

Pragmatic Transfer in Second Language Acquisition in Intercultural Communication

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Abstract. Pragmatic transfer refers to the phenomenon where individuals apply the pragmatic rules and conventions of their first language to the second language during intercultural communication. Pragmatic transfer can result in communication failures, thereby affecting the effectiveness and rapport in communication. Consequently, investigating pragmatic transfer is of paramount importance for enhancing cross-cultural communicative competence and instructional quality. Previous research has predominantly focused on the definition, types, causes, influencing factors, and evaluation methods of pragmatic transfer. Nevertheless, there are still deficiencies and controversies regarding how to effectively avoid or reduce pragmatic transfer and incorporate it into foreign language teaching. In fact, research on pragmatic transfer from a cross-cultural communication perspective necessitates both theoretical deepening of the understanding and comprehension of pragmatic transfer and practical exploration of preventive and instructional strategies to enhance the cross-cultural communicative competence of foreign language learners. Therefore, this paper delineates the relevant theories and empirical studies in this field, summarizes the impact of pragmatic transfer on second language acquisition, and aspires that the ensuing conclusions will promote the development of foreign language education.

Keywords: pragmatic transfer; second language learning; intercultural communication.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

In recent years, the theory of pragmatic transfer has become a hot topic in the field of language transfer research both domestically and internationally and has made significant progress. Unlike previous language transfer theories, the theory of pragmatic transfer focuses on the phenomenon of pragmatic transfer in language acquisition at the conceptual level. There is no direct connection between a linguistic symbol and the specific object it refers to; instead, it is mediated by concepts. When learners acquire new pragmatics, they inevitably transfer their understanding of the concept system from their first language to their second language learning, to a greater or lesser extent. This article aims to explore the phenomenon of pragmatic transfer in language learners during the learning process through the analysis of pragmatic transfer theory, in order to promote research in foreign language teaching and help learners to learn languages more effectively.

1.2. Definition of Pragmatic Transfer

Language transfer refers to the linguistic phenomena that occur when learners of a second language are influenced by their first language. Transfer can occur at various levels of language, including phonetics, vocabulary, syntax, and pragmatics. Specifically, learners may exhibit phonetic transfer when learning the pronunciation of a second language, as they may be influenced by the pronunciation patterns of their first language. Similarly, learners may exhibit syntactic transfer when learning the grammar of a second language, as they may be influenced by the grammatical structures of their first language.

For example, in English, the use of articles (a/an/the) can be complex, requiring learners to select the appropriate article based on specific contexts and noun properties. However, Chinese does not have the concept of articles, so Chinese learners may overuse or omit articles in English. These are examples of language transfer. Pragmatic transfer is a form of transfer that occurs when learners, influenced by their first language habits, exhibit pragmatic phenomena that differ from those in the target language. Pragmatic transfer manifests in various aspects of communication style, contextual usage, and language habits.

In the process of learning French, students may apply semantic rules from Chinese. For example, Chinese-speaking learners may misunderstand English idiomatic expressions based on their first language. For instance, the Chinese idiom "一箭双雕" (meaning "to kill two birds with one stone") might be translated literally as "one arrow, two eagles" in English, which does not hold the same meaning. Thomas points out that pragmatic transfer is a common phenomenon in second-language learning, as learners' first language profoundly influences their pragmatic use of the second language [1].

Rohde's study found that English-speaking learners exhibited excessive pragmatic transfer from their German first language when using request strategies, relying heavily on German politeness formulas [2]. These examples illustrate the widespread occurrence of language transfer and pragmatic transfer in learners' language use. Such transfer phenomena are common in language learning and require teachers to pay sufficient attention and focus on their instruction. By understanding learners' first language background and specific manifestations of pragmatic transfer, teachers can better help learners correct pragmatic errors and enhance their second language communicative competence. The first part of this article provides an introduction to the definition and classification of pragmatic transfer, laying the groundwork for the subsequent research content.

1.3. Significance

Due to the different ways of thinking among people from different countries, it means that individuals who speak different pragmatics are influenced by different pragmatic systems. In the process of learning the target language, learners are required to master the pragmatic system of that language. Therefore, research on pragmatic transfer is of great significance to foreign language learning. The study of pragmatic learning emphasizes the summarization of regularities in pragmatic transfer. This theory attempts to establish a unified theoretical framework and propose a pragmatic transfer mechanism that can predict bidirectional transfer, rather than simply learning pragmatics.

Based on the research background and significance, the definition of pragmatic transfer has been clarified, stating that it is the influence of first-language pragmatic habits. This article further explores the theory of pragmatic transfer, such as the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis and the Pragmatic Markers Theory. Based on the aforementioned research, the author summarizes the impact of pragmatic transfer on foreign language learning.

2. Theories Related to Pragmatic Transfer

2.1. Contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH)

This theory stems from behaviorism and structuralism. Lado proposed the concept of comparative analysis [3]. He believed that learners often rely on their mother tongue when learning a second language. For example, they may retain the meaning, form, and culture of their mother tongue. If first language (L1) is similar to second language (L2), learners will experience positive transfer. Many empirical studies provide evidence from syntactic, lexical, and contextual perspectives.

