

# Demystify a Positive Role of L1 in L2 Acquisition: In the Case of Chinese Aspect Marker *Le*

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**Abstract**—This study aims to uncover a positive role of L1 in L2 acquisition through analyzing the positive effect of Chinese aspect marker *le* on the use of English simple past by Chinese EFL learners. The theoretical framework is set first, with clarification of theories about tense and aspect as well as discussion of the impacts of L1 on SLA. Following a review of Chinese aspect marker *le*, relevant empirical research and teaching practice are cited to demonstrate the positive influence of *le* on the L2 English simple past use. This positive transfer of Chinese Aspect Marker *le* is explained using transfer theory and connectionism. The present study is meant to arouse L2 English teachers' awareness of the benefits of L1 so that they can capitalize on L2 learners' native language to facilitate their students' L2 learning.

**Index Terms**—aspect marker *le*, English simple past, language transfer, positive effect of L1

## I. INTRODUCTION

Temporality, which is expressed by various devices, is an important concept in language. In English, tense and aspect are two primary grammatical devices describing temporality. English native speakers can naturally acquire the tense/aspect system of English, but it poses many problems for Chinese ESL/EFL learners. The reason lies in the fact that Chinese and English are two very dissimilar languages in terms of typology. Although English has both tense and aspect markers, Chinese only has a comprehensive system of aspect markers (Tian, 2021; Wang & Li, 2021). The purpose of this study is to investigate the factor contributing to Chinese EFL learners' use of English simple past to enlighten L2 English teachers on a positive role of L1 in L2 learning.

This paper falls into three sections. The first part defines tense and aspect and adopts the theory that there are three tenses in English. The second part goes into details about three theories of L1 transfer. It is meant to prove that L1 does have a positive impact on second language acquisition (SLA), apart from a negative effect (Ellis, 2012; Lado, 1957), thus laying a theoretical foundation for what follows. The third part draws on relevant empirical research and teaching practice to display how Chinese aspect marker *le* makes a positive effect on the use of English simple past on the part of Chinese EFL learners.

## II. TENSE AND ASPECT

Both tense and aspect are categories connected with verbs. In his two books – *Tense* and *Aspect*, Comrie (1976, 1985) offers a thorough analysis of each term, which sheds light on the difference between tense and aspect. According to him, time can be depicted graphically as a straight line traveling from left to right, from the past to the future (Comrie, 1985) (see Figure 1).

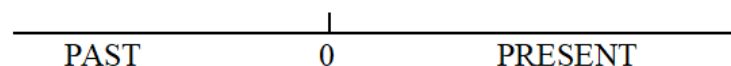


Figure 1. Representation of Time (*Tense* p. 2)

According to Comrie (1985), tense is “grammaticalised expression of location in time” (*Tense* p. 9), which is usually related to the present moment, though concerning other situations as well. Aspect concerns “the internal temporal constituency of the one situation” rather than “relating the time of the situation to any other time-point” (*Aspect* p. 5).

These two terms, Comrie argues, are different because aspect exhibits “situation-internal time” while tense reflects “situation-external time” (*Aspect* p. 5). To clarify this point, four statements are provided as follows:

- (1) Peter hits the door.
- (2) Peter hit the door.
- (3) Peter went dancing.
- (4) Peter was going dancing.

The only difference between statements (1) and (2) is the tense. The first statement is true either before or after the reference point while the second statement is true only before the reference point. As a result, these two statements reveal two distinct points in time. Both of the last two statements refer to past occurrences, but differ in aspect. The subject is done with dancing in statement (3), but not in statement (4). The former provides an event's accomplishment by presenting the event in its entirety whereas the latter merely shows a portion of the event and thus cannot provide a completion.

