



NEGATIVE TRANSFER OF TOPIC-COMMENT STRUCTURES: CAUSES AND IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

This study investigates students' reflection on their negative transfers of topic-comment structures from Vietnamese to English in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. Data was collected from students' responses to the questionnaire. Data analysis revealed eight reasons for students' incorrect translation, of which that the structure has not been taught yet is the most influential. Noticeably, students blamed objective more than subjective factors for their own translation errors. The current research also attempted to suggest some useful implications in order to help Vietnamese learners of English avoid negative transfer from Topic-Comment sentences from Vietnamese into the English language and improve their translation skill as well as to make the process of EFL teaching and learning language better.

Keywords: EFL classes, Negative transfer, Topic-comment sentences, Topic-comment structures.

Introduction

The concept of Topic-Comment structures (TCSs) has been one of the most controversial linguistic issues. The reason for this seems quite clear: this concept seems too vague to be fruitfully applied to the analysis of language-specific constructions, let alone cross-linguistic investigations. In fact, having been a student and a teacher of English for years has brought to my attention a number of problems related to TCSs. It has been observed that in some Vietnamese sentence types, the subject, in term of the obligatory

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Subject-Predicate structure (SPS) in English, is not obvious to the students. They find it difficult to locate the subject because Vietnamese sentences do not require a grammatical subject if it can be inferred from the context. Besides, what appears at the beginning of a sentence in Vietnamese is often the Topic, which can be the Subject, Object or Adjunct of the Predicate.

For example, the following sentence is quite common in Vietnamese:

Vietnamese sentence	Món này	nấu	bây giờ	không kịp.
English meanings of each word/phrase	This dish	cook	now	not enough time.
Topic-comment structure	TOPIC		COMMENT	
General sentence structure	OBJECT OF THE VERB		PREDICATE	
Translated sentence into English	(1) <i>I do not have enough time to cook this dish now.</i>			

Numerous Vietnamese students and translators may find it challenging to deal with this kind of sentence. What appears at the beginning of the sentence - the subject position in English - is not the structural subject of the predicate. Rather, it is the object of the verb. Therefore, the students and translators must go beyond the word level to make sense of the “topic” and “comment” in the TCSs, and correctly identify the grammatical relationship between the predicate of the sentence and the existing topic, which functions as the object of the verb, and then express it as an object in a SPS.

Literature Review

The Topic-Comment structure of a sentence is commonly construed not as an aspect of its meaning, but rather as an aspect of how this meaning is structured for the purpose of communicative interaction, which implies that the choice of topic is guided primarily by the speaker’s assumptions about the listener’s state of knowledge. In term of information structure, Halliday stated that Topic and Comment make up the “system of information”. (Halliday, 2004, p.93).

Sentence Topic and Subject

In their seminal article, “Subject and Topic: a New Typology of Language”, Li and Thompson (1976) set up many criteria to distinguish the notion of subject and topic. The main difference, according to them, lies in the idea that while topic is a discourse-related notion, subject is more integrated into

the syntax of the sentence. They also argued that the topic should be treated as a basic, rather than a derived category.

The major distinction between topic and subject is that, the subject has a grammatical relation with the predicate, while this is not required for the topic. The topic is related to the comment semantically, and may or may not be grammatically related. The semantic dependency of the topic-comment relation means that it is insufficient to infer a TCS's meaning solely by its syntactic structure.

If a sentence has only one topic, this topic is very often (but not always) the subject of the sentence. For example, consider the sentence: (2) *"John wants to see Mary."* with heavy stress on *John* (the sentence can, for example, be considered as an answer to the question *Who wants to see Mary?*), we can see that this sentence is evidently about Mary and says that John wants to see her.

Sentence Comment and Predication

We would like to start this section by examining the following sentence:

(3) *As for my parents, my father is a businessman, and my mother teaches at a high school.*

Here, *As for my parents* constitutes the general topic, and *my father* and *my mother* constitute subtopics. The comment to *As for my parents* is the rest of the sentence, which itself consists of two topic/comment structures.

The Topic in a unit of information is the information that is "given" - treated as already known to the hearer-and that has other information building on it. The Comment is "new": it is the added information; "new" here includes what is important, as well as what is unfamiliar or not readily accessible to the hearer; it is often called "focus." "Information" includes qualities, as well as participant entities.

Shi (2000) defines a topic as

an unmarked NP (or its equivalent) that precedes a clause and is related to a position inside the clause; a topic represents an entity that has been mentioned in the previous discourse and is being discussed again in the current sentence. The clause related to the topic in such a way is the comment. (p.386)

Nehaniv (2000, 2005) suggested that predication emerged from the simple symmetric association of two ideas via a stage in which one idea has a topic role, and the other one is a comment.

Typically, we must make use of a grammatically marked nominalized form of a predicate if we want to make it subject. Languages might differ quite drastically in how well developed a predication relation they have. There are topic-prominent languages that do not have a well-established subject relation (Li & Thompson, 1976), and there are languages in which the distinction between nouns and verbs, the typical categories suited for topics and comments, is less clear, if present at all (Sasse, 1991).

