

# Pragmalinguistic Failure Under the Negative Transfer Impact of Mother Tongue in Consecutive Interpreting and Coping Strategies

Xin Wei

Department of Foreign Languages  
Guangzhou College of Technology and Business  
Guangzhou, China

**Abstract**—Many types of researches have proved that the negative transfer of mother tongue has exerted a great impact on the second language acquisition. Moreover, many types of researches have shown that pragmatic failure arises during the second language acquisition. For language learners, pragmalinguistic failure can be avoided gradually by adopting some effective strategies, and their interpreting competence can be correspondingly improved. This thesis aims to probe deeper into the pragmalinguistic failure caused by the negative transfer of mother tongue. The case study of this thesis chooses the third-year college students of English major as the research object, and the author is going to analyze the errors made in the students' final test on English-Chinese consecutive interpreting. By probing into the post-test interview and research data, it is found that pragmalinguistic failures frequently arise during the interpreting process and that errors in consecutive interpreting are mainly affected by the negative transfer of Chinese. The errors are manifested mainly on the lexical level, syntactic level, and textual level. The thesis will focus on the three aspects: vocabulary, syntax, and text. By analyzing the errors made by students in interpreting process and summarizing the causes for pragmalinguistic failure, the author aims to provide some enlightenment in teaching and to put forward some strategies to help students or interpreters to cope with pragmalinguistic failure under negative transfer impact of mother tongue.

**Keywords**—*pragmalinguistic failure; negative transfer; consecutive interpreting*

## I. INTRODUCTION

As a teacher from Guangzhou College of Technology and Business, the author gave students a final test on consecutive interpreting from English to Chinese to test students' interpreting competence after one semester's study of interpreting. Surprisingly, the author found that students were making mistakes in some aspects never expected. By collecting and analyzing the research data, the author has summarized the mistakes into categories. What's more, the author has made studies on the causes for the misinterpreting. This study is meaningful as the author gets to know from which aspect to improve teaching strategies in the following semesters based on the errors made by the students.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Requirements of Consecutive Interpreting

According to Russell (2005), Consecutive Interpreting (CI) was described into interpreting process during which the speaker puts forward ideas in the source language and after a while, the interpreter keeps on transmitting the source language into the target language. As an on-site task, it requires the interpreter to convey ideas of the speaker in a precise, fluent and prompt way. By way of precisely interpreting, it requires the interpreter to understand the source language well and then transmit it into the target language. By way of fluently interpreting, it requires the interpreter to output expressions conforming to the source language norms. By way of promptly interpreting, it requires the interpreter to start interpreting right after the speaker finishes his or her speaking in less than 5 seconds. Nevertheless, few interpreters can meet all the demands in actual interpreting. To clarify the causes of the mistakes in CI would be helpful to promote the interpreting process.

### B. Definition of Language Transfer

According to Rod Ellis (1997) [1], language transfer refers to a phenomenon that existing knowledge in learner's mind has an effect on the acquisition of second language and development. According to him, language transfer can be categorized into 2 kinds: positive transfer and negative transfer. The former indicates that existing knowledge in learner's mind can help in the learner's acquisition of the second language. While the latter refers to the interference impact the existing knowledge has on the second language acquisition. Then, how to distinguish positive transfer from the negative transfer? During the second language acquisition, if a learner uses his or her knowledge of native language to learn the second language, and makes no mistakes, it can be deemed as positive transfer, if not, then can be deemed as negative transfer [2].

### C. Definition of Pragmalinguistic Failure

Jenny Thomas (1983) [3] in her book proposed the term "pragmatic failure". She described that pragmatic failure as

"the inability to understand 'what is meant by what is said'" (p.91). According to her, pragmatic failure falls into two kinds: pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure. When the learner fails to understand the linguistic context and misuses the target language, pragmalinguistic failure arises. When the learner fails to understand the social context and improperly uses the target language, sociopragmatic failure occurs. English and Chinese differ in various aspects as they are in different language families, ranging from lexical level, syntactic level and textual level. Due to failure to differentiate the similarities and differences between these two languages in terms of linguistic features, many language learners would make pragmalinguistic mistakes. In consecutive interpreting between English and Chinese, many of the pragmalinguistic mistakes are made due to the fact that the interpreters are not quite familiar with English linguistic features and are influenced by Chinese.

