

Negative Transfer and Acquisition of Non-agentive Passive Voice

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Abstract: This thesis aims to probe into the relationship between negative transfer and the acquisition of non-agentive passive voice. After the introduction of the classification of passive voice, the definition of language transfer, characteristics of negative transfer, , and the detailed analysis of acquisition of non-agentive passive sentences, I arrive at the conclusion that negative transfer plays a major role in learners' acquisition of non-agentive passive voice, and offer the pedagogical implication.

Key words: language transfer; negative transfer; acquisition; non-agentive passive voice

1. INTRODUCTION

From the 1960's and 1970's, the second language acquisition became an independent discipline. Researcher employed different research methods and made thorough research into how learners acquired the second language from various perspectives, among which few studies focused on how learners acquired passive voice, not to mention learners' acquisition of non-agentive passive voice. In this thesis, the author mainly deals with the relationship between language transfer and acquisition of non-agentive passive voice.

1.1 Voice defined

Passive voice is not a derivative of active voice, which is the outcome of people's different meaning expression. Passive voice describes the whole process of certain event from the patient's point of view. It is a marked form of voice. There are three markers in passive voice, be, -ed and by, which has its meaning and significance respectively. Typical passive could be classified into two categories, passive with agent and passive without agent, or, agentive passive and non-agentive passive. In the agentive passive, the agent will not appear but will be implicit in the context.

1.2 Quirk's view about classification of passive voice

The passive construction has been classified in many different ways. Summarizing the discussion of the passive scale in the "*A Grammar of Contemporary English*" (1972), Quirk set up the following subcategories, agentive passives, quasi-passives, and non-agentive passives/ intensive active complement constructions.

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1.3 Non-agentive passives/intensive active complement constructions

(a) The modern world becomes more highly industrialized and mechanized.

Sentence (a) has no active transform or possibility of agent addition, since no “performer” is conceived of. The participles have adjectival values: compare *industrialized-industrial* and *mechanized-mechanical*. Besides a number of such “resulting” verbs ending in *-ize* (*organize, Americanized*, etc), this class includes “existing” constructions, as in

(b) The house is already sold.

The corresponding active of which is not (c) but (d).

(c) (The agent) already sells the house.

(d) (The agent) has already sold the house.

In this case, voice transformation involves aspectual shift from present to present perfect.

While it is clear that (a) and (b) are not ‘passive’ in the sense of sentences, they still satisfy the formal passive requirement and, as in the case of (b), often have an “indirect” voice relationship. We will therefore call this class “non-agentive passive/intensive active complement constructions”, recognizing that The house is already sold. It is related both to agentive passive The house has already been sold and to the intensive (active) complement construction.

(e) The house is already gone/ no longer available.

1.4 Quirk’s another passive scale (Quirk, et al, 1972, 266-231)

Table 1: Quirk’s passive scale

Quirk’s passive scale				
Central passive or true passive		semi-passive or mixed passive	Pseudo-passive	
With agentive phrase	Without agentive phrase		With current copula verbs, e.g., <i>be, feel, look</i>	With resulting copula verbs, e.g., <i>get, become, grow</i>

2. LANGUAGE TRANSFER

2.1 Concept of language transfer

Language Transfer has been a central issue in second language acquisition and language teaching for at least a century. In the 1950s, it was often deemed the most important factor to consider in theories of second language learning as well as in approaches to second language teaching. In the 1960s, its importance waned as learners’ errors were seen not as evidence of language transfer but rather of the creative construction process. In recent years however, a more balanced perspective has emerged in which the role of transfer is acknowledged and in which transfer is seen to interact with a host of other factors in ways not yet fully understood.

When it occurs, it is often the most baffling to readers and the most intractable for writing instructors. It is helpful both for student writers and their instructors to consider the linguistic complexities that writing in English demands of ESL students.

In the foreword to *linguistics across cultures*, a highly influential manual on contrastive analysis by Lado (1957), Fries stated: "Learning a second language ...constitutes a very different task from learning the first language. The basic problems arise not out of any essential difficulty in the features of the news language themselves but primarily out of the special 'set' created by the first language habits."

