

The Translation and Acquisition of French Pronominal Verbs by Chinese Speakers

Yalan Wang

College of Foreign Languages, Shenyang University,
Shengyang, Liaoning, 110044, P.R.China

Abstract: Currently, the French teaching method in China make it difficult for the students to understand pronominal verbs thoroughly and to use in the oral practice properly. Why there are such obstacles and what contributes to these difficulties? To solve this problem, the most effective method is to analyze the data based on the linguistic experiments. By analyzing the data, the variations of the students in all of the phases of language acquisition will show and let us distinguish the different types of their mistakes. By researching on the strategies which the participants adopt to complete their narration, we can infer that there exist an inter-phase relationship between their native language and other languages.

Finally, this linguistic experiment also respond to the following questions: what is the transitional language in students' minds? What factors encourage and determine their grammatical transfer system? How can we interpret the different types of mistakes made by the students in different studying phase?

Keywords: Language type; Semantic absence; Linguistic strategy; Multifunctional pronoun

DOI: 10.47297/wspiedWSP2516-250007.20220608

1. Introduction

Currently, the French teaching method in China make it difficult for the students to understand pronominal verbs thoroughly and to use in the oral practice properly. Why there are such obstacles and what contributes to these difficulties? To solve this problem, we propose some assumptions regarding the process of the cognition. In order to prove the assumptions, we start with the analysis of the differences of the two languages, and then elicit data by a linguistic experiment and through analyzing the data, we can observe the variations of the students in all of the phases of language acquisition and distinguish the different types of their mistakes. And the most effective method is to analyze the data based on the linguistic experiments. Meanwhile, we can research on the strategies which the participants adopt to complete their narration. By analyzing these strategies, we

can infer the inter-phase relationship between their native language and other languages.

2. Review of the Methods of Research on Pronominal Verbs

Since 16th century, the foreign linguists have been researching on the pronominal verbs because of their complexity. Currently, the research is not confined to the field of linguistics; it has also become a popular target of research in the field of psychology, philosophy, literature and the like. From 16th century to 19th century, the traditional quartation (reciprocals, reflexives, neuters, passivity) of French grammar has been generally accepted by linguists. However, entering the 20th century, the quartation has caused doubts among some researchers such as Hatcher(1942), Geniesi (1987) and Zribi-Hertz(1987). In his masterpiece *La Voie pronominale : la systématique des tours pronominaux en français moderne*, representative Ludo Melis reviews on the history of various methods of research, which dominates by the method of lexical semantics led by Dangeau and Laveau and method of sentence meaning led by Geniušien and Guillaume.

As various theories develop, all the past researches reveal their limitations on the analysis of forms, semantics and syntax, and some more comprehensive researches involving attributes, researching methods and typology of pronominal expression come into our scope. In his thesis *Les tours pronominaux dans la grammaire traditionnelle française : statut, typologie et problèmes*, Peter Lauwers(2007) proposes three perspectives: whether pronominal verbs is a special form of verbs or a semantic form or a new type of conjugation? First, there is no such single thing as solving all the problems regarding pronominal expression, especially the last two problems involving neuter and passivity. Second, when putting these theories to use, problems always arise on these two problems. Peter Lauwers also summarizes two characteristics of pronominal verbs: one is the contrariety of the two groups, with the latter always the focus of problem; the other emphasizes the complexity of the criterion of typological classification. The big difference between the two groups of meaning is the reason why this paper only researches on the acquisition of the first group, not the whole meaning of the pronominal verbs.

Thus, since we regard reflexives and reciprocals as main targets of this research, we have to perceive the relationship between reflexives and reciprocals first. As for this point, Mélis come to a conclusion by comparing and analyzing in his article: seemingly, the reciprocals distinguish from reflexives by implementing actions on themselves. Indeed, reciprocals are characterized by plural or collective subjects. From traditional definition, there is no marked distinction either from the

functional analysis or corresponding comparison of sentences without pronominal verbs.

