# An Analysis of Interlanguage Caused by Negative Transfers in Second Language Acquisition

**Shiyan Qiao**

*Foreign Languages School, Guangzhou College of South China University of Technology, Guangzhou, China*

**ABSTRACT.** *Interlanguage plays a significant role in second language acquisition. It is produced under the influence of language learners' mother tongue. The author mainly analyses interlanguage resulting from learners' negative transfer of their mother tongue to the target language on different levels. This analysis shows the close relationship between the negative transfer and interlanguage. It also gives some enlightenment on second language teaching.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Interlanguage, Negative transfer, Language learners, Mother tongue, Target language*

## 1. Introduction

"Interlanguage", proposed by S. Pit Corder and Larry Selinker, is an important term in the theory of second language acquisition. It was established as learners' independent system of the second language which is of neither the native language nor the second language, but a continuum or approximation from their native language to the target language. It contains a large number of 'errors' which seem to have no connection to the forms of either the learner's first language or second language. But there are certainly aspects of first language and second language. Actually interlanguage is produced under the influence of learner's first language on his second language. Thus similarities and differences between the learner's mother tongue and the target language may lead to positive and negative transfer in learning a second language. This paper will analyze factors influencing the production of interlanguage, the characteristics of interlanguage and the stages of its development. It will mainly focus on the negative transfer in the interlanguage.

## 2. Factors Influencing the Production of Interlanguage and Characteristics of Interlanguage

### 2.1 The Factors Influencing the Production of Interlanguage

The production of interlanguage is a complicated process under the influence of many factors, such as the comprehensive linguistic factors of the learner's mother tongue and target language, the psychological or neurological mechanisms, textual factors and social factors. Selinker, from the cognitive perspective, concluded 5 aspects which may contribute to the production of interlanguage.

### 2.1.1 Language Transfer

For the second language learners who have mastered the fundamental vocabulary and grammatical structures of their mother tongue, their learning of the vocabulary and semantic structures of the second language will certainly be affected by those of his first language. Language learners tend to transfer the features of their mother tongue to the second language learning in a direct way. The structural similarities between the first language and the second language may lead to the facilitation of second language learning, while the structural differences between them may cause interferences of it. The previous facilitation is named as positive transfer and the latter interference is called negative transfer.

### 2.1.2 Overgeneralization of the Target Language System.

During the process of second language acquisition, language learners often tend to overgeneralize the previously available rules to simplify the structures of the target language. This may lead to the appearance of creative construction variants which don't exist in the target language. These variants have got no characteristics of the mother tongue, but really display some characteristics of the target language. For instance, some learner employs the plural suffix "-s" to "foot", thus its plural form becoming foots which is unacceptable.

### 2.1.3 Transfer Due to the Effects of Teaching

In a class of the target language, emphasizing a structure or a rule too much will also lead to transfer. This is mainly ascribed to the teacher's improper teaching or the improper content of the class. For example, the teacher's poor pronunciation of certain phonemes may affect the second language learners' poor performance of pronouncing them. During the exercises, frequent use of the pronoun "he" will reduce the frequency of the use of "she". The language learners will replace "she" with "he" unconsciously.

### 2.1.4 Learning Strategies

Learning strategies here refers to language learners' employment of certain strategies in second language learning before they are proficient at the language. They includes transfer, simplification, reduction, omission, substitution, restructuring and formulaic language which may benefit the language learners. This will directly influence the development of interlanguage.

### 2.1.5 Communication Strategies

Communication strategies refer to a set of systematic skills that speakers employ to overcome difficulties during the communication. They are classified into two categories, receiving and expressing. The choice of communication strategies can reflects the learner's developments in different stages. With the developments of the learners' proficiency of target language, they will convert from the strategies basing on their mother tongue to those on the basis of the target language. They will employ language in true context and construe, inspect and moderate the psychological mode of that new language.

