes the waste of resources?” can remind the reader to think about the cause of waste.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Research Questions

In order to investigate information prominence reflected in the application of sentence structures, this study is design to solve the following questions:

- 1) Which kinds of sentence structures are EFL writers inclined to apply for highlighting information? 2) What aspects of information are brought to salience by the application of different sentence structures?

#### 4.2 Subjects

The participants were 60 second-year non-English majors aging from 19 to 22, who were studying at Leshan Normal University, Leshan, China. They were chosen without considering the gender but on the premise that they all passed CET-4, ensuring the proficiency to be able to express thoughts in an accurate, coherent and grammatically correct way (Cai, 2002).

#### 4.3 Instruments

The selected subjects were required to sit in a classroom and finish a topic in 30 minutes without preparing it previously. The proficiency-catering topic of CET-4 in 2012—"On excessive packaging"—was chosen as the writing topic, which was meant to be written as an argumentation. The total number of words was restricted not to exceed 150 words, which is enough for a decent and appropriate argumentation according to the requirements of CET-4. 30 minutes later the 60 papers were submitted and after a rough scan the author collected 57 valid samples with complete structures and topic-centering contents, from which 20 samples were randomly selected.

#### 4.4 Procedures

This study takes the method of quantitative research. The data collecting include the following two specific steps:

1) Categorization. Sentence structures are generally classified into three types: link verb sentences, notional verb sentences (subject+vt.+object and subject+vi.) and specific sentences. With precision being concerned, the sentences in each writing samples of this study are more specifically categorized into the following patterns: link verb sentence, active sentence, passive sentence, non-finite verbs (including various nominal clauses, the infinitives, the gerund and participle) as subject and the special sentence patterns including inverted sentence, cleft sentence, pseudo-cleft sentence, left-dislocation construction, "there be" pattern and interrogative sentence. Among them, the proverbial sentences like "every coin has two sides" and collocations like "as far as I'm concerned" are excluded into the category but included into the total number of sentences.

2) Quantification. As for each sample, the total number of sentences is first counted quantitatively on the base of the total number of predicate verbs including various subordinate clauses (adverbial clauses and nominal clauses) but not including proverbial sentences and collocations. Then, the total number of each sentence type is counted in accord with categorization. Therein, passive sentences include the ones led by "be", "get", "have" and etc. The non-finite verbs include nominal clauses, infinitive, gerund and participle; "there be" sentences includes "there exist". Finally, the total proportion of each sentence type used by all the writers (the total number of each sentence type of all the samples/ the total number of sentences of all the samples) is showed in Table 1. Besides, various proportions of each sentence type used in each sample (the total number of each sentence type in a sample / the total number of sentences of the sample) are demonstrated in Figure 1.

#### 4.5 Data Analysis

After careful categorization and quantification, a table and a figure are made to illustrate how information prominence is reflected in the application of various sentence structures by EFL writers. Table 1 refers to the total proportion of each sentence type used by all the writers, whose percentage can explain EFL writers' tendency of sentence structure application. The higher the percentage is, the more frequently the sentence type is used. Figure 1 shows the preference of sentence types in each sample, in which the higher percentage indicates the more frequent usage of this sentence type. It can demonstrate the distribution of sentence structures in each sample and personal preference of information prominence by combining with the specific contents of each writing paper.

(1) The tendency about sentence structure applications.

Table 1. The total proportion of each sentence type used by all the writers

The total number of sentences	328	Proportion	
Link verb sentence	82	25%	
Active sentence	183	55.8%	
Passive sentence	26	7.9%	
non-finite verbs as subject	11	3.4%	
Special sentence patterns	inverted sentence	1	0.3%
	cleft sentence	0	0%
	pseudo-cleft sentence	2	0.6%
	left-dislocation construction	0	0%
	“there be”	3	0.9%
	interrogative sentence	8	2%

The statistics in table 1 clarify that: 1) the writers tend to apply active sentence type with the highest percentage of 55.8%, indicating that for a writing paper, nearly half of the sentences are constructed by active voice; 2) the second most popular usage is link verb sentence, which accounts for a quarter of a writing paper; 3) passive sentence can be found on a few occasions; 4) non-finite verbs as subject is seldom used by the writers; 5) all the writers are trying to avoid the use of special sentence patterns.

