

The Interpretation of English Reflexives and Pronouns by Adult Speakers of Chinese: An analysis of language transfers *

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Abstract: The study reports the L2 acquisition of English reflexives and pronouns between native English speakers and adult Chinese speakers of L2 English. It is found that Chinese pronouns are quite similar with English, and Chinese and English pronouns can be either long-distantly binding or referred to others except for the local domain in complex sentences. However, Chinese reflexives are not the same as English reflexives. Chinese reflexives have two types, monomorphemic *ziji* and polymorphemic *ta ziji*, and one of the goals on the study is to test whether Chinese speakers of L2 English will domain the local binding in the complex sentences of English reflexives *himself/herself*. Finally, the results of the interpretation of English pronouns and reflexives show that L1 transfer cannot totally account for the interpretation of sentences. Two theories thus called Full Transfer/Full Access (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1994; 1996) and Partial Access (Tsimplici & Roussou, 1991) probably can account for the results of the present study.

Keywords: Binding Principles, pronouns, reflexives, language transfer, second language acquisition

1. Properties of pronouns and reflexives in Chinese and English

In this section, I briefly introduce the basic backgrounds of Chinese pronouns/reflexives as well as English pronouns/reflexives, respectively.

1.1 Pronouns in Chinese

Pronouns in Chinese syntactically behave like their English counterparts. Chinese pronouns can replace proper nouns, as shown in (1a). According to Binding Principle B (Chomsky, 1981), a pronoun must be free in its governing domain, as shown in (1b).

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- (1) a. Zhang San_i ai Li Si / ta.
 Zhang San love a person's name / her
 'Zhang San loves Li Si / her.'
- b. Zhang San_i zhidao Li Si_j piping ta/*j/k.
 Zhang San know Li Si criticize him
 'Zhang San knows that Li Si criticizes him.'

In (1b), *ta* can refer to *Zhang San* (i) or someone else in the context (k). But *ta* cannot refer to *Li Si* (j) because it must be free in the local clause headed by the verb *piping* (criticize). Additionally, Mandarin Chinese is not an inflectional language, so Mandarin Chinese does not have case markers (Li and Thompson, 1989). The same personal pronoun is used to represent both the subject and the object.

1.2 Reflexives in Chinese

Reflexives in Chinese can either be morphologically complex/polymorphemic or morphologically simple/monomorphemic (Kong, 2009). *ta ziji* is a polymorphemic anaphor and *ziji* is a monomorphemic anaphor. According to Huang et al (2009), the behavior of the Chinese compound reflexive, *ta ziji*, is quite similar to the English reflexive.

- (2) Zhang San_i zhidao Li Si_j piping ta ziji*_{ij}.
 Zhang San know Li Si criticize he -self
 'Zhang San knows that Li Si criticizes himself.'

ta ziji in (2) can only refer to *Li Si*(i) but not *Zhang San*(i) for the reason that Binding Principle A (Chomsky, 1981) states that reflexives must be locally bound. Therefore, *Zhang San*(i) cannot bind *ta ziji* because it is in the upper clause. The monomorphemic anaphor, *ziji*, on the other hand, can be bound locally or long-distantly (Huang et. al., 2009). This is illustrated in (3a):

- (3) a. Zhang San_i zhidao Li Si_j piping ziji_{ij}.
 Zhang San know Li Si criticize self.
 'Zhang San knows that Li Si criticizes himself.'
- b. Zhang San ziji keyi chifan.
 Zhang san self can eat.rice
 'Zhang San himself can eat.'

ziji can be bound locally by *Li Si*(j) or long-distantly by *Zhang San*(i). Besides, the monomorphemic anaphor *ziji* can play an intensifying role, locating at a non-argumentation position, as shown in (3b). Yet, monomorphemic anaphor *ziji* is not the main issue in this study

1.3 Pronouns in English

Pronouns are a closed class of words (Carter & McCarthy, 2006) that are one of the most commonly seen in the English language (Balogh, 2003). English pronouns, like their

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Chinese counterparts, must be free in their governing domain. They can be bound, however, by a constituent in a different clause, as illustrated in (4a) and (4b):

- (4) a. Wendy_i hates her_{*ijj}.
b. Betty_i knows that Wendy_j hates her_{i/*jk}.