### III. RESEARCH DESIGN

#### A. Test Design

As junior students of English majors, most of the students have mastered some basic skills, ranging from listening, speaking, reading and writing. What's more, one semester's input of interpreting knowledge and practice has equipped them with basic interpreting skills. Given so, the final test is an effective way to test their interpreting competence. The 201 students are taking the test by class.

#### B. Procedures and Data Collection

The final test was taken in the following procedures: To begin with, the students were asked to find an English composition containing no less than 120 English words respectively and were asked to note down the new words with pronunciation and meaning at the bottom of the composition. The students were told not to find compositions too hard to be interpreted; neither should the compositions be beyond their comprehension. The teacher should preview all the compositions to exclude materials that are beyond the students' abilities. Secondly, all of the compositions were printed out and handed in over to the teacher for testing material. Thirdly, the target student was asked to go on to the stage to pick randomly from the testing material on test day one by one. The picked composition would be read out by the owner. The two students fell into a pair in consecutive interpreting. Each student was given 3 minutes and 30 seconds to finish the consecutive interpreting. Time length was set so as to test students' abilities to interpret within the limited time. What's worth mentioning was that, as the students had no idea which composition would be picked, so the interpreting was designed to be impromptu, with the exception of the fact that the students were given 10 seconds to go through new words before the interpreting. As this test was designed to test the students' interpreting skills based on the accumulated knowledge, so difficulties arising from new words were excluded in advance.

#### C. Post-test Interview

After the test, I asked some students how they felt about their performances. Few of them felt satisfied with their interpreting, most of them thought they had done badly in the test. They had shared with me some ideas for the failure: Firstly, they failed to catch the words, phrases or sentences uttered from the reader. Secondly, they failed to interpret the words and phrases in Chinese even though they knew their meaning, which was manifested in their reluctance in their utterance. They told me they had to think in Chinese first and then to speak it out. Thirdly, they failed to interpret the sentences in Chinese even though they knew their meaning, which was manifested in the pause, omission and badly organized sentence uttered. Fourthly, they failed to understand the words they heard. I asked them to give me examples of the words they didn't know, but it turned out to be the learned words instead of new words. Fifthly, they didn't know which meaning the word referred to, as there were several meanings to choose from for the word.

### IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

According to the above test, it's found that in consecutive interpreting, the application of mother tongue habits would strongly affect the interpreting process.

#### A. Negative Transfer on the Lexical Level

A nation's core can be reflected from its words, ranging from the physical environment, social structure and religion, etc. From the words, a nation's individuality and specialty are reflected. The meanings of one word can be complex. Leech (1974) [4] divides meanings into seven types: conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, reflective meaning, collocative meaning and thematic meaning (p. 55). From the second meaning to the sixth meaning, they are all concerned with associative meaning, which is based on the subject's culture and emotion, so it is also called social-cultural meaning. Though it's hard and unnecessary to find out the seven meanings of a specific word in interpreting, it reminds us to differentiate meanings in different contexts and social situations. The meanings a word carrying vary greatly depending on people's nationality, class, race, religious beliefs, political concepts or occupations.

To start with, the negative transfer on the lexical transfer is manifested in the failure to understand the meaning of social and cultural meaning. As a result, omissions and misinterpretations arise in interpreting, which would hinder the carrying on of the activities. In the test, there are many lexical mistakes relating to interpreting, the testing material offers abundant examples.

Example 1: The video of his grand-daughter's fluent reciting of Chinese ancient poems and singing of Chinese songs has raised a wave of discussion. (Original)

他的孙女流利背诵中国古诗词和演唱中国歌曲的视频掀起了一阵议论的浪潮。(Improper interpretation from the student.).

他的外孙女流利背诵中国古诗词和演唱中国歌曲的视频掀起了一阵议论的浪潮。(Modified interpretation).

