

# Research on Language Transfer in Second Language Acquisition

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**Abstract:** *Language transfer shows close relevance to second language acquisition. Despite the passage of nearly a century, the discussion on language transfer and the role of mother tongue never ceased. This paper reviews the background of language transfer research and the development of research on language transfer. It also shows the analysis on the transferability of mother tongue and its characteristics. Finally, this paper makes it clear the implications of language transfer research for second language teaching.*

**Keywords:** *Language transfer, Mother tongue transfer, Second language acquisition*

## 1. Introduction

Language transfer has always been an important concept in the field of second language acquisition. However, due to the difference in research perspectives, there has been controversy over the phenomenon of language transfer. American linguist Odlin (2001:25-27)<sup>[1]</sup> believed that transfer failed to lie on: "the result of pure habit formation", "pure interference", "pure turn back on the mother tongue", "frequent reference to the influence of mother tongue". He believed that transfer refers to the impact of similarities and differences between the target language and other languages that have been (or have not been) fully acquired. The influence of mother tongue in the process of foreign language learning, either from the perspective of professional knowledge or cultural thinking, cannot be underestimated, instead, it is worth our in-depth study and thinking. If we can effectively avoid the negative influence of mother tongue in foreign language teaching, the teaching efficiency can be greatly improved.

## 2. Research background of language transfer

The research on transfer can be traced back to the 1950s. Language transfer theory is an integral part in second language acquisition. Lado (1957), an American linguist, put forward the contrastive analysis hypothesis, which made it clear that the similarities between the second language and the mother tongue in second language acquisition can be garnered in a easy manner; On the contrary, those different from the mother tongue will pose obstacles to people in learning. Later on, Chomsky's idea of universal grammar generate profound implications in the field of linguistics. He held that the mechanism of language was a universal peculiarity of human beings on the whole, which was determined by genes and was part of the human mentality.

This viewpoint made some linguists to be skeptical of the contrastive analysis hypothesis. Meanwhile, the markedness theory put forward by Chomsky's made up for the deficiency of the hypothesis in explaining the causes of errors in second language acquisition. In the 1990s, under the influence of the development of cognitive theory, "transfer theory" has once again become an important strategy in language learning, which was represented by the studies of "Processability Theory" and "Conceptual Transfer", etc. At the same time, the research horizon of language transfer was broadened, and thus deepening people's understanding of language transfer. Since then, linguists have begun to discuss language transfer from psychological, neurophysiological, linguistic and social perspectives.

### 3. The development of research on language transfer

#### 3.1. Construction of the framework of hypothesis of comparative analysis

Behaviorist linguistics and structuralist linguistics laid the foundation for the early study of language transfer, which, on the same time, served as the theoretical basis of the contrastive analysis hypothesis. Contrastive analysis hypothesis by Lado held that, as an acquired language, learners are used to grafting language forms and structures from their mother tongue to their second language learning, so the interference caused by mother tongue remained to be the main obstacle in second language acquisition. The contrastive analysis hypothesis held that by comparing the similarities and differences between different languages, we can predict the difficulties that may be encountered in second language acquisition, so as to promote language teaching. Similarities between two languages give rise to positive transfer; On the contrary, differences lead to negative transfer (Lado, 1957)<sup>[2]</sup>. It can be said that the process of second language acquisition is the process of conquering of the transfer of mother tongue by learners.

Besides, there was some opposition from the linguistic community. Through experiments, Dulay and Burt conducted studies on whether children with Chinese and Spanish as their native language had similar acquisition order when learning English, and it was found that learners with different language backgrounds did develop generally similar order in the acquisition of English functional words (Dulay & Burt, 1974)<sup>[3]</sup>. It can be discovered that mother tongue fails to be the only factor affecting second language acquisition. By contrast, other linguists did not hold that differences between two languages necessarily cause difficulties in second language acquisition. Andersen (1983)<sup>[4]</sup> pointed out that, on the contrary, the similarity of languages will lead to the association of learners and interfere with the learning of the second language, and the knowledge points that do not exist in the mother tongue are easy to be acquired by learners.

#### 3.2. Profound implications by the view of universal grammar

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there had been suspicious comments on the contrastive analysis hypothesis and language transfer theory based on behaviorist theory by many linguists. At this time, the markedness theory in universal grammar by Chomsky gradually became the focus of research on language transfer. The concept of "markedness" first emerged in Principles of Phonology by Trubetzkoy (1931), where he made specific descriptions of distinctive features of speech. This theory expounded the existence of antithetical forms of marked and unmarked one for certain antithetical features in language systems. Later, in the framework of Chomsky's universal grammar theory, the markedness theory is discussed in a deeper level, which promoted the in-depth development of transfer problem research.

Different from the "contrastive analysis hypothesis" mentioned above, the markedness theory held that all differences may lead to transfer, and the degree of markedness is proportional to the difficulty of acquisition, which signified that for learners, the unmarked form of language can be garnered than the marked form in a easier manner. Still, not all differences between native and second languages lead to transfer.