In (4a) and (4b), *her*(i) cannot refer to *Wendy*(j) of the same clause. However, *her* can refer to others out of the sentence in (4a), or it can refer to *Betty* of the upper clause within the sentence in (4b) as its antecedent. The syntactic behavior of English pronouns is similar to that of Chinese pronouns.

1.4 Reflexives in English

Binding Principle A points out that an anaphor must be bound within its governing domain; that is, it must take a local subject as its antecedent. English is no exception, as exemplified in (5a) and 5(b):

- (5) a. Oliver_i hit himself_i.
b. Oliver_i thought that Wilson_j hit himself_{*ijj}.
c. * Oliver hates self./ * Oliver thought that Wilson hates self.

In (5a), the English reflexive *himself* must refer to the subject *Oliver* of the same clause; similarly, in (5b), the English reflexive *himself* in (5b) must be bound by *Wilson* of the same clause. The subject *Oliver* of the upper clause cannot be its antecedent. However, English bare reflexive *self* syntactically differs from Chinese *ziji* in that it cannot be an anaphor in (5c), contra to (3a).

1.5 Summary

To sum up, English pronouns and Chinese pronouns are similar in the way that they must be free in their governing domain. The English reflexives are very similar to the Chinese polymorphemic/complex reflexives, allowing local anaphors only. What differentiates the two languages is the monomorphemic/simple reflexive, which exists in Chinese but not in English. Chinese complex reflexives allow local and long-distance antecedents. The present study is organised as follows: Section 2 briefly reviews three prior studies concerning the acquisitions of pronouns and reflexives in English, Chinese/Cantonese. Section 3 demonstrates my experiments on second language acquisition on pronouns and reflexives in English and Chinese. Finally, I discuss the study.

2. Previous studies

According to the previous studies on the Second Language Acquisition (SLA), English pronouns and reflexives have been intensively studied. In the following section, I briefly review three studies which greatly concern about Chinese speakers of L2 English.

2.1 Yip and Tang (1998)

Yip and Tang (1998) report in details on the interpretations of English reflexively

him/herself by the Cantonese learners of English based on the transfer hypothesis, specially Positive Transfer Hypothesis. The study, based on the three types of sentence (finite clauses, non-finite clauses and single-clause dative constructions. posited two problematic issues: (I) Cantonese speakers did not consistently treat *keoizigei* ‘him/herself’ as a local anaphoric; (ii) many advanced Cantonese speakers of L2 English, acquiring local binding of English reflexives, allowed *keoizigei* to bind a long-distance antecedent. Additionally, much advanced learners were able to treat the binding properties of L2 as an independent system, without any transfer from their native speakers. Moreover, this study provides Logical Form to account for the findings. Yip and Tang also pointed out that the local binding of English reflexively is readily learnable while others like subject orientation are less so, compared to Yuan (1998). However, Yip and Tang provided specific explanations to the findings, but they did not test English pronouns and Cantonese pronouns in order to prove the Positive Transfer Hypothesis.

2.2 Yuan (1997)

Yuan (1997) only investigates the acquisition of Chinese reflexive *ziji* by English and Japanese learners. Unlike English reflexive, Chinese *ziji* and Japanese *jibun* allow a long-distance antecedent as well as a local one. The observations thus showed that it is easier for Japanese learners than for English learners in acquiring the literature no-distance binding of Chinese *ziji*. Additionally, it is asymmetry in finite and nonfinite clauses in English speakers’ grammars of Chinese. Yuan also points out that both English and Japanese learners have trouble in acquiring subject orientation of Chinese *ziji* and cannot find out the implication relationship between long-distance and subject orientation. There are two examples of the null subject and the null objects of pronouns to be illustrated below:

(6) Wo wen ta Li Ming_t jintian lai bu lai, ta shuo _{ei} yiding hui lai.
I ask him Li Ming today come not come he say certainly will come
‘* I ask him whether Li Ming will come or not, he says _e will certainly come.’

