

Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue in Chinese-English Translation: A Case Study of *Fortress Besieged* and *Memories of Peking: South Side Stories*

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Abstract. In the field of negative language transfer, most studies have focused on students' daily translation exercises, with relatively fewer investigations into literary translation. However, this paper aims to analyze the phenomenon of negative language transfer in Chinese-English translation, mainly focusing on its impact on tense expression and connection methods. Through analysis of examples from literary works (*Fortress Besieged* and *Memories of Peking: South Side Stories*), the essay demonstrates how linguistic features unique to Chinese, such as reliance on time adverbials and omission of connectives, can lead to errors in English translation due to negative transfer. The research also highlights the importance of linguistic proficiency, cultural understanding, and awareness of linguistic disparities in facilitating accurate and culturally appropriate translations and gives some related suggestions for better translation. This paper addresses the gap that exists in the negative language transfer field by carefully analyzing literary translation, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of negative language transfer in translation practices.

Keywords: Negative transfer; second language learner; Chinese; English; Translation.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Definition of Language Transfer

Language transfer is the application of linguistic features from one language to another by a bilingual or multilingual speaker. Language transfer may occur across both languages in the acquisition of a simultaneous bilingual, from a mature speaker's first language (L1) to a second language (L2) they are acquiring, or from an L2 back to the L1 [1]. Since the 1950s, language transfer theory has occupied an important position in the field of second language acquisition research. From the 1950s to the 1960s, language transfer theory based on structuralist linguistics and behaviorist psychology entered a period of prosperity. Contrastive analysis research became popular in the field of second language acquisition, and research also entered a period of prosperity. Lado's "Contrast Analysis Hypothesis" believes that the biggest obstacle to second language acquisition comes from the first language [2]. Through the comparison of two languages, difficulties in the second language learning process can be predicted. From the late 1960s to the 1970s, structuralism and behaviorism declined, and the comparative analysis hypothesis and language transfer were also questioned or even denied. From the 1980s to the present, with the formation and development of cognitive and social perspectives, the phenomenon of language transfer has once again attracted the attention of second language learning researchers and restored its important position. This development process also proves the important impact of the language transfer phenomenon on second language acquisition.

1.2. The Classification of Language Transfer

When the relevant unit or structure of both languages is the same, linguistic interference can result in correct language production called positive transfer: here, the "correct" meaning is in line with most native speakers' notions of acceptability [3]. However, language interference is most often discussed as a source of errors known as negative transfer, which can occur when speakers and writers transfer items and structures that are not the same in both languages. Within the theory of contrastive analysis,

the systematic study of a pair of languages to identify their structural differences and similarities, the greater the differences between the two languages, the more negative transfer can be expected [4]. There are huge differences between Chinese and English in terms of pronunciation, lexical morphology, grammar, and so on. Therefore, when translating from Chinese to English, the phenomenon of negative transfer of the mother tongue is not uncommon. On this basis, this article aims to analyze the negative transfer of the mother tongue in the translation of Chinese-English literary works. The chosen literature works are Chinese and English versions of *Fortress Besieged* and *Memories of Peking: South Side Stories*.

2. The Specific Embodiments of Negative Transfer in Translation

2.1. Tense Expression Differences

English is a morphological language, and the vocabulary especially changes frequently [5]. Verbs are deployed to reflect their related tense, for example, a verb with “ed” represents past tense, and “will” plus verb represents future tense. In English, a verb, as a noticeable mark, helps readers clearly understand the targeted sentence that happened in the past, present, or future. In contrast, Chinese is an isolated language. The verb itself has no morphological changes and can only rely on specific time adverbials like in 1987, particles, or context before and after the verb to express the tense of the sentence [5]. Therefore, it is more difficult for readers to figure out the correct tense unless they find the specific clue that implies tense. This difference can be commonly found in the Chinese-English translation.

(1) *E: Now he's too busy chasing Miss Pao, so naturally he can't spare the time.*

In this sentence, the Chinese time adverb “Now” shows this sentence happens in the present and the character “Right” refers to the simple continuous tense. In English, the structure “be +ving” corresponds to the simple continuous tense [6]. However, in this translation, apart from this structure, another time adverbial “now” is used. In fact, this is an embodiment of negative transfer, as the translator transfers Chinese tense expression habits to English. While it is necessary to emphasize the time adverbs in Chinese to improve understanding, it is redundant in English because the verb form has already contained the meaning of time verbs. Therefore, it is better to delete “now” while translating this sentence.