#### 3.3. Development of cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology

With the development of cognitive science in the field of linguistics, second language acquisition is no longer simply defined as a process in which language habits are replaced, rather it was interpreted as a kind of psychological experience naturally produced in learners' cognitive processing and the restriction effect of language processing ability on language transfer is not affected by the relationship between language types. Pienemann put forward the theory of language processability in 1998. As a new theory in the field of language teaching, it explained the developmental sequence and process of second language acquisition from the perspective of language processing with exploration on the restriction effect of language processing ability on language transfer.

The concept transfer proposed by Jarvis (1998)<sup>[5]</sup> provided a new idea for the study of language transfer after the 1990s. The word "concept" refers to the mental representation of a class of basically identical or similar things, which was composed of multiple images, impressions or image schemas obtained through various senses based on the archetypal and representative nature of a specific concept. Concepts also affect individual perception, attention and recall (Li Xijiang and Liu Yongbing, 2013)<sup>[6]</sup>.

Jarvis pointed out that second language learners should reintegrate the habitual thinking of their

mother tongue to make it endowed with new conceptuality. The main theory of conceptual transfer hypothesis is derived from the weak form hypothesis of Sapir-Whorf's linguistic relativity (namely, language influences thinking) and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which broadened language transfer to the level of cognitive linguistics and played an important role in expanding the new vision of language transfer research.

#### **4. The transferability analysis of mother tongue**

Currently, linguists have established that the influence of mother tongue is not only a mechanical behavioral transfer process, but also affects the process of second language acquisition in different ways. However, the debate about how the mother tongue influences the acquisition of a second language has always been a focal point of debate. Behaviorist suggested that the learning of a second language was a process of replacing the old language with a new one, and language learning was a natural result of habit. If the mother tongue is similar to the second language, it will produce positive transfer, that is, to promote second language acquisition. On the contrary, negative transfer will come into being, that is, it will probably interfere with second language acquisition.

Subsequently, the rise of cognitive theory encouraged people to pay attention to the nature of intelligent activities of human beings (such as learning, thinking, language, etc.) and the way of activities, emphasizing the process of learning. Although this theory also believed that learners' existing language knowledge will have a certain impact on second language acquisition, cognitivism pointed out that learning should be realized through the subjective role of the subject, rather than mechanical and passive stimulation, which is a challenge and breakthrough to behaviorism theory.

Linguists represented by Selinker advocated that the influence of mother tongue on second language acquisition is a cognitive process rather than just interference. Selinker also put forward the concept of "interlanguage" for the first time, that is, it plays an intermediate role in the process of second language acquisition. It is a dynamic language that is different from the mother tongue and the target language, and it gradually approaches the target language in the constant development and change. It can be seen that Selinker emphasized that learners should actively view various transfer functions of their mother tongue and adopt effective strategies in the cognitive process to realize the transition from mother tongue to target language as soon as possible.

Being that as it may, the transfer of mother tongue is still the most easily associated factor. In 1977, Kellerman proposed that learners developed a psychotypology, also known as perceived language distance. That is to say, the learner's perception of the distance between his native language and his second language constitutes the mentality. This psychology will promote or restrict learners' language transfer and directly affect the process of second language acquisition (Jin Suyang, 1998)<sup>[7]</sup>.

As mentioned above, it is a bold and effective attempt to introduce the markedness theory into the study of language transfer, which is conducive for people to better understand the impact of mother tongue transfer on second language acquisition. The influence of markedness on the mother tongue can be analyzed from two aspects. First, when a specific feature in the second language is marked, learners transfer the corresponding unmarked component in the mother tongue. Second, when a specific feature in the second language is an unmarked component, learners will avoid transferring the corresponding marked component in the mother tongue (Yang Chen and You Chunying, 2014)<sup>[8]</sup>. The markedness differential hypothesis also pointed out that not all differences between mother tongue and second language will probably lead to transfer and interference.

In conclusion, studies on the transfer of mother tongue should also give top priority to the individual differences of each learner as a cognitive subject, and the positive role of mother tongue in language learning should be properly given full play so as to minimize the interference caused by mother tongue.

#### **5. The implications of language transfer research for second language teaching**

The study of language transfer should not be confined to superficial wording. The enlightenment brought by the research results can be applied to teaching. For example: To give close eyes to comparative analysis, grasp the language transfer conditions, seek the optimal learning strategy. Besides, we should re-examine the avoidance strategies used by second language learners in the process of language learning, and they should be guided to confront the differences between the two languages with a positive attitude. Later on, pragmatic teaching should be put on agenda with deep concerns, the "untold story" of the

foreign language should be told to the students, so that the learners can actively perceive the target language and its cultural connotation.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper gives brief discussion on the background of language transfer and the development of research on language transfer. It can be seen that since the middle of the last century, people have gradually deepened their understanding of the environment and conditions of language transfer, and thus developing a more objective understanding of the role of mother tongue in second language acquisition. Second language acquisition is a creative process in which learners use all the knowledge they have mastered to develop their own interlanguage and gradually learn a new language. From this perspective, the transfer of mother tongue is inevitable. However, there presents complex factors restricting language transfer and mother tongue is not the only factor affecting second language acquisition.

In retrospect of the teaching environment of foreign language in China, research on language transfer is of great significance to understand the characteristics of foreign languages and improve the quality of second language teaching. There are still many aspects about language transfer in second language acquisition waiting to be researched. It is a good option to integrate language transfer theory with second language teaching and give full play to the positive effects of "transfer".

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