In terms of context, Wang Shaobin and Li Wei conducted a cross-cultural comparative analysis [4]. Firstly, they designed some specific rejection scenarios and presented them by a questionnaire. Then they invited English learners in China and native English speaker in Australia to answer, which aimed to observe these learners' language strategies to express rejection respectively. Finally, the

study found that most Chinese English learners experienced negative pragmatic transfer in refusal behavior. For example, they tended to express regret or gratitude before giving reasons and were more sensitive to social rights. In terms of syntax and vocabulary, R Clouet conducted empirical research [5]. He believed that second language learning is influenced by language distance and cultural distance from L1. To confirm it, he decided the first-year students who majored in translation and interpretation as research object, and then analyzed their assignments which required translating Spanish into English. What's more, it was discovered that most students just translated similar content and forms between two languages. Finally, the results indicated that the similarity between L1 and L2 promotes second language learning, while significant differences may lead to pragmatic failure.

2.2. Linguistic Markup Theory

Eckman proposed markedness differential hypothesis (MDH) to explain how markers affect transfer [6]. He believed that migration mainly occurs in the case where L2 function is marked but L1 function is not, and the migration is obvious at this time. There is no doubt that it is difficult to determine which factors are relevant. Overall, this statement compensates for the shortcomings in CAH.

Lisheng Lv and Lixia Gong used corpus analysis method [7]. The research topic revolved around the use of the discourse marker 'you see', and the research subjects were divided into two groups, including Chinese English learners and native English speakers. As a result, it's discovered that Chinese students use less frequently than native English speakers, and their functions are relatively simple. From the perspective of linguistic marker theory, this also reflects the significant difference in the usage habits of sentence initiators between Chinese and English. However, what is insufficient is that this paper only described the phenomenon instead of analyzing the reasons in detail. Hyechong Park collected 84 articles with pictures in English and Chinese [8]. Then she compared the subject position of each sentence and the use of Topic marker. The results show that the use of English topic marker becomes more frequent with the improvement of learners' language ability. Additionally, this also proves the directionality of pragmatic transfer.

Since the 1990s, cognitive theory and neuropsychology have become the core theoretical framework of language transfer. With the deepening of researchers' understanding, pragmatic transfer has become a hot research issue now.

3. Empirical Research on Pragmatic Transfer

Research on language transfer is mostly empirical. In generally, pragmatic transfer as a subordinate branch of linguistic transfer can be divided into linguistic and social pragmatic transfer.

This paper searched a total of 228 journal papers and 120 foreign language papers in CNKI from 2000 to 2023 with "transfer" as the theme and 12 foreign language journals (Foreign Language World, Foreign Language Teaching and Research, Modern Foreign Languages, Foreign Languages in China, Foreign Languages Research, Foreign Language Research, Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages, Foreign Language Learning and Theory, Foreign Languages and Literature, Journal of Foreign Languages, Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education, Foreign Language Education) as the search scope. Meanwhile, this paper combines the papers of Hongshan Yin, Zhenqian Liu, Xi Wu & Xianghong Cao and Shilin Zhou, found that qualitative and quantitative analysis are commonly used research methods in pragmatic transfer research. In addition, qualitative analysis also includes case studies and comparative analysis [9-11]. Commonly used research tools are questionnaires, Discourse Complementation Tests (DCTs), and role-plays, or a combination of one or both as needed.

Early types of research were mainly qualitative, typified by interview and observation methods [12,13]. Most of them are designed to find out whether linguistic transfer really exists in a particular group. Questionnaire and corpus methods are also used, mostly based on statistics, to find out the existence of linguistic transfer or the characteristics of a particular group by empirical language

research methods [14-17]. In addition, case studies and comparative analysis studies were also included, mostly used to determine the existence of positive and negative migration relationships between L1 and L2 [18,19].

However, nowadays, the academic community is dominated by quantitative research, with questionnaires and DCT (including spoken discourse complementation tests) as the main research tools, and a small part of the early literature uses the role-playing method [20]. SPSS is usually used to analyse data in quantitative studies, and part of the literature also uses other methods such as STTR [21].

In terms of refusal speech behaviour in social pragmatic transfer, for example, Robinson, Yuanfang Dai, Shaojie Zhang and Allami, Naeimi all used discourse complementation tests as a research instrument to investigate the refusal speech behaviour of English learners in Japan, China and Iran, respectively [22-24]. Their findings, however, were all different, with Robinson suggesting that low proficiency learners are more susceptible to the influence of their mother tongue, while Allami and Naeimi came up with the opposite result to theirs. Dai and Zhang's study, on the other hand, concluded that there is a clear difference between learners with different language proficiency in an inverted U-shape. Also using refusal speech behaviour as an object of study, Al-Mahrooqi, R., & Al-Aghbari, K investigated the relationship between high and low status and direct or indirect strategies of refusal speech behaviour with English language learners in Oman [25]. Shaobin Wang and Wei Li, on the other hand, similarly used DCT to investigate the differences and reasons for Chinese and Australian students' speech refusal behaviours [26]. The emergence of different research directions for the same research topic reflects, to some extent, the diversity and complexity of pragmatic transfer research.

