Classifications and Characteristics of Language Transfer

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Abstract: "Transfer" is originally a basic concept in psychology. In psychology, it refers to "the phenomenon of previous knowledge being extended to the area of new knowledge, i.e.the influence which the learning or remembering of one thing has on the learning and remembering of another thing". However, it was not until the 1950s and 1960s that the term became popular among linguists. In the thesis, the author gives a general explication about the classification and characteristics of language transfer.

Keywords: language transfer, definition, classification, characteristics

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1. DEFINITION OF LANGUAGE TRANSFER

In the study of applied linguistics, different researchers would like to define a term from their own perspectives. The term of transfer is one of these.

As Odlin put it in his book "a definition will be presented, along with a critique of that definition. However, before any observations are made out about what transfer is (or at least seems to be), some observations about what transfer is not are appropriate."(Odlin, 2001) He pointed out four conceptions of what transfer is not.

Firstly, he argued "transfer is not simply a consequence of habit formation." This discussion is quite different from the view of behaviorists (which will be explained in the following sub-chapters). They propose that language acquisition simply a "habit-fsounds in the learner's native language. Not surprisingly, then, the term interference continues to be widely used. Nevertheless, much of the influence of the native language (or some other previousut any behaviorist connotations, the notion of interference does seem applicable in the description of some aspects of second language performance, such as phonetic inaccuracies that resemble sounds in the learner's native language. Not surprisingly, then, the term interference continues to be widely used. Nevertheless, much of the influence of the native language (or some other previously learned language) can be very helpful, especially when the differences between two languages are relatively few. Thirdly, "transfer is not simply a falling back on the native languages." There are several problems with analyzing transfer as merely a falling back. On the one hand, it ignores the head start that speaker of some language have in coming to a new language. For example, Chinese English learners feel it more difficult than French English

learners in learning English, because French and English both belonged to Latin phylum. Therefore, the two English learners do not start together. On the other hand, sometimes there is no obvious distinction between native language and target language. Fourthly, "transfer is not always native language influence." In many books, native language influence is used as a synonym for transfer; however it is only a convenient fiction.When individuals know two languages, knowledge of both may affect their acquisition of a third. Most probably, knowledge of three or more languages can lead to three or more different kinds of source language influence, although pinning down the exact influences in multilingual situations is often hard.

Transfer is also defined positively from different views.

"Transfer" is originally a basic concept in psychology. In psychology, it refers to "the phenomenon of previous knowledge being extended to the area of new knowledge, i.e. The influence which the learning or remembering of one thing has on the learning and remembering of another thing." (Sajavaara, 1986) And it is this concept that forms the psychological basis for "language transfer."

The use of the psychological term "transfer" in language can be traced back over a century ago when Whitney first use the term to refer to cross-linguistic influence. However, it was not until the 1950s and 1960s that the term became popular among linguists. Transfer has been used by educational psychologists and educators to describe the use of the past knowledge or experience in new situations. In FLL, transfer refers to the effect of one language, usually the NL (native language), on the learning of another, usually the FL (foreign language). This is also a common strategy employed by the FL learners. A good many linguists, from their own respect of study, have provided various definitions for the term. There are in all over 300 definitions.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) thought transfer as "the use of previous linguistic or prior skills to assist comprehension or production."

2. CLASSIFICATION OF LANGUAGE TRANSFER

According to definition of language transfer, there exist the similarities and differences between the native language and the target language. The previously acquired language has an influence on the target language, that is, language transfer will appear. Different scholars may have their different definition of language transfer, and also different classifications. And as time goes by, the classification is on the change. In the following part, the author makes a detailed classification of language transfer from different perspectives.

At first, language transfer was equaled with "interference". Especially when Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis was popular in 1960s, linguists believed that it's first language transfer that served as "interference" in the study of a foreign/second language. Later, when CAH was declining, people realized that language transfer also could help language study in some

respect, thus divided language transfer into two types: positive and negative. And some offered three types: positive, negative and zero transfer.

Positive transfer is also known as facilitation. It is transfer that helps or facilitates language learning in another later situation, and may occur when both the native language and the target language have the same form. Negative transfer, also known as interference, is one that interferes with language learning in another later situation. Specifically, it refers to the use of native language patterns or rule which leads to an error or inappropriate form in the target language. Zero transfer refers to those situations that no transfer occurs.