Topic-Comment Problems of Language Learners as Translators

Fawcett (1997) is one of the authors who mention the relationship between theme/rheme structure and translation. He does not go into detail in describing different perspectives of defining the term theme and rheme; rather, he tries to give different examples of theme/rheme in different languages to observe how translators handle these. His general approach to the “theme” is whatever stands in the first position of the sentence and the “rheme” is whatever following the “theme”. Themes are classified according to the nature of the linguistic constituent in the first position, and when the linguistic constituent in the position is not the norm, it is a marked theme (Eggins, 1994). Fawcett says that theme-rheme has also been explained as Topic (what we are talking about) and Comment (what we are saying about it). According to Fawcett, this way of naming theme/rheme as Topic/Comment has to do with the way Eggins defined the term “topical Theme”: the theme part of the sentence is not just the first word or phrase, but extends to include the first properly “topical” item. That is to say, functional grammar acknowledges the “real” topic in the sentence, but will give the theme a different name depending on what linguistic item comes first (topical, interpersonal, textual).

In relation to the task of translation, Fawcett (1997) also mentions the influence of unmarked and marked theme on it. The problem lies in the fact that “what is considered as marked theme and unmarked theme varies between languages”, (p.88), and “not all languages organise theme-rheme in the same way and indeed may not even have a theme-rheme structure” (p.89). Also according to Fawcett (1997), many unskilled translators may

produce clumsy translations by unthinkingly reproducing source-language thematic structures. However, the reality of handling theme/rheme structure is “probably one area where seasoned translators in particular feel free to shift things around to their heart's content without regard to any theory” (p.90).

In 2009, Wang has an article “Exploring the Negative Transfer on English Learning”, in which he clarified the common negative Chinese-English transfer as well as the causes. Recently, researchers (e.g. Fujiwara et. al, 2024, Tang, 2024) have examined the transfer of TCSs from learners’ first language to English, concluding that EFL learners’ knowledge and acquisition of topic-comment structures is not deep enough, leading to a lot of misleading interpretation and transfer of them from the first language to English.

As can be seen clearly, there have been a great interest and concern in the issues of Topic-Comment and negative transfer. However, to the best of my knowledge, up to now, there have been very few studies of TCSs as well as the study that have been devoted to the possible reasons as well as suggested implications relating to EFL learners’ negative transfer of these structures.

Methodology

Participants

A hundred 1st year students from the College of Foreign Languages in Danang University were randomly chosen to be the subjects of this study. All of them major in English, which means that they have already acquired certain knowledge of English.

Participant demographics

Number of participants	Years of learning English	Level	Major at university	Geographical origin
100	9-10	Pre-intermediate and intermediate	English	Urban, rural and highlands

Data Collection and Analysis

The 100 subjects had been required to translate 14 simple sentences from Vietnamese into English in 30 minutes. The questionnaire was then designed to gain more insight into the students' account of their own process of making errors, by allowing them to express themselves freely. The subjects who did not perform well in the translation were later chosen in the questionnaire purpose, which is the main focus of this current research.

The questionnaire was in English. The students were asked to indicate the factors that caused them to make errors by checking the appropriate box on a provided list. The questionnaire comprises 7 close-ended options and 1 open-ended option for the students to choose from. The students were asked to refer back to their errors (which were numbered and highlighted) and tick the box that best described their opinion.

Findings and Discussion

Students' Reflection on the Causes for their Negative Transfer of TCSs

To our surprise, all of the 100 participants conduct more or less negative transfer and all of them seriously take part in the questionnaires. However, the answers from the questionnaires are just used as supporting. The author has grouped the answers to find the frequencies and the ranking.

Number	Causes	Frequency	Percentage	Ranking
1	It is different from Vietnamese syntactic structures.	50	14.5%	3
2	I don't practice frequently.	29	8.5%	6
3	I cannot understand the source sentences.	43	12.5%	4
4	I am influenced by the Vietnamese language.	61	17.8%	2
5	I forgot the rule.	27	7.8%	7
6	I cannot apply the knowledge of English when translating the sentences.	39	11.3%	5
7	The structure has not been taught yet.	83	24.1%	1
8	Other (open-ended question)	12	3.5%	8

Figure 1. Distribution of Causes of Negative Transfers

Very surprisingly, the answer that accounted for the highest percentage (24.1%) is choice 7: *"The structure has not been taught yet"*. This suggests the fact that sentence topic-comment structures are not concerned at English classroom. This does not mean that the structures are not used but they are not fully focused and emphasized by the teachers.

To our expectation, the Vietnamese language has a deep influence on the negative transfer, which is proved by the second highest choice (17.8%) of the students. This can explain for the answer with the third highest choice (14.5%): *"It is different from Vietnamese syntactic structures"*. The fourth most popular answer (12.5%) was *"I cannot understand the source sentences"*. This means that although students might be well-equipped with the linguistic knowledge of English, topic structures seem to be a real challenge to them.