(2) *E: I hope in the future we will have the opportunity to hear his earnest and solemn discourse.*

In this sentence, the position of time adverbs lacks appropriateness. The translator follows the Chinese sequence by putting the time adverbials behind the verb when he translates this sentence. While the position of time adverbials in Chinese is quite flexible, the position of time adverbials in English is relatively fixed, and usually appears at the beginning and end of sentences. Therefore, a better translation version is “I hope we will have the opportunity to hear his earnest and solemn discourse in the future.” Besides, the time adverbial “in the future” can also be regarded as redundant use, as the “will+verb” structure includes the meaning of the future. As a result, another better translation version may be: “I hope we will have the opportunity to hear his earnest and solemn discourse.”

From the above two examples, it is worth mentioning that the negative transfer of the mother tongue commonly interferes with Chinese to English translations. If the common time adverbs in Chinese are directly translated into English word for word, it will lead to semantic duplication. It may be difficult for native Chinese speakers to detect this kind of mistake or even think it is no problem because Chinese is entrenched in their minds. However, this kind of negative transfer is obvious to native English speakers.

2.2. Connection Method Differences

Chinese is a semantic language. In Chinese, a sentence can be composed of many small sentences connected by commas. There are no grammatical rules, as long as the subject is clearly expressed [7].

With the help of contexts and semantics, readers can figure out the logical relationships among sentences without particular conjunctions or prepositions. English, however, is a morphological language, and each sentence is connected by certain grammatical rules and logical relationships. Through conjunctions, prepositions, and logical relation words, readers can clearly recognize the relationships among sentences, which helps improve understanding of given articles. Otherwise, it is difficult for the reader to get the correct meaning from several independent sentences without any conjunctions.

Apart from omitting connectives, another prominent feature of semantic language is deleting the redundant subject. When several sentences share the same subject or theme, Chinese is used to delete the redundant parts and connect all of these clauses with commas [8]. It is precisely because of this that sentences without subjects and flowing sentences are more common in Chinese. This kind of special but common sentence pattern sets a big challenge for translators, for they may forget to add connection words as well as disappearing subjects.

(3) E: Sharing a cabin with Miss Pao, Miss Su slept in the lower berth, which was much more convenient because she didn't have to climb up and down every day.

In this sentence, only in the first clause, does the subject “Miss Su” appear and it is noticeable that the rest of the clauses all lack subject. However, from a semantic perspective, all of these small Chinese sentences describe the same subject – Miss Su. Therefore, to avoid unnecessary redundancy, it deletes the same subject. When Chinese omits the subject, it also omits the logical keywords between clauses. The omitted causal relationship is that because Miss Su sleeps on the lower bunk and does not have to climb up and down every day, it is much more convenient for her than Miss Bao. In Chinese topic chains, in many cases, even without logical connectives, Chinese can rely on semantic logical relationships to express the entire topic chain smoothly. However English needs to use explicit causal conjunctions to connect two clauses to formally mark the logical relationship between sentences, making the sentences more readable and logically clearer. Therefore, while translating this sentence, translators not only add the personal pronoun “she” in the clause to complete sentence structure, but also plus causal conjunction “because” to explain the logical relationships between clauses.

(4) E: Suddenly, she stood up and pulling her sleeve and the leg of her trousers, she said softly, “See how my pa beat me up!”

It is surprising that the first short clause in Chinese has no subject, then the subject “she” appears in the closest following clause. After that, the shared subject “she” does not appear anymore. While omitting the subject, the logical connective is also omitted. Omitting parallel logical connectives is a common phenomenon in Chinese. Although Chinese omits connectives, clauses can still be connected by logical relationships at the semantic level. The series of actions in this sentence follows a logical sequence in semantics. Standing, lifting cuffs, and lifting trousers is the logical sequence of the body from top to bottom. Therefore, when the subject is the same, the logical relationship between each clause can rely on semantic connection, and the sentence meaning remains smooth and coherent even without conjunctions. In contrast, English is quite different. English uses formal and clear structures to imply the meaning of sentences instead of depending on semantic background. In order to maintain formal logical fluency, English needs to use logical connectives to help readers grasp the logical relationship between clauses. As a result, translators first add the adjective possessive pronoun “her” to complete the initiator of each action. Then they add the conjunction “and” to connect the three actions, showing the parallel relationships among these three verb phrases.

(5) E: Although he was now twenty-seven and had been engaged before, he had had no training in love.

