

Research on Transfer of Chinese on English Learning Based on Markedness Theory in China

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Abstract

L1 Transfer is always a research hotspot in L2 acquisition. Markedness Theory as an exploration and perspective of the research on native language transfer has impelled the development of research on Second Language Acquisition. In China the research on 1L transfer made its first move in 1990s and the research based on Markedness Theory has gradually been paid much more attention at home. The transfer of Chinese on English learning Based on Markedness Theory at home in recent years mainly develops in some typical areas: English Vocabulary, English Sentence Structure, and English Pronunciation.

Key words: 1L transfer; Markedness; English; Chinese

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INTRODUCTION

The research on 1L transfer started at 1950s and reached its climax at 1990s. No matter in theory or practice research, researchers abroad has achieved great success. Although the research has been only several decades to study 1L transfer, it develops very fast and different theories are developing very frequently abroad. Approximately the research on 1L transfer has been

through some phrases: behaviorist Stimulus-Response Theory, Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, Minimalist Position and Cognitive Theory of Constrained Transfer.

There is no doubt that the influence of 1L transfer on second language acquisition is an uncontroversial fact. 1L transfer was divided into two underlying types: one is positive transfer and the other one is negative transfer. The positive transfer is known as facilitation and the negative one as interference on the process of learning second language.

However, on the research of L2 acquisition, people do not doubt whether first language influences L2 acquisition or not any longer but pay much more attention to that under what kind of situation 1L have the influence on L2 acquisition and how to influence L2 acquisition.

As a main constrain factor on 1L transfer, Markedness Theory has gain much more attention. Many researchers abroad and at home try to explain 1L transfer from the perspective of markedness.

While in china the research made its first move in 1990s and has also gained some achievements. Therefore, this paper aims to do a review of transfer of Chinese on English learning based on Markedness Theory in recent years from the perspectives of English vocabulary, sentence structure, and pronunciation

This paper is mainly divided into three parts: Markedness Theory and 1L Transfer abroad and Markedness Theory on Transfer of Chinese on English at Home. In the first part, the paper will have a brief introduction to the developing history of Markedness Theory and then introduce the development of the research on L1 transfer based on Markedness Theory. In the second part, also the main part, the paper will introduce the development of the research at home from the perspectives of English vocabulary, sentence structure,

pronunciation. In the end, conclusion and critical advice will be put forward.

1. RESEARCH ON MARKEDNESS THEORY AND 1L TRANSFER ABROAD

In language system, *Markedness* refers to many phenomena of linguistic asymmetry opposites, namely one term is regarded as a basic term with a neutral meaning and the opposite term owns some marginal meanings based on the neutral meaning. Therefore, these marginal meanings have been called “marked term”. And the theory with the asymmetry relationship is called Markedness Theory which is first proposed by a famous scholar Trubetsoy Nicholas in the Prague School.

Later another representative of the Prague School Roman Jakobson developed Markedness Theory and the application is extended from phonology to semantics. Markedness Theory proposed by scholars of the Prague School exerted great influence on many linguists later at home or abroad, such as N. Chomsky and Huang Yan etc. The theory has been extended to almost every aspect of language such as morphology, semantics, syntax and second language acquisition and so on.

Talking about L1 on basis of Markedness Theory, people tend to discuss it from constraints of linguistics and cognitive category. Linguistic Markedness Theory argues that the relative markedness of L1 and L2 features can be used to predict the areas of L2 difficulties and transfer. Many researchers abroad have done the research on Markedness Theory and 1L transfer. The paper here just lists some basic theories and some representatives of linguists in the research.

In order to explain in what kind of way markedness affects the 1L transfer. Eackman (1977) proposed Markedness Differential Hypothesis, based on which people can predict the areas of difficulties target language. He put forward some points as follows:

For second language learners, those areas in target language that are different and relatively more marked than L1 language will be the difficult part.

In target language, the degree of difficulties in those areas that are different and relatively more marked than native language conforms to markedness of these areas.

Those areas in target language that are different from and less marked than L1 language are not difficult to learn.

The interaction of markedness and different language is existed and could decide when to happen or not. When some structures of L1 are unmarked while the related structures of target language are marked, the transfer will occur. On the contrary, when some structures of L1 are marked and the related structures of target language are unmarked, there is little possibility of the transfer occurring.

Zobl (1983) found that when learners encounter some marked structures in target language they tend to learn them under the help of L1 language so that L1 transfer appears. Ellis (1994) summed up the relationship between markedness and L1 transfer, and claimed that when L1 is unmarked and target language is marked, the interlanguage is naturally unmarked; when native language is unmarked but target language is marked, the transfer will appear; when native language is marked, no matter the target language is marked or unmarked, the transfer will not appear. The conclusion of Ellis holds that language learners will avoid marked transfers in native language.