### 2.2 Characteristics of Interlanguage

### 2.2.1 Systematicity

There exist all kinds of variants in the interlanguage. Everyone has his own distinctive interlanguage and it is always changing. But this does not mean that interlanguage is language in disorder. In fact, interlanguage can display the systematic nature and the internal conformity at any stage. It has a unique system of phonetic, grammatical, and vocabulary rules. We can make a systematic language analysis of it. Though it is changeable in a certain stage, for example, the switching of styles, there is the sameness across several stages, like modifications of the rules. People's language performance depends on his intrinsic knowledge system of his mother tongue. The language learners' use of the second language is also dependent on their construing of the grammatical system. In other words, the changes of the interlanguage can be predicted through situation, context, plan and other knowable factors.

### 2.2.2 Permeability

Interlanguage is an open system rather than an invariable closed one. Second language learners continuously accept new language forms and new language rules constantly permeate through their interlanguage. That is to say, interlanguage can be permeated by the forms and rules of language learners' mother tongue and target language. This is not only a unique attribute of interlanguage, but the essential element which account for the differences of interlanguage from the learners' mother tongue and from the target language. The permeation of the learners' mother tongue is positive or negative transfer. Positive transfer leads the approach of interlanguage to the target language, while negative transfer strengthens the interlanguage and causes an error or a mistake. The permeation from the target language mainly refers to the overgeneralization of the forms or rules of the target language which language learners have learned and it may also leads to errors or mistakes.

### 2.2.3 Fossilization

The fossilization of interlanguage is the manifestation of its stability. It is defined as a process occurring from time to time in which incorrect linguistic features become a permanent part of the way a person speaks or writes a language.

Fossilization may occur at any time and at any level. On one hand, the interlanguage can't reach the same level of the mother tongue. On the other hand, aspects of pronunciation, vocabulary usage, and grammar may become fixed or fossilized in second language learning. The language learners' interlanguage may develop to a certain period, in which it contains many features which do not match the target language. Then they will not progress any further. Fossilization is ordinarily manifested phonologically in "foreign accents" in the speech of many of those who have learned a second language after adolescence.

### 2.2.4 Dynamicity

Language learners' interlanguage is always changing. But the changes are not sudden movements from one stage to another, but the proposing of hypotheses of the target language and their verifications. Usually, there will be only one new rule in a new context. Another new rule occurs in the next context. In fact, new rules can come up in all kinds of contexts. The frequent revision and extension of the rules are the inner property of interlanguage. Since interlanguage is dynamic, it has different stages of its development. This will be the focus of the following part.

### 2.3 Stages of the Developments of Interlanguage

H. D. Brown classified the errors and mistakes that language learners committed during language acquisition and proposed four stages of the developments of interlanguage.

The first is a stage of random errors, a stage that Corder called "presystematic," in which the learner is only vaguely aware that there is some systematic order to a particular class of items. There is no regular pattern of the language learners' errors or mistakes. Due to their lack of the knowledge of target language system, their output of target language is mostly incorrect. The correct ones are accidental ones.

The second one is the emergent stage. This stage is characterized by some "backsliding," in which the learners seem to have grasped a rule or principle and then regresses to some previous stage. The emergent stage finds the learners growing in consistency in linguistic production. The learners have begun to discern a system and to internalize certain rules. These rules may not be "correct" by target language standards, but they are nevertheless legitimate in the mind of the learners.

A third stage is a truly systematic stage in which the learner is now able to manifest more consistency in producing the second language. While those rules inside the head of the learner are still not all "well-formed," they are more internally self-consistent and, of course, they are more closely approximating the target language system.

The fourth one is the stabilization stage which is akin to what Corder (1973) called a "postsystematic" stage. Here the second language learners have relatively few errors and has mastered the system to the point that fluency and intended meanings are not problematic. This stage is characterized by the learner's ability to

self-correct. The system is complete enough that attention can be paid to those few errors that occur and corrections made without waiting for feedback from someone else. The system of the target language tends to be stable and the errors or mistakes are mostly caused by carelessness or temporary forgetting certain rule.

