

# Review of English Pronoun Acquisition by Chinese Learners from the Perspective of Transfer

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explore the negative effects of language transfer on the acquisition of English pronouns by native Chinese learners of English (hereinafter called Chinese learners). Though there have been many language transfer researches, few are set in the Chinese learners' perspective. We find that there are more pronoun acquisition biases for Chinese learners in English learning, but less research on pronoun acquisition in the direction of language transfer. We therefore take the learning problems of personal, possessive and reflexive pronouns as examples. We find that language transfer has a degree of negative transfer for Chinese learners of English as a second foreign language. For language transfer of pronouns, we find that there are concrete negative transfer phenomena such as lack of grammatical concepts in L1 leading to inability to transfer, deviations in grammatical concepts between L1 and L2 leading to negative transfer. Finally, we provide strategies that can be applied to teaching and learning, centred on the findings of the study.

**Keywords:** English pronoun acquisition, L1 Transfer, personal pronoun, possessive pronoun, reflexive.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, researchers have shown an increased interest in the transfer of English learning concepts and achieved remarkable progress in this field. However, few researchers pay attention to the transfer of English pronoun acquisition among Chinese learners and their research direction is relatively scattered. Thus this review aims to synthesize the key research insights in the acquisition of three important subcategories of pronoun by Chinese learners from the perspective of language transfer and provides corresponding strategies for teaching. It is expected that this review could shed light on exploring the rules of English learning and language transfer for Chinese learners as well as future teaching methods.

## 2. LANGUAGE TRANSFER

Language transfer is a commonly used term in linguistics and yet it is a concept difficult to define precisely. In broad terms, it refers to a phenomenon that learners tend to express their thoughts with the help of

the pronunciation, meaning, structure rules and habits of their first language. Similarly, this term is defined by Gass [1] as the use of previously acquired linguistic information in a non-native language context. In comparison, Jarvis & Pavlenko [2] introduce it as the impact that one language of a man make on the knowledge or use of other languages he learned. Among numerous definitions, the most frequently used one is that there will always be similarities and differences between the target language and any previously acquired (perhaps not fully mastered) language, and the influence resulting from these similarities and differences is called transfer [3]. However, Odlin later points out that his definition contains some nebulous terms such as "acquisition" and "influence"[3-4]. Besides, the precise definition to transfer requires an accurate understanding of the neural basis of language and how two language systems are stored in the brain.

### 3. CHINESE LANGUAGE TRANSFER IN ENGLISH PRONOUN ACQUISITION

#### 3.1. Personal Pronouns and their Internal Subject-Case

This section focuses on the issue of subject-object confusion and reference within personal pronouns in a native language transfer perspective. We will discuss the confusion between personal pronouns and possessive pronouns in 3.2.

##### 3.1.1. Transfer of Chinese to English Personal Pronouns in the Subject-Object Case

Chinese is not a case marking language, so there is no grammatical concept of case in personal pronouns. This means that there is no distinction between subject and object case. English, on the other hand, is a case marking language [5], i.e., language users can learn grammatical information from the use of the subject and the object of the personal pronoun. Because of the lack of sub-concepts under the personal pronoun in Chinese, Chinese learners acquire English personal pronouns without a basis for language transfer. It makes acquisition process more difficult. As Chinese learners lack the awareness of using object personal pronouns with object markers, they prefer to use subject personal pronouns without morphological markers [6].

- (1) a. \* *I like they.*  
b. *I like them.*
- (2) a. \**He said that drinking can make he relaxed.*  
b. *He said that drinking can make him relaxed.*

Also, they may misuse the subject-object case of personal pronoun because they are unclear about its grammatical concepts and functions.

- (3) a. \**My parents and me go to the school together.*  
b. *My parents and I go to the school together.*
- (4) a. \**After me go to the hospital, ...*  
b. *After I go to the hospital, ...*

##### 3.1.2. Transfer of reference of personal pronouns

Reference is an important feature of English discourse feature. It can be divided into in-text and extra-text referents. The use of personal pronouns and the narrative perspective in the discourse differ markedly between Chinese and English due to differences in culture and thinking, etc. Chinese emphasises paratactic, i.e., not bound by morphological constraints, with a preference for covert coherence, while English focuses on hypotactic, i.e., more on overt cohesion, with formal coherence concentrated on the surface structure of the language [7-9].

As a result, many Chinese students unconsciously engage in negative language transfer when learning English expressions. This leads them to construct texts that conform to Chinese pronoun referential conventions and narrative style. However, these texts lack logic from an English perspective.