Kellerman (1983) defined *markedness* from a perspective of cognitive science as Prototypicality. Learners may decide what should be transferred or not in second language acquisition based on institution. Thus, according to such hypothesis, a number of researchers begin to explain native language transfer based on Markedness Theory from a cognitive category. From the perspective of prototypicality, the research provides a new perspective to the research on 1L transfer, which is as well the heated research topic for Chinese researcher nowadays.

2. RESEARCH ON L1 TRANSFER BASED ON MARKEDNESS THEORY IN CHINA

As a heated research issue, the application of Markedness Theory to explain 1L transfer has been paid much more attention at home in recent years. Xu (2004), Liang and Feng(2006), Wang (2007), and Zhou (2009) have made a general introduction to the development and application of Markedness Theory, and analyzed markedness and its functions on L1 transfer. However, all the literatures above are researched from the way of general introduction, and do not describe the influence on some specific areas in detail so the following researches will focus on such specific areas as vocabulary, sentence structure and English pronunciation.

2.1 Research on Transfer of Chinese on English Vocabulary Learning

No matter in Chinese or English, vocabulary is always the basic element and the most active aspect. In English teaching and learning, both for teachers and students vocabulary is an important part as well as a difficult part. Although students can master every word's meaning correctly but English is far more complicated and difficult for its connotations and collocations. Doing research on transfer of Chinese on English vocabulary learning based on markedness is helpful for prediction of students' errors and teachers' teaching designs.

Xu (2006) did a research on Markedness Theory and the transfer in the acquisition of Non-terminative Verbs by an empirical research. On the basis of Markedness Differential Hypothesis that the transfer might occur when features of target language are more marked than those of L1, she compared non-terminative verbs of English and Chinese by the method of empirical study with a text about non-terminative verbs. She asked students to translate 13 Chinese sentences of “（直到）...才” or “直到...” including both non-terminative verbs and terminative verbs into English by using “... until/ not... until” for college English major students in different study levels, then she applied SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) to analyze final scores of all the students and found that non-terminative verbs of English are more marked than those of Chinese.

Xu Reifen's research affirmed that Eckman's Markedness Differential Hypothesis does not only depend on the theoretical description or evaluation, but rely on the empirical research. The result she found has great influence on the English Non-terminative Verbs learning. Based on the research, teachers compare English non-terminative verbs and Chinese non-terminative verbs in the class, so students may have a better understanding of English non-terminative verbs and reduce the impact of Chinese on English verb learning.

Xiang (2010) did a research of Markedness Theory on input order of Chinese collocation transfer research based on empirical research. The research was on the basis of both quantitative and qualitative analyses. He hypothesized that when neither Chinese collocations nor related English collocations are unmarked, learners will transfer the Chinese ones; when the related English collocation is marked, learners will transfer the unmarked Chinese collocations; when related English marked collocations is unmarked, learners will not transfer the marked Chinese collocations; when both Chinese collocations and related English collocations are marked, Chinese collocation might transfer. Afterwards, he found 60 people who knew English to translate English sentences to testify whether his hypotheses were correct. Finally the result came out as he wanted.

Xiang Yuqi's research also provides many good advices for English learning and teaching. Markedness of English collocations is necessary for markedness differences of English collocations can predict errors; teachers should encourage students doing more extensive readings in English and make use of English dictionaries in an effective way. The author as well admitted that because of the lack of a mature criterion for markedness of English collocations, the classification of collocations as marked or unmarked items might be inappropriate.

Yang (2011) found that learners are apt to transfer Chinese cultural connotations into English words during the process of English learning. Base on Kellerman's theory of psychological markedness, she did the research

of the cultural connotation transfer of Chinese words into English from surface cultural transfer and deep cultural transfer. She claimed that English learners and some English teachers put most of their efforts into enlarging vocabulary but ignore connotations of words, therefore, students still cannot understand some sentences even they knew all words' meanings in Chinese. From the perspective of surface cultural transfer, She divides the transfer into three categories: coincidence words which mean that one word has a similar cultural connotation to the related word in another language; vacant words which refers to the words that exist in a language but the related words cannot be found in another language; semantic dislocation words which refer to the words that hold the same conceptual meaning to the related words in another language. From the perspective of deep cultural transfer, she discussed the influence of cognition, religion, environment and history etc.

Yang Chunling concluded that in natural English discourses pronunciation, words, sentences are in possession of some idiomatic features but not only depend on their related Chinese meanings. Thus, she suggested that students should improve and enforce idioms' learning.