2.2 Classification of language transfer

Language transfer phenomena tend to appear in language learners' language, i.e. their inter-language. Interlanguage is an independent language system of L2 learners, which exists between the L1 and L2. It is a transitional system reflecting the learners' current second language knowledge. Though it is full of errors, some rules of it can be observed. Selinker (1972) points out that five principal processes are operating in the interlanguage system. They are: language transfer, overgeneralization of L2 rules; transfer of training; strategies of L2 learning and strategies of L2 communication. Here, language transfer is listed first. Selinker (1992) claims in his book *Rediscovering Interlanguage* that language transfer is the essence of interlanguage theory and highlights the role language transfer plays in constructing learner's L2 system.

Views about language transfer have undergone considerable change. In cases where the target language differed from the L1 this would result in *interference or negative transfer*. In cases where the patterns of the L1 and the target language were similar, positive transfer would occur. Thus, the L1 could both impede and facilitate the acquisition of the L2. In order to try to predict when interference would take place linguists carried out elaborate contrastive analyses of the native and target languages. Transfer often did not take place when there were differences between the target and native languages.

More recently the importance of transfer has once again been acknowledged. Odlin (1989), reflecting a consensus that grew throughout the 1980s, comments:

"Despite the counterarguments...there is large and growing body of research that indicates that transfer is indeed a very important factor in second language acquisition"(1989:4)

2.3 Manifestation of language transfer

In traditional accounts of language transfer, the research focus was placed on the errors that learners produce. Errors occurred as a result of the negative transfer of mother tongue patterns into the learner's L2. It is possible to identify a number of other manifestations of transfer, however, three of which will be considered here: facilitation, avoidance (or underproduction), and over-use. Rod Ellis's classification of outcomes overlapped with that of Terence Odlin. In this thesis, I will combine these ideas together to develop my explanation of the manifestation of transfer.

2.4 Negative transfer

Transfer is one term of psychology. In traditional accounts of language transfer, the research focus was placed on the errors that learners produced. Errors occurred as a result of the negative transfer of mother tongue patterns into the learner's L2.

Negative transfer, also known as interference, is the use of a L1 pattern or rule which leads to an error or inappropriate form in the L2. Negative transfer can be found at all the levels of language structure. A substantial amount of empirical work in SLA research has been devoted to establishing to what extent errors are the results of transfer (i.e. interference). The following Table 2, from Ellis (1985a), illustrates the considerable variance in the proportion of transfer errors reported by different investigators. Whereas Dulay and Burt (1973) report that transfer accounts for only 3 percent of the errors in their corpus of Spanish-speaking learners' L2 English, Tran-Chi-Chau (1975) reports 51 percent in the research in adult, Chinese speaking learner's English.

Table 2: Percentage of interference errors reported by various studies of L2

English grammar (from Ellis 1985a:29)		
Study	% of interference errors	Type of learner
Grauberg 1971	36	First language German adult, advanced
George 1972	33 (approx)	Mixed first languages adult, graduate
Dulay and Burt 1973	3	First language Spanish children, mixed level
Tran-Chi-Chau 1975	51	First language Chinese adult, mixed level
Mukkatesh 1977	23	First language Arabic adult
Flick 1980	31	First language Spanish adult, mixed level
Lott 1983	50 (approx)	First language Italian adult, university

3. ACQUISITION OF NON-AGENTIVE PASSIVE VOICE

In the practice of translation question, “美国十月份举行大选” is supposed to be translated into “American general election was held in October”. It has a non-personal agent because America here works as an abstract concept and could not hold any election. Only people can do it instead of a country. The Chinese noun phrase 大选 can be a topic of the sentence or the patient of the verb, as we have discussed in Chapter two that Chinese is topic-prominent and it cannot change the meaning of the sentence when the NP freely occurs in preverbal or post verbal position. Therefore, for example “美国大选十月份举行” means the same in Chinese. While in English the case is so different, the general election is assigned the patient role by the verb and it originally appears in post verbal position, i.e., the object position, but when it occupies the subject position, the verb should be marked with passive morphology. The position where the noun phrase 大选 was put would not change its meaning. However, the familiar and habitual expression in native language may transfer to the target language, thus such sentences like question (f) could be produced by Chinese ESL learners in the following way:

- (f). *America will have the election in October.
- (g). *America hold election in October.
- (h). *American election taken place in October.
- (i). *American elections are held in October.

