Transfer from Topic-Prominence to Subject-Prominence by Chinese Learners of English

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I Theoretical Background and Rationale for the Study

This study investigates how Chinese learners of English transfer the structural features in Chinese into their use of English. The study of language transfer is often associated with Contrastive Analysis (CA) Hypothesis (Fries 1945; Lado 1957), according to which linguistic difference necessarily means difficulty. Early CA was criticized for the overemphasis on its predictive power about the learners’ errors since the errors may not always arise from cross-linguistic differences. However, many recent studies support the view that cross-linguistic influences can have an important impact on second language acquisition (Odlin 1989). The contrastive study on the typological organization of Chinese and English has been such a significant attempt. According to Li and Thompson (1976), languages could be classified into topic-prominent (hereafter TP) ones such as Chinese and Japanese and subject-prominent (hereafter SP) ones such as English and other European languages. Since Li and Thompson, two different conclusions have been made by researchers: 1) TP features are transferable (Rutherford 1983, Jin 1994, Yuan 1995); 2) TP features are not transferable (Fuller & Gundel 1987).

This study has investigated a typological transfer from Chinese, a topic-prominent language to English, a subject-prominent language. Two hypothesis are proposed. 1) TP features would appear more in learners’ spoken production than in the written production. 2) Learners’ L2 proficiency would affect the transfer of TP to SP in intensity and in the types of TP features. The eight topic prominent features that have been examined in this study are:

1) Double nominative constructions. In Chinese, a topic and a subject may appear side by side, which is ungrammatical in SP languages.
   (1) Nei ge haizi ta hen taoqi
   *That child he is very naughty

2) Limited use of passives. In Chinese, passives are not used as often as in English. In forming Chinese passives, the verbs do not undergo inflectional changes and the syntax is also different from English as in
(2) Zhe ben shu shi ta xie de.
   This copy book is he write.
   This book is written by him.

3) Serial verbs. In Chinese, two verbs can appear side by side without using a
   conjunction such as “and” or an infinitive marker “to”, as in the following example:
   (3) Zhang-san mai le piao jinqu
       *Zhang-san bought a ticket went in.

4) Rare nouns. In Chinese, it is not necessarily the case that nouns denoting previous
   information take specificity markings such as the definite articles or demonstrative
   pronouns.
   (4) Shu zai zhuzi zhang.
       book on table.
       (The) book is on (the) table.

5) Empty elements in subject position. As a TP language, Chinese allows empty
   elements to occur in subject positions. For example,
   (5) Speaker A: yao bu yao?
       want not want?
       (Do you) want (it)?
   Speaker B: Yao.
       Want.
       (I) want (it).

6) Empty elements in object position. In (5), the speakers also dropped the objects.
   However, they do not violate the Chinese structural rules. If Chinese learners of English
   transfer this property into their use of English, they will produce an inappropriate sentence:
   (6) Speaker A: Do you want the book?
       Speaker B: *Want.

7) Limited use of possessives. In English, possessive determiners (my, your, his,
   etc.) are used to achieve cohesion if not grammatical correctness. Since Chinese is a TP
   language which depends more on context for interpretation, specification is not necessarily
   prerequisite within the sentence. Thus (7) does not sound natural to a Chinese native speaker
   because it uses “wo de” (my) before “zaofan” (breakfast).
   (7) Wo yiban zai qi dan zhong chi wo de zaofan.
       I generally at 7 o’clock eat my breakfast.

8) Lack of subject-verb agreement. In SP languages, the verb shows obligatory
   agreement with the subject of a sentence. Though English has an “incomplete agreement
   system”, the use of inflected third person singular forms such as in he likes, she doesn’t and
the plural forms such as want-wants or was-were do exist (Fuller and Gundel 1987:13). However, topic-predicate agreement can be hardly found in TP languages such as Chinese. The reason for this is that topics are much more independent of their comments than are subjects of their verbs (Li and Thompson 1976:464).

(8) And the farmer become very angry and give he ice cream to the King Roller.