(7) Zhang San shuo [_e bu renshi _e].
Zhang San say not know
‘* Zhang San said _e didn’t know _e.’/‘Zhang San said (he) didn’t know (him).’

The findings have shown the more advanced groups show that they successfully acquire the non-null subjects in English. Besides to null subjects, in the structures of null objects, the results of Chinese learners of L2 English compare to the results of the group native speakers with great gaps, meaning that Chinese learners of L2 English do not successfully acquire that English does not allow null objects either. In brief, in acquiring the long-distance properties of Chinese *ziji*, Japanese speakers are better than English learners since the properties of Japanese *jibun* are parallel to those of Chinese *ziji*. Although Yuan

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investigated both English and Japanese learners on Chinese bare reflexive *ziji* in various syntactic structures, he did not further investigate whether both English and Japanese learners can well acquire Chinese disyllabic reflexive *ta ziji* ‘him/herself’.

2.3 Kong (2005, 2009)

Kong (2005, 2009) reports that the L2 learners performed native-like in acquiring the locality of complex reflexive *ta ziji* ‘him/herself’ whereas they could acquire locality condition of bare reflexive *ziji* ‘self’. Two points designed in Kong’s study: one is to test Yuan’s hypothesis that Chinese speakers have less trouble unlearning null subjects than null objects based on the assumption that the recognition of S-V Agreement features triggers their unlearning of null subjects while transfer of L1 [+ topic-drop] property causes them problems in unlearning null subjects. The other is to include some syntactic items. For example, non-subject topics in clause initial position which is described and concluded in the section 6, Discussion part. As for native speakers, monosyllabic *ziji* can be locally and long-distantly bound. According to his results of experiments, Kong concludes that the divergence may be an effect of the inaccessibility of some critical period-associated functional features (Hawkins & Chan, 1997), and what appears to be a parameter resetting scenario is an adjustment of f L2 setting to match with the L1 setting. Therefore, he further claims that the monomorphemic *ziji* may have been misanalysed as pronouns in English.

2.4 Interim summary

To sum up, these three studies put much attention on acquisitions of English reflexives by L1 Chinese speakers, and provide as many sentence types as possible to investigate how Chinese speakers as L2 English acquire English reflexives. Besides three prior studies, there are also many studies to test the acquisitions of binding English reflexives for native speakers of Chinese, and also to study the acquisitions of non-null subjects and objects languages, like English language, of Chinese speaker, which Chinese is the null subjects and objects language. However, there are fewer studies to the acquisitions on binding of English pronouns. Therefore, I am going to focus on the studies of binding on English reflexives and pronouns to test Chinese learners as L2 English whether to acquire the binding principles or not.

There are two research questions that I am going to discuss in the current study: one is that will L1 be a factor in the acquisition of English reflexives and pronouns; the other one is that will advanced learners perform like native speakers in the interpretation of English reflexives and pronouns. The results of my experiments are shown as follows. Based on the results, this study proposes the language transfers (positive/negative transfer) to account for my observations.

3. Statistical analysis of the survey

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Table 2 Types of Sentences and Examples in the Comprehension Test

| | |
|---|---|
| Type 1: him/her in finite clauses | Tom says that Peter hates him. |
| Type 2: him/her in infinite clauses | Ryan begs Marco to forgive him. |
| Type 3: him/her in dative clauses | Jeff asked Louis a question about him. |
| Type 4: him/herself in finite clauses | Lisa knows that Claire likes herself. |
| Type 5: him/herself in infinite clauses | Wendy asked Grace not to criticize herself too often. |
| Type 6: him/herself in dative clauses | Fiona sent Jenny a book about herself. |

Learners' performance was calculated individually and as a subgroup for their interpretation of the pronouns and reflexives concerned. Average scores were then calculated.