In terms of turning conjunctions, there is a common mistake that exists in Chinese beginners when they translate Chinese to English. “Although” and “but” are found in one sentence at the same time. Undoubtedly, this is a typical grammar mistake, this mistake originates from the negative language

transfer of the mother tongue. In Chinese, turning or concessive conjunctions always appear in pairs. If directly translated into English, it will lead to grammar mistakes, as one of the turning conjunctions conveys the meaning of transitions. To conclude, Chinese is richer and more flexible than English in terms of expressions of transitions, and its ways of change are also diverse. Although the position of the transitional conjunction in English and Chinese may be different in the sentence, there is not much change in its semantics. However, compared with casual and parallel relationships, the Chinese rarely omit transition conjunctions. The reason is that transition refers to a relatively big change in Chinese semantics, so semantic connections alone are not enough to express its internal logical relationships. Then, it is necessary to use Explicit logical conjunctions.

In connection methods differences, it is not difficult to find that Chinese sentences tend to omit logical connectives and they rely on semantic logical relationships to connect clauses well, forming a semantically smooth and logical topic chain. Chinese organizes language around events rather than characters. What is important is that one thing or one action proceeds step by step in a semantically logical sequence, and the initiator is relatively secondary. Therefore, in Chinese sentences, the subject is often omitted, and logical connectives are also not necessary. On the other hand, English pays great attention to the logical relationship between sentences. Formally, English needs clear logical connectives to connect the separate clauses. As English is a subject-predicate structure, and the subject of each clause may be different, logical connectives are deployed to show the logical relationship between sentences.

3. Solutions

Through the above argument, it can be found that the impact of negative mother tongue transfer on translation is mostly caused by the differences in thinking habits and language habits between Chinese and English. Therefore, if second language learners want to overcome the impact of negative transfer of their native language, they should first improve their native language proficiency [9]. Only in this way can learners understand the original text more accurately and comprehensively, and then translate it on this basis. Taking Chinese-English translation as an example, the translator needs to first fully understand the meaning of the original Chinese text especially the meaning of some idioms and proverbs which contain complex meanings behind limited words. At the same time, it may also be necessary to understand the historical background of the author, the environment in which the original text was born, and the contemporary significance that may be hidden in the text, so that the translation can be comprehensive and clear rather than miss the information hidden in the original text or misinterpret the meaning of the original text.

Secondly, during the learning process, Chinese EFL learners should be exposed to more authentic local books, papers, and other literary works. From these materials, EFL learners can accumulate the authentic expressions of native speakers, clarify the similarities and differences of words with similar meanings, and develop a correct sense of the second language. While translating, learners should refer to English-English definition dictionaries instead of English-Chinese dictionaries to avoid inappropriate expressions [10]. Using English-Chinese dictionaries can easily form stereotypes about English words based on their Chinese meanings. As a result, translators may ignore the other meanings of the same words and be unfamiliar with the fixed collocations of words in English. This incorrect behavior exactly leads to a negative transfer of the mother tongue.

Thirdly, second language learners must be able to clearly distinguish the differences between the two languages, and pay attention to them at all times during translation. For example, while Chinese is a semantic language, English is a morphological language. While Chinese does not pay much attention to connecting components, obvious connection methods are an indispensable part of English. Therefore, when proofreading the translation, translators are supposed to make modifications in time if they find anything that does not conform to the language habits and way of thinking of the target language.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, in this exploration of native language negative transfer in translation, particularly focusing on English-Chinese translation, several key insights have emerged. Through meticulous analysis of literature examples, this study has underscored the pervasive influence of native language habits and structures on the translation process. From tense expression to connection methods, the impact of linguistic disparities between English and Chinese has been evident, often resulting in errors or distortions in translated texts. Then, this research has emphasized the critical role of translators as cultural mediators, necessitating not only linguistic proficiency but also a deep understanding of cultural nuances and contextual significance. As globalization continues to foster increased cross-cultural interactions, the demand for accurate and culturally resonant translations becomes ever more pressing. Therefore, this study gives some suggestions for translation practices and intercultural communication. By addressing the challenges posed by negative language transfer, translators can facilitate clearer and more effective cross-cultural communication. This research lays the groundwork for future investigations into language transfer phenomena in translation studies. In conclusion, by examining instances from literary texts, this paper firstly illustrates the unique features in Chinese, like the dependence on time adverbs and the absence of connectives, which can result in inaccuracies in English translation because of negative language transfer. Then, it underscores the importance of linguistic proficiency, cultural sensitivity, and awareness of linguistic disparities in achieving accurate and culturally appropriate translations. Last, it proposes some suggestions for translators to improve their translation quality while translating the literature work. By acknowledging and mitigating the complexities of language transfer, translators can foster mutual understanding and appreciation across diverse linguistic and cultural landscapes.

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