How many tenses there are has been a controversy. In the eyes of Morenberg (1997, p. 48), "Tense determines the form of a verb". His theory of tense is associated with "the grammatical concept tense" instead of "the real-world time" (p. 48). English verbs, therefore, have only two forms – past and present. Binnick (1991, pp. 3-4), echoing Comrie, claims that in the Indo-European language, time seems to be a line divided into the three sectors of past, present, and future. The tripartite divisions of time are explicitly reflected in tense, with each tense corresponding to a sector of time. If the present instant is used as a reference point, there are usually three tenses: past tense, present tense, and future tense. All three types of tense, Binnick thinks, exist in English.

As far as aspect is concerned, the situation is quite different. Comrie's typology of aspect categories is widely accepted, as shown in Figure 2:

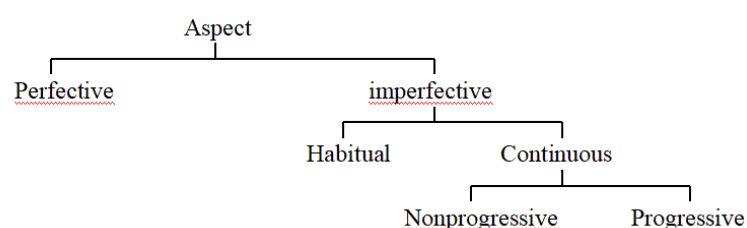


Figure 2. Classification of Aspectual Opposition (*Aspect* p. 25)

This diagram reveals Perfective and Imperfective Opposition (PFV / IPFV). Fleischman (1990, p. 19) compares this contrast to "a camera lens that can adjust the focus on an object so that it may be viewed from different perspectives". Imperfective aspect consists of habitual aspect and continuous aspect, with the latter composed of Progressive and Non-progressive Opposition (PRO / IPRO). Perfective aspect suggests a holistic picture of a situation, rather than a breakdown of the many phases that comprise the situation. In English, simple past tense and perfective aspect are subsumed under the universal perfective aspect. In contrast, imperfective aspect refers directly to varying time points within a situation. Whereas a lot of languages have only one category for imperfective aspect, other languages contain different categories for imperfectivity. For instance, English has a distinct habitual aspect, though only in the past tense, e.g. He *used to dance* here; there is also a separate progressive aspect, e.g. He *was dancing* when I visited.

This study adopts Comrie's theory that in English, there are three basic tenses and two marked aspects. When these tenses are used alone, we have simple present tense, simple past tense, and simple future tense. It is worth pointing out that simple past tense also serves as a perfective aspect typologically, so it is more appropriate to call it simple past as used in the following.

### III. THEORIES OF LANGUAGE TRANSFER

In the field of SLA, the influence of L1, so-called L1 transfer or cross-linguistic influence, has been debated for more than half a century. It first gained a full acceptance in the 1950s and 1960s; however, the next decade saw a downplayed role of L1 in SLA. Interest in language transfer revived and was re-recognized in the late 1970s and early 1980, regardless. Such an unusual development of L1 transfer has been propelled by theoretical concerns about language and language acquisition (Ellis, 2012). The main theories of language transfer are summarized below.

#### A. The Behaviorist Position

The role of L1 in SLA was first recognized in the 1940s and the 1950s with Lado's works. Within a behaviorist framework, Lado (1957, pp. 1-4) regarded L2 learning as the formation of a new set of patterns and believed that L1 learning patterns interfere with L2 learning ones. Consequently, L1 is of great importance because it appears to be a key source of failure in L2 learning. Lado's conception of transfer is reflected in the famous Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH). This hypothesis proposes that L2 learning difficulties should derive where the native language differs structurally from the target language:

We assume that the student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult (Lado, 1957, p. 2).

In a word, the CAH claims that disparities between L1 and L2 are both essential and sufficient to explain the difficulty occurring in L2 learning. In this connection, all SLA difficulty should arise solely in places where L1 and L2 are different from each other, making L1 interference the most important source of explanation for SLA.

In the early 1970s, the CAH was challenged due to either conceptual or empirical research results. Conceptually,

structuralism, the theoretical foundation of the CAH, had been questioned by generative grammar. Empirically, much counterevidence to the CAH had been reported, and many of the CAH's predictions failed to come true (Ellis, 2012).

