



## A Case Study on the Impact of Mother-Tongue Negative Transfer on Chinese-English Interpretation

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### Abstract

Interpreting is not only a simple conversion of language, but also a cross-cultural activity which aims to resolve language barriers and cultural contradictions in communication. How to avoid the interference of mother tongue becomes a focus of interpreting studies. This paper is a case study on the impact of negative transfer of mother-tongue on C-E (Chinese to English) interpreting. Twenty graduates from interpreting majors of Sichuan University were chosen to take a test of C-E interpreting full of Chinese features. Test results show that there are different degrees of negative transfer of mother-tongue in C-E interpreting, which have some negative impact on cross-culture communication. By studying the different types of negative transfer in the test results, some suggestions are given on how to reduce the impact of the negative transfer of mother-tongue from a broader view. We have every reason to believe that as more and more people consciously avoid the negative transfer of mother tongue in their C-E interpreting practices, they will greatly improve their interpreting quality and achieve successful cross-cultural communication.

**Key words:** Negative transfer of mother-tongue; C-E interpreting; Contrastive analysis; Cross-cultural communication

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### INTRODUCTION

Business activities and cultural exchanges between China and other countries have met rapid growth in recent years, which lead to more and more people getting involved in interpreting practices and researches. Mei (1996) believed that interpreting was a basic communication tool by which people could realize cross-cultural and cross-national exchanges. Interpreting is a kind of skill as well as an art of cross-cultural communication. While interpreting, the interpreter should focus more on cultural differences so as to avoid misunderstandings. Wang (1989, p.34) mentioned that something might be understood easily in one culture, but efforts should be taken to explain them in another one. Therefore, interpreters not only handle with two languages, but also different cultures in them. They should increase their cultural sensibility and responsibility so as to make more successful cross-cultural communication.

Although there are more studies focus on cultural differences between Chinese and English, the negative transfer of mother tongue is a big challenge for English learners in China. Some scholars have applied the negative transfer of mother-tongue, an important theory in second language acquisition, to translation study and made several achievements. However, since interpreting and translating differ sharply with regard to their own characteristics, studies on the negative transfer of mother-tongue in interpreting are rarely found. This paper is a case study on the impact of negative transfer of mother-tongue on C-E interpreting. Twenty graduates from interpreting majors of Sichuan University took a test of C-E interpreting full of Chinese features. By examining and classifying the negative transfer of mother-tongue students showed in their C-E interpreting performance, it can be found that some students neglect the linguistic and cultural difference between Chinese and English. Thus, they stress much on lexical and syntactic equivalence

and their interpretation becomes unnatural and odd in English culture. Such kind of interpretation is actually a result of mother-tongue negative transfer. Practical countermeasures are given later on how to reduce the negative transfer of Chinese in C-E interpretation.

## 1. WHAT IS NEGATIVE TRANSFER?

Transfer is an important concept in researching second language acquisition, which is first put out by American linguistics Robert Lado in his book *Linguistics Across Cultures*. Lado (1960, p.2) claimed that while learning and using a second language, people had an inclination to transfer their mother tongue, such as words and cultural structure into the new language and its culture. Odlin (1989, p.77) defined language transfer in a broader view: The transfer was a result of language differences and similarities that had been previously acquired. Language transfer is a pervasive phenomenon in learning and using a second language, which has both positive and negative effects on foreign language learners. Similarities between two languages lead to positive transfer, while the differences to negative transfer. Language transfer can be seen not only on the lexical and syntactic level, but also on pragmatic level. Kasper (1992, p.152) studied language transfer from pragmatic perspective and argued that pragmatic transfer was a result of mother tongue's pragmatic impact on the learner's ability to comprehend and acquire the cultural and pragmatic knowledge of another language. Yu (2004, pp.108-111) pointed out that the difference between Chinese and English language could be a major impediment to English learners in China. Negative language transfer of mother tongue is common in studying and utilizing a second language.