This classification of transfer is just a general classification. Next the author would like to list some more detailed classifications of language transfer.

2.1 Underproduction

Learners may produce very few or no examples of a target language structure. Often the examples learners produce result in comparatively few errors, but if the structure is more infrequent than it is in the language of native speakers, the infrequency constitutes a divergence from target language norms. There is good evidence for one form of underproduction related to language distance: avoidance. If learners sense that particular structures in the target language are very different from counterparts in the native language, they may try to avoid using those structures. For example, Schachter (1974) found that Chinese and Japanese students of ESL tended to use fewer relative clauses than did students whose languages have relative clause structures more like those of English.

2.2 Overproduction

Overproduction is sometimes simply a consequence of underproduction. For example, in an effort to avoid relative clauses, Chinese students may violate norms of written prose in English by writing too many simple sentences. Overproduction can also arise for other reasons, however. For example, the use of apologies appears to be more frequent in American English than in Chinese, and English speakers learning Chinese appear to follow the norms of their native language in making apologies.

2.3 Production errors

In speech and writing there are three types of errors especially likely to arise from similarities and differences in the native and target languages: (1) substitutions, (2) calques, and (3) alterations of structures. Substitutions involve a use of native language forms in the target language. Calques are errors that reflect very closely a native language structure. And when there is no obvious corresponding between the native and target languages, alterations of structures may occur.

2.4 Misinterpretation

Native language structures can influence the interpretation of target language messages, and sometimes that influence leads to learners inferring something very different from what speakers of the target language would infer. Variant interpretations can arise from misperceptions of target language sounds that become categorized in terms of native language phonology.

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF LANGUAGE TRANSFER

In light of the observations on the language transfer phenomena, some characteristics of language transfer can be summarized as follows:

1) Language transfer is inevitable in that no one can escape from it and it affects all the linguistic subsystems. Language transfer, whether regarded as an interfering old habit or the application of Universal Grammar through Language Acquisition Device, plays a central role in foreign language study. The influence is extensive and persistent, and to get rid of language transfer is utterly impossible. The only reasonable way to tackle it is to recognize, to study and to make best use of it rather than reject it. After all, you cannot throw away the apple because of the core.

2) Language transfer is unstable. It varies from time to time, from individual to individual and from language to language. This results from the fact that both the internal factors such as age, language aptitude, motivation or linguistic awareness, and external factors such as social context or language distance are in a state of constant change.

3) Language transfer has dual functions, positive and negative. The native language knowledge, when appropriately used, will facilitate foreign language study, but in most cases, negative transfer seems prevalent. Some transfer is easier to overcome than others and some transfer is so stubborn that it seems impossible to overcome. For example, the syntactic transfer such as the omission of the plural from "-s" is much easier to be corrected by certain amount of practices than the pragmatic transfer of thinking and behaving in a habitual Chinese way. The phonetic transfer is the most difficult to overcome. The "foreign accent"of many immigrants living in the foreign country for years serves as a strong proof.

4) The mechanism of language transfer is very complicated. There seldom exists pure positive or negative transfer in foreign language learning. In most cases they merge into one another, forming a cross cause-effect association. Specific conditions are the chief reason deciding the ratio of positive to negative transfer. We would not be able to fully exploit its positive side unless we pursue a profound study in language comparison and mechanism of transfer.

5) The depth of transfer is varied. The more abstract the concerned concept is, the deeper the transfer is, and the more difficult it is to overcome its negative influence. On the other hand, the

more concrete the concerned concept is, the shallower the transfer is, and the less difficulty it causes. The transfer that lies deep in the thinking mode and habit is almost impossible to be eliminated thoroughly.

6) Usually the transfer of native language takes place unconsciously in an automatic or semiautomatic way. However, consciousness can intervene in the process, which means that, one is able to consciously avoid negative transfer and at the same time promote positive transfer if he has realized its mechanism.

The recognition of the characteristics of the transfer of native language in foreign language learning is a prerequisite for making use of it. The ultimate goal is to incorporate the features in the teaching practice. The complete observation of the transfer phenomenon helps foreign language learners to be more careful in the learning process, to make best use of positive transfer and to reduce the native language interference.

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