

Structural differences and similarities between English and Standard Mandarin

- and their effects on L2 learning

Current Topics in English Linguistics E22
Sille Haley Bach Jensen

Introduction

- English and Chinese are the two most widely spoken languages in the world as of 2023. (Statista Research Department 2022),
- Germanic vs Sinitic
- English has more L2 speakers, whereas Chinese has more L1 speakers. (Matthiessen 2015, 3).
- Why this topic?
 - Chinese major, specifically didactics so relates to both major and minor

Word order

- SVO word order
 - Basic sentences like 1.1 the same in both English and Chinese (Li 2020, 1128).
- The same in sentences with a ditransitive verb as well like 1.2, given that the verb carries a meaning of giving/transferring smth (Li 2020, 1129).

1.1	I	like	hotpot
	S	V	O
	Wǒ	xǐhuān	huǒguō
	我	喜欢	火锅
	S	V	O

1.2	I	gave	you	a book
	S	V	IO	DO
	Wǒ	gěile	nǐ	yī běn shū
	我	给了	你	一本书
	S	V	IO	DO

Word Order cont.

- For example, the sentence 1.4 does not keep the same order translated into proper Chinese (Li 2020, 1130).
- Verbs as prepositions (coverbs) (Ramsey 1989, 79).

1.4	The mother	makes	the child	food
	S	V	IO	DO
	妈妈	给孩子	做	饭
	S	IO	V	DO

Word order cont.

- When using time-adverbials, you can either create a sentence like in English (1.5.1) or place the time after the subject (1.5.2) (ChineseGrammarWiki 2023).

1.5.1

Today I want to go see a movie

Time S MV V V O

今天 我 想 去 看 电影

Time S MV V V O

1.5.2

Today I want to go see a movie

Time S MV V V O

我 今天 想 去 看 电影

S Time MV V V O

Topic-Comment

- Even though SVO is the standard, Topic-Comment sentences are very common. (Ramsey 1989, 66, 82).

Standard SVO:

2.1	wǒ	kànguò	zhège diànyǐng
	我	看过	这个电影
	S	V	O
	I	have seen	this movie (before)

Topic Comment

2.2	zhège diànyǐng	wǒ	kànguò
	这个电影	我	看过
	O	S	V
	this movie	I	have seen (before)

Object-fronting (把-construction)

- Object-fronting is sometimes necessary since the verb-modifiers cannot be separated from the verb in Chinese, making 2.3 incorrect. (ChineseGrammarWiki 2023)
- To make up for this the preposition 把 is used to front the object, allowing the verb + modifier to stay together.
- Does technically exist in English but very uncommon ie 'I thee wed' (HandWiki 2022).

2.3

fàng	diànnǎo	zài bāo lǐ
*放	电脑	在包里
V	O	VM
Put	the computer	in the bag

2.4

Bǎ diànnǎo	fàng	zài bāo lǐ
把电脑	放	在包里
O	V	VM
*The computer	put	in the bag

Conjugation/Tenses

- No verb tenses in Chinese.
- Uses context and/or aspect, time adverbials and complements etc instead to tell time/manner.

3.1

Wǒ	kàn	wán	le	yī	běn	shū
我	看	完	了	一	本	书
			completed		Measure	
I	To read	To be over	action	one	word for	book
			marker		books etc.	

(Ramsey 1989, 76).

Measure Words

- All nouns in Chinese have a fitting measure word. (Ramsey 1989, 68).
- Also present in English i.e. 'sheets of' or 'bottle of' but a lot of Chinese measure words are untranslatable.

4.1

liǎng

zhāng

zhǐ

两

张

纸

*Two

sheets

paper

4.3

sì

tiáo

shé

四

条

蛇

*four

snake

Pro-drop

- Pronouns can be dropped in Chinese, given that the context is known (Huang 1989, 185-186);
- Sometimes happens in English but only in spoken language i.e. 'Finished?' (Wagner 2016, 1).

5.2

chī wánle	ma
吃完了	吗
Finished (eating)	question marker

Articles 'a/an' and 'the'

- Articles 'a/an' and 'the' do not exist in Chinese (Snape 2009, 36).
- The semantics of 苹果 is dependent on context, could be either the apple, apples, or an apple.
- It is possible to express 'one' of something, which in many cases would be similar in meaning to 'a/an'

6.1

wǒ	xiǎng	chī	píngguǒ
我	想	吃	苹果
*I	to want	to eat	apple

wǒ	yǒu	yī ge didi
我	有	一个弟弟
I	to have	one (mv) younger brother

UG, Language Learning Strategies and Interlanguage

- UG in L2 learning
 - Debatable whether it is actually utilised
 - Three different theories; full-access hypothesis, full-transfer/full-access hypothesis and no-access hypothesis. (Montrul 2014, 81-82)
- Language learning strategies in L2 learning
 - LLS are conscious/partially conscious, purposeful efforts to meet a self-chosen goal in relation to learning a language. (Oxford 2018, 82)
- Interlanguage
 - The interlanguage hypothesis details the idea of an interlanguage that happens while you're learning a new language - a sort of middle-language that mixes your L1/L2s with your new L2 and slowly develops until your language is near identical to your target L2. (Montrul 2014, 78-79).
 - In this we see language transfer - both negative and positive. (Amin 2017, 32-33).
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Language Proximity

- Language proximity details how much two languages have in common in terms of syntax, structure, origin, transparency etc (Booth, Clenton and Van Herwegen 2018, 54).
- Semantic processing speed affected by larger language proximities (Booth, Clenton and Van Herwegen 2018, 63).
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Motivation, Investment, and Identity

- Motivation might be the most important factor when it comes to language learning
- Most of the aspects of LLS requires motivation and active participation from the learner (Adams 2006, 261).
- Investment and identity also plays a role, a student could be highly motivated but if the teaching environment isn't favourable, i.e. if the classroom allows racism etc, this could affect their learning outcome (Darvin and Norton 2015, 37).
- Language learning in itself can also be seen as a form of identity formation (Jin 2014, 59).

Immersion

- Traditionally considered a highly advantageous way of learning a new language (Kinging 2017, 126).
 - Shows increase in motivation and confidence (Adams 2006, 259-260).
- Speaking with experts helps develop a more correct interlanguage (Isabelli-García 2006, 232).
- Similar to how L1s are acquired (Jin 2014, 57).
- Motivation is still key here (Isabelli-García 2006, 231).

Discussion and Conclusion

- Learning an L2 is a complex affair with many variables
- Language proximity does affect the ease of L2 learning, so the structural differences likely does have an effect of L2
- However, especially motivation and the right environment is key when it comes to learning a new language.
- Cultural differences might also affect learning i.e. 上 means on top/up, but also last, whereas 下 means under/down but also next.
 - different way of thinking might be difficult to adhere to

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