

Positive Transfer of Third Language Acquisition in English and French Sentence Patterns

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Abstract

Language takes sentences as the basic unit and sentence structures in different languages have their own characteristics. At present, with the in-depth development of economic globalization and the rapid enhancement of the demand for cross language communication, there are more and more trilingual users. Therefore, third language acquisition, as an emerging field of international and domestic research in recent years, has attracted extensive attention. As is known to all, the two languages, English and French, are closely related but different. Hence, in the process of learning French as a second foreign language, the positive and negative transfer of English to French is inevitable. Under the framework of third language acquisition and based on language transfer theory, this paper analyzes the positive transfer of sentence structure in the process of third language acquisition through the comparative analysis of four special sentence patterns in English and French, which is helpful for English majors to learn French as a second foreign language more concisely and efficiently.

Keywords

Third Language Acquisition, English and French, Sentence Structure, Language Transfer, Positive Transfer.

1. Introduction

Bilingual studies have been emphasized in linguistics for a long time. However, with the in-depth development of economic globalization and the rapid enhancement of the demand for cross language communication, there are more and more trilingual users. Third language acquisition, as a new research field, is to further study learners' language acquisition on the basis of second language acquisition. Jorda pointed out that "third language" is a general concept. It does not exactly refer to the number of languages learned by language learners, but to the one or more languages that learners are currently learning in addition to their mother tongue and second language they have mastered (which may be imperfect)[1]. Therefore, third language acquisition indicates the acquisition process of one or more languages that learners are currently learning in addition to their mother tongue and second language[2].

The Role of L1 in Foreign Language Learning, written by Ringbom and published in 1987, analyzes the impact of mother tongue Finnish and second language Swedish on third language English, opening the door to third language acquisition research. The independent study of third language acquisition began in the early 1980s and started a little late. Nonetheless, after more than 40 years of development, the research on third language acquisition has made great progress in depth and breadth, with independent theoretical foundation and research methods. Nowadays, third language acquisition has become an important discipline intersecting with sociology, psychology, pedagogy and other disciplines. Its research fields mainly focus on metalinguistic awareness and interlingual transfer[3]. The former is seriously concerned about the study of phonological and syntactic awareness, while the latter involves the study of

phonological, lexical, syntactic and semantic transfer. At present, the research on third language acquisition has been paid more attention by language learners, developing rapidly.

2. Literature Review

Language transfer refers to the influence caused by the similarities and differences between the target language and any other acquired language, mainly reflected in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, semantics and so on. This chapter mainly introduces the concept of language transfer and research status and achievements of language transfer in third language acquisition.

2.1. Introduction to theory of Language Transfer

The theoretical term "Language Transfer" originates from psychology field. In Dictionary of Language and Linguistics, language transfer is regarded as the promotion or hindrance of early behavior patterns to learning new behavior patterns. Since 1950s, Lado and other scholars have applied this term to linguistic research, which made language researchers in second language acquisition field pay extensive attention to the phenomenon of language transfer. As the research field deepens and expands, the definition of language transfer is not completely unified in academic circles. In view of this, language researchers described and summarized the concept of language transfer from different perspectives. For instance, from the perspective of task learning, Ellis assumed that transfer was the learning effect of task A on task B. From the research scope of language transfer, James defined transfer in the language learning environment, which was reflected in the learning effect of the first language on the second language. Zhou Liuxi understood transfer from two levels. Firstly, in a general way, transfer refers to the influence of the knowledge and skills learners have mastered on the new knowledge and skills they have learned in the process of learning new knowledge. Secondly, in a narrow sense, transfer only indicates a process of foreign language learning, which means language learners transfer their mother tongue, second language or third language to new language's learning and use. Considering that the complexity and diversity of language transfer's definition, academic circles generally recognize the standard concept of language transfer given by Odlin in his book *Language Transfer: Cross-linguistic Influence in Language Learning*: Transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired[4]. In Odlin's definition, language transfer is also divided into two categories: positive transfer and negative transfer. On the one hand, positive transfer implies that the similarity between the target language and mother tongue (or acquired language), which is conducive to the learning of the target language; on the other hand, negative transfer means that the difference between the target language and mother tongue (or acquired language), which is detrimental to the learning of the target language.

The study of language transfer can be divided into three periods. In the early 1950s and 1960s, language transfer played an extremely significant role in second language acquisition and most of studies were closely related to behaviorism and structuralism that prevailed in the past. From the late 1960s to the late 1970s, the behaviorists' view of language learning has been fiercely criticized. Chomsky's universal grammar has been widely used in the study of language acquisition. From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, transfer research combined with psychology, turning more to the study of its production mechanism.