This sentence is extracted from a report on American President Trump's family. It can be concluded that the girl mentioned in the report is the child of Trump's daughter. The mistake lies in the interpretation of the word "granddaughter", in Chinese people call the girl "外孙女 (Waisunv)" of Trump, instead of "孙女 (Sunnv)", misinterpreting of this appellation would arouse misunderstanding to the public.

As is well-known, Chinese appellations are more complicated than English appellations. The distinctions between superiority and inferiority, seniors and juniors, intimacy and estrangement will lead to different appellations. Take some appellations in a family for example, appellations of "哥哥, 弟弟, 姐姐, 妹妹" in a Chinese family are used to clarify brothers and sisters by age, while in English, brothers of different ages only called by "brother", and sisters of different ages only by "sister". While in consecutive interpretation, it's necessary to clarify the difference on the basis of background information in order to present accurate interpretation.

From the above comparison, it can be told that the classifications in Chinese are much more specific, detailed and systematic. The differences existing in the appellations also embody well the differences between eastern and western social family cultures. To be more specific, strict ethics deeply rooted in Chinese culture have led to detailed appellations, which is quite different from the individuality-oriented western culture.

What's more, the wrong selection of meaning of a word would cause great differences.

Example 2: The motorcycle wound through the village. (Original)

摩托车穿过村庄的时候坏了。 (Improper interpretation from the student.)

摩托车迂回盘旋, 穿过小村庄。 (Modified interpretation)

The mistake lies in the interpreting of the word "wound", the student interpreted it into "broke down", as he understood "wound" as a synonym of "break". However, what he didn't take into consideration was that, in this sentence, "wound" was actually the past participle form of "wind", which referred to tortuous, roundabout status.

Last but not least, for some English words, they are quite special as they carry the function of metaphor. To interpret them well, the metaphor aspect of the words should be deeply explored.

Example 3: Mr. John is a very white man. He was looking rather green the other day. He has been feeling blue lately. When I saw him, he was in a brown study. (Original)

约翰先生是个白人, 前几天他看起来脸色很绿。最近他感觉挺不高兴。当我看见他时, 他在做一个棕色的研究。 (Improper interpretation from the student.)

约翰先生十分忠实可靠, 那天他脸色看起来不太好。最近他一直都是不开心。我看到他时, 他正处于沉思之中。 (Modified interpretation)

In both Chinese and English, the words describing colors are abundant. Although the classification of color terms in two languages is similar, that doesn't mean the color terms can be equated in two languages. Instead, it's necessary to probe much more deeply into the research of color terms' contextual meaning, especially the terms under special context or used in some proverbs. Vocabulary accumulation and analysis are indispensable in interpreting of words.

#### *B. Negative Transfer on the Syntactic Level*

The basic sentence structure of "subject+predicate+object" is applied in both English and Chinese. Nevertheless, obvious differences are found between these two language systems. The prominent difference lies in the performance of the language law. English puts emphasis on hypotaxis while Chinese puts emphasis on parataxis [5]. The so-called hypotaxis depends on the grammatical rules while parataxis on the internal logical relationship of the sentence. Therefore, English sentences are characterized by a compact and tight structure. However, Chinese sentences are characterized by a concise and lively structure. Failure to reorganize the sentence structure based on the respective rule leads to mistakes in interpreting of sentences and redundant interpreting productions. What's more, neglect of tenses, cultural background also leads to misunderstanding of original sentences.

Example 1: The contract stipulates that four month's notice be given by letter of the intention to terminate it. (Original)

合同规定, 以终止合同的书信形式提前 4 个月给予通知。 (Improper interpretation from the student.)

合同规定, 如想终止合同需提前 4 个月给予书面通知。 (Modified interpretation)

The cause for the mistake lies in the misunderstanding of the sentence element. In the sentence, the propositional phrase of "of the intention..." is to modify the subject of "notice" in the object clause. However, the student mistakenly thought the propositional phrase of "of the intention..." was to modify the noun of "letter".

Example 2: There are many people coming to the wedding. (Original)

有很多人来婚礼。 (Improper interpretation from the student.)