Brown has pointed out that it should be made clear the four stages outlined do not describe a learner's total second language system. It is also difficult to assert which stage a learner is for all the linguistic subsystems of language. Here it is just shows that learners' interlanguage is developing.

## 3. Negative Transfer in Interlanguage

We have known that language learners' mother tongue have effect on their second language learning. Some of its features are transferred by the language learner to achieve their success of communication in the target language. The language transfer, occurring in interlanguage, can be classified into two categories, positive transfer and negative transfer. When some features of the mother tongue are similar to or the same as those of the target language, positive transfer occurs. For instance, in Chinese "我们热爱祖国" while in English " we love our motherland". The English structure of this sentence is similar to the Chinese one. Then it is a positive transfer. When there are differences between mother tongue and the target language, negative transfer occurs. For example, if "爱人" was translated into *lover*, there would be ambiguity or misunderstanding. Because the Chinese equivalence of *lover* is "情夫,情妇". That is not the same meaning of "爱人". We can see that positive transfer can benefit language learning while negative transfer may hinder it. In addition to different cultures and social conventions, Chinese and English are from different language families. Therefore a lot of negative transfers occur in the Chinese language learners' English learning, thus producing their interlanguages. The following parts are the analysis of the negative transfer on different levels.

### 3.1 Phonological Negative Transfer and Interlanguage

Phonological negative transfer mainly results from the sharp differences between the Chinese phoneme system and English one. For instance, Chinese characters are all monosyllabic. Basically, they are all open syllables and ended with a vowel. Yet, in English, there are words of open syllables ended with a vowel, such as *hi, my*, and words of closed syllable ended with a consonant like *map* and *stand*. Due to the mother tongue's negative transfer, some learners may pronounce *good* [gud] as [gudə]; and *right* [rait] as [raitə]. Since there is no dental fricatives in Chinese, *thank* always was pronounced as [sæŋk] rather than [θæŋk]. As the negative transfer produced in language learning is stubborn, those occurring on this level are innumerable. Sometimes the interlanguage caused by phonological negative transfer doesn't hinder the communication. However, the distinctive phonemes and phonemic means, like *base* [beis] and *bathe* [beið], should be paid much attention to, otherwise that may affect the progressing of communication.

### 3.2 Morphological Negative Transfer and Interlanguage

The negative transfer on the morphological level is mainly manifested by the meaning of words and the collocations of words.

Semantically, the word *lover* mentioned above is a good example. The sense of *lover* is different from that of "爱人". Therefore, introducing one's wife or husband by the sentence "She/he is my lover" will lead to some misunderstanding. Here is another example. The sense of laborer is different from that of "劳动者" in Chinese. The latter one comprises both people going in for the mental work and those engaged in the physical work. But the sense of *laborer* English is much narrower. According to Collin COBUILD English Dictionary, a laborer is a person who does a job which involves a lot of hard physical work, for example, digging or carrying bricks. Webster's Third New International Dictionary of English Language defines it more concrete. "One that labors; specially a person who does unskilled physical work for wages, sometimes as assistant to a skilled artisan."

About the collocation, negative transfer on this aspect is displayed by the transferring of the mother tongue's collocation to the target language incorrectly. That actually ignores that each language has its own special way and habit of the collocation of words. For example, in Chinese we often say "学习知识", while the similar expression in English is *gain knowledge*. However, under the effects of mother tongue, the interlanguage *learn knowledge* appears.

### 3.3 Syntactic Negative Transfer and Interlanguage

When the same meaning has different syntactic constructions in the mother tongue and the target language, negative transfer on syntactic level occurs. Language learners make a lot of negative transfers on this level in both speeches and writings.

Here are some examples.

(1)In order to country's tomorrow could better, I must study better.

(2)Though he did his best, but he failed.

(3)He like Japanese.

(4)I very much like English.

(5)They go to Beijing last year.