2.2. Transfer Research in Third Language Acquisition (TLA)

In recent years, due to the deepening of world economic globalization and frequent population mobility, cross language communication has been increasingly promoted all over the world, resulting in the prevalence of multilingualism. The research on third language acquisition abroad has developed rapidly and made remarkable achievements both in theory and practice.

Foreign researchers not only study the language characteristics of third language learners and explain the process of language acquisition under the guidance of linguistic theory, but also, through an interdisciplinary way, they make an in-depth and multi-angle exploration of third language acquisition with the help of the relevant disciplines' existing achievements. For the past few years, although the main research results of third language acquisition abroad are still concentrated in two research fields: trilingual interlingual transfer and metalinguistic awareness, their research contents have shown a plural characteristic. Among them, the most striking change in language knowledge transfer is the increasing research on phonetic transfer. It is found that phonetic transfer research involves a variety of languages, such as English, Spanish, German, French, Malaysian and Dutch. And its research objects include plosive, vowel and consonant. Simon and Leuschner proved that L2 will produce positive transfer in the process of trilingual phonetic acquisition by comparing VOT values of /p/, /k/, /d/, /t/, /b/ in L1(Dutch), L2(English) and L3(German)[5]. When Hassan investigated Malaysian students' vowel pronunciation ability in L3 French, he found that Malaysian students can distinguish French vowels, but there are problems in trilingual output[6]. It can be explained that students are not only affected by the negative transfer of their mother tongue Malaysian, but also owing to spelling rules of French. Likewise, scholars are still enthusiastic about syntactic transfer. Vinnitskaya and Flynn compared the relative clauses acquisition of L3 English by children and adults whose mother tongue is Kazakh and their second language is Russian, which they found that all previous languages of trilingual learners will affect the acquisition of trilingual language structure, that is to say, both their mother tongue and second language will migrate to third language[7]. As a result, it is worth emphasizing that both L1 and L2 may be the sources of syntactic transfer on third language.

In comparison with foreign research on third language acquisition, domestic research on third language acquisition started late, beginning in the middle and later periods of 1990s. What's more, the study of language transfer in third language acquisition began to increase gradually in the early 21st century, but there are few in-depth and influential literature. Zhao Liang (2006) inquired the German learning level of 31 undergraduates majoring in English and found that learners' German interlanguage is jointly affected by their mother tongue Chinese, second language English and third language German, which the second language English has the greatest influence, the third language has moderate influence and the first language has the least influence. Kang Yinghua (2010) explored language transfer at phonetic and grammatical levels in the acquisition of Mongolian Students' third language English, and proved that in general, the similarity of language types contributes to the positive transfer. Li Hongyan (2011) demonstrated the impact of mother tongue Chinese and second language English on the acquisition of third language Japanese's intonation transfer. Ni Chuanbin and Zhang Zhiyin (2011) measured accuracy and response time of trilingual learners of different languages when recognizing the same second language vocabulary, in order to explore the vocabulary recognition influence of third language on second language.

Taking a panoramic view of the achievements made in third language acquisition field at home and abroad, a conclusion can be drawn: the research of language transfer mostly focuses on the influence of mother tongue or second language on third language acquisition, which is reflected in many aspects, such as pronunciation, vocabulary, semantics, syntax, pragmatics, culture and so forth. Nevertheless, there are few literatures discussing the positive impact of English (second language) on French (third language) syntactic learning. Practice shows that for foreign language learners with certain foundation of English vocabulary and grammar knowledge, English and French belong to the same language family and have more similarities, which will make them spontaneously learn French with their mastered English learning habits and ways of thinking, resulting in confusion between two languages. For example, sentence components include at least two parts in both English and French: subject and predicate. Based

on the above, this paper will preliminarily analyze the positive transfer of third language acquisition in English and French sentence patterns through the comparative analysis of English and French special sentence structures, so as to make it more concise and efficient in learning second foreign language French.

3. Positive Transfer in English and French Sentence Patterns

English and French belong to the Indo-European language family. They have influenced each other for hundreds of years on account of a good deal of similarities between two languages, which has a wide range of positive effects for French beginners with English capacity. This chapter makes a detailed analysis of four special sentence patterns (impersonal sentence pattern, interrogative sentence pattern, exclamatory sentence pattern and imperative sentence pattern) and illustrates similarities and differences between English and French in virtue of sentence examples. The purpose is to demonstrate that the mastery of English sentence patterns has a positive impact on the acquisition of French sentence patterns, which helps French beginners use appropriate methods to solve the interference of English foundation on French learning.