In certain or given patterns, Chinese learners are more likely to make mistakes because of their literal or word-to-word translation. For example, in the practice of sentence translation, 美国十月份举行大选，有人建议会议延期举行，希望这样的事情不再发生, some subjects take it for granted that sentence subjects are “美国”，“有人”，“希望”，therefore, we find the following translation respectively:

- (j). * America holds the election in October,
- (k). * Some people suggest that the meetings are to put off,
- (l). * Hope this kind of matter won't happen again.

美国 is not a human being, not a person but inanimate, an abstract word, so the right translation should be *The election will be held in America in October.*

Similarly learners just translate sentence words to words, if they did not grasp the right structure *It is suggested that ---, It is hoped that ---, It is expected that---*.

As we have discussed above, English and Chinese languages belong to different language families and have distinct characteristics. English is a typical subject-prominent language. The noun phrase which appears in the top of the sentence is supposed to play a role of subject (its grammatical function), i.e., it occupies the subject position. When a non-agent is put into the subject position, the verb must be marked with passive morphology to sign the essence of the superficial subject. Since its subject is *an agent*, there

must be a passive voice structure. As in this translation, the right answer is supposed to be “It is hoped that such things would not happen again”. While Chinese is a topic-prominent language, the subject only works as a topic without the grammatical function and it could be an agent or patient logically. The so-called subject position is just associated with the topic rather than the agent. Chinese students usually apply this rule to English translation.

L1 transfer or negative transfer would be the main cause of this phenomenon. In Second Language Acquisition, it is assumed that where there are differences between the L1 and L2, the learner’s L1 knowledge would interfere with the L2, and where the L1 and L2 are similar, L1 would actively aid L2 learning. The process that is held responsible for this is called language transfer. In the similarities between the L1 and L2 it functioned positively, while in the case of differences it functioned negatively (Ellis, 1999b:7). And it is commonly believed in SLA that errors occurred as the result of the negative transfer of native language into the learner’s L2. The more different L1 and L2 are, the more likely negative transfer of L1 occurs. Lado (1957:2) states the relationship between difference and difficulty in its simplistic form: the greater the difference, the greater the difficulty. For our Chinese ESL learners, the NL (Chinese) and TL (English) are so different in language system, which implies the possibility of L1 transfer to L2. James (2001) also claims the systematicity of language would cause learners to commit errors.

Of course in Chinese there are many 被 constructions with 被 although many 被 constructions are unmarked. Therefore, many learners are likely to forget the auxiliary verb.

4. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION

From the analysis above, we could say that negative transfer plays very important roles in the acquisition of non-agentive passive voice. It goes without saying that the passive voice is of complicated nature, which has always been one of the difficulties for Chinese ESL learners. As for its teaching, it involves a wide range of aspects.

Therefore, in the process of second language teaching, teachers are supposed to be fully aware of their responsibilities for a comprehensive teaching.

As far as passive voice teaching is concerned, first, teachers are supposed to keep all these difficult points in mind to have a clear outline of the general types of mistakes which are most likely to be made. Only on this basis, they could have the possibility to predict the possible difficulties that students may encounter and then could work out the corresponding resolutions.

The interference and negative transfer of native language will be a dilemma in this process. Students should be tutored to perceive the differences between active and passive expression and comprehend the setting and style where passive structure is supposed to be employed.

Writing would work as an effective way for students to acquire English voice. If they are given more training in writing, that will be a great help to them in this respect.

The most significant step is to lead students into understanding and appreciating English language and culture. Only when they could understand cultural factors, are they able to obtain native-like grammar.

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