

Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue in Chinese-English Interpretation

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Negative transfer of the mother tongue occurs when a speaker's first language negatively impacts their ability to learn or use a second language. It can manifest itself in the context of Chinese-English interpretation which can lead to various challenges and errors. By exemplifying the negative transfer of mother tongue in Chinese-English interpretation, this paper contends that the occurrences of inappropriateness, misunderstanding, and pragmatic failure in interpretation more often than not are due to the constraints of the mother tongue. It then proceeds to offer some tips regarding interpretation teaching to help students beware those potential pitfalls, so as to mitigate negative transfer effects. Understanding the structural and cultural differences between Chinese and English can significantly enhance interpretation accuracy and effectiveness.

Keywords: negative transfer of mother tongue, interpretation, implications

Introduction

Language transfer is one of the main research areas of second language acquisition, which refers to “the application of linguistic features from one language to another by a bilingual or multilingual speaker.” In second language learning, when learners apply the language rules in their mother tongue to foreign language learning, if a certain language rule is similar in two languages, the transfer will have a positive impact on learning new knowledge and mastering new skills, which is called “positive transfer.” Conversely, within the theory of contrastive analysis, the greater the differences between the two languages, the more negative transfer can be expected. As an impromptu activity involving the process of bilingual information conversion, interpretation is particularly found the frequent occurrences of language transfer, especially the mother tongue transfer in the interpretation process. The mother tongue transfer should be highlighted and viewed objectively in interpretation teaching, with an aim to affirm its positive role and contain its negative influence. The negative transfer of mother tongue in interpretation boils down to being unable to get rid of the constraints of the source language, resulting in improper wording, misunderstanding, and misinformation or in some circumstances pragmatic failure. The following will probe into the manifestations and causes of this negative transfer in Chinese-English interpretation from three aspects.

Linguistic Differences Cause Misinterpretation and Redundancy

Mistranslation of Topic Sentences

The renowned linguist Wang Li once pointed out, “Western languages are governed by law, while Chinese language is governed by man. In governed-by-law languages, the structure of the sentence must rigidly adhere to

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grammatical rules, regardless of whether the subject is necessary; whereas in governed-by-man languages, the subject is used if needed and omitted if not, as long as the listener can understand the speaker's meaning" (Zhao & Li, 2004, p. 19). As a subject-prominent language, "The English subject-verb structure is a highly grammaticalized syntactic structure. As a topic-prominent language, in Chinese, the topic may not align with the subject, and the topic is given higher grammaticalization than the subject" (Shao, 2006, p. 88). As a language that emphasizes topics, many sentences revolve around a specific topic, and as long as the semantics are coherent, the constituents can be arranged freely. Therefore, the relationship between the subject, verb, and object in Chinese often does not reflect a controlling action. Rather, it embodies a relationship between a theme and its explanation. Such topic sentences in Chinese can easily lead to errors in interpretation as shown in the following examples:

Example 1:

该地区已没什么城乡差别。

This region has little difference between town and country.

(Correct: There is little difference between town and country in this region.)

Example 2:

今天的事故，我不想作任何评论。

Today's accident, I don't want to make any comment.

(Correct: As for today's accident, I don't want to make any comment.)

Displacement of Personal and Impersonal Subjects

In interpretation, students often translate the subject of a sentence directly into the subject in English according to the order of Chinese, ignoring the differences in syntax and thought processes between the two languages. Sometimes, the subject in the interpretation needs to switch between personal and impersonal subjects or be adjusted appropriately based on the context. The following examples illustrate this:

Example 3:

人类即将进入21世纪，世界经济正在发生广泛而深刻的变化。(Liu, 2006, p. 222)

As mankind is entering into the 21st century, world economy is changing extensively and profoundly.

Example 4:

中国的四大发明对人类进步做出了巨大贡献。

The four great inventions of ancient China have made tremendous contributions to human progress .

In the first sentence, the translation "mankind is entering into the 21st century" is illogical; it should refer to "an era or time" and can be revised to "As the new century approaches," or "Mankind is at the threshold of the 21st century." In the second sentence, the subject should be people, and it cannot be paired with "the four great inventions."