3.1. Impersonal Sentence Pattern

In French, impersonal sentence pattern is considered as a common special sentence pattern. But traditional French grammar regards impersonal sentence pattern as the simplest sentence pattern. Under normal circumstances, the neutral pronoun “il” serves as a formal subject, which is equivalent to the formal subject “it” in English. In fact, the real subject is the noun, infinitive or clause behind the verb and the verb only uses the third person singular form. According to the nature and syntactic characteristics of verbs, this part dissects two kinds of representative impersonal sentence patterns expressing special meanings in English and French.

3.1.1. Indicating weather conditions

In terms of the nature of verbs and impersonal sentence pattern’s composition and usage characteristics, research shows that there are a lot of similarities between English and French impersonal sentences in expressing weather conditions. First, some verbs used in French to express weather conditions and natural phenomena, like *pleuvoir*, *neiger*, *tonner* and others, are mostly used in impersonal sentences. The number of these verbs is limited and their word meanings are relatively single, not to mention that there are few changes in sentence structure, so these verbs are called “the impersonal verbs”. Impersonal verb refers to the verb with the neutral pronoun “il” as the subject. Its basic sentence pattern is “Il+verb”, which only uses the third person singular form. For example, “Il pleut” in French is similar to “It’s raining” in English. In a general sense, raining is a natural weather phenomenon and does not depend on manpower. On the top of that, in French, the universal verb “*faire*” can also be used to describe the weather. The basic sentence pattern is “Il *fait* + adjective/ noun/ numeral indicating weather conditions”. For instance, “Il *fait beau*” in French is similar to “It’s sunny” in English. Generally speaking, the impersonal sentence pattern of weather conditions in English has much in common with French. Therefore, French beginners can master this kind of usage quickly.

3.1.2. Indicating there is something in a place

Take sentence structure as focus, the English and French impersonal sentence patterns indicating that there is something in a place are similar in structure and usage “There be” sentence pattern is one of the commonly used sentence patterns in English, which means “has/have”, expressing “the existence of people or things” or “there is something in a place”. As we all know, English learners are familiar with this sentence pattern. In French, the expression corresponding to English “there be” is “Il y a”. By comparing the following examples, we can further analyze their similarities or differences.

- English: There are many people at the show.
- French: Il y a beaucoup de tableaux sur le mur.

According to research, it is found that the generative structure of two sentences is the same. For example, “there” guides the whole sentence, indicating the existence of someone or something, which is actually used as a formal subject in the sentence and has no meaning. Besides, “il y a” is close to the use of “have” in English, which can be followed by nouns or pronouns to make sure the meaning of sentence is complete. When “there are” and “il y a” are omitted from two sentences, “many people” and “beaucoup de tableaux” are real subjects in the sentence. Meanwhile, “at the show” and “sur le mur” act as adverbials in the sentence. At this time, sentence patterns of two different languages are the same in structure and usage, which proves that there is a positive transfer in the learning of French sentence patterns.

3.2. Interrogative Sentence Pattern

English interrogative sentences include general interrogative sentence, special interrogative sentence, alternative question and disjunctive question; however, French interrogative sentences include general interrogative sentence, special interrogative sentence and alternative question. It should be noted that there is no special term disjunctive question in French. Only “n’cest-ce...pas”, a special structure, is equivalent to the disjunctive question in English. In this part, two commonly used interrogative sentence patterns will be analyzed in English and French: general interrogative sentence and special interrogative sentence, which aims to illustrate the positive transfer of English to French learning.

3.2.1. General interrogative sentence

General interrogative sentences are usually used to ask whether something is true, which is commonly adopted in English and French. As following three groups of sentences:

- English: Does he know the truth? French: Est-ce qu’il sait la vérité?
- English: He knows the truth? French: Il sait la vérité?
- English: Are you a boy? French: Sait-t-elle la vérité?

Using head movement theory, it can be explained that the generation of French general questions is consistent with that of early English general questions[8]. For instance, taking the first group as an example to investigate the generation process of these two languages, which shows that they both use the head movement to realize the formation of general questions, and they are filled with dummy auxiliary words, such as “do” in English and “est-ce que” in French. The difference is that the French question word “est-ce que” can be applied to all persons and numbers, while the English question word “do” needs to change the persons and numbers according to the subject, keeping consistent with the subject.

