
Information Structure Transfer: Topic-Comment Structures Use in the Interlanguage of L1 Topic-Prominent Mandarin Chinese Advanced Learners of L2 Subject-Prominent English

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Language transfer is a popular topic of second language acquisition (SLA) studies. It is important to refer to the influences of the learners' first languages on their second languages as a "transfer" instead of an "interference", for it would be unfair and inaccurate to address this as a phenomenon of errors-making by the learners during their second language acquisition process (Ortega 2013). In this perspective, this presentation will discuss and analyze a small-scale empirical research on the language transfer phenomenon of topic-comment structures in the interlanguage of L1 topicprominent (TP) Mandarin Chinese advanced learners of L2 subject-prominent (SP) English.

The elicitation method of topic-comment structures in L2 productions was through a survey questionnaire, delivered via the online Google survey platform, which required participants to complete 6 translation tasks. The translation tasks in the questionnaire were methodologically inspired by Li & Yang (2014), who "[elicited] the [Chinese learner of English's] production of anaphoras [sic][ZAs]" by asking the participants to translate "two pieces of Chinese discourse[s] into English"—the original discourses "characterized by [...] ZAs" were taken from English textbooks and translated to Chinese by the researchers (Li & Yang 2014: 116). In this study, I have taken 6 instances of English sentences with topic-comment structures (T-C structures) produced by Mandarin Chinese L1 speakers of L2 English provided as examples from previous studies conducted by Schachter & Celce-Murcia (1971) and Rutherford (1983), translated them into Mandarin Chinese, and then asked the participants of this study to translate them back to English.

The results of this study are (see figure 1): The advanced (CEFR C1/C2 level) L2 English learners with a L1 Mandarin Chinese background who participated in the question-

naire survey tend to use topic-comment structures instead of subject-predicate structures in their English translations of the Chinese sentences provided in the survey questionnaire. To be more detailed, 11.73 % of the English translations they have provided are constructed with T-C structures, with S3

…而且有一座山分隔了兩個湖, receiving the most T-C English translations (57.89% of all T-C sentences; see figure 1), whose possible S-P English translation could be ‘...*and a mountain separates two lakes*’ (Schachter & Celce-Murcia 1971: 445). Features of the T-C English translations match findings in previous researches (see figure 2): (a) Instead of making grammatical errors in some of the translations (e.g. No.5-S3 and No.23-S3), it could have resulted from the participants’ “attempts to establish a topic and follow it with a comment, a process that is syntactically and pragmatically acceptable in [Mandarin] Chinese” (Schachter & Celce-Murcia 1971: 445). (b) All of the T-C English translations are framed in the “existential construction (there is/there are)”, which could be because that the participants are “skillfully using it to fulfill an L1-induced preference” (Ortega 2013: 45).

s1	2
s2	2
s3	11
s4	3
s5	0
s6	1
sum	19

Figure 1: The Numbers of T-C English Translation Sentences Produced by the Participants for Each Chinese Sentences

No.10-s1	s1	There are many Taiwanese living near the lake.
No.18-s1	s1	There are many Taiwanese living around the lakeside.
No.18-s2	s2	There were many serious events happened in my country.
No.7-s2	s2	There were many big events happened in my country.
No.10-s3	s3	Besides, there is a mountain which separates two lakes.
No.14-s3	s3	...and there is a mountain separating two lakes apart.
No.18-s3	s3	In fact, there is a mountain in between two lakes.
No.1-s3	s3	And there's a mountain dividing two lakes.
No.5-s3	s3	And there is a mountain separates two lakes.
No.8-s3	s3	...and there's a mountain that divided the two lakes.
No.19-s3	s3	...and there is a mountain separating two lakes.
No.20-s3	s3	And there's a mountain which separated both lakes
No.21-s3	s3	... , and there is a mountain separating the two lakes.
No.23-s3	s3	... and there is a mountain divides the two lakes
No.31-s3	s3	...and there is a mountain that separates the two lakes
No.14-s4	s4	...and there are many visitors come to Taiwan.
No.27-s4	s4	... and there are many tourists visiting Taiwan.
No.8-s4	s4	...and there are many tourists that come to Taiwan.
No.25-s6	s6	In my country, there is an easy way for people to choose who they marry

Figure 2: English Translation Sentences Produced by the Participants