Most researchers studied language transfer from a comparative way. *Linguistics Cross-Cultures* is the first book to explore the comparative analysis method. Lado (1960) attributed the main difficulties of learning a foreign language to language differences. He believed that mother tongue had an interference on learning process and we could predict the language errors and difficulties of L2 (second language) learners through comparing the similarities and differences between the structures of the two languages. Krashen (1983) thought that while learning L2, one could use the rules of L1 (first language or mother tongue) if they were lack of equivalent target knowledge to maintain a successful cross-cultural communication. Corder (1973) considered transfer as a communication strategy. No matter how linguists define language transfer, the mother-tongue's negative transfer is an inevitable phenomenon in second language learning (Ellis, 1985).

In C-E interpreting, one obstacle for interpreters is how to deal with the linguistic and cultural differences between Chinese and English. How do interpreters

effectively avoid the negative transfer of mother tongue and realize a successful cultural communication in real-time interpreting environment opens a whole new perspective for interpreting theory.

## 2. COMMON TYPES OF NEGATIVE TRANSFER IN C-E INTERPRETING

Negative transfer of mother-tongue is common to be seen in C-E interpreting. Sometimes literal interpreting of words and phrases could be OK if they can arouse the same feeling in the listener. However, the negative transfer of mother tongue at lexical, syntactic and cultural level can lead to pragmatic transfer in C-E interpreting, which has negative effects on cross-cultural communication.

### 2.1 Lexical Transfer

Lexical transfer is a prominent issue in C-E interpreting. The negative transfer at lexical level is mainly manifested in the following three parts:

#### 2.1.1 Word Redundancy

Word redundancy is very common in C-E interpreting. John Pinkham (1998) pointed out that redundant twins and unnecessary modifiers were important parts of word redundancy. For example, “参观考察、旅游度假、投资兴业” are words frequently used in Chinese business speech. “旅游”和“度假” almost have the same meaning in Chinese. Besides, “参观考察”和“投资兴业” are mostly pursuit of parallelism and grace. Some students interpreted this word by word as “to visit and inspect the company, to spend vacation and have a holiday or make an investment and start business”, which will result in redundant twins. Actually, Chinese language emphasizes more on cadence, while paying less attention to repetition in meaning. However, English is more concise, where repetition is not welcomed.

#### 2.1.2 Malapropism

While analyzing the test results, we find that malapropism is a serious problem in C-E interpreting. To illustrate, “春熙路是……步行街” is interpreted as “Chunxi Road is ...walking street”. In English, we can see phrases like “walking wounded” which means “a person is wounded, but still can walk”. And a “walking dictionary” refers to people who has a large amount of vocabulary. So to interpret “步行街” as “walking street” is kind of ridiculous. Besides, “我们希望能够不断得到贵公司的帮助” some interpret as “...continuously”. According to Webster's Dictionary, “continuously” means happening or existing without a break or interruption. In this context, using “continuously” is improper since it means getting help constantly. Another example should be mentioned, as for “……供大家参考”, some take for granted to interpret this as “...just for your reference”. In Chinese, “……供大家参考” is a modest expression, which means others could have their

own opinions. However, in English, “reference” means information or literature sources, from which people can get some help “for one’s reference” has a kind of authority, which is inappropriate here.

### 2.1.3 Collocation Error

Each language has its own conventional collocation rules. Interpreting is not a simple and mechanical make-up of words and phrases. Some Chinese collocations, if mechanically interpreted, could become indecent in English. While analyzing the test results, we can see that some students directly migrate Chinese lexical collocations into English and result in awkward errors.

To illustrate, some students interpret “.....参观了展览.....” as “...visited the exhibition...”. According to English Usage, “exhibition” should not be the object of “visit”. And for “.....有困难请找我.....”, some interpret as “... please feel free to find me...”, which seems very improper. Because here “找” doesn’t mean looking for a person, but contacting with someone. Another example, “.....促进了全球资源的优化配置.....”, only few students interpret it as “... optimization of the resources allocation...”, most of them choose to say “...promote/increase/upgrade/ the allocation of...”. Actually, “...to optimize the allocation...” is frequently used in English, while “promote the allocation” is hardly ever used. And some interpreted “价廉物美” as “cheap price ...”, while it is correct to say something is cheap, but we when refer to price, the collocation should be “high” or “low”.