In accordance with Chomsky’s The Minimalist Program, all interrogative sentences are guided by the prefix of abstract interrogative sentences[9]. As in the second group, generation process of interrogative sentences is completed by adding a question mark at the end of the declarative sentence. Finally, by analyzing sentences in the third group, it is obvious that both English and French use the subject-predicate inversion. In English, the be verb “are” is interchanged with the subject “you” and moves to the beginning of the sentence, while in French, the notional verb “sait” is also placed at the beginning of a sentence to generate an interrogative sentence pattern. On the basis of parameter concept of universal grammar, this point can be appropriately explained as follows: in modern English, the linking verb “be” has strong features and can be directly moved to the beginning of the sentence, producing a general question; however, French verb “sait” (the original form of verb: savior) is a notional verb with strong features and can also move directly to generate interrogative sentences[10].

To sum up, by comparing three groups of general interrogative sentence patterns, we can conclude that, general interrogative sentence patterns in English and French are almost the

same in structure and form except for subtle disparities in grammar, which is conducive to promoting the positive transfer of French beginners' acquisition in general interrogative sentences.

3.2.2. Special interrogative sentence

English special interrogative sentence and French special interrogative sentence have a common generative process, which they both carry a *wh*-question qualifier with deictic characteristics and their generative process conforms to the principles of universal grammar. As following three groups of sentences:

- English: What do you do after class? French: Qu'est-ce que vous faites après les cours?
- English: Who are the comrades? French: Qui est-ce que sont ces camarades?
- English: Where do your family live? French: Où est-ce que votre famille habite?

In the case of the minimalist program, special interrogative words in English are called *wh*-question words and special interrogative words in French special interrogative sentences are *qui*, *que*, *où*, *dont* and so on. Next, two points can be drawn from the comparative analysis of above three groups of sentences. Firstly, the biggest similarity is that there is only one single special question word at the beginning of sentence and all question words have been shifted to the beginning of sentences. Secondly, their common ground is reflected in the usage of words, that is, the interrogative word "*que*" in French is equivalent to "*what*" in English, which regards as an object in sentences; the interrogative word "*qui*" in French is close to "*who*" in English, which acts as a subject in sentences; the interrogative word "*où*" in French is similar to "*where*" in English, which serves as adverbial of place in sentences. In a word, French special questions and English special questions have the same generation process. To be honest, it is convenient for French beginners who have mastered the special interrogative sentences in English to learn special interrogative sentences in French.

3.3. Exclamatory Sentence Pattern

Exclamatory sentence patterns play a unique role in language communication. As is known to all, exclamatory sentences in French and English are special sentences that express strong feelings, indicating the speaker's joy, anger, surprise and other emotions. Besides, exclamation marks or full stops are often used at the end of exclamatory sentences, usually in a falling tone. In terms of whether there are interjections in exclamatory sentences, this part divides exclamatory sentence patterns into two categories: exclamatory sentence with interjection and exclamation sentence without interjection.

3.3.1. Exclamatory sentence with interjection

From the syntactic level, according to the research, there are many common grounds between English and French exclamatory sentences containing exclamation words. Through the comparative study of two languages, language learners can simplify a number of complicated problems and effectively avoid the interference of negative transfer between two languages, which is fully in line with linguist Odlin's language transfer theory[4]. It is well known that exclamatory sentences in English are mainly guided by exclamation words "*what*" and "*how*", while some exclamation words that independently express exclamatory sentences are "*ah*" for surprise and happiness, and "*alas*" for pain and anxiety. But in French, exclamation words are *quel*, *quelle*, *comme*, *que* et cetera, which means "*how...*" or "*really...*". And independent exclamation words like "*euh*" for well, "*hein*" for what, "*bon*" for ok, "*ciel*" for god and "*voyons*" for hurry. For one thing, the resemblance between two languages is remarkable, which means the subject and predicate of exclamatory sentences with interjections in English and French are in normal word order. By the same token, the subject and predicate can also be omitted in the colloquial language, forming elliptical sentences. For example:

- English: What good children they are! How cold (it is) today!

- French: Comme il fait frais ici! Quel musée (il est)!

For another thing, domestic scholars believe that the dissimilarities between English and French exclamatory sentences are mainly reflected in two aspects. In the first place, only one exclamatory word “how” in the English exclamatory sentence can modify the whole sentence. On the contrary, in French, the exclamatory adverbs like “comme”, “que” and “combien” can be used to modify the whole sentence (for example, “How he worked!” “Comme elle est belle!”). In the second place, it is the change of exclamation words’ forms. It must be admitted that there is no change in form in English exclamation words “what” or “how”. Nevertheless, due to the emphasis on masculine and feminine in French, the exclamatory adjectives in English should be consistent with the sex and number of the following nouns. For instance, when “quel” in French is used as an exclamatory adjective, there are four forms: quel, quels, quelle and quelles, in accordance with the sex and number of the following nouns.

