

Study on Translating Subjectless Sentences in the China's Energy Transition White Paper

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ABSTRACT

Subjectless sentences, a notable feature of Chinese, are prevalent in political texts but pose challenges in English translation due to a reliance on explicit subjects, potentially impeding cross-cultural communication. This study aims to explore effective translation strategies for such sentences in Chinese political texts, focusing on how to convey their meaning accurately while retaining the original stylistic features. Taking China's Energy Transition White Paper (2024) (issued by the State Council Information Office) as the research object, it analyzes typical subjectless sentences and examines four key strategies: passivization, syntactic rephrasing, supplementation of logical subjects, and insertion of formal subjects. Findings show that context-adaptive strategy selection is critical for accurate rendering, enhancing the international readability of political texts. This study offers practical guidance for translators and enriches research on linguistic differences in political discourse translation.

KEYWORDS

Subjectless Sentences; Political Text Translation; China's Energy Transition White Paper; Chinese-English Translation; Translation Strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Political texts are central to communicating policies and international discourse, essential for conveying a country's governance concepts, strategies, and development vision. Among these, white papers-authoritative and systematic-act as a key window into national policies. Thus, accurate and effective translation is vital for cross-cultural dialogue and shaping national image.

A notable feature of Chinese political texts is the use of subjectless sentences. Reflecting structural and discursive norms of the language, they omit grammatical subjects to enhance conciseness, objectivity, and collective authority-common in policy statements, guidelines, and summaries. While natural and tone-building in Chinese, their translation into English-a language requiring explicit subjects-presents challenges. Without a clear subject, meaning can become ambiguous, expressions awkward, or rhetorical intent distorted. Against this backdrop, this study focuses on the translation of subjectless sentences in Chinese political white papers, taking China's Energy Transition White Paper (2024) as a specific case. It aims to explore effective translation strategies that balance linguistic conversion and rhetorical preservation, thereby contributing to improving the quality of political text translation and enhancing the efficacy of China's international policy communication.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Political Text Translation

Research on Chinese-English political text translation has expanded considerably, with scholars addressing linguistic, strategic, and functional aspects from multiple perspectives. Early work by Jia Yuling (2003) identified sources of “Chinglish” in Government Work Reports and proposed tactics such as reducing repetition and hierarchical restructuring, stressing that comprehension and flexibility are essential^[14]. Wang Nongsheng (2004) emphasized accuracy and offered guidance on culture-specific terms and political jargon^[18]. Wang Xiaoping (2006) highlighted the balance between fidelity and adaptability, noting the importance of audience awareness^[19].

As the field evolved, Li Hongxia (2010) applied Skopos Theory, arguing that translations must serve communicative purposes^[15]. Guo Yingping (2015) outlined principles of accuracy, amplification, and condensation tailored to readers’ needs^[13]. Later studies, such as Li and Xu (2018) and Li and Pan (2021), employed Appraisal Theory to show how translation shapes national image through evaluative language^{[5][6]}. Recent work uses linguistic frameworks for deeper analysis. Chen et al. (2024) and Lijuan and Afzaal (2024) applied SFL to analyze cognitive and modal patterns, showing how translators adjust to audience expectations^{[2][7]}. Valdeón and Li (2024) reviewed broader ideological and cross-cultural themes^[9]. However, few studies offer fine-grained, quantitative analysis of specific syntactic structures-such as subjectless sentences-in a single contemporary policy document.

2.2. Subjectless Sentence Translation

Research on translating Chinese subjectless sentences has evolved from practical strategy summarization to deeper linguistic and empirical analysis, with increasingly diverse methodologies.