During interpretation, interpreters need to pay particular attention to these displacement situations, appropriately adjusting the choice of pronouns and their correct positions in sentences to maintain the fluency and accuracy of the language.

Improper Handling of Redundant Information

Negative transfer is also reflected in the handling of redundant information. Chinese language tends to favor concrete wording and often expresses abstract concepts in a tangible form. There are many habitual collocations in Chinese, such as numerous category terms, which often carry vague meanings and lack substantial content. In

contrast, English places greater emphasis on functionality and often abstracts specific concepts, turning the concrete into the abstract. Common category nouns used in Chinese include “工作,” “问题,” “局面,” “方面,” “状况,” “现象,” and “水平.” These can often be omitted in interpretation. However, in most cases, the following translations are frequently seen in students’ interpreting practice, which often reflect the negative influence of mother tongue transfer.

Example 5:

我们要重视沿海与内地贫富差距 *问题*。

We must pay close attention to (the problem of) the gap between coastal and inland areas.

Example 6:

群众在就业、教育、医疗、居住、养老等方面面临不少难题。

People face many difficulties in employment, education, healthcare, housing, and elderly.

In addition, there are many adjectives in Chinese vocabulary that serve to intensify the tone, such as “不切实际的幻想,” “毫无根据的诽谤,” “严重的自然灾害,” and “大无畏的勇气.” These adjective modifiers constitute redundant information, and directly translating them may end up being an unnecessary addition. Furthermore, many adverbs in Chinese are commonly used to strengthen the meanings of verbs or adjectives, such as “隆重召开” for a meeting, “胜利闭幕.”

“彻底粉碎” and “坚决响应.” In English, if there are too many modifiers, it can come across as pompous and counterproductive. Therefore, these formulaic expressions often create semantic redundancy when translated literally and may appear repetitive and cumbersome in interpretation, potentially even distorting the original meaning. For instance, translating “胜利召开” as “successfully convened” may imply that there were significant difficulties and obstacles prior to the meeting (Cheng, 1997, p. 43). In practical interpreting practice, it can be observed that most students “faithfully” translate the redundant information from the source language, as seen in the following example:

Example 7:

1998年夏季, 长江流域发生了特大自然灾害。

In the summer of 1998, an *extraordinarily serious* natural calamity occurred in the Yangtze River region.

Example 8:

请您多提宝贵意见。

Your *valuable* opinions are welcome.

Improper Phrasal Collocations

The different historical developments and cultural habits of the English and Chinese languages have led to various differences in their vocabulary collocation abilities, which in turn cause many variations in expression. In interpretation, such collocational errors are quite common. For example, “light” can be translated as “淡” and “thick” as “浓,” but using these two words uniformly in different contexts can often lead to inappropriateness. For instance, “淡酒” can be translated as “light wine,” while “淡茶” is often translated as “weak tea.” On the other hand, “浓汤” can be translated as “thick soup,” but “浓茶” is typically translated as “strong tea.” Similarly, the term “大” in “大风,” “大雪,” and “大旱” should not all be translated as “big;” the appropriate translations would be “strong wind,” “heavy snow,” and “serious drought,” respectively.

Additionally, certain verbs in Chinese can collocate with many nouns, and when converting them into English, adjustments must be made according to context. However, in actual interpretation, students often,

influenced by their native language thinking, tend to blurt out the most commonly used corresponding word in their mother tongue. For example, in Chinese, “看” can pair with many phrases, such as “看书,” “看电视,” “看医生,” and “看朋友,” but these are not all translated as “see” directly; adjustments need to be made. In practice, we frequently encounter students translating “开灯” (turning on the light) and “开电视” (turning on the TV) as “open the light” and “open the TV.”

Literal Translation Leads to Misinterpretation

Many Chinese expressions bear a superficial structural similarity to English, but their actual connotations can be entirely different. Each word possesses referential meaning and connotative meaning, along with rich pragmatic meanings. Influenced by native language transfer, some translations that rigidly apply literal meanings often overlook the cultural features and pragmatic significance inherent in the original language. For instance, in the expression “他是领导面前的红人” (“He is a favorite in front of the leader”), “红人” cannot be translated as “red man;” instead, it should convey the pragmatic meaning of “a favorite (with sb).” See the following examples:

Example 9:

这篇报告旨在分析该行业龙头企业的竞争力。

This report aims to analyze the competitiveness of the dragonhead enterprises in the industry.