婚礼来了很多人。 (Modified interpretation)

The mistake is clear to us. The student literally interpreted the sentence without adjusting the word order to reorganize into a fluent sentence. It can be told from the student's interpretation that the sentence does not sound fluent at all. Hence, it's quite obvious that the sentence structure is important in expressing the sentence fluently.

Example 3: Jack can be trusted. He eats no fish and plays the game. (Original)

杰克值得信任, 他一向不吃鱼而且经常玩游戏。 (Improper interpretation from the student.)

杰克值得信任，他忠诚且正直。(Modified interpretation)

In this case, the misinterpreting was caused by the students' unfamiliarity with English proverbs. In the times of Elizabeth, the Jews refused to obey the religion of Christians' eating fish only on Friday to express their loyalty to the government. Therefore, "to eat no fish" contains the meaning of "being loyalty". Moreover, "to play the game" equals to "to play fair". Thus, the modified interpretation fits better the original.

Example 4: He is late for the meeting. He was not always so. (Original)

他开会迟到了。但他也并不是总这样。(Improper interpretation from the student.)

他开会迟到了。过去他却并不总这样。(Modified interpretation)

The mistake is quite obvious, which might caused by the student's failure to clarify the differences in tense. The predicate of "was" is referring to past tense, so in interpreting, it shall be noted the difference, or the meaning is far from correct. In English, tense is of vital importance in the English language, and it reflects on the different change forms of the verb. There are 16 kinds of tenses in English; any adoption of one single tense would cause minor differences in interpreting, not to mention the adoption of two or three kinds of tenses in one sentence. However, in Chinese, the verb shows no change in the past tense or in the future tense. The negative transfer of mother tongue would hinder students' sensitivity to tense existence. Hence, it's vitally important to attach importance to tense in interpreting while trying hard to get rid of the impact of the negative transfer of mother tongue.

### C. Negative Transfer on the Textual Level

On the textual level, English and Chinese share both similarities and differences. The differences are manifested in two aspects. On the one hand, English is a subject-prominent language, it pays attention to subject. While Chinese is a topic-prominent language, it pays attention to the topic instead of the subject [6]. On the other hand, English attaches importance to the strict and tight structure of the sentence, there always are function words to give service to connection, such as, "and, but, if, as, therefore, when, however, moreover" and some specific phrases like, "in addition, what's more important", and etc. While in Chinese, fewer conjunction words and transitional sentences are found. In the English-Chinese interpreting of text, it's suggested to interpret with fewer subjects, fewer conjunction words. In textual interpreting, equal importance shall be attached to the understanding of the text, and relating the sentence with former and latter context.

## V. CAUSES FOR PRAGMALINGUISTIC FAILURE IN CONSECUTIVE INTERPRETING

### A. Lack of Cultural Input in Target Language Learning

As interpreting is the transformation of one language to another, so it requires knowledge accumulation and flexible

use of both languages. Most college students have been learning English from Junior high school, when they entered the third year in college, they would have spent more or less than nine years in learning English at their 20-year-old age. However, mother tongue input is from babyhood, even from an unborn baby in some families. Obviously, the mother tongue impact overwhelms of that of the second language, hence, students will be unconsciously influenced by mother tongue habits. On the lexical level, students don't have the idea that some English words are carrying metaphor functions, and students are inclined to interpret the words from superficial meaning, instead from cultural meaning. The literal interpreting of the word would definitely lead to misinterpreting.

On the syntactic level, some English proverbs are quoted in expression. Any interpreting based on guessing is an irresponsible act. Furthermore, misunderstanding and misinterpreting would arouse jokes or disputes to corresponding parties unexpectedly.

It is necessary to admit that compared to language knowledge input, cultural input of target language is not attached equal importance to in China. From school teaching, students are trained to memorize the word's spelling, word's meaning, the contents of the texts, the grammar rules. The knowledge of histories and culture of western countries are seldom referred to. Neglect of cultural input in school has led to a comparatively weak accumulation of cultural knowledge of target language. The shortage has manifested in interpreting in that students are at wit's end when confronted with words or sentences carrying cultural background information.