However, linguist König & Kokutani (2006) propose the research on typology of reciprocals. In the symposium compiled by Ekkehard König & Volker Gast (2008), *Reciprocals and reflexives: Theoretical and Typological Exploration*, they expound their point of view aiming to research on the distinction between reciprocal meaning and reflexive meaning that the main distinction lies in the multiple functions of reciprocals. The symposium also introduced relative viewpoints of other scholars. For example, Reinhart & Siloni (2005) distinguish two types of verbs which can express reciprocal meanings: one type with reciprocal meanings inside the verbs and the other type requiring adding prefixes or other phrases to express reciprocal meanings.

3. The Deficiency of Pronominal Verbs in Chinese

Due to the linguistic difference between Chinese and French, the Chinese verbs don't have the characteristics of grammatical change. Instead they have semantic expressions. That means both the languages are able to express the same scenes but in different forms. Regarding to reflexives, in *L'énoncé réfléchi* by André Rousseau (2007), they are divided into five categories.

(1) Complete reflexives

E.g. Il se soigne = 他照顾自己 (he takes care of himself)

Analysis: in this category, '自己 (ziji)' in Chinese is used to convey reflexive meaning which resembles 'soi-même' in French and -self in English.

(2) Reflexives including adjectives.

E.g. Il se reconnaît coupable = 他承认 (自己) 有罪 (he admits himself guilty)

Analysis: in this category, we can observe that '自己 (ziji)' here is not indispensable. Reflexive meaning in this case can be conveyed either explicitly or implicitly.

(3) Reflexives involving parts of body.

E.g. Il se mouche le nez = 他擤鼻涕 (he blows his nose)

Analysis: in this category, obviously, reflexive meaning is expressed implicitly in Chinese. It's self-evident that blowing one's nose should be done by oneself. Nose is one part of the body. Therefore, there is no need to convey explicitly that it is oneself who blow the nose.

(4) Reflexives with actions. (in contrast with reflexive verbs with static meaning)

E.g. il se réveille= 他醒了 (he wakes up)

Analysis: in this category, as in example 3, in Chinese, there is no need to convey explicitly that it is oneself who conducts the action. If ‘自己 (ziji)’ is added here, it emphasizes that one wakes up naturally without being awakened by someone else or the alarm clocks.

(5) Reflexives with absent objects

E.g. il se prépare à l'examen= 他自己主动为考试做准备 (he is prepared for the examination himself)

Analysis: in this structure, ‘自己 (ziji)’ and ‘主动 (zhudong)’ are used in Chinese to express reflexive meaning and spontaneous meaning respectively.

From the analysis of the five categories, we can draw the following conclusion:

Both ‘自己 (ziji)’ in Chinese and ‘se’ in French serving as a reflexive symbols can express reflexive meanings either explicitly or implicitly. Take example 3 (reflexives involving parts of body) for instance, ‘自己 (ziji)’ cannot be used to express reflexive meaning, once used, the meaning of the whole sentence could be altered. On the contrary, as for reciprocal meaning, according to the research of Siloni(2005), verbs with reciprocal meanings are classified into two categories. One constitutes the verbs with reciprocal meaning within the verbs e.g. ‘打架’ (fight). The other constitutes the verbs without reciprocal meaning inside the verbs, but they require the help of other words or phrases to express the reciprocal meaning. e.g. ‘互相认识’ (know each other) and ‘互相了解’ (get to know each other) etc.

E.g. (1): ils se connaissent= 他们互相认识 (they know each other)

Analysis : in Chinese, ‘认识’ (know) doesn't fall into the category of verbs with reciprocal meaning itself, so when it is used, words like ‘互相 (huxiang), or 对方 (duifang)’ are added to express reciprocal meaning.

E.g. (2): ils se battent= 他们在打架

Analysis : in this example, ‘打架’ (fight) falls into the category of verbs with reciprocal meanings, for one cannot fight with himself. Therefore, no other supplementary words are needed to express the reciprocal meaning. in other words, ‘他们互相打架’ (they fight with each other) is not acceptable in Chinese, because the reciprocal meaning is expressed repetitively.

Thus we may draw the following conclusion: in Chinese, verbs with reciprocal meanings and verbs without reciprocal meanings fall into two categories. While in French, 'se' is used for all verbs to express the reciprocal meanings. In Chinese, verbs with reciprocal meanings can be used separately, while verbs without reciprocal meanings need adding words like '互相' and '彼此' (both mean 'each other') to help express reciprocal meanings.