In the example sentence, “龙头企业” is translated as “dragonhead enterprises,” which is unlikely to be accepted by English readers due to cultural differences between the East and the West. In Chinese culture, “龙” carries a positive connotation and symbolizes leadership or superiority, while in English culture, it may conjure a terrifying image, lacking the same associations. Therefore, translating it as “leading enterprises” is more straightforward.

There are quite a few “false friends” generated by rigidly applying literal meanings in Chinese-English translation. Below are a few examples:

Example 10:

吃醋 drink vinegar (be jealous, envy)

红茶 red tea (black tea)

红白喜事 red and white happy occasions (weddings and funerals)

黄色书籍 yellow book (pornography book)

戴绿帽子 to have/wear a green bonnet (to cuckold sb)

柴米油盐酱醋茶 fuel, rice, oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar, and tea (daily necessities)

Ignorance of Contextual and Cultural Differences Leads to Pragmatic Errors

Pragmatic errors refer to “mistakes that occur in verbal communication, resulting in the communicator’s failure to achieve satisfactory communication.” These errors are specifically manifested in how an inappropriate translation misleads the target audience, causing them to feel awkward, uncomfortable, abrupt, ridiculous, or even insulted (Chen, 2005, p. 33). A seasoned interpreter once shared an unforgettable experience (Zhang, 2004, p. 95) at the opening ceremony of an international fashion festival, when the host delivered the opening statement, “Ladies and gentlemen, good evening!” he unexpectedly added, “Please take your seats.” The interpreter’s immediate reaction was to translate this into English, but his second thought was that everyone was already seated, so he could not say “Please sit down.” However, he did not have time to formulate a third response and impulsively blurted out, “Please be seated.” He later regretted it because, given the context, translating it as

“Attention, please” would have more accurately conveyed the pragmatic message suitable for the occasion. This illustrates that even excellent interpreters are not immune to pragmatic errors caused by the influence of the source language.

For example, traditional Chinese culture emphasizes humility, politeness, and indirectness, leading to certain conventional phrases that should not be translated literally, as they may cause misunderstanding and confusion. For instance, when a foreign guest visits a Chinese home, the host often habitually expresses, “Sorry, there is not much to eat.” This does not align with Westerners’ preference for directness, and thus should not be translated literally; it would be better to convey to the guest, “I hope you will enjoy your dinner.” Similarly, when a Chinese receives compliments for good work, he often humbly responds, “没什么, 这是我应该做的” or “哪里哪里” Translating this as “Nothing special. It is just my duty to do so” might give the impression that he is only fulfilling a responsibility, and rendering “哪里, 哪里” “Where, where” would be particularly absurd.

Conclusion

In the process of Chinese-English interpretation, the issue of negative transfer from the native language significantly affects communicative effectiveness. Accordingly some key insights should be kept in mind in Chinese-English interpretation teaching.

First, a comparative study of the linguistic differences between the two languages is advisable. The differences in linguistic structures including syntax and lexical collocation between Chinese and English often lead to improper translation, distorting intended meanings. Students must familiarize themselves with common linguistic discrepancies between both languages to navigate this challenge successfully.

Second, students should foster cultural awareness. Ignoring the cultural implications behind certain phrases can result in miscommunication. Phrases that seem straightforward in one language may carry different meanings or connotations in another. Interpreters should strive to understand and convey the underlying cultural nuances to ensure clarity.

Third, students should cultivate pragmatic understanding: Effective communication requires more than just translating words; it necessitates an understanding of the pragmatic aspects of language. Interpreters must be adept at recognizing the context in which statements are made and selecting appropriate equivalents that align with the communicative intent.

Final, students should improve interpretation skills. Continuous training and exposure to both languages and cultures are critical for learners. Engaging in practice scenarios, feedback sessions, and real-world interpreting experiences can help mitigate the effects of negative transfer.

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