One approach to conquering the weaknesses of the CAH is evident in the Markedness Differential Hypothesis (MDH) proposed by Eckman. He first defined markedness as follows:

A phenomenon A in some language is more marked than B if the presence of A in a language implies the presence of B; but the presence of B does *not* imply the presence of A (Eckman, 1977, p. 320).

Based on this definition, Eckman (1977, p. 321) put forward the MDH, which theorizes that a thorough comparison of the grammars of the native language, the target language, and the markedness connections presented in universal grammar can forecast the areas of difficulty that a language learner would face. For example, L2 learners will have difficulty where the target language is different from the native language and more marked than the native language, but have no difficulty where the target language is different from the native language and less marked than the native language. In addition, there is a correlation between the relative degree of markedness and the relative degree of difficulty of the areas of the target language which are more marked than the native language. In terms of the goal, both the MDH and the CAH aim to account for L2 learning difficulty. Nonetheless, the MDH can provide explanations for some phenomena the CAH cannot: (1) why some differences between the native language and target language do not lead to difficulty; (2) why some differences are related to degrees of difficulty while others are not.

### B. The Mentalist Position

The 1960s saw some challenges facing the behaviorist theory of language and language learning. Chomsky (1959, p. 42-43) argued that language should not be viewed as a set of automatic habits, but as a set of structured rules. These rules are not learned by imitation, but formulated on innate principles through exposure to the language. Under Chomsky's attack, the behaviorist position did not seem to be tenable any longer. Therefore, Dulay and Burt (1974) proposed a mentalist account of how L2 is learned, which is called the Creative Construction Hypothesis (CCH):

[Creative construction is] the process in which children gradually reconstruct rules for speech they hear, guided by universal innate mechanisms which cause them to formulate certain types of hypotheses about the language system being acquired, until the mismatch between what they are exposed to and what they produce is resolved. (p. 37)

Taking a mentalist position, Dulay and Burt advocated that children reconstruct L2 in comparable ways irrespective of their L1 or the target language, and this was summarized as the "L1=L2" hypothesis. In one word, they held that L1 plays no role in L2 learning.

### C. The Cognitive Position

The late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed a received recognition of the importance of L1 in L2 learning. This recognition resulted from the extension of the cognitive approach to transfer. From a cognitive perspective, Ervin-Tripp (1974, pp. 111-112) suggested that during the process of creative construction, L2 learners use previous linguistic knowledge as input, with their native language serving as a significant source of information. According to Schachter (1992, p. 33), language transfer is as much a creative process as any other part of acquisition. Thus, L1 transfer to L2 learning has gradually been perceived as a strategy because L1 knowledge assists L2 learners in developing hypotheses about L2 rules.

To summarize, among the three theories of language transfer, the mentalist position seems least convincing because the interference of L1 in SLA is clear-cut. On the contrary, both the behaviorist theory and the cognitive position emphasize the important role of L1 in L2 learning, with the latter focusing more on L1's positive influence. The present study draws on the combination of the behaviorist position and cognitive position. However, the present study differs from the behaviorist framework in a major respect: the CAH and the MDH within the behaviorist framework stress the difference between L1 and L2, yet this study intends to cast light on the effects of similarities and how those effects positively impact Chinese EFL learners' use of English simple past.

## IV. ASPECT MARKER *le* IN MODERN CHINESE

Debate has raged over whether Chinese has a tense/aspect system for decades. The traditional view that Chinese has aspect but no tense was proposed and elaborated on later by two famous Chinese linguists Wang Li and Gao Mingkai (Jiang, 2019). Afterwards, most linguists have accepted this view. Many other linguists (e.g., Zhang, 1996), on the other hand, have challenged the well-received view that Chinese does not have tense, although they all accept the existence of the aspect category. This study adopts the traditional view and centers on the aspect system in Chinese. It is worth noting, though, that the lack of the tense category in Chinese does not mean the lack of expressions of temporality because temporality in Chinese can be expressed through such devices as temporal adverbials and the context.