Early foundational work by LaPolla (1993) challenged conventional subject concepts, arguing Chinese lacks a strict syntactic subject, thereby rationalizing subject omission^[4]. Wang Manliang (2000) proposed five practical principles, associating subject supplementation with “stylistic fidelity” and advancing operational models^[17]. Subsequent studies refined classification and discourse approaches. Ge Weilei (2001) defined eight semantic types with matched strategies^[12]. Zeng Xiaohong (2007) differentiated syntactic and pragmatic gaps, highlighting challenges in topic-chain translation^[20]. Zhang Shujian & Li Ling (2010) classified omissions as absolute or relative, incorporating strategies like passivization and formal subjects^[21]. Modesto (2008) situated Chinese within topic-prominent typology, supporting topic-information supplementation over subject insertion^[8]. Chen Ju (2013) integrated six core strategies into a coherent system^[10]. Recent research employs empirical tools to examine cognitive-syntactic dimensions. De Lisser et al. (2016) proposed “Spell-Out Omission” based on Creole acquisition data^[3]. Brandel (2025) tested “Meso-parameters” in L2 acquisition, linking subject omission to T-feature reassembly and processing load^[1]. While existing strategy taxonomies are well-developed, their application to contemporary political texts-such as energy transition discourse-remains limited. This study applies these frameworks to a new corpus to validate and refine strategy use.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on translating subjectless sentences in Chinese policy texts, with China’s Energy Transition White Paper (2024) (bilingual version, issued by the State Council Information Office) as its primary corpus. To ensure a systematic analysis, the research adopts a two-step approach combining quantitative identification and qualitative case analysis.

First, the Chinese text of the white paper was thoroughly parsed to identify all subjectless sentences—defined here as syntactic structures lacking an explicit grammatical subject while retaining complete semantic meaning. A total of 148 such sentences were identified, representing 35.66% of the 415 sentences in the corpus (Figure 1.). This quantitative overview provides a clear baseline for understanding the prevalence of subjectless constructions in the text.

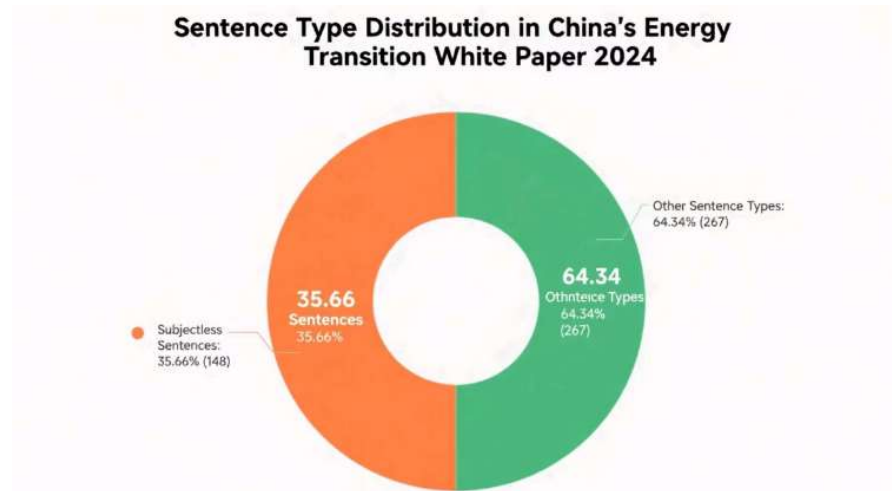


Figure 1. the Proportion of the Subjectless Sentences in the White Paper

Second, based on the initial identification, representative cases were selected for in-depth analysis. Selection criteria prioritized structural diversity and semantic relevance to ensure coverage of the main functions of subjectless sentences in political discourse. For each case, the translation strategies employed in the English version were examined, with a focus on their syntactic adaptability, semantic consistency with the source text, and alignment with the authoritative tone of political discourse.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The subjectless sentence, a common syntactic phenomenon in Chinese, refers to a sentence structure where the subject is omitted, absent, or unnecessary in terms of grammatical form (Zhang Shujian & Li Ling, 2010)^[21]. Such sentences are typically composed directly of predicates or predicative phrases. Although they lack an explicit semantic subject, they can still convey complete meaning and are often used to express objective facts, universal truths, policy propositions, or actions (Dong Shaoke et al., 1996; Ma Wenxi et al., 2004)^{[11][16]}. A subjectless sentence does not lack a subject entirely; rather, the subject is implied or contextually evident and thus omitted. In political discourse, this structure serves key functions: it enhances authority and objectivity by omitting agents, focuses attention on actions to emphasize national resolve, avoids repetition to increase informational density, and promotes collective identity through generalized subjects.

Given these functions, specific translation strategies are necessary to achieve equivalent meaning in English. Based on the translation of China's Energy Transition White Paper, four main strategies are identified and illustrated with examples below.