## 2.2 Syntax Transfer

Syntax transfer is also a major problem in C-E interpreting. Interpreters have a tendency to be impacted by Chinese sentence structure. For instance, some interpret “中国人喜欢以茶招待客人.....” as “Chinese people like to treat their guests with tea...”. We can see that Chinese sentence structure “以.....” has a negative transfer in interpreting. Actually, “以.....招待某人” is equivalent to “treat sb. to...”. Besides, some students interpret “两国关系时好时坏” as “the relationship between the two countries is sometimes good, sometimes bad.” Actually, there is an existing expression as “now good, now bad”.

Besides, tense error is also an important part of the negative transfer since Chinese do not have any tense changing. While interpreting “抱歉, 让您久等了”, we can see interpretation like “Sorry for keep you waiting so long”, “Sorry for keep you waiting”, and “I’m sorry to have you waiting”...but none had used the right tense. When the speaker says such sentence, it indicates that the waiting has already happened, that is to say, the speaker is apologized for an action that already happened. So perfect tense should be used here. Although it is not a wrong sentence, such interpretation is obviously affected by mother-tongue.

## 2.3 Culture Transfer

We can find from the test results that some students have difficulties in dealing with Chinese cultural factors, and their interpreting have a reflection of cultural transfer. Culture is a comprehensive concept which includes different ethnic customs, religious beliefs, thinking modes and polite principles. Cultural transfer can be found in the following aspects:

In social communication, people believe that courtesy language can help maintain good relations with other people. People with different cultural backgrounds have different polite principles. Polite principles are most widely used in the salutation. In social communication, Chinese people like to behave humbly and use self-dispraise expressions just for politeness. However, in western culture, people are more direct, showing respect to others with less self-dispraise. We can see from the test results that the negative transfer of polite principles is a vital part of cultural transfer. To illustrate, “您过奖了” is interpreted as “I’m flattered”. And for “这是我应该做的”, some interpreted as “...my duty/obligation” or as “...what I should do.” Another example is “菜不好, 请多多包涵”, some interpret it as “I’m sorry for not serving you with many food” and “The dishes may be not so delicious.” In addition, “您一路辛苦了” is interpreted as “You must have a terrible/hard journey...”, which shows negative transfer of Chinese.

Besides, address in China and western world are totally different. When we introduce someone in Chinese, we first mention their title and then their names. However, in English, name goes first before one’s title. In interpreting “尊敬的国际奥委会主席罗格先生, 尊敬的国际奥委会名誉主席萨马兰奇先生.....”, most students have shown a transfer of polite principles as “Your Excellency president Rogge of the International Olympic Committee, the Honorably president Samaranch....”

Some interpretation with negative pragmatic transfer of mother tongue could be barriers to cross-cultural communication. Although they might be understood by others, such behaviors are inexcusable. In C-E interpreting, interpreters should fully take into account the differences of politeness principles and strive for a state of “When in Rome, do as the Romans do”.

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## 3. HOW TO MINIMIZE THE NEGATIVE TRANSFER IN C-E INTERPRETING?

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### 3.1 To Improve Language Ability by Contrastive Analysis

A smooth and fluent interpretation requires that the interpreter have strong language ability. The phenomenon of the negative transfer of mother-tongue reflects that students have inadequate bilingual knowledge in

translating and their bilingual language ability should be improved (Shao, 2012).

On one hand, we should improve our Chinese language ability. Although Chinese is our native language, we should not take for granted that we have enough Chinese knowledge to deal with interpreting. As a premise of interpreting, comprehension determines the quality of interpreting. In C-E interpreting, we can meet Chinese with all kinds of stylistic features. Any small error in comprehension will lead to interpreting mistakes. Therefore, all interpreters should improve their Chinese ability and lay a good foundation for interpreting. On the other hand, we should strengthen our English language ability. A lot of learners' in China cannot smoothly use proper English to express their ideas or to interpret. Sometimes in C-E interpreting, they know the meaning of Chinese but fail to find a proper English expression. Thus, they take a literal interpreting strategy and make the word to word interpreting, which brings negative transfer.