You (2009) referred to Sheng Jiaxuan's new markedness theory which emphasized the mode of relativity and associativity of markedness to study Chinese negative transfer on English vocabulary learning. In her study, relativity means that markedness and unmarkedness are relative. For example, compared to plural noun, singular noun is relatively more marked; when it is compared to the double number, plural noun is relatively marked. The mode of associativity refers to the change of the mode of only two members within one category and the building of two or more categories. For example, for individual nouns, singular nouns are unmarked while plural nouns are marked. But when it comes to collective nouns, the situation goes in the opposite direction. In her study, she found that students tend to transfer unmarked items or the low marked items into the related English items, which also illustrates Eckman's Markedness Differential Hypothesis.

In her study, Chinese as a less inflectional language often causes students less conscious of markedness. Therefore, teachers should do some explicit teachings for students to know that the ubiquity of markedness and the influence of markedness on English learning. The author wrote markedness from a new perspective based on Sheng Jiaxuan which is more suitable for people's language habits and cognitive modes.

Li (2013) did a research on a study on the impact of L1 transfer on acquisition of metonymic personal names from the perspective of markedness based on Eckman's Markedness Differential Hypothesis. She found that it is not easy for Chinese learners to acquire metonymic personal names for English metonymic personal names are marked while related Chinese expressions are unmarked.

The author does not do the study from a broad scope of vocabulary but from a tiny and new point—Metonymic Personal names. The examples that the author set are all extracted from some classic literatures which are supposed to arouse readers' interest. On the other hand, the paper's framework is very clear for readers to understand what the author wants to express.

2.2 Research on Transfer of Chinese on English Sentence Structure Learning

As a difficult part for students' learning English, English sentence structure is always an important content of English teaching. But English sentence structures are complicated and quite different from Chinese Sentence Structures; analyzing the differences between them cannot explain why some English sentences are acquired first or more quickly than other sentence structures. However, Markedness Theory offers a new tunnel to solve those problems largely.

Both Hu and Tan (2008) did a Study of Markedness Theory and its role in L1 transfer in terms of acquisition of English Interrogations. The object of study is China's English beginners in the construction of English interrogations. She found that Markedness Theory on the basis of language universals and language markedness provides a better explanation than that of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis to transfer of Chinese. In order to acquire more accurate data, she designed a text for the first-year students in junior middle school. The result proves that when students are learning the structure of declarative sentences and some English Interrogations replace the position of the subject, such as the structure of "Wh—", the negative transfer seldom occurs due to the common features of Chinese and English. but when it refers to English interrogations that are not in accord with the related Chinese structures, for example, "你在找谁?" (Who are you looking for?; ni zai zhao shui?) will often translate into English as "You are looking for who?", negative transfer will occur.

Hu Lingling's empirical study is a great help to middle school English teachers for where students' errors often occur and when they are learning English interrogations. They should consider the degree of markedness and teach unmarked structures first. Wang (2008) also did the study of L1 transfer in English interrogations based on markedness transfer, which proves that negative transfer of Chinese seldom occurs because of the common features of Chinese and English, but as features of the two are not quite different the transfer might occur.

Besides, Xuan (2012) did a study on the effects of Cognitive Markedness on the ditransitive construction transfer in Chinese-English interlanguage based on Kellerman's theory. Xuan Feifei did an experiment to testify the validity of Kellerman's theory and made up the shortcomings of Kellerman's theory. She looked for the experimental subjects from three different levels: high

school students, sophomores of English major students and postgraduates of English major in grade three, which respectively referred to the primary level, the intermediate level and advanced level. They were required to finish some translation works and questionnaires. Her finding lies in the following points:

1) Proficiency is closely correlated to the perceived markedness of English, psychodistance, transferability judgment as well as the actual amount of transfer, but not correlated to the perceived markedness of Chinese.

2) The psychotypicality (perceived markedness) of English and Chinese ditransitive construction is correlated to transferability.

3) The psychotypology (psycho-distance) between Chinese and English ditransitive construction does influence transferability.

4) Transferability has its predicative power in transfer performance, but some other cognitive factors may compensate its weakness. (Xuan, 2012)

In the previous study of the ditransitive construction, researchers concentrated on the analysis of the formation and syntax of ditransitive constructions on the basis of the construction theory and UG and the contrastive analysis of ditransitive construction between Chinese and English. Researchers seldom study the learning of English ditransitive constructions from the perspective of L1 transfer. This is where originality of the paper lies.

2.3 Research on Transfer of Chinese on English Pronunciation Learning

English pronunciation is always in the spotlight of the research on L2 acquisition. The previous researches mainly focus on the distinction of Chinese and English pronunciation systems to predict the difficulties of English pronunciation learning. Later, with more and more shortcomings of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis found out by increasing number of researchers, Markedness Theory has become a heated solution to deal with the problems of English pronunciation learning in an appropriate way. As is known to all, Chinese consists of the mandarin as the standard Chinese and several different dialects such Sichuan dialect which will be discussed below.