In the aspectual system of Chinese, *le* (了) constitutes the most important elements, despite controversy over the exact number of aspect markers. In *Mandarin Chinese*, Li and Thompson (1981) detail the two major usages of *le* (了) in Chinese. Illustrated in sentence (5), the *le* follows the verb; illustrated in sentence (6), the *le* is at the end of a sentence.

(5) 我 喝 了 三 杯 咖啡。 (Chinese)  
 wo he -le san bei kafei. (Sounding System)  
 I drink **LE** three CL coffee. (CL: classifier) (Direct translation)  
 I drank three cups of coffee. (Real meaning)

(6) 我 喝 三 杯 咖啡 了。  
 wo he san bei kafei le.  
 I drink three CL coffee **LE**.  
 I have drunk three cups of coffee. (adapted from Li & Thompson, 1957, p. 243-244)

Additionally, there could be another usage which combines the above two situations into a single one. As shown in sentence (7), such sentences consist of only a subject, a verb without objects, and the following *le*. Therefore, this *le* sits both after the verb and at the end of the sentence.

(7) 她 怀孕 了。  
 Ta huaiyun le.  
 She pregnant **LE**.  
 She got pregnant. (adapted from Li & Thompson, 1957, p. 252)

According to Cai (2010, p. 37), the *le* in sentence (5) is verbal *le*, and that in sentence (6) is sentential *le*. The former functions as a perfective aspect marker viewing an event in its entirety, while the latter signals a change in the temporal state. As such, sentence (5) with the verbal *le* conveys the completion of coffee drinking. Sentence (6) with the sentential *le* articulates that the subject changed from the state of not drinking coffee to that state. Although the verbal *le* does not refer to events in the past, its primary role of conveying an overall picture allows it to be used to discuss previous occurrences, much like the English simple past tense functioning as perfective past.

#### V. EFFECT OF ASPECT MARKER *LE* ON ENGLISH SIMPLE PAST

Based on the language transfer theory, it is the functional similarity between the aspect marker *le* and English simple past that makes *le* a facilitator of the simple past use in L2 English by Chinese EFL learners. Empirical research has yielded robust evidence for the boosting effect of *le* on SLA.

Cai (2001) investigated the effects of multiple linguistic factors on the use of tense and aspect in L2 English. The subjects included 60 Chinese college students divided into low and high English levels, required to complete a Chinese-English translation test. The results pointed to positive effects of Chinese aspect markers on the use of L2 English tense and aspect in that Chinese EFL learners were inclined to translate *le* into perfect aspect and simple past. Cai presents us with the following examples (2001, p. 215):

(8) 我 吃 饭。  
 I eat meal  
 I have my meals (e.g. every day). (or I will have the meal.)

(9) 昨天 我 吃 了 饭。  
 (Yesterday) I eat -le meal  
 I had my meal (yesterday).

(10) 明天 我 开 会。  
 Tomorrow I open meeting  
 I will attend a meeting tomorrow.

(11) 明天 我 开 了 会。  
 Tomorrow I open-le meeting  
 I will have attended the meeting tomorrow.

Sentence (9) with the aspect marker *le* can merely express one temporal concept – past occurrence. Without the aspect marker *le*, by contrast, sentence (8) can indicate either a present or a future occurrence. The presence or absence of *le* results in the sole difference between these two sentences. This comparison indicates that *le* is a past tense marker that promotes the correct interpretation of the past tense of sentence (9). Nonetheless, the temporal adverbial 明天 (tomorrow) in sentence (10) causes the event to be perceived as happening only in the future. The ungrammatical use of *le* in sentence (11) appears to support the theory that *le* is a past tense marker similar to a simple past morpheme in English.