In addition, Jin and Marti.L also used DCT as a research method to examine the acquisition of trilingualism (Norwegian) by learners whose mother tongue is Chinese and second language is English, as well as the request speech behaviours of Turkish and German bilinguals, respectively [27,28]. Their study found that bilingual or trilingual speakers are more likely to be affected by negative transfer from their mother tongue, but a small part of the literature argues against this view, suggesting that the above situation is influenced by the fact that learners have sufficiently acquired the relevant attributes of their second language [29].

4. The Impact of Pragmatic Transfer on Foreign Language Learning

4.1. Causes That Affect Pragmatic Migration

The causes of socio-pragmatic transfer are mainly due to social factors. This includes individual factors, e.g. learners may lack socio-pragmatic knowledge (semantics, pragmatic issues), insufficient level of the target language. It also includes group factors such as age (younger learners tend to learn faster than middle-aged learners and others are more tolerant of pragmatic failures), ethnicity (native vs. foreign language, which mainly occurs in countries where there are two or more official languages or where there is a large-scale mastery of a particular second foreign language, e.g., Pakistan, the United States, etc.) [30], and social class (apologetic behaviour of people with a higher social status tends to be more accepted and those of lower status respond more positively, and vice versa) and level of education, etc. In addition, the contextual situation of the test may also influence social pragmatic transfer. Jiawei Lu and Jie Gu respectively summarized the influencing factors of pragmatic transfer [31, 32]. In the past, scholars only considered the structural differences between the mother tongue and the target language, but now internal factors (learner's mother tongue background, personal goals and levels, individual traits, emotional attitudes, etc.) and external factors (communication occasions, objects, purposes, etc.) have also been considered [31]. In summary, the achievements are becoming increasingly rich and systematic.

4.2. The Impact of Foreign Language Learning

It is widely acknowledged that pragmatic failure can lead to ineffective or counterproductive communication. However, Kasper emphasized that negative pragmatic transfer does not necessarily mean communication failure [33]. For example, members of the target language society will expect that learners' language behaviors are consistent with their mother tongue in cross-cultural communication. This is because complete integration poses a threat to these members. Furthermore, Wenhui Yang's research result is consistent with this viewpoint [34]. She surveyed 90 British students who were familiar with China's toasting culture. According to the results, negative pragmatic transfer may play a cultural balance role, while positive one may lead to non-cooperation in communication.

As for the possible effects of pragmatic transfer on second language acquisition, there is no unanimity in the academic community. Takahashi and Beebe put forward the hypothesis that the level of second language acquisition is positively correlated with pragmatic transfer [35]. The study by Naoko Maeshiba, Naoko Yoshinaga, Gabriele Kasper and Steven Ross, on the other hand, advocates the exact opposite concept [36]. Jiawei Lu suggests that the vast majority of previous studies have neglected the setting of criteria for the emergence of pragmatic transfer and have not investigated the effect of second language acquisition on pragmatic transfer, and they have mostly been conducted from the perspective of pragmatic language transfer [28]. His study, from the perspective of social language transfer, takes refusal strategies as the object of study and finds that language transfer varies in different groups and forms of refusal triggers, and is clearly influenced by refusal triggers. Overall, Lu's conclusions are broadly similar to Takahashi and Beebe's, but he also suggests that high-level learners may consciously utilize language transfer to make decent refusals [28]. It should be noted that there is still some disagreement about the impact of pragmatic transfer on second language acquisition. The phenomenon observed from the point of view of sociolinguistic transfer tends to favour a positive correlation between second-language proficiency and pragmatic transfer, but this is not entirely the case from the data and is also related to the social factors mentioned above.

5. Conclusion

As a review article, this paper combs through the research and development in the field of pragmatic transfer at home and abroad, which admittedly can't be perfect, but it also finds that there are some problems in the field of pragmatic transfer research at present. At present, scholars at home and abroad have not established a complete and universal theory and standard, and all of them are more or less one-sided in their research, ignoring the possible mutual influence between various factors. There is also a lack of a universal and rigorous assessment method and research method.

Hence, it is clear that the field of pragmatic transfer still has many problems waiting to be solved, including highly abstracted general descriptions and the causes that specifically affect pragmatic transfer. A scientific and standardised theoretical framework for pragmatic transfer needs to be developed, and a unified and clear definition also needs to be established. In addition, a common assessment method or tool should be proposed, which will effectively enhance the efficiency of research in the field of pragmatic transfer, instead of the present confusing scene of varying standards among researchers.

In the field of foreign language learning, on the other hand, teachers need to re-examine the causes behind the phenomenon of pragmatic failure and consider both the individual factors of students and the social group factors. In the actual teaching scene, teachers should try to avoid the misteaching of pragmatic failure at the level of language structure, so as to ensure the accuracy of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar acquired by students in class. Teachers should also consider cross-cultural communication factors. Teachers should help students to gradually familiarize themselves with the cultural background of the target language and build up adaptive cultural concepts so as to understand the rules of language learning and alleviate language learning anxiety to a certain extent. In this way, students can gradually reduce or even fade the interlanguage residue while improving their language ability.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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