4.1. Conversion into Passive Structures

The active voice commonly used in Chinese subjectless sentences is often transformed into the passive voice in English. The original object is elevated to the subject position, and the verb-object

structure is converted into a subject-predicate structure, adapting to the syntactic features of English, which emphasizes clear subject-predicate relationships.

Original Text: 支持创新型企业成长为创新发源地，完善扶持政策和公共服务体系，促进企业创新创业潜能充分释放。

Translation: Innovative enterprises are also supported with preferential policies and better public services to grow into hubs of innovation.

Analysis: In the first example, the original object “创新型企业” (innovative enterprises) is directly converted into the subject of the passive sentence, while the verb-object structure “支持” (support) is transformed into a subject-predicate structure (“are supported”), creating a grammatically complete and contextually natural passive sentence.

Original Text: 建立健全能源领域全国重点实验室、国家工程研究中心、国家能源局研发创新平台。

Translation: Efforts have also been made to establish and improve key national energy laboratories, national engineering research centers, and R&D innovation platforms under the National Energy Administration.

Analysis: The second sentence introduces “efforts” as a supplemented hypernym to serve as the subject, forming a coherent passive structure (“efforts have been made”). This allows the sentence to encompass a series of subsequent actions within a logically unified framework, enhancing textual cohesion and formal tone.

Original Text: 鼓励公众绿色出行，优先选择公共交通、自行车和步行等绿色出行方式。

Translation: Green travel is promoted as the public are encouraged to make public transport, cycling, and walking their first choices for getting around.

Analysis: The third example further advances the strategy by converting both the direct object (“绿色出行” – green travel) and the indirect object (“公众” – the public) into grammatical subjects in the translated version. The two passive clauses are then logically connected using the conjunction “as,” resulting in a complex yet well-structured sentence that clearly conveys both the action and the target audience while maintaining fluency and semantic accuracy.

The choice of passivization here effectively conceals the agent, which reinforces the authoritative and impersonal tone of the policy document, a desirable effect in this context. However, it may also slightly reduce the sense of agency and proactive effort compared to the active voice.

4.2. Syntactic Adjustment and Structural Rephrasing

This approach involves converting parts of speech, restructuring information, or employing fixed English expressions to transform Chinese subjectless sentences into idiomatic subject-predicate sentences or clausal structures in English. Prepositional phrases are often used to connect ideas, minimizing verbal elements and aligning with English’s preference for static expression.

Original Text: 应对这些困难挑战，根本要靠能源转型。

Translation: Energy transition is the fundamental solution to the above challenges.

Analysis: In the first sentence, the object “能源转型” (energy transition) is elevated to the subject position (“energy transition is...”). The adverbial-verb phrase “根本要靠” (must fundamentally rely on) is transposed into a nominal structure “the fundamental solution,” shifting the emphasis from dynamic action to a static fact. The preposition “to” is then employed to introduce the purpose (“to the above challenges”), effectively replacing the original verb “应对” (address).

Original Text: 既要绿水青山，也要金山银山，能源转型是关键。

Translation: Energy transition is critical for balancing economic growth and eco-environmental protection.

Analysis: The second sentence further illustrates lexical adaptation: the noun “关键” (key) is converted into the adjective “critical”. The preposition “for” is used to logically connect the statement with its rationale, while the verb “balance” elegantly captures the dual objectives of economic growth and environmental protection implied by “既要绿水青山，也要金山银山”.

Original Text: 基本形成油气“全国一张网”，油气资源优化配置和互济互保水平显著提升。

Translation: A unified national pipeline network has taken shape to optimize and coordinate oil and gas allocation and supply across regions.

Analysis: The third sentence employs a more advanced strategy: the object “油气‘全国一张网’” (unified national oil and gas network) becomes the subject (“a unified national pipeline network”). The idiomatic expression “has taken shape” conveys the completed action in an active form with a passive meaning. The infinitive “to” is then used to link the outcome with its effects (“to optimize and coordinate...”), seamlessly integrating the two parts of the original sentence.

4.3. Supplementing a Logical Subject

This strategy involves adding an explicit subject to establish a clear subject-predicate framework in English, enhancing pragmatic clarity. In subsequent references to the supplemented subject, pronouns, synonyms, or hypernyms are often used to avoid repetition.