3.3 Procedure

The participants took the comprehension test separately. The three experimental groups took the test in class during a regular class period. Participants were stimulated not to discuss or check answers with each other. The test was not timed. Participants in control group took the test separately.

3.4 Results

3.4.1 *him/her* in finite clauses

Table 3 shows that all groups performed native-like in accepting the non-local binder for the pronoun (*him/her*) than local antecedents. All groups scored above 85%. They all disallow the pronouns (*him/her*) to be locally bound. It indicates that the property of English pronoun is quite similar to Chinese pronoun, and it shows that learners have no problems in acquiring English pronouns in finite clauses.

Table 3 The Results of *him/her* in Finite Clauses

| | Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 3 | Group 4 |
|---------------------------|---------|-----------|---------|-----------|
| Him/Her Fin (Non-local) * | 97.5% | 85% | 97.5% | 97% |
| Him/Her Fin (Local) | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| Him/Her Fin (Both) | 0% | 8% (7.5%) | 0% | 3% (2.5%) |

*Note: Him/Her Fin (non-local): Him and her pronouns in finite clauses. Non-local = non-local preferred; local = local preferred; both = both local and non-local accepted.

3.4.2 *him/her* in infinite clauses

Table 4 shows that the experimental groups prefer long-distance antecedents to local antecedents of *him/her* in English. However, Group 1 shows that there are higher scores than Group 2 and 3, and some participants in Group 2 and 3 accept local binding (both are 5%) and both (both are 8%), long-distance and local antecedents in infinite clauses. By contrast, native speaker of English accept long-distance antecedents only in infinite clauses.

Therefore, Group 1 with advanced English proficiency greatly acquire English pronouns in infinite clauses whereas Group 2 and 3 may be influenced by the property of Chinese pronouns.

Table 4 The Results of *him/her* in Infinite Clauses

| | Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 3 | Group 4 |
|-----------------------------|---------|-------------|-----------|---------|
| Him/Her InFin (Non-local) * | 95% | 83% (82.5%) | 85% | 100% |
| Him/Her InFin (Local) | 2.5% | 5% | 5% | 0% |
| Him/Her InFin (Both) | 0% | 8% (7.5%) | 8% (7.5%) | 0% |

*Note: Him/Her InFin (non-local): Him and her pronouns in infinite clauses. Non-local = non-local preferred; local = local preferred; both = both local and non-local accepted.

3.4.3 *him/her* in dative clauses

Table 5 shows that the experimental Group 1 and 3 more accept long-distance antecedents of *him/her* than local antecedents in dative clauses; the results of Group 2 show 45 % in long-distance antecedents, and 40% in local antecedents, which means participants select either long-distance or local antecedents to refer to the pronouns in dative clauses. By contrast, native speakers of English show that they accept both long-distance and local antecedents, more than select local antecedents only. That is, the results of three experimental groups seem to have more problems in acquiring English pronouns binding in dative clauses than in finite and infinite clauses. This study infers that Chinese pronouns in dative constructions prefer to a long-distance interpretation.

Table 5 The Results of *him/her* in Dative Clauses

| | Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 3 | Group 4 |
|------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Him/Her Dative (Non-local) * | 62.5% | 45% | 57.5% | 0% |
| Him/Her Dative (Local) | 30% | 40% | 17.5% | 22.5% |
| Him/Her Dative (Both) | 7.5% | 7.5% | 25% | 77.5% |

*Note: Him/Her Dative (non-local): Him and her pronouns in dative clauses. Non-local = non-local preferred; local = local preferred; both = both local and non-local accepted.

3.4.4 *himself/herself* in finite clauses

According to Binding Principle, Chomsky (1981) points that Binding Principle A states that an anaphor must be bound in its domain; that is. It must take local subjects as its antecedents. Table 6 shows the scores of three experimental groups increase gradually to prove that they acquire the local binding of English reflexives as long as they expose to more English.