Contrastive analysis is the best way to improve our English and Chinese language ability and reduce the negative transfer of mother-tongue in interpreting. Hu (2007, p.17) points out that by contrastive analysis, people can know more about the characteristics of both English and Chinese. Thus, they can consciously pay attention to the language and cultural differences in communication so as to prevent pragmatic errors and achieve different communicative intentions. By analyzing the similarities and differences in a contrastive way, interpreters can be more sensitive and can try their best to reduce the interference of mother tongue. Besides, interpreters should not ignore the influence of culture. Only through consciously analyzing cultural differences, can they further deepen their language ability and reduce the negative transfer of mother-tongue in C-E interpreting.

### **3.2 To Accumulate Lexical Schema and Choose Flexible Strategy**

Schema is a concept of Piaget's epistemology, which means the knowledge structure stored in our brain. While learning English, we are building new schema in our mind. Cognitive schemata theory plays a vital role in the process of language comprehension. If schema theory is used to explain the process of cognition, we can find that language transfer is one of the key problems in vocabulary acquisition because the original cognitive schemata of learners might have negative effects on forming new schema.

Therefore, interpreters should try to build their lexical schema in English and accumulate some idiomatic expressions or building blocks in English. It will be easier for them to find the proper expression when they are in time-limited C-E interpreting practices. Besides, such behaviors can reduce their negative transfer in interpreting.

In many cases, interpreting failures are not because the interpreter has encountered obstacles of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, but because they only pay attention to the equivalence in language form while ignoring cultural connotation it conveys. Dai (2000) mentioned that while learning a word, we should master its complete knowledge. Ellis (1997, p.51) believed that the word equivalence between a foreign language and native language was usually superficial and partial, and their connotation difference could lead to pragmatic negative transfer. Therefore, when interpreters meet expressions with cultural factors or Chinese characteristics in C-E interpreting, dynamic equivalence (Nida, 1993) should be the strategy of our first choice. Only by dynamic equivalence, can we keep the cross-cultural communication going on smoothly and avoid negative transfer of mother tongue.

### **3.3 To Improve Interpretation Teaching**

Interpretation teaching should focus on contrastive analysis of English and Chinese language, such as comparison between bilingual grammars, words, syntax, etc. Besides, related exercises should be increased. By doing so, language errors can not only be prevented but also can be corrected. Only by this way, can we minimize the interference of the negative transfer of mother-tongue from the very beginning.

The negative transfer of mother-tongue at lexical level is very prominent. Therefore, more attention should be paid to this problem. Lewis (1993) came up with the lexical approach and mentioned that lexical chunks played an important role in second language output. Teaching should emphasize those relatively fixed expressions (Sun, 2011). Thus, learners can refer to the prefabricated phrases in their memory vault at any time and generate proper expressions in a short time so as to reduce negative transfer.

Besides, teachers should maintain a favorable learning environment for their students. While making full use of class time to provide language teaching, they should also encourage students to broaden their language input and make students expose to all kinds of language forms. So students can gradually form English thinking habits and reduce mother-tongue negative transfer (Gan, 2004).

Interpretation teaching should not only focus on skills and techniques, but also should pay attention to culture teaching. It should have an aim to improve students' sensitivity to cultural differences so as to reduce mother-tongue negative transfer and strengthen their ability of cross-cultural communication.

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## **CONCLUSION**

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Negative transfer of mother tongue is an inevitable problem in C-E interpreting. Through studying different

types of negative transfer in the test results, suggestions are given to minimize the impact of the negative transfer of mother-tongue on C-E interpreting. The negative transfer of mother tongue in C-E interpreting indicates that it is still far for students in China to improve their language ability. As we can see from the test results, lexical transfer is a serious problem. And we should not ignore the fundamental role of word learning in interpreting. Besides, in C-E interpreting practices, we should accumulate expression building blocks and take the proper strategy to pursue dynamic equivalence and reduce the negative transfer of mother tongue. The awareness of intercultural communication is predominantly important for interpreters. And enhancing communicative intercultural awareness and competence of the interpreter is of great importance to conduct a successful cross-cultural communication.

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