

The Influence of Conceptual Transfer in English Academic Writing: The Evidence from the Use of Prepositions in English Writing by Chinese Students

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Abstract: English academic writing is becoming more and more important nowadays. However, due to the obvious difference between Chinese and English, people are often affected by the influence of conceptual transfer during the process of second language acquisition. This corpus-based study aims to study cross-linguistic conceptual influence (positive or negative) in Chinese undergraduates' use of prepositions in academic writing. The author has built up a corpus from English-majored undergraduates' academic writing tasks (ZSAC), comparing it to the data from Baseline (CAEC) via Sketch Engine Software to find evidence of cross-linguistic conceptual influence in using prepositions. This study can provide a conceptual framework for second language learners to study function words such as prepositions in a foreign language context and lays a certain theoretical foundation for subsequent research on language transfer. In terms of research methodology, its authentic corpus data and its methodology are conducive to the development of further bilingual researches.

Keywords: Conceptual transfer, English prepositions, Chinese academic writings, Image Schema Theory, Sketch Engine Software

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Nowadays, an increasing number of Chinese undergraduates have studied for master's degree at British universities. Speaking English is an essential skill for international students and English academic writing is becoming more and more important. However, due to the obvious different language systems, culture backgrounds and thinking modes between Chinese and English, undergraduates are often affected by the linguistic modes during the processing of second language. This kind of influence also occurs in academic writings, especially lead to errors made by the usage of prepositions. Thus, elaborating and exploring the phenomenon of cross-linguistic conceptual influences is crucial for putting forward some suggestions on English preposition teaching and learning.

1.2. Literature review

1.2.1. Language transfer and conceptual transfer

Language transfer focuses more on the influences between two or more languages which can be categorized into positive influence and negative influence. It refers to the effects of the similarities and differences between the target language and other acquired languages that have been studied previously or incompletely [1]. Many scholars tried to find out the deep mechanism to examine the reason why transfer takes place during this process. Existing studies may overlap with each other and these studies can be categorized into three main types: linguistic transfer, conceptual transfer and semantic transfer. Most of the early scholars focus on the issue of linguistic transfer, which have many different topics including morphological, lexical, phonological, syntactic or phonetic [2]. Some researches [3] dealt with the acquisition of L2 phonemes and tones. However, language transfer not only includes the influence of phonology, vocabulary, grammar and semantics, but also involves non-linguistic factors such as thinking patterns, cultural traditions and social history [4].

Understanding of conceptual transfer had be divided into 3 different levels: an observation, hypothesis and approach. According to Jarvis [5], it focuses more on the influence of cognition, especially the influence of cognitive patterns acquired in the target language on the receptive or productive use of another. During this process, L2 learners interact with each other through both L1 thinking mode and L2 thinking mode [2]. In a formal way, conceptual transfer refers to an approach that scholars may used in researches and it shows the study of cross-linguistic influence through empirical and theoretical developments in cognitive linguistics in recent years while also drawing on cognitive psychology. According to Lakoff [6], culture and cognition are two sides of the same coin. This means that when we discuss conceptual structures, it is essential to depend on our knowledge-based perspective to the concepts of linguistic structures and connect them together. Therefore, when studying conceptual structures we should know that it is essential to consider "concepts" as psychological representations such as auditory, visual and perceptual details [7].

1.2.2. The conceptual transfer between Chinese and English

In many previous studies, some scholars have utilized many methods to study this issue. Some scholars draw attention to the image schema from the perspective of “spatial”. According to Gibbs and Colston, the definition of image schema is “dynamic analog representations of spatial relations and movements in space” [8]. In English, the basic concept underlying “at” means “a specific position in space.” (see Figure 1). The figure is a representation of the TR (trajectory), represented by a circular shadow, and a parallelogram image schema represents the LM (landmark). Thus we can see static spatial relationship between them [9].

