

A Study on Language Transfer from the Perspective of Translation

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Abstract: Among the many branches of second language acquisition, language transfer is an active one since it analyzes the problems in language acquisition through comparing the different languages. From a common sense, language transfer can be seen as an inter-language influence which refers to the influences of an old language to the new language learning. With the deeper study of language transfer, researchers have broken the limits of language structures and started to explore the conceptual influence between different languages, which has extended the study of language transfer both horizontally and vertically. This study adopts the translation material of the English major students in Inner Mongolia Normal University. Using the methods of questionnaires, thinking aloud and error analyzing, the paper tries to analyze the practical problems and obstacles in the English learning process. By overviewing theories and methods in the language transfer field, the paper combines the result of the study with the actual English learning issues. Ultimately, the paper tries to provide references and suggestions for the English teaching and learning.

Key Words: Second Language Acquisition; Language Transfer; Conceptual Transfer Hypothesis; English Teaching

1. The General Definition of Language Transfer

Commonly, language transfer can be seen as a kind of cross language influence. It normally refers to the impact that one's mother tongue does to the second language learning. However, with the study on language transfer has been extended in length and depth, there are more specific topics about the transfer problems, like the orientation of the transfer and the occurring level of the transfer, to name two main ones. And this shall be illustrated more specifically in this paper later. The definitions of language transfer are almost all about the relationship between first language and the new learned language. And many linguists have given their own opinions on the definition of language transfer. Sajavaara defines transfer as "the phenomenon of previous knowledge being extended to the area of new knowledge." Krashen believes that transfer can be described as language learners seek help to their mother tongue when they encounter problem in communication with target language. While when we know that the influence of the languages is mutual. Cook holds the idea that mutual influence does exist between first language and second language. Brook considers "the most remarkable fact of language learning is what habits and performance it involves rather than the solution of problems." Here the "habits" and the "performance" are the knowledge of first language. Kellerman takes transfer as "the process of combining two language components." Odlin defines the language transfer "The transfer is a kind of influence caused by the generality and difference between target language and other language has been learned."

2. A Brief History of Language Transfer Study

Since 1950s, the issue of language transfer has aroused the attention of many linguists. And the achievement in the field was delightful. Over the half century, the research of language transfer has gone through three dominating periods: the contrastive analysis hypothesis in 1950s to 1960s; the studies under nativist approaches in

1970s; and the conceptual transfer hypothesis from 1990s till present. Another opinion from Cai Jinting is the study on language transfer can be divided into two periods: before 1980s, language as an affective factor was used to explain the behaviors and process in second language learning, and the first language transfer was the center topic in the field; the second period was after 1980s, language transfer was treated as a phenomenon, and researchers began to pay attention to the happening process of the transfer, they tried to find out where and when would the language transfer occur. From the perspective of research methodologies, the approach of language transfer has shown the same new characteristic as second language acquisition did, which is multi-subject. For instance, the cooperation with psychology has promoted the language transfer research a lot.

3. The Classification of Language Transfer

According to the different occurring levels of the language transfer, it can be divided into linguistic transfer and conceptual transfer. The former one concerns the difference between language structures and forms. That is to say, when the linguistic transfer happens, we know it is the transfer in the field of phonetics, semantics, morphology, syntax, pragmatics, etc. On the other hand, the conceptual transfer concerns the inner relationship between the language and one's brain. It is saying that the former concept towards something in mother tongue would affect the new forming concept in target language learning. Compared with the linguistics transfer, conceptual transfer is abstract and often invisible.

Unlike the linguistic transfer and conceptual transfer, which are the differences in the language transfer process, the negative transfer and positive transfer are about the ultimate effect of the transfer, or in other words, about the result. When it is regarded as a result, just as the famous American psychologist Thorndike points out that transfer can be divided into positive transfer and negative transfer according to common element theory. When the characteristics in one's mother tongue are the same or similar to those in the target language, positive transfer would happen; while the negative transfer happens when the characteristics in two languages are not the same or even distinctively different. And the result of this two kinds transfer is obvious. Naturally, the positive transfer brings the progress in language learning for it is easier for the learner to handle the similar elements. On the other hand, the negative transfer will hinder the learning process for the difference between two languages makes the learning more challenging.

Here the forward transfer refers to the mother tongue will influence the acquisition of the second language; while the reverse transfer refers to the influence of the second language to first language. And the lateral transfer is the influence that second language has toward the third language, the fourth language etc. The direction of language transfer is always mutual. For if we have learned something new, naturally our old knowledge will influence the learning process of the new knowledge and be influenced by it, too.

4. The Conceptual Transfer Hypothesis

The development of Linguistic Relativity and the Thinking for Speaking Hypothesis has promoted the mature of conceptual transfer

hypothesis. Linguistic relativity says that one's language will influence his or her thoughts and the structure of mother tongue one holds will partly or completely decide his or her opinions toward the world and the social cultures. The thinking for speaking hypothesis advocates that one's mother tongue would not influence the direct acceptations of the brain. But when we are expressing our thoughts with language, our mother language would affect the direction of our attention to then affect the brain's selection and organization of the new features and characteristics of the surroundings. As the latest achievement of language transfer, the meaning of conceptual transfer study is profound. The mature and development of one's "concept" system is one of the important steps in language learning. At present, the studies on conceptual transfer research are mainly about the following topics: the definition and categorization of conceptual transfer; the methods to judge the happening of conceptual transfer; and the relevant empirical researches. As to the shortages in the actual researches, the definition and boundaries of the conceptual transfer are not clear; the research theories and methods are still deficient; last but not least, the present methods that used to judge the conceptual transfer are not strict enough.