(2) The preference of sentence structures applied in each sample.

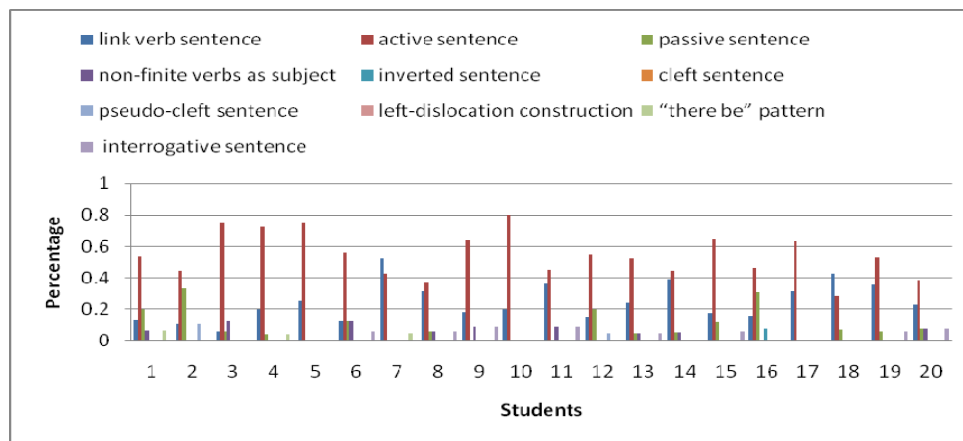


Figure 1. The proportion of each sentence type used in every writing paper

The statistics in Figure 1 and the specific samples indicate that: 1) for each writer, the application of sentence structures is monotonous with active sentence as the most frequently used. Such active sentences pervade in each sample as “I think...”, “many people like...”, “excessive packaging make the product...”, “product of excessive packing has disadvantages” and etc. In the sample of the most-frequent user (No.10), only two types of sentence patterns (active sentence and link verb sentence) are found, indicating the paper’s shortage of diversity in sentence structures; 2) for most writers, they tend to use link verb sentences and even some writers (No.7, No.18) use more link verb sentences than active sentences. For example, “the attraction to you is the outlook”, “this was not good to us”, “the goods are useless even if the package is very beautiful”, “the phenomenon that many productions are on excessive packaging is more and more serious” and etc. But for a few writers (No.2, No.12 and No.16), the application of passive sentences is more than that of link verb sentences. For instance, “the product in the market are excessively packaged”, “the packages after being used are abandoned, “...especially some products, which are packaged to your teachers, bosses and friends” and etc.; 3) non-finite verb as subject can be found in No.1, No.3, No.6, No.8, No.9, No.11, No.13, No.14, but all of them are their familiar “that-clauses as subject” like “the reason that the product is excessively packaged is that the shop keeper want to

attract more customers”, “it is reported that many productions are on excessive packaging”, “it is common that products are on excessive packaging” and “it is necessary that...” and etc. non-finite verbs such as infinitive and gerund as subjective are seldom found; 4) all the students avoid the usage of special sentence patterns except interrogative questions in No. 6, No.8, No.9, No.11, No.13, No.15, No.19 and No.20 and “there be” pattern in No.1, No.4, No.7, for instance, “why this thing comes up?”, “why are so many products on excessive packaging?”, “why does this happen?”, “where do you go shopping?”, “there is a phenomenon that...” and etc. According to the specific samples about interrogative sentences, most of the writers tend to question the cause of the phenomenon. Most of the “there be” patterns are used to introduce the social phenomenon.