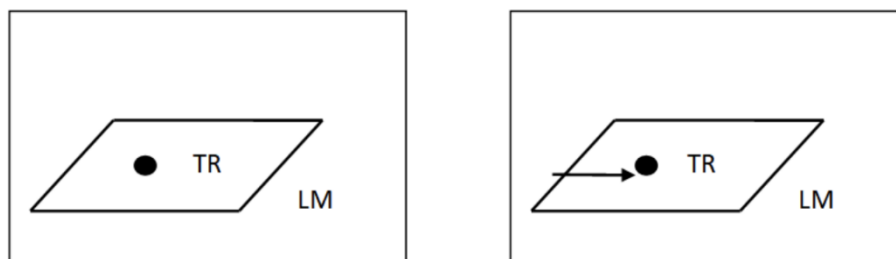


Figure 1: Image schema for AT

In English, the use of the preposition “at” is consistent with the Chinese meanings “朝 (towards)”, “向 (towards)” and “面对 (face)” in semantic condition. As they share the same meaning of “facing or towards a certain direction” [9], in Figure 1 above (the arrow there indicates a motion picture pattern) it is represented by a dynamic image schema. In English, the spatial relationship expressed by “at” is quite similar to the Chinese expression when “at” is used with words like “shout”, “mad”, “smile” and other verbs and other adjectives appear together to form a collocation when the spatial relationship expressed is very similar [9]. Therefore, because the conceptual meanings can correspond between them, they are likely to lead to positive conceptual transfer.

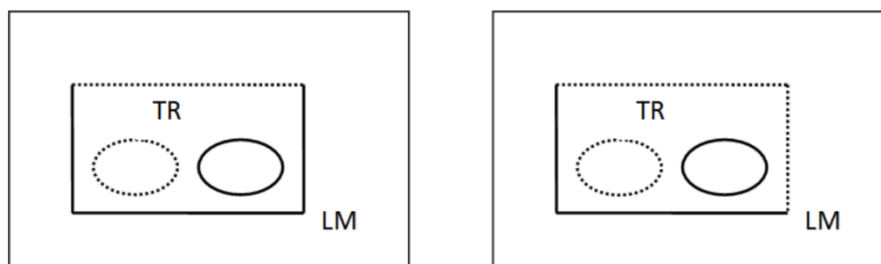


Figure 2: Image schema on “IN”

These figures above illustrate that Chinese preposition “里(in)” and the English preposition “in” have both conceptual similarities and discrepancies in concept. Also, the Chinese “里(in)” tends to show that the TR there is completely within LM, whether the LM is open or closed and whether the TR is in motion or stationary. From the figure above, it can be seen that the preposition in English “in” denotes the conception of “TR is encircled or partially encircled by other objects” regardless of whether the TR is in motion or stationary. It is clear that the only difference between Chinese preposition “里(in)” and English preposition “in” by comparison is whether TR is completely surrounded. As a result, the temporal, spatial or psychological concepts represented by the Chinese “里 (in)” is narrower than the concept represented by the English preposition “in”. For instance, Chinese tend to choose the preposition “on” instead of “in” to express that there are birds in the tree. Because of Chinese thinking modes, when we expressed with the preposition “in” it means that the bird will be inside the trunk of the tree. So this kind of difference may lead to negative conceptual transfer.

1.2.3. The influence of conceptual transfer on academic performance/writing

Some studies also focus on this issue which have influenced the methodology of this research. Nghi and Phuc [10] have built up a corpus aimed to study the usage frequencies of English preposition in terms of conceptual transfer which is from third -year English majors’ academic writing papers (HSAC). The writings are from their final assignments during 2019 to 2020 academic year. The corpus research for different types of errors they made in their academic writings. Through Sketch Engine software, these scholars used consistent output to determine the frequency of English prepositions. The results of the study showed that preposition lexemes and their collocations are negatively correlated with some linguistic features of Vietnamese. Based on the findings, they provided a conceptual framework for the educating and studying of prepositions and other function words.

In the present study, and based on Jarvis’s [2] and Odlin’s [11] frameworks, I develop the framework about the English prepositional usages of Chinese students of English from perspective

of language transfer (Figure 3) to predict the influence of conceptual transfer between these two languages that used by the majority of people worldwide.