In the case of personal pronouns, Chinese has the same three third-person singular forms of "他(he)/她(she)/它(it)" as English. The third-person plural of them is "they" in English. But Chinese add the plural morpheme "们" after each of the three forms in Chinese to express third person plural. Given this linguistic difference, students will proceed to equate "they" with feminine plural and masculine plural. They tend to ignore the fact that "they" can also mean no gender or animal plural semantically. e.g.

(5) *Refugees flow from one country to another, but too few students can point to these great migrations on a map or talk about the famines, wars, or poverty that caused them* [8].

When the class of 43 was asked what "them" meant in the sentence, 28 students (65.1%) thought it referred to refugees, 5 students (11.6%) thought it referred to students, and only 10 students (23.3%) thought it referred to migrations. Most of the students took it for granted that they or them only referred to people [8].

In China, many scholars have discussed the differences between English and Chinese pronouns, and the phenomenon of language transfer has received widespread attention. But few researches focus on the negative transfer of acquisition, especially the systematic studies. A study of the difficulties in referring to English personal pronouns due to the negative transfer of Chinese would help us to further understand the cognition and acquisition of language. It would also promote the development of foreign language teaching research.

#### 3.2. Possessive pronouns

Moving on now to consider the transfer in possessive pronouns as well as its two negative influences to Chinese learners. The following findings deal only with adjectival possessive pronouns.

In general, Chinese pronouns can only be divided into three categories: personal pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, interrogative pronouns according to their meanings and functions, excluding the possessive pronouns. Chinese tend to add "的" after the personal pronouns (hereinafter called "Pp+的") to express the relation of the genus. Under the framework for the transfer of Grammatical concepts in Chinese, this lack in concept can trigger transfer [6] which may bring two barriers to new learners in China. First, they may not use possessive pronouns in English frequently because of the

differences between the two languages. Chinese tends to omit the pattern "Pp+的", e.g.

*He lowered his head and kept chewing the inside of his lips.*

他低下头，不停地咬着嘴唇的内侧。 [10]

In comparison, English emphasizes regularity of form, and all kinds of relations should be expressed clearly [11-12]. This means possessive pronouns are much more frequently used in English than in Chinese. Thus, Chinese learners are likely to have a low awareness of using them and make mistakes in expression, e.g.

- (6) a. *\*I invited them watched them favourite film.*
  - b. *I invited them watched their favourite film.*
- [6]

In addition, because of the dependence of personal pronouns ("Pp+的"), Chinese learners tend to confuse them with personal pronouns, causing free variation, e.g.

- (7) a. *\*My father says "You called my uncle ? "*
- b. *My father says "You called me uncle ? " [6]*

Briefly, the cognitive root of the above biases lies in the lack of possessive pronouns. Given this reason, it is advisable for Chinese learners to reclassify their pronoun conceptual category system and gradually establish the concept of possessive pronouns [6]. However, researchers seem to exclude nominal possessive pronouns. As mentioned before, Chinese learners can use the concept of "Pp+的" to substitute the adjectival possessive pronouns. We propose that the cognitive root of the above bias lies in the lack of nominal possessive pronouns.

Also, the two barriers in the transfer of adjectival possessive pronouns have not received much attention and almost no textbook clearly points out this phenomenon and gives a reasonable explanation.

### 3.3. Reflexives

#### 3.3.1. Re-evaluation of Universal Grammar's Role in L2 Acquisition

The role of universal grammar in second language learning, more specifically reflexives, has been investigated by many scholars. Opinions vary from entirely effective to partially effective or even not effective at all. Research from the Chinese learner's angle often disregards other factors and believes UG to be entirely or strongly effective in L2 acquisition. The common understanding before was that the acquisition of UG is how learners understand the role of reflexives in L2. Recently, studies have been made to challenge that belief and take new perspectives on the issue. Wang argues that in L2 acquisition, UG takes effect but alongside other factors such as L2 input and L1 Transfer [13-15]. Following this hypothesis, Wang tests

his theories using a series of questions designed to measure the participants' understanding of reflexives in L2 English (All participants are of L1 Chinese). He proposes that if UG were solely effective in L2 English learning, then participants should be able to identify the constrictions on the reflexive pronouns and thus their antecedents. The questions he designed followed three major categories: The biclausal finite, non-finite, and mono-clausal. Each category contains two scenarios with the picture showing either near or far subject interpretation.