In Cai's (2001) words, it is this similarity that renders the use of English simple past less daunting to Chinese EFL learners. Despite the fact that *le* is an aspect marker in Chinese, the events described by verb+*le* in Chinese versions always take place in the past. The aspect marker *le* can only be used as a past tense marker in this situation. The subjects in the translation test all recognized the underlying meaning of *le* in this situation since they were all Chinese native speakers. Accordingly, when they translated from Chinese to English, the existence of *le* reminded them to use English simple past, thus resulting in increased use of simple past. This association explains why the presence/absence of the construction of verb+*le* in Chinese versions correlates with the rate of the use of English simple past forms. This is how the use of *le* in Chinese versions can transfer to enhance the simple past use in English writing.

The finding of a positive effect of *le* has been reinforced by Cai's (2004, 2010) other two studies on Chinese college

students' use of English simple past in narrative writing. Results revealed that the presence of *le* in the Chinese version correlated significantly with the simple past forms and that the use of *le* exerted a significant influence on the simple past marking. Cai's studies can be corroborated by the author's own EFL teaching practice in China, for her college students are prone to do the same thing when translating sentences from Chinese to English. In the following example, they were supposed to use the simple past to translate the whole passage.

(12) 一天, 我们的班长组织了一次活动, 以减轻我们的学习压力。

One day our monitor organized an activity to lesson our stressful study load.

(13) 首先, 我们准备了一些食物和水。

To begin with, we prepared some food and water.

(14) 我们从学校出发向一座山前进。

Then, we take off, leaving school towards a mountain.

(15) 我们步行然后到达山脚。

We walk on the road and reach the foot of the mountain

(16) 然后我们爬山。

Afterwards, we climb the mountain

(17) 大家都觉得很累。

We all feel very tired.

(18) 最后, 我们回家了。

At last, we went home.

The verbs in each sentence are underlined. The aspect marker *le* is used after 组织 (organize), 准备 (prepare), and 回家 (go home) in Chinese in sentences (12), (13), and (18) respectively, so all of the students appropriately marked these two verbs in simple past. Conversely, 65% of them failed to mark the English verbs in sentences (14), (15), (16), and (17) and used simple present instead due to the lack of the aspect marker *le* in Chinese. It gives strong proof to the transfer of the aspect marker *le* to the English simple past forms.

This positive transfer effect gains best support from the theory of connectionism. As Gass and Selinker (2000, p. 216-217) maintain, this system relies on pattern associations between L1 and L2. If a model is to work, the strength of association will change in response to the input. It is worth noting that a pattern of connectivity may already exist, indicating that the strength of association is already present. Cai (2010) provides further explanation. More specifically, with L1 already present, there appear a set of associations with fixed strengths. When meeting language patterns similar to those in L1 in the process of SLA, L2 learners readily activate L1 patterns. As a result, L1 plays a positive role in their L2 learning, thus triggering a positive transfer. In the above examples, past events are expressed via comparable patterns, verb+*le* in Chinese and verb+*ed* in English, allowing Chinese EFL learners to activate their understanding of the aspect marker and transfer it to L2 English use.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study is meant to shed light on the positive influence of L1 on L2 learning through analyzing the positive effect of Chinese aspect marker *le* on the English simple past use. First, the theoretical foundation is laid by clarifying the theories concerning tense and aspect as well as discussing the effects of L1 on SLA. Next, different usages of Chinese aspect marker *le* are reviewed. Following this, relevant empirical studies and teaching practice are employed to testify the positive influence of the aspect marker *le* in Chinese on the use of English simple past. In addition, the theories of transfer theory and connectionism are used to account for the positive transfer of *le*. This study also aims to provide pedagogical implications. On the one hand, English teachers should take advantage of ESL/EFL learners' knowledge of their mother tongue rather than restrict their students to resort to their L1 during L2 learning. On the other hand, teachers should compare L1 and L2 in their teaching to clarify L1-L2 similarities and differences to trigger a positive transfer of L1 by their ESL/EFL students.

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