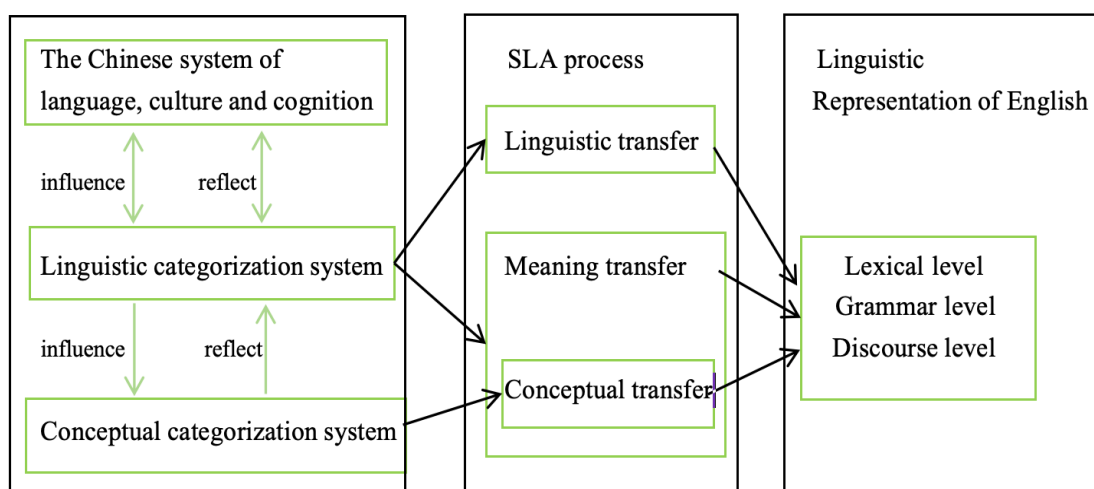


Figure 3: Conceptual transfer between Chinese and English

Conceptual transfer has developed rapidly and this issue gains numerous different topics which draws many scholars' attention worldwide. However, there are very few studies on the conceptual transfer of Chinese EFL learners' linguistic output from the perspective of prepositions. Therefore, using prepositions to investigate the influence of cross-linguistic influence could provide more evidences on the role of conceptual transfer in SLA, and can provide more specific advice for SLA for English learners and teachers in China.

In order to test the framework in Figure 1 and examine the existence of the influence of conceptual transfer in writing performance for Chinese-English learners, we will compare the usage of prepositions IN; ON; AT between Chinese and English based on two corpora (ZSAC and CAEC) and two research questions will be solved in this study.

1.3. Research question and predictions

1.3.1. Questions

- (1) Is cross-linguistic conceptual influence (positive or negative) existing in academic writings of undergraduates in China?
- (2) If yes, how are they manifested?

1.3.2. Predictions

- (1) There is cross-linguistic conceptual influence (positive or negative) exists in academic writings of Chinese undergraduates.
- (2) They are mainly manifest when students use preposition of "at; in; on" in their academic writings.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The corpus, Zhejiang Gongshang University (ZJGSU) Student Academic Corpus (ZSAC) data will be collected from 65 ZJGSU English majored undergraduates. All of these students use Chinese as

their mother language and learn English as their second language. These undergraduates' age range is from 18~22 who had 8 to 10 years English learning experience.

2.2. Material

The corpus will collect 260 academic writings from participants' final submission of final academic papers for courses (e.g. History of the development of the English language; history of Western civilization). The corpus is expected to collect more than 2,000,000 words involving English prepositions in the corpus. And this study will focus on the most high-frequency English prepositions, "at; in; on" not only because they have the mainly highest frequency in writings [12] but also there is evidence to prove that these three prepositions have the possibility of leading to conceptual transfer during the processing of English writing based on the Image Schema Theory [9]. Based on Gibbs and Colston [8] we mentioned above, we chose "at" as the preposition to examine conceptual transfer phenomenon's existence.

For this study, the Cambridge Academic English Corpus (CAEC) will be chosen as the comparative baseline. The CAEC is a corpus of academic English consisting of text samples from undergraduates and postgraduates at a number of universities in the United States and the United Kingdom. The academic English writing corpus material includes research articles, university lectures, presentations, essays, seminars, and university textbooks. They include almost all the topics in ZSAC, and it is a great choice to use it to test the characteristics of conceptual transfer of Chinese students during their second language processing compared to the data of native speakers. The corpus CAEC includes 154,457 documents, 1,951,384 paragraphs, 4,578,508 sentences, 85,683,246 words and 100,190,245 tokens in total [10].