**Table 1.** The scores of test group and control group

	SubC 1a	SubC 1b	SubC 2a	SubC 2b	SubC 3a	SubC 3b
Test Group	3.75	3.65	3.45	3.4	3.5	1.05
Control Group	3.929	4	3.929	3.857	3.071	1.643

Wang points out that the control group has the same average score for subcategories 1a and 2a, but the scores drop between 1b and 2b (see table 1). Meanwhile, the test group scores similarly for the two subsets within category 1, and similar scores between subsets of category 2, albeit lower than category 1. This pattern is different from the control group. Wang proposes that if participants' learning of reflexives is affected by UG, they should incorrectly identify both far and near subjects as the antecedent in a biclausal finite sentence the same way they do in a biclausal non-finite sentence. This is true for the control group, who scored similarly for category 1 and category 2. An explanation for this difference in scores is the positive transfer from Chinese grammar. Reflexives in Chinese are limited to the near-subject in biclausal finite sentences, not in biclausal non-finite sentences. By cross-comparing his results with more studies centered around other east-Asian languages such as Japanese and Korean, Wang concluded that his results, along with evidence from prior experiments, can provide evidence for L1 transfer occurring in L1 Chinese learners of English.

#### 3.3.2. Further Studies on L1 Transfer

Since Wang's article in 2000, L1 transfer has become the topic of many more studies regarding L2 acquisition by L1 Chinese learners. Li's article in 2002 investigates the positive and negative transfer of reflexive properties from Chinese to English. This was done by asking participants to identify the antecedent to the reflexive in the given statement in each question. Similar to Wang, Li designed a series of questions to test participants' knowledge of reflexive restrictions in English. However,

Li did not accompany the questions with a picture and her sample of participants included English learners from different levels. Li concluded from the data that the binding distance of Chinese reflexives undergoes transfer in learners of all levels. Li observed that both positive and negative transfer occurs for binding distance because the Chinese reflexive "他自己" can be bounded to both far and near subjects. This is different from English, which can lead to learners correctly identifying near-subject bindings and incorrectly refusing far-subject bindings. The interesting fact to extract from this research is how the learners ultimately attain the properties of English reflexives despite the very obvious L1 transfer. In her paper, Li proposed that this could be a result of UG influence in L2 acquisition, but does not elaborate.

Another study in 2018 tackles the issue from a more generalized standpoint, as they focus on all forms of L2 English confusion by L1 Chinese learners and attempt to model the process of concept transfer in L2 acquisition[6]. Zhang mainly focuses on confusion between the many pronouns of English by L1 Chinese learners. His study seeks to support this claim by proving the confusion of pronouns comes from a place of L1 concept transfer.

Zhang's paper, in essence, was more a proposal to a new model of L2 acquisition that incorporates factors such as UG, L1 transfer, and L2 environmental input. The two studies align in terms of concept transfer being a factor in L2 grammar development. However, Zhang disregards the possible influences of UG in his study, whereas Li takes a similar stance with Wang and considers UG along with L1 transfer and L2 input in his evaluations.

#### **4. POTENTIAL STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING**

To address the above problems of pronoun acquisition due to language transfer, we propose the following strategies to mitigate the effects of negative language transfer.

Firstly, the use of Chinese-English vocabulary lists should be reduced, as the aim of learning English vocabulary is not to know the meaning of the words, but more to understand the application of the words [16]. Simple word-meaning comparisons make it more likely that negative language transfer will occur. Teachers should place new words in specific contexts when teaching them so that students can gradually learn how the word is used [17]. Secondly, teachers should highlight English grammatical concepts and functions that are lacking in Chinese, so that students can clarify the different grammatical frameworks of Chinese and English. Thirdly, as mentioned in 3.2, the bias in the use of possessive pronouns is not given enough attention and information about it is lacking in textbooks. We therefore

suggest that a comparison of possessive and personal pronouns be added to relevant textbooks, with corresponding example sentences explaining in detail the causes of this phenomenon and the correct way of using it.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

This review analyses the difficulties of Chinese learners of English in learning pronouns from the perspective of language transfer. A detailed analysis of the language transfer of Chinese to English pronoun acquisition is useful for Chinese learners and teachers to raise awareness of English grammatical concepts and the unconscious grammatical transfer of Chinese. This is conducive to improving the acquisition of various English language phenomena. The review also summarises the discussion on the impact of universal grammar on second language acquisition. We propose that there are other factors besides universal grammar that influence it. Through this review, we find that there is a lack of research on the issue of personal pronoun referents in the context of language transfer, the issue of nominal possessive pronoun transfer, and a lack of quantitative research.

However, there is a need for extended research, due to time constraints, our lack of survey data and systematicity. In addition, the issues involved in universal grammar and L1 output L2 input (3.3), are more complex and difficult to develop in detail under a transfer perspective. So it is hoped that this area can be expanded upon in the future.

#### **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

We collect and review information on the phenomenon of SLA pronoun difficulties from the unique perspective of language transfer in Chinese Learners. We discuss these studies and compared them so we can shed light on the unconscious process of language transfer. We also suggest methods of teaching based in our analysis of the aforementioned issues.

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