Group1 seems to still have problems in select local antecedents of English reflexives in finite clauses. To compare to native speakers, they only accept local subjects as antecedents

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in finite clauses. Even if most of participants of Group 3 know to choose local antecedents (25%), there are some to select both (25%), local and long-distance anaphors.

Table 6 The Results of *himself/herself* in Finite Clauses

| | Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 3 | Group 4 |
|-----------------------------------|---------|-----------|---------|---------|
| Himself/Herself Fin (Non-local) * | 35% | 20% | 2.5% | 0% |
| Himself/Herself Fin (Local) | 65% | 70% | 72.5% | 100% |
| Himself/Herself Fin (Both) | 0% | 8% (7.5%) | 25% | 0% |

*Note: Himself/Herself Fin (non-local): Himself and herself reflexives in finite clauses. Non-local = non-local preferred; local = local preferred; both = both local and non-local accepted.

3.4.5 *himself/herself* in infinite clauses

In infinite clauses, table 7 shows that Group 2 and 3 also acquire to take local anaphors in infinite clauses whereas the score of Group 2 in selecting local antecedents is higher than Group 3's by 5% and is closer to Group 4's (native speakers'). The score of Group 1 in selecting local antecedents is higher than in choosing long-distance anaphors, but the distance to prove that Chinese learners of L2 English successfully acquire English reflexives binding is not oblivious.

Table 7 The Results of *himself/herself* in Infinite Clauses

| | Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 3 | Group 4 |
|-------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Himself/Herself InFin (Non-local) * | 35% | 2.5% | 7.5% | 5% |
| Himself/Herself InFin (Local) | 65% | 90% | 85% | 95% |
| Himself/Herself InFin (Both) | 0% | 7.5% | 7.5% | 0% |

*Note: Himself/Herself InFin (non-local): Himself and herself reflexives in infinite clauses. Non-local = non-local preferred; local = local preferred; both = both local and non-local accepted.

3.4.6 *himself/herself* in dative clauses^①

Table 8 shows that three experimental groups do not perform well in dative clauses of English reflexives. By contrast with Group 4, native speakers of English accept long-distance anaphors in dative clauses. Thus, the scores of Group 2 and Group 3 show that they also prefer to select long-distance antecedents. For Group 1, the scores of selecting long-distance and local anaphors are not quite oblivious to show they allow long-distance anaphors or local antecedents in English dative clauses. Similar to the result

^① The both results in section 3.4.3 and section 3.4.6 have shown that L2 English learners have much trouble in acquiring dative clauses of English pronouns and reflexives. Thus, the on-going study expands this research to collect more tests of participants from other English departments, and the study will run R and ANNOVA to investigate whether there is any significant to account for the asymmetry results in that the current is a primary step to investigate how L2 English learners in acquiring English pronouns and reflexives. (This study thanks to one of anonymous review to mention the reliable test).

of table 5, the L2 English learners on English reflexives in dative clauses cannot syntactically behaves like what native speakers do.

Table 8 The Results of *himself/herself* in Dative Clauses

| | Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 3 | Group 4 |
|--------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Himself/Herself Dative (Non-local) * | 57.5% | 72.5% | 55% | 75% |
| Himself/Herself Dative (Local) | 42.5% | 15% | 22.5% | 0% |
| Himself/Herself Dative (Both) | 0% | 12.5% | 22.5% | 25% |

*Note: Himself/Herself Dative (non-local): Himself and herself reflexives in dative clauses. Non-local = non-local preferred; local = local preferred; both = both local and non-local accepted.

3.5 Interim summary

In Chinese reflexives, there are two types which are pointed in section 2, monomorphemic/simple, *ziji*, and polymorphemic/complex reflexives, *ta ziji*. On Chinese reflexives, the behavior of the compound reflexives, *ta ziji*, is quite similar to English; that is, it have to take a local subject as its antecedent. On the contrary, the behavior of the bare reflexives, *ziji*, can be bound in its local antecedent, or it can also be free to its long-distance antecedent.