We can see that negative transfer on this level is complicated, for it involves a lot of aspects, such as the use of conjunctions, word order, and the expression of time. Language learners produce so many negative transfers mainly because they haven't mastered enough sentence patterns. And they didn't master them well enough. The acquisition of a second language is an accumulating process. Therefore, if the efficient input of the target language was increased and if the language learners do more comparison and analysis, they could reduce the appearances of negative transfer on this level. That is to say, language learners can avoid negative transfer on

this level consciously.

### *3.4 Pragmatic Negative Transfer and Interlanguage*

Negative transfer on this level is mainly manifested by the inappropriate application of the functions of the target language due to the effects of mother tongue. During the communication, interlanguage resulting from the pragmatic negative transfer may cause the commitment of cultural mistakes, misunderstanding or the failure of communication.

For example, in Chinese, one's family name is always put before his title, like "李经理,王奶奶,赵爷爷". But in English, addressing somebody *Manager Smiths*, *Granny Nancy, Grandpa Zhao"* is a violation of the communicative principles. That may make the addressee unhappy and misunderstanding arises in communication.

Another example, we Chinese students are accustomed to saying " 老师好" in order to show their respect for the teacher. Then, they transfer that into English, thus producing *Good morning, teacher.* In English, *teacher,* like *driver*, and *cook,* is just a noun standing for one's occupation, rather than an addressing term. It cannot show any respect for the addressee. The interlanguage of the kind of teacher followed by a family name never occurs in English. That is Chinglish.

Here is a joke,

An Englishman: Your wife is so beautiful.

A Chinese Man: Where, where. (哪里,哪里)

Can you figure out the Englishman's answer? He was so puzzled that he said *everywhere*. Actually the Chinese man had transferred our Chinese response to others' praise, however, that is different from the English culture. The negative transfer on this level may hinder the progressing of communication.

The production of interlanguage is closely related to the negative transfer of language. Figuring out the close relationship between the interlanguage and negative transfer has enlightenment on the second language teaching.

### 4. Enlightenments on Second Language Teaching

Second language learners learn the target language in hope that they can use it to communicate with the foreigners. However, a lot of facts prove that not all of them can achieve that goal, though they have devoted much time and energy into language learning. Therefore, teachers of foreign languages should form a correct idea about the language learners' interlanguage and their commitment of mistakes. Meanwhile, they need to help the learners avoid using too much interlanguage in order to prevent the fossilization of the language learners' interlanguage.

Firstly, the teachers should have a correct idea of the interlanguage. In other word, they should evaluate it with the right attitude. Interlanguage cannot be skipped

during second language learning. It is a changing and developing continuum which is always approaching the target language. Errors and mistakes committed in the developing process cannot be avoided in second language acquisition. Language teachers should be tolerant to them.

Secondly, the teachers should apply different kinds of means to reduce negatives on different levels so that the fossilization of the language learners' interlanguage can be prevented and the interlanguage can progress further.

(1)To distinguish different mistakes and handle them differently. There are mainly two kinds of mistakes, those of comprehension and those of expression. The previous ones are ascribed to the learners' ignorance of certain rule of the target language, while the latter ones result from the learners' carelessness or nervousness. The teachers should correct the previous ones by teaching them new rules of the target language. The latter one should be handled if the teachers make language learners conscious of their mistakes.

(2)To devote enough correct input of the target language. Teachers of foreign languages should develop their own proficiency of the target language so that they can ensure enough correct input of the target language. Then the learners can accept the original expressions. Some English novels, newspapers, magazines and English movies may help language learners' form an English thinking way and reduce negative transfers on different levels. These inputs can correct language learners' interlanguage so that it may be closer to the target language.

(3)To teach language learners knowledge of English culture background. Different culture backgrounds lead to different use of language. As long as they master the differences on culture background, they can figure out the real linguistic differences between the two languages. Thus, teachers should be equipped with knowledge of this aspect. Then they can offer more help to the learners on correcting their interlanguage.

(4)To encourage and foster language learners' communication strategies. Meanwhile, teachers should teach learners how to employ them correctly and properly and help them improve their capability of language learning. The language learners should be guided to find out the right and proper ways of learning. This will also help to reduce the learners' negative transfer and the employment of interlanguage.

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