### B. Learning Target Language and Neglecting Linguistic Differences

In language families, English is included in Indo-European languages, however, Chinese is included in Sino-Tibetan languages. Different language families differ in features. On the one hand, English and Chinese are not totally equivalent in vocabulary from original, not to mention that many new words are created as time passes by. On the other hand, sentence structures in two languages also differ, English puts emphasis on hypotaxis while Chinese puts emphasis on parataxis. What's more, the tenses, verb changes in English also distinguish itself from Chinese. Any interpreting of English sentence from the aspect of Chinese would lead to difficulties in understanding the sentence for interpreter himself/herself or the audience. The act of classifying the linguistic feature differences would help prevent students from the negative transfer impact of mother tongue.

## VI. COPING STRATEGIES

### A. Strengthening Listening Competence

In consecutive interpreting from English to Chinese, the first task is listening. If an interpreter fails to catch the contents in the first task, nothing to be expected from him/her in the following tasks, with the exception of

recklessly concoct. As the old saying goes, practice makes perfect. In daily training, the chosen materials should be from easy to hard, the speed should be from slow to quick, to let students gain stronger listening competence step by step. Materials from VOA special, BBC, press conferences are good choices for practice.

### *B. Enlarging Vocabulary*

Words are the basis to construction of phrases and sentences, to gain a large vocabulary would facilitate interpreting process. To start with, when learning a new word, students are suggested to look into different meanings of the word in different sentences, if any, and make some comparative studies between the meanings so as to deepen impression and understanding of the word. What's more, they are suggested to focus on the words carrying cultural or metaphor functions. It would be better to suggest them to look into words from cultural background and metaphor uses. Last but not least, they are suggested to probe into the origin of the word to gain better understanding so as to deepen memorization of the word.

### *C. Comparative Studies Are to Be Encouraged*

Mistakes often arise from lack of understanding of the target language, no matter in linguistic aspect or cultural aspect. By making comparative analysis, a deeper understanding of the target language can be expected and achieved. Comparative studies can be made from the following aspects: Firstly, comparative studies to be made on words, in terms of pronunciation, word-forming and word origin; Secondly, comparative studies to be made on sentences, in terms of sentence structure, grammar and idiomatic expressions; Thirdly, comparative studies to be made on culture, in terms of religion, literary quotations of history, social living, values and etc.

### *D. Increasing Sensitivity to the Target Language*

To reduce or avoid the negative transfer impact from the mother tongue, it's of vital importance to train students to think in English, and enable them to get used to the English thinking pattern. In daily, students shall be encouraged to read original English books, watch English videos, learn English songs, imitate English speeches so as to indulge themselves in English learning environment. In class, students shall be stimulated to express ideas and to communicate with teachers completely in English. After class, students shall be advised to take part in some English activities or competitions, such as dubbing contests, speech contests, singing contests, and etc.

## VII. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the negative transfer of mother tongue leads to pragmalinguistic failure in consecutive interpreting. As on-site activity, consecutive interpreting is a highly-demanding task that requires interpreter to be equipped with strong English competence and abundant knowledge. For students, by adopting some effective strategies, it's possible to prevent themselves from the impact of the negative

transfer of Chinese. Teachers shall continually improve teaching strategies to help students strengthen English competence in an all-round way to reduce the impact of the negative transfer of mother tongue.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Ellis. R. *The Study of Second Language Acquisition* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Languages Education Press, 1997.
- [2] Tang Zhenhua. *Negative Cultural Transfer in Chinese-English Translation* [J]. *Foreign Language and Foreign Language Teaching*, 2000.
- [3] Thomas J. *Cross-Culture Pragmatic Failure* [J]. *Applied Linguistics*, 1983(4):91.
- [4] Leech. *Semantics* [M]. London: Penguin, 1974.
- [5] Zhao Qingjing. *Analysis of General Errors in English Translation*, *Dehong Teachers' College Journal*, No2.2013. Vol.22.
- [6] Xu Yulong. *Introduction to Comparative Linguistics*. Shanghai Foreign Languages Education Press, 1992.