2. Method

A total of 95 Chinese native speakers learning English participated in the study and produced both oral and written data. The participants were given an English proficiency test and were divided into 3 groups according to the scores: Group 1 is the highest in level; Group 2 is the average and Group 3 is the lowest. The raw scores were converted into Z scores to achieve compatibility among the levels. The result of the Kruskal-Wallis Test showed there were significant differences among the 3 level groups. (Kruskal-Wallis $X^2 = 82.85$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, the Ryan procedure was used to determine the precise location of the differences. Comparisons were made between Group 1 and Group 2, Group 1 and Group 3, Group 2 and Group 3. The results show that there is a significant difference in each of the three comparisons (in Group 1 vs. Group 2 comparison: $Z = -6.58$; in Group 1 vs. Group 3 comparison: $Z = -6.87$; in Group 2 vs. Group 3 comparison: $Z = -6.74$).

After watching a 5-minute video program, each participant did two tasks: first relating the story into the tape (in 10 minutes) and then writing a composition (in 15 minutes) about the same story in English. The sequencing of the two tasks was expected to affect the end products in that the participants might be influenced by the first task when doing the second one in terms of textual organization, vocabulary, or even sentence structure. However, if the participants could still produce speaking and writing data which are contrastive to each other, we would be able to conclude with more confidence that the difference between oral and written modes is an important factor when the participants use English. The occurrences of the TP features in both the written production and the transcribed oral production were tallied for examination. Percentage distribution of every TP feature in relation to the total number of sentences at the English proficiency levels and the types of production was then calculated. Chi-square tests were used to look for the significance of frequency differences among the levels and between the oral and written production.

3. Results and discussion

The results of the percentage distribution and the Chi-square tests supported the two hypothesis. Firstly, with all the TP features except for lack of passive structures, the oral
production was more topic oriented than the written production. This seems to suggest that TP features are more transferable in the spoken mode. Secondly, the target language proficiency also played a significant role in determining how much the participants transferred the TP features. This could be accounted for by the fact that with most TP features, the lower the proficiency level of the participants, the more topic oriented their production was. The following table reports the occurrences of empty elements in both oral and written production.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Proficiency Levels</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oral production</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of sentences</td>
<td>1,012</td>
<td>991</td>
<td>983</td>
<td>2,986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>3.17%</td>
<td>5.05%</td>
<td>8.14%</td>
<td>5.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written production</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of sentences</td>
<td>762</td>
<td>741</td>
<td>715</td>
<td>2218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>1.97%</td>
<td>3.23%</td>
<td>6.99%</td>
<td>4.01%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square tests
Between oral and written productions (total): $x^2 = 21.24$, $p < .001$
Among Levels (both oral and written): $x^2 = 42.91$, $p < .001$

The qualitative analysis did not support the claim by Fuller & Gundel (1987) that TP features are not transferable. It was found that the TP features produced by the participants could be traced to their mother tongue in 3 categories. 1) Structure. For example, although serial verbs are syntactically possible in Chinese but incorrect in English, the participants produced wrong sentences such as *He looks seem very hungry*. 2) Words. For example, the participants used English transitive verbs intransitively, as in *This time the farmer also don't want*. The Chinese equivalent for *want* is both a transitive and intransitive verb. 3) Rhetorical conventions. Since Chinese speakers depended more on context for comprehension, they tended to transfer this into the use of English and produced many bare nouns.

TP features were also different among themselves in that some were more transferable than the others for the Chinese-speaking learners of English. There was in fact a continuum of difficulty from the easiest to the most difficult TP features as shown in the
following graph (the percentage = the frequency of the occurrences of the TP features):

The Continuum of Difficulty for the Six TP Features

<p>| | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DN</td>
<td>SV</td>
<td>EES</td>
<td>EEO</td>
<td>SVD</td>
<td>BN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

least difficult     most difficult

DN = double nominative.
SV = serial verbs.
EES = empty elements in subject position.
EEO = empty elements in object position.
SVD = subject-verb disagreement.
BN = bare nouns.

The analysis also showed that TP features that were related to mother tongue rhetoric conventions were generally more difficult.

4. Future work
   1) More research should be done to investigate how TP features affect the elementary-level learners of English.
   2) It also might be interesting to make comparisons between the learners who have received English education in the classrooms and
those who have learned English outside schools to see which group relies on their mother tongue more as far as TP features are concerned. 3) A contrastive analysis may be done on how Japanese native speakers and Chinese native speakers learning English behave.

References