Original Text: 为全面介绍十年来中国能源转型取得的历史性成就，分享中国能源转型的实践做法，发布本白皮书。

Translation: The Chinese government is publishing this white paper to document China’s successful actions and historic achievements in energy transition over the past decade.

Analysis: In the first sentence, the subject “The Chinese government” is explicitly added to form a complete main clause (“The Chinese government is publishing...”). The purpose clause is smoothly attached using the infinitive “to document”, while the conjunction “and” logically connects “successful actions” and “historic achievements”, reflecting the natural sequence of practice preceding results. Repetition of “China’s energy transition” is avoided through concise noun phrase structuring.

Original Text: 能源的饭碗必须端在自己手里，立足国内增强能源自主保障能力。

Translation: To ensure that it always has control over its own energy supply, China has increased its capacity to meet its domestic needs.

Analysis: The second sentence demonstrates a more sophisticated approach: the purpose clause is placed at the beginning (“To ensure...”), and the pronoun “it” is used to supplement the subject and corefer with “China” in the main clause. This creates a coherent and grammatically compact structure. The possessive pronoun “its” is added to enhance grammatical completeness and fluency.

4.4. Supplementing a Formal Subject

This strategy employs “it” as a formal subject or utilizes the “there be” existential structure to handle Chinese subjectless sentences that express evaluation, necessity, or existence, thereby achieving syntactic completeness and semantic equivalence.

Original Text: 亟须增强系统灵活调节能力，不断提升能源系统安全运行和抵御风险能力。

Translation: Therefore, it is important that the country should increase the regulation ability of the system, keep improving its capacity for safe operation and strengthening its resistance to risk.

Analysis: In the first sentence, the formal subject “it” is introduced to create the structure “It is important that...”, converting the original urgent modality (“亟须” – must be enhanced) into a static evaluative statement. The verbal sense of “亟须” (urgently need) is transformed into the adjective “important”, emphasizing a state or necessity rather than an action. Additionally, the logical agent “the country” is explicitly supplemented to clarify the actor, resulting in a grammatically complete and formally objective expression.

Original Text: 修订可再生能源法、电力法.....

Translation: There are also plans to revise the Renewable Energy Law and the Electric Power Law.

Analysis: The second sentence adopts the “there be” structure to present the information (“There are also plans...”), placing the semantic focus on the noun “plans” and reducing the verbal force of “修订” (revise) by rendering it as an infinitive modifier (“to revise”). This strategy weakens the prominence of the action and instead highlights the existence of a planned activity. The adverb “also” is added to tightly connect this sentence with the preceding context, ensuring smooth discourse flow. The information is organized from general to specific, refining the presentation step by step.

This analysis has systematically examined the syntactic features and discursive functions of subjectless sentences within the context of white paper translation. It identifies four core translation strategies-conversion into passive structures, syntactic adjustment and rephrasing, supplementation of a logical subject, and use of a formal subject-to achieve functional and communicative equivalence in English.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has explored the translation of subjectless sentences in the China’s Energy Transition White Paper, highlighting key challenges such as syntactic restructuring, semantic precision, and pragmatic appropriateness. The absence of explicit subjects in Chinese political texts requires translators to make careful strategic choices to achieve both faithfulness to the original intent and acceptability in the target language. Strategies including passivization, syntactic rephrasing, logical subject supplementation, and formal subject insertion each offer distinct pathways for resolving these difficulties, yet the application must be context-sensitive and guided by the discursive conventions of English. Balancing the rigor of political texts with readability remains a core concern. Translations must accurately reflect policy positions and national narratives without distortion; on the other hand, they must be fluently articulated and rhetorically effective for an international readership. This balance can be achieved through a reader-aware approach that prioritizes functional equivalence, where the translation not only conveys information but also reproduces the persuasive and authoritative tone of the original. Corpus-based analysis and typological categorization of strategies, as demonstrated in this study, provide practical guidance for maintaining both precision and clarity.

Future research could conduct a comparative analysis of subjectless sentence translation across different white papers to determine if strategy preference is topic-dependent. Additionally, a reader-response study could be designed to test the comprehension and perceived authority of different translations among international readers.

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