After collecting writings, I will interview 10 students randomly from those 65 undergraduate participants in order to observe their thinking processes and preposition using habits and potential problems during writing. the conversation will be recorded with some machine and transcribe them into words for further analysis. Here are some examples of questions in the interview:

- (1) Did you use the preposition IN in your writing? If used, in which sentences and the meaning of preposition IN in these sentences?
- (2) Why you used IN in these sentences?
- (3) Which of the following pictures do you think can describe IN perfectly?

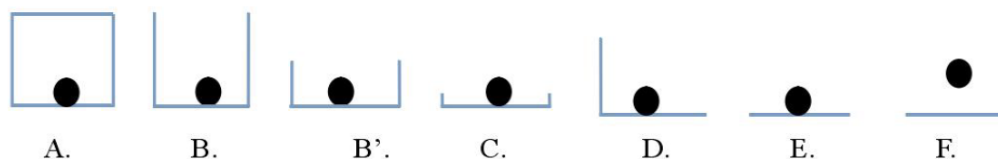


Figure 4: Description of IN

2.3. Procedure

Firstly, I will calculate the normalized frequencies for every 1,000 words of prepositions in both ZSAC and CAEC via Sketch Engine Software. Then, the 10 students who participant in the study will be called into a room on a rotating basis and they are expected to answer those questions I have mentioned above and describe their thought process of choosing prepositions in writing. Their answers will be recorded.

2.4. Data analysis

I will list their normalized frequencies of these three prepositions, “at; in; on” from ZSAC and CAEC and then compare the similarities and differences between their rates. Then, analysis their thinking modes via the undergraduates’ interview records.

3. Conclusion

3.1. Discussion

There is cross-linguistic conceptual influence (positive and negative) exists in academic writing for Chinese undergraduates. According to previous study [10], if the normalized frequencies from ZSAC is quite similar to the data from CAEC, it implies a positive transfer of the preposition during second language acquisition. However, if the data from ZSAC is quite different from the data from CAEC, it implies a positive transfer of the preposition during second language acquisition.

1. The preposition AT will remained at the similar rates in both corpora. It means that undergraduates are not likely to make errors about the usage of AT as conceptual presentations for the meaning of AT had reached the level of native speakers. Also according to the students' responses in the interviews, they think that the preposition AT is not very likely to make mistakes in English writing because of its identity with Chinese prepositions in their mode of thinking.

2. Besides, the preposition IN and ON will remained at quite different rates between both corpora. It means that undergraduates may get confused when they search for appropriate English prepositions which leads to negative transfer in academic writing. Also according to the students' responses in the interviews, they think that the preposition IN and ON is very likely to make mistakes in English writing because of their different concepts between the Chinese and English.

3.2. Implication

Firstly, this study delves into the development of theory on the conceptual transfer under the context of Chinese and lays a certain theoretical foundation for subsequent research on language transfer. Secondly, this study attempts to provide more evidence of conceptual transfer for prepositions, which is conducive to providing suggestions for university teachers' teaching as well as undergraduates' academic English writing. Third, in terms of research methodology, its authentic corpus data and its methodology are conducive to the development of bilingual research.

3.3. Limitation and further study

There still exist some limitations during the study process.

1. This study only pays attention to the use of 3 high-frequency English prepositions. In order to collect data expediently, peripheral situations or low-frequency prepositions were left out.

2. This study only focuses on the word level but the conceptual transfer at the textual and grammatical levels has been left out which is also important.

3. The corpus of writing samples are confined to the Zhejiang Gongshang University. There are only 260 writings chosen to conduct the data analysis, which is relatively small for conceptual transfer study. Although it is an outstanding university, it still can not represent all Chinese undergraduates.

Therefore, further research needs to be more comprehensively considered and needs to include the study of low-frequency or marginal prepositions in order to provide stronger and more comprehensive and persuasive evidence for the existence of conceptual transfer. And further study will pay more attention on lexical and grammatical levels from the perspective of linguistic issue.

Also, a large scope of undergraduates and their academic writings can be observed among other universities to set up a large corpus. In this way, regional conceptual transfer can be obtained and available to other scholars.

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