5. The Research Methodologies of Language Transfer

For linguistic transfer, there are the contrastive analysis proposed by Lado; the error analysis proposed by Pit Corder; the inter-language theory proposed by Larry Selinker; the united framework that proposed by Jarvis and the comparison-induction methodological framework that proposed by Cai Jinting. When collecting data in language transfer, we could first of all use the data from the founded corpus. On the other hand, there are translation approach and the narrative description approach to get the research data of learners' second language learning. More specifically, the data collecting methods includes the highly controlled tasks and the relatively free tasks. Generally speaking, the former one includes picture naming, picture classification, word naming, word translation, lexical decision, lexical preference task and grammaticality judgment. The later one includes the observing of natural language, the oral interview, formal writing, oral or written descriptions of pictures, and silent movie watching. To tell if a phenomenon is a kind of conceptual transfer, we must first of all make sure it is a kind of linguistic transfer. For the exploration of conceptual transfer is on the basis that the transfer did happen so that we can judge if the reasons of the transfer have something to do or are completely because of the differences in "concept" between two languages. For conceptual transfer research, online and offline techniques are suggested to be combined. The online techniques mainly include eye-tracking, the electroencephalograph(EPR), the effective radiated power(ERP), and the functional magnetic resonance imaging(FMRI). Among these online techniques, eye-tracking is often used together with the narrative description to do the research on conceptual transfer. EPR and ERP are the new techniques in the second language research field. FMRI is used to observe the cross-language influence to the brain during second language processing. While The offline techniques mainly include object naming, typicality judgment, categorization and sorting etc. In all, language transfer is a very complicated phenomenon. In doing the research, the best way to avoid mistakes is to combine all the scientific methods and the research data from those methods.

6. Research Process and Data Analysis

This paper uses several methods to analyze the language transfer phenomena in the translation process of the English majors in Inner Mongolia Normal University. This paper mainly tries to answer two questions: 1. Is there language transfer phenomena in the translation

materials? 2. Are there any conceptual transfer phenomena can be found under the linguistic transfer? The concrete research process can be illustrated as following, the selection of research subject, the preparation of the translation material, the implementation of the research and the analysis of the research result. Language transfer studies originated from the last century has become an important issue nowadays. Influenced by linguistics, psychologies, sociologies and many other subjects, we are getting a more comprehensive and all-around view on language transfer issue. From the questionnaire of the study, the subjects of the study are all the learners who mastered their mother language which is Chinese firstly. And also from the questionnaire, we see that they prefer to consult to their mother language when there's difficulty in English learnings. 77.78% of the students have expressed that their Chinese efficiency can directly influence their English learning. And 61.11% of the students think that the Chinese thinking pattern greatly influence their English learning. 66.67% of the students consider that the cultural background instead of the grammar or the vocabularies is the biggest problem in their Chinese to English translations. And the students who have participated in this study have all confirmed the influences of their mother language on their English language learning. And mostly, there are the cultural factor of Chinese that influence their English translation mostly. As to the translation material, the students have been asked to finish the translation task within ten minutes. By analyzing the translation materials, several kinds of language transfer have been found. For example, in the translation sentence "Sports are people's languages, which are important to peace and development. From the ancient time, sports has overcome different race, skin colors and cultures, and become the pursuit to a peace and beautiful world." Comparing the translation with its Chinese meaning, the paper noticed that the Chinese grammar has influenced the translation as there's no plural form changes in Chinese sentences, the student has naturally translated the sentences as "sports has". On the other hand, the Chinese sentence habit has also influenced the translation as most of the students have organized the sentence by placing "from the ancient time" at the beginning of the sentence. Also, the wrong spell of the word "pursuit" (pursuit) may have some connections with the differences between Chinese and English phonetics. After the translation part, the paper has done the think aloud part by interviewing several participants of the study. According to the students, they found a natural and strong power is dominating their translation the whole time. As they have mastered Chinese firstly, they often use Chinese without hesitation when there's obstacles in English learning. Also, they consider such influences from Chinese to English are rooted deeply in their mind.

From the whole research process, we have found the language transfer from Chinese to English which has answered the first study question. And we have found that such transfer can be discovered from the linguistic level yet can be traced deeply to the conceptual level of the learners which has answered the second research question. However, limited by the actual conditions, the research didn't get the chance to use online tools and methods to explore the more scientific and specific results.

7. Result Discussion and Conclusion

As a central topic in second language acquisition, language transfer has many unsolved problems. The issues of future language transfer researches are: the deeper understanding of language transfer, for we should be aware that the transfer could both be a linguistic one or a conceptual one, a visible one or a invisible one, a conscious one or an unconscious one, a reverse one or a forward one, and it could be a

process or a result; and we need pay more effort to the construction of the theory frameworks. Many reasons can be accounted in the language transfer. For example, there are the distance between languages. That refers to the differences between languages. Naturally, the bigger the difference, the bigger the language transfer is. Also, the differences between learners are also another important reason in causing different kinds of language transfer. As the higher level of one's language efficiency is, the smaller the language transfer is. And for most of the time, social environment is also a significant factor. Surrounded by a target language environment would definitely help the learners to reduce the language transfer from their mother languages.

Language transfer impacts the language learning a lot. Facing the different kinds of problems, it's better for language teachers and researchers to value the role of mother language in second language teaching. Using various teaching methods to lead the students and try to discover the different characteristics of different students would help to provide a better learning experience. And behind the various kinds of language transfer phenomena, there are the conceptual reasons. We should focus on the reflection relationships between language forms and their underlying meanings and reasons. To explore the conceptual transfer issues is to improve the recognition we have on

second language learning and teaching.

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