2.3.1 Syllables in Mandarin on English Pronunciation

Shen (2012) did a research on both linguistic and cognitive theory of markedness and the negative transfer of Chinese on English learning. Based on Markedness Theory, she discussed the negative transfer of Chinese on English learning from the perspective of phoneme, the combination of sounds and rhythm. In her some findings, they are concluded as following:

There is a lack of the distinction of long and short syllables in Chinese, and for some other syllables like [æ], [ɒ], [ə], [ʌ], Chinese learners would like to use some similar pronunciations to replace English, such as "yi" to [i:] and "er" to [ə] etc. In English, these syllables are more

marked than Chinese so it is difficult for Chinese students to learning these syllables well.

Some Chinese syllables and related English syllables have something in common but are not completely same. For example, Chinese students are inclined to pronounce “u” as [u]. What’s more, Chinese learners usually lack a process of “slide” in English, for example, people often pronounce “ei” to replace [ei] with a slide from [e] to [i]. Consonant Clusters is a marked feature of English but it does not exist in Chinese pronunciation. For instance, when students pronounce *bed*, they are apt to add a vowel /e/ after the last consonant /d/ and read like /bede/.

Rhythm in English is stress-timed rhythm which means the beat within a sentence lies in number of stressed syllables. More stressed syllables a sentence has, the longer time for the sentence to be read. While Chinese is syllable-timed which means the number of syllables within a sentence decides the time of reading the sentence. That’s why Chinese learners feel so difficult to master the stressed syllables in English for this marked English feature does not occur in Chinese.

Shen Lifen’s research can provide many tips for English teachers. Most importantly, teachers should conform to the rule that the degree of markedness should be in accordance with the degree of difficulties and teach the less marked syllables first.

2.3.2 Syllables in Dialects on English Pronunciation

As a new perspective of research on transfer of Chinese on English pronunciation learning, dialects are quite different from mandarin so that the students have different difficulties due to different sound systems. Therefore, when we research transfer of Chinese on English pronunciation, we are supposed to consider the different dialects as well.

Yang (2010) made an analysis of markedness features of syllables in Sichuan dialect and English pronunciation acquisition. First, she concludes some Sichuan dialect features from the perspectives of structure, tone, and juncture. She claimed that Sichuan dialect has its own characteristics. For example, the back-nasal finals “ing”, “eng” are pronounced as front-nasal finals “in”, “en”; Sichuan dialects also hold four tones as mandarin: yin ping, yang ping, shang sheng and qu sheng; Sichuan dialect has possession of many open syllables, that is to say, many syllables begin with a consonance and end with a vowel and cannot be read in a way of liaison which is similar to mandarin as well.

Then, she described the influence of Sichuan dialect syllables on English pronunciation learning from the perspectives of structure, intonation, and juncture. For example, Sichuan dialect has four basic constructions which are completely same to English single consonant syllables: V, CV, VC, CVC, so they are less marked features and students feel easy to learn English single consonant syllables; English words have no fixed tones

but hold three basic intonations: rising intonation, falling intonation, and flat intonation. However, because Sichuan dialects hold four tones as mandarin: yin ping, yang ping, shang sheng and qu sheng, and the change of Sichuan dialect intonation lies in the final syllable, for Sichuan English learners, therefore, the feature makes them read both Chinese and English very flat and will impact their acquisition of English intonations which a marked feature for them.

In fact, Sichuan dialect is one branch of north language family and mandarin is based on Beijing dialect which is one branch of north language family as well. Therefore, Sichuan dialect possesses many similarities of Mandarin. Whereas, some dialects in China like Cantonese, The dialect of Southern Fujian, Hakka and even some minority languages have a very specific and unique language system, so doing research on the influence of those dialects and minority languages on English learning not only in English pronunciation can reinforce our research on transfer of Chinese on English learning so that Chinese students can learn English more effective and targeted.

CONCLUSION

Although the research on transfer of Chinese on English learning on the basis of Markedness Theory at home has been only for a short time, many researchers have applied this theory on empirical researches to deal with many problems occurring during students’ learning process caused by the transfer of Chinese, and achieved some successes. Markedness Theory provides us a new perspective to study L1 transfer, which is as well good for our research on L2 acquisition in China. This paper presents some achievements of researches with higher frequency in the fields of vocabulary, sentence structure, and pronunciation, which improve the development of L2 acquisition. In china, however, there is not only mandarin but also many other kinds of dialects and minority languages. Each dialects or minority languages might have its own language system and culture, in other words, each of them might have some marked features that are different from both mandarin and English. But nowadays the researches are generally from the perspective of mandarin. Therefore, we can divide the research on the transfer of Chinese on English learning based on Markedness Theory into specific minority languages and dialects, which will be more targeted to different students.

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