Because of Chinese bare reflexive, *ziji*, it seems there is an influence, an obstacle, for Chinese speakers of L2 English learning English reflexives as illustrated in table 8, 9, and 10. Particularly, Chinese speakers learning English reflexives cannot well perform in infinite clauses and dative clauses. I discuss the analysis in the following section.

4. Discussion

As far as the interpretation of English reflexives and pronouns is concerned, the results in the current study have shown that Chinese speakers of L2 English have less trouble acquiring reflexives and pronouns in finite and non-finite sentences than in dative sentences. Advanced learners perform much better than their lower proficient counterparts whereas still have problem acquiring reflexives and pronouns in dative sentences. The asymmetry in advanced learners' interpretation of finite/non-finite and dative sentences provides an answer to my second research question which asks if advanced learners can acquire the language form in question. It seems that they can acquire reflexives and pronouns in finite and non-finite sentences but not in dative sentences. The question to ask now is if L1 transfer can account for such an asymmetry. Recall that our first research question is whether or not L1 transfer plays a crucial role in L2 development.

It is evident that L1 transfer influences learners' interpretation of the sentences, given the similarities the two languages share in reflexives and pronouns discussed in section 1. However, L1 transfer alone is inadequate to account for finite/non-finite and dative

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sentences asymmetry. Dative sentences exist in Chinese as well as in English. Why would transfer occur in finite/nonfinite but not in dative sentences in advanced learners' L2 grammar? Two influential theories may offer an explanation to the observed behavior in the study. But because of the pilot nature of the study, we will review the essence of two theories and discuss their explainabilities to future study.

One of two theories is called Full Transfer and Full Access (FT/FA) of Schwartz and Sprouse (1994, 1996). The theory assumes full transfer of L1 grammar in initial state of L2 acquisition. Target language grammar is acquirable provided that there is sufficient in the L2 input to inform the learner that L1 and L2 are different. Based on the input, the learner will be able to acquire the target grammar. The other theory is proposed by Tsimpli and Roussou (1991) called the Partial Access to Universal Grammar hypothesis. Similar to the FT/FA account, it stipulates full transfer of L1 grammar in the early stages of L2 acquisition. However, it differs from the FT/FA hypothesis in the sense that it assumes some functional category-related properties be inaccessible to adult L2 learners. This is because those properties are parametric variant between languages and are inaccessible beyond the critical period. In other words, adult L2 learners will never be able to acquire some L2 properties like native speakers do.

The two theories can provide an answer to the observed behavior in the study. But we will leave this to the future study. What needs to be considered in the future study is the task design. A subtle testing of a wider range of properties in relation to reflexives and pronouns is also required.

Appendix

The examples in a questionnaire sample

Type 1: *him/her* in finite clauses

1. Tom says that Peter hates him.
2. Oliver thought Wilson criticized him.
3. Adam doubted that Jeff treated him.
4. Oliver hopes that Adam will help him.

Type 2: *him/her* in infinite clauses

1. Ryan begs Marco to forgive him.
2. Gina warns Mary not to hit her.
3. Wendy asked Grace not to criticize her too often.
4. Tom asks Billy to take care of him.

Type 3: *him/her* in dative clauses

1. Jeff asked Louis a question about him.
2. Tina gave Sarah a picture of her.
3. Marco sent Henry a book about him.
4. Henry told Dr. Kong a secret of him.

Type 4: *himself/herself* in finite clauses

1. Lisa knows that Claire likes herself.
2. Jane thought Mary criticized herself.
3. Mary hopes that Jane will help herself.
4. Alex doubted that Bruce believed himself.

Type 5: *himself/herself* in infinite clauses

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1. Fiona asks Becky to take care of herself.
2. Wendy asked Grace not to criticize herself too often.
3. Ryan begs Marco to forgive himself.
4. Gina warns Mary not to hit herself.

Type 6: *himself/herself* in dative clauses

1. Fiona sent Jenny a book about herself.
2. Sam gave David a picture of himself.
3. Sunny asked Ianne a question about herself.
4. Tony gave Jimmy a portrait of himself.

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