#### 4.6 Results

The data analysis indicates that: 1) the excessive use of active sentences makes argumentative writing subjective. In Chinese college EFL argumentative writing, the writers are inclined to use active sentence which is frequently applied in their native language. Chinese is a language which tends to use active sentence to express ideas (Ye, 2009). In his study of comparing writing papers of the students from different countries, Kaplan (1966) states that being influenced by Confucianism and Buddhism Chinese people are reserved, modest and cautious. Thus, they tend to express their ideas in a tactful and topic-avoiding way. They think that human beings are the center of thought and universe and accordingly they are inclined to neglect objective facts and emphasize the initiative of human. Therefore, Chinese English learners tend to illustrate their opinions by using active sentences, which highlights the prominence of the initiative of agents and the natural process of an action (Ye, 2009). This cultural indication explains why Chinese EFL learners prefer to use personal pronouns or persons as the subject of a sentence, which is able to weaken the objectivity of an argumentative writing. The voice can be improved objectively if the active sentences like “I think that...”, “product of excessive packing has disadvantages” are converted into passive sentences like “it is thought that...” or “disadvantages are found in the product of excessive packaging”, in which the agents are neglected and objects become the focus of attention, highlighting the facts but not persons; 2) the fewer usage of passive sentences shows the lack of objectivity. Passive sentence is often used to neglect the agent of an action and highlight the situation of an object. It emphasizes the result of an action, which focus on the facts but not personal emotions (Gui, 2010). Passive sentences are much more frequently applied in English than in Chinese whose passive structure is more complicated and hidden. In Kaplan’s study, he finds that western English learners are inclined to use passive sentences in their writing because they pay more attention to facts; 3) the frequent use of link verb sentences makes argumentative writing less forceful. The application of link verb sentences shows the writers’ tendency of describing the identity, quality, characteristics or state of the target (Ma, 2000). Too much static description realized by link verb sentences can make the tone of an argumentation mild and short of forceful rhythm; 4) occasional application of non-finite verb as subject explains the writers’ ignorance of the objectivity of an action. Putting non-finite verb in the place of subject can direct the attention to the significance, consequence, cause and effect or other logical relations of an action. Objective arguments of argumentation mainly root in facts, which are verified and concluded by already-occurred events. Thus, prominence of event itself ensures the objectivity of argumentation writing; 5) the evading of special sentence patterns exposes the writers’ non-prominence of circumstantial elements of an action. The realization of an act is affected by circumstantial elements like time, space, way, degree, cause and effect, and condition. The non-prominence of such elements makes the supportive arguments short of detail and emphasis.

According to the result, it can be concluded that being influenced by the codes of native language, the students’ argumentative writing lack in diversity of sentence structures with active sentence and link verb sentence as the most frequently used and passive sentence as the less popular one. The excessive usage of the former two sentence patterns and the deficient application of the latter can direct readers’ attention to personal feelings and static description, making the argumentation objective and less forceful. Moreover, the evading of special sentence patterns makes the writing short of prominence of circumstantial elements, which weakens the tone of argumentation.

#### 5. Discussion

This essay has analyzed 20 argumentative writing papers of Chinese college EFL learners and found out that the writers are inclined to use partial types of sentence patterns like active sentences and link verb sentences to illustrate their points, which highlights personal views and static descriptions. This explains the subjective voice and forceless tone of their writing. The findings inspire the teaching of EFL writing and the cultivation of Chinese college EFL learners’ objective thinking in the following three aspects: 1) teach them not only how to apply sentence structures but more importantly the structural meaning of each pattern and then enhance the practice by providing them with different contexts; 2) remind them to avoid native language influence and teach

them how to observe and illustrate a point from objective perspective. As the excessive usage of active sentences and the evading of passive sentences are caused essentially by Chinese thinking way, in order to think objectively, the learners should be taught to observe in passive voice and focus more on solid facts. The effective way is to use passive sentences to convey the personal perspective; 3) in order to make an argumentation sound more forceful, the students should be taught to emphasize information by applying special sentences patterns.

However, there are some limitations of this research: 1) it is hard to conclude the 20 randomly selected samples can represent all the Chinese college EFL learners' inclination. Thus, more analysis should be done on a larger scale; 2) the numbers of active and passive sentences are counted only in the structural form. However, in a lexical level, there are some English words which are passive in meaning but not in structure. Thus, there must be some deviation in the counting; 3) the counting can only explain the prominence of information on a theoretical scale but for a specific writing, the specific situation should be further analyzed.

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