Kong & Kokutani's article refers to the three categories classified by Maslova(2008) of the relation of these two meanings in different language.

1.The signs expressing reflexive meanings accords with the signs expressing reciprocal meanings

2.The signs expressing reciprocal meanings include both signs expressing reflexive meanings and other complementary constituents.

3.The signs expressing reflexive meanings differ from the signs expressing reciprocal meanings.

From above analysis, French belongs to the first category, while Chinese belongs to the third. That is to say in French, pronoun 'se' is of multiple functions, expressing both reflexive and reciprocal meanings. While in Chinese, '自己' (oneself) and '相互' (each other) are two different forms with different expressive forms. Thus, we assume the multiplicity of pronoun 'se' in French causes a major difficulty for Chinese students in the process of acquisition of French pronominal verbs. But more empirical statistics are required to prove the assumption.

4. Hypothesis

Through analyzing factors influencing reflexives and reciprocals of pronominal verbs and difficulties hindering Chinese students, the author raises the following hypotheses basing on previous stud:

(1) The different types of two languages, especially deficiencies of reflexives and reciprocals of pronominal verbs on meaning and format side, trouble Chinese students. By comparing two deficiencies, a hypothesis can be raised that format deficiency can be remedied more easily than meaning deficiency can because grammar rules are helpful to the former while the latter needs abstract reaction.

(2) Chinese students study English when they are in junior high school and French is their second foreign language. Therefore, English plays a very important role in their study. The second hypothesis is that effect from English to beginners is more serious than to the students who have higher level of knowledge.

5. Language Experiment

An experiment is designed to reproduce Chinese students' acquisition of reflexives and reciprocals of pronominal verbs. Some material with pictures was offered to the participants. The answer was recorded one by one.

There were four groups of participants. 10 persons whose mother languages are French and Chinese respectively formed the first group. The other three groups members were Chinese students who took French as foreign language and whose ability was elementary, intermediate or higher. 10 members were in each group, which led to 40 participants altogether. After recording, all the participants were asked to fill the forms to collect relative information, including age, ability to use French, major, educational history and so on.

6. Errors and Strategies in Language

To the members in the elementary group, several errors of reflexives can be summarized from the data. 1. 'e', the reflexive, is absent. Take 'Elle dépêche' as an example, whose correct form should be 'elle se dépêche'. 2. 'Be + past participle', an English sentence structure, is patterned. 'il est dormi' should be 'il se dormi'. 3. Sentence structures of mother language are patterned, which means some members added extra reflexives in order to stress reflexive meaning. For example, they used 'il dit soi-même' which should be 'il se dit'. The errors of reciprocals are similar to those of reflexives, except the differences on semantic side. 1. 'se', is absent. Take 'il fait bisous' as an example, whose correct form should be 'ils se sont fait bisous'. 2. 'Be + past participle', an English sentence structure, is patterned. 'ils sont embrassés' should be 'ils se sont embrassés'. 3. Sentence structures of mother language are patterned, which means some members added non-reciprocals. For example, they used 'Ils échanger le cadeau ensemble' which should be 'ils s'échangent le cadeau'.

Mistakes made by the intermediate group members are similar to those by the elementary group members. All wrong sentence structures are due to negative transfer of mother language and English. On the form side, the grammatical errors, including mistakes on conjugation, tenses or collocations, made by the first group can still be seen in the second group. However, there is a new type of errors, which is the misapplication of 'se', such as 'se ranger', 'se balayer', 'se faire un peu de ménage' and so on. This type of errors does not appear in the first group. This case suggests that the students begin to adapt to pronominal verbs, but they do not master them. Moreover, the students' thinking mode can be observed, which means the process for them to constantly look for the correct forms of pronominal verbs. The case in the first group is similar but the degree and content of self-correcting.

In the first group, the members always try to find the correct verbs again and again. However, in the second group, their self-correcting content is mainly about forms of conjugation, such as “Elle se, se, elle se, s’est couchée plus tard” ..., “elle se réveille, elle se réveille, elle s’est réveillée ...”