3.3.2. Exclamatory sentence without interjection

From the grammatical level, there are a lot of similarities between English and French exclamatory sentences without interjections according to research. In addition to using exclamation words, French and English also express strong feelings with the help of different modes or structures, such as strong intonation, stress enhancement, subjunctive expression and so on. First, French declarative statement and English indicative statement usually present facts or definite contents, but in a certain context, they are followed by exclamation marks to reveal strong emotions such as happiness, atmosphere, anger, and praise, becoming exclamatory sentences. As following examples:

- English: You are kidding!
- French: Elle est sortie sans la permission du docteur!

Moreover, subjunctive in both English and French show the subjective will, such as wishes and blessings. Under normal circumstances, an exclamation mark is added at the end of a sentence to form an exclamatory sentence. It should be noted that English mostly adopts declarative word order, but French uses declarative or inverted word order in most cases. Take two sentences as examples:

- English: I wish I were 20 years younger!
- French: If only you had finished your work earlier!

In summary, it is very important to sum up the similarities and differences between English and French exclamatory sentences and make a scientific comparative analysis. Language learners can directly learn from the same parts of two languages to promote the positive transfer of English to French; however, for different parts, learners should classify them separately to prevent the interference caused by English negative transfer.

3.4. Imperative Sentence Pattern

Imperative sentence patterns in both English and French refer to the meaning of command, prohibition, request, suggestion, wish and so forth. There is a great commonality between English and French imperative sentences that we have to remember that the subject in a sentence does not need to be expressed evidently, and the predicate verb is directly used to make an imperative sentence. Nevertheless, there is a compulsory regulation in French, that is, only the first-person plural, the second-person singular and the second-person plural have imperative moods. Even though English does not emphasize this point too much, readers can find that English imperative sentences are also different in person and have different forms through the change of person. In this part, similarities and differences between the two languages in imperative sentence will be analyzed and appropriate and favorable learning methods of English imperative sentences in French will be explored, so as to promote the positive transfer between languages.

The research shows that English and French imperative sentences are most similar in the second-person usage, as long as the subject in a sentence is omitted. Look at the following example: Attends/Attendez!=Wait! Based on the production process of sentence, it is found that French omits the subject “tu” and “vous” respectively to form French imperative sentence, while English omits the subject “you” to form English imperative sentence.

Subsequently, about the first-person plural’s usage, the imperative mood of the first-person plural (nous) is the same as that in the second-person in French, that is, omitting the subject to make an imperative sentence. Linguists often distinguish between “let’s” and “let us” in English. According to research, the simplest and conventional explanation is that “let’s” includes the speaker himself, but “let us” does not include the speaker. Yet in French, the first-person imperative mood should include the speaker, so the corresponding imperative mood of the first-person in English is guided by “let” and its basic sentence pattern is: let’s+verb+other components. For example, Attendons Jacques!=Let’s wait for Jack! In conclusion, it can be seen that mastering English imperative sentence patterns plays a positive guiding part in learning French imperative. It should be noted that there are four verbs in French that have special inflections when they are used as imperatives (As shown in Table 1).

Table 1: Four Special Inflections of Verbs in Imperative Tense

	tu	vous	nous
avoir	aie	ayez	ayons
être	sois	soyez	soyons
savoir	sache	sachez	sachons
vouloir	veille	veuillez	veillons

4. Conclusion

Under the framework of third language acquisition and based on language transfer theory, this paper explores similarities and differences between English and French through the comparative analysis of four special sentence patterns, respectively are impersonal sentence pattern, interrogative sentence pattern, exclamatory sentence pattern and imperative sentence pattern. Therefore, the following conclusions could be drawn: in the first place, when expression forms of sentence patterns in English and French show the same meaning, there will be positive transfer at the syntactic level between two languages. In English, a lot of unique sentence structures have a positive impact on French learners who are proficient at mastering and understanding English. It must be admitted that positive transfer at the syntactic level is common and most common in verb phrases, sentence pattern features and frame structure. A large number of positive transfers at this syntactic level stem from learners’ thorough mastery of the target language’s sentence patterns. In the second place, for those language learners who take English as a second language and French as a third language, they can make use of the language basis of second language English to make a positive transfer in French learning, including the transfer of language knowledge and language skills. At the same time, in the process of acquisition, language learners should be good at using comparative analysis and enlarge the effective input of target language, in order to promote the positive transfer of English to French and effectively weaken the negative transfer of acquired language and avoid the interference between languages.

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