Analyzed from the data of higher group, the presentation is much better than the former groups, even though there are still some mistakes of several obscure verbs, such as *se coucher*, *dormir*, et *s’endormir*. However, the misapplication of “se” is in an up trend. They still make the similar errors like the second group, taking “se bavarder, se discuter...” as an example. Some members even use “se penser” instead of “penser”, “se récupérer” instead of “aller prendre”, “se passer” instead of “passer une journée”. The development means they are experiencing process of adaptation. This reaction is effective to acquiring a new structure and errors in this process are unavoidable due to its self-adjusting. The number of grammatical errors is decreasing, which means the members can not use French like native speakers. Furthermore, other strategies are diversified and approach to the correct use of language.

Through analyzing the experiment results of elementary group, it is concluded that all mistakes can be divided into format mistakes and semantic mistakes. Format mistakes are mainly grammatical mistakes and semantic mistakes focus on the use of “se”, a reflexive pronoun. In the intermediate group, the accuracy of using pronominal verbs is higher, except missing and misapplying “se” and borrowing of English words and sentence patterns. However, some words without function of reflexives and reciprocals, such as “soi-même” and “ensemble” are not used in this group, which suggests the members can distinguish reflexives and the stress use of personal pronouns, and group moves and reciprocal moves. However, borrowing English sentence patterns means the deep influence from English. The members in the higher group can use “se” much better and the mistakes only appear in the use of several promiscuous words. This suggests that they master the reflexives and reciprocals function of “se” through long-term study. To other strategies, the members use syllogism and lexical methods^①. There are no words or sentence structures borrowed from English, which means higher the members’ ability to use language is, less influence from English is. However, it is surprising that misapplication of “se” is more serious. This may indicate the process of master the language is still far to end. With studying for long time, format mistakes will be fewer and fewer. But correcting semantic mistakes needs longer time.

7. Causes and Conclusion

The conclusion drawn from analyzing data is that the source of members’

strategies is the source of their mistakes. Specifically, the differences of language types and the differences of languages lead to difficulties of cognition. These differences are based on absence of semantic side and format side of grammar in Chinese and the complex use of “se”. It is not wise to neglect other factors, such as influence from mother language and foreign language, complexity of target language, etc... The mistakes on semantic side and format side exist in the whole language learning. Students in the higher group commit some semantic mistakes, but not many format mistakes or even no format mistakes. This indicates that format mistakes can be corrected with further learning and enhancing memory while correcting semantic mistakes and internalizing language need longer time and process. The influence from mother language and English is not so obvious in the higher group, but the most difficult session is to internalize the corresponding semantic part absent in mother language.

This article only focuses on acquisition of reflexives and reciprocals. Hopefully this is helpful to studying acquisition of French pronominal verbs. Study on neuter meaning and passive meaning should be conducted further.

Notes

- ① Several ways to express mutuality: inference method which uses a sentence to express mutuality (such as il lui a offert un cadeau, elle lui a offert aussi and so on); words, noun phrases and adverb phrases expressing mutually (such as en retour, en échange and so on).

References

- [1] Catherine A C., Cyrille G., Jin-ok K. & Mireille P. (2009), *L'Acquisition de la Grammaire du Français Langue Etrangère*, Paris, les Éditions Didier. 19p.
- [2] Mélis L. (1990), *La Voie pronominale : la Systématique des Tours pronominaux en Français moderne*. Paris Louvain-la Neuve, Duculot, 1-90.
- [3] Rousseau A., Bottinneau, D. & Roulland D.(2007), Présentation générale, *L'Enoncé Réfléchi*, Presse universitaire de Rennes. 10-20 .
- [4] Gilbert L., Le réfléchi est-il une voix ? *L'Enoncé Réfléchi*, Presse universitaire de Rennes 34-45.
- [5] Peter L., Les tours pronominaux dans la grammaire traditionnelle française : statut, typologie et problèmes, *L'Enoncé Réfléchi*, Presse universitaire de Rennes. 131-148.
- [6] Ekkehard K. & Volker G.(2008), *Reciprocals and reflexives : Theoretical and Typological Exploration*, Mouton de Gruyter Berlin, New York. 12-39.
- [7] Juang L.(Amy), *Second language acquisition of English 'pronominality' by Chinese speakers*. 47-70.