11.3% of the answers explaining for the negative transfer revealed the fact that the students do not have the ability to apply their English knowledge to an actual task of translation. Despite their attempts, their limited knowledge of English hampered their achieving a grammatically acceptable translation. That is to say, translation in English classrooms is still limited.

The two remaining causes which are ranked the sixth and seventh highest were *"I don't practice frequently"* and *"I forgot the rule"*. These reasons rise from the subjects themselves. The students are aware of the role of practice in learning a language but in this case, lack of practice is not the main reason.

The last choice in the questionnaire was the open-ended answer which aimed at eliciting students' explanations of their own errors, if they wanted to give more causes for the errors. Only 12 out of 100 students raised their voice in open-ended answers of students, accounting for 3.5% of all the answers, as manifested in the following table:

Causes	Frequency	Percentage
Mistake/Carelessness	5	41.6%
Lack of Linguistic Competence	7	58.4%
	12	100%

Figure 2. Distribution of Causes of Errors Ascertained in the opened-ended question

Almost half of the answers (frequency=41.6%) showed that the negative transfers were caused by carelessness, or that the students did not check the translation carefully before submitting it. The answers indicated that these negative transfers may not be completely treated as “errors”, according to Corder’s definition. Because these students realized their own problems after they were shown the test, and that it was just a matter of carelessness, the errors cannot be the evidence of their lack of linguistic competence. However, they may indicate that the students are not very good at translating.

Seven out of twelve students (frequency=58.4%) showed a lack of language competence in English through their answers. They were often confused or misled by the words or structures that look similar to each other, and finally chose the word that does not convey the meaning of the source text. In some cases, they did not understand what was wrong with their translation. Even when the errors were circled and pointed out to them, they could not figure out the problem.

In two instances, the students revealed that they had never been corrected before, when they used the same structure. Consequently, they thought that the choice was correct. This answer suggests that in language study or in translation training, students’ errors may need a more suitable method of correction from the teachers. The students can also be trained to detect their own errors and correct their own deficiencies.

When we discuss about students’ negative transfers, one issue that should be noticed here was that Vietnamese sentence topic-comment structures have something in common and different from those in the English language. For instance, in Vietnamese, the topic can be marked by “thì, mà, là” and in English common topic markers are “As for”, “As far as ... is concerned” or “For ...”. Topic always appears at the beginning of a sentence in the both languages. However, the English sentence topic must be a noun, pronoun or a noun phrase while in Vietnamese, any part of speech can function as a topic of a sentence. This difference has been a barrier for the learners of the two languages.

Pedagogical Implications

Implications for EFL Learners

First, learners should be equipped with different types of TCSs in Vietnamese and in English. What's more, the topic markers should also be pointed out and taught so that students can recognize and apply to transferring process from this language to the other. If the structures are not in the materials at school, learners ought to study more from the outside books. Besides, people use TCSs with different intentions. Therefore, understanding these structures profoundly will develop their communication skills.

Second, in order to get success in choosing a proper TCS, students should have the ability to analyse what structure is commonly used in the two languages and on what occasion. This is really important because there is a big difference in the use of STC between the two languages. Therefore, Vietnamese learners of English should know the similarities and differences of TCSs in English and Vietnamese to study English better as well as have effective application in their daily communication.

Finally, when they encounter a topic-comment structure in Vietnamese, the first thing they should do is to consider the equivalent structure in English. They should not try to transfer freely and literally basing on the objective inference. In the process of translation, learners should pay more attention to the teachers' correction and try to self-correct when it is possible. Through self-correction, students will find out the rules and naturally avoid the mistakes the next time.

Implications for EFL Teachers

When teaching Vietnamese students how to translate Vietnamese TCSs into English, some specific contents should be emphasized to students, including the syntactic features of TCSs of the two languages and how to translate different types of topic-comment structures of Vietnamese.

In the sentences where the subject is a repetition or an appositive of the topic, there are two suitable ways of translating this structure. The first way is to single out the topic at the beginning of the sentence with the phrase "As for" and the subject is a pronoun replacing the noun introduced in the phrase "As for". Alternatively, the topic of the Vietnamese sentence can be

the subject in the English translation and consequently, the subject of Vietnamese sentences becomes the appositive in the English translation.

In the sentences with “double subject” constructions of Vietnamese. In these three sentence types, the topic is not identical with the subject. The relationship between the topic and the subject can be possessive, partitive or inclusive, or “aboutness” relation. There are four instances where the topic can appear: (1) The topic can be possessor while the subject is the possessee, (2) the topic is the direct object of the verb in the comment clause, (3) the topic is the adverb or adverbial clause of the verb in the comment clause, and (4) the topic may also be the indirect object of the verb in the comment clause. To help learners deal with the above constructions, the teachers, first of all, have to indicate the relationship between the subject and the topic or the “aboutness” relation.

When the topic is a verb/verb phrase in Vietnamese, the teachers should emphasize the necessity to change the part of speech of the verb when transferring the topic into English. The students in the study forgot to do this because in Vietnamese, most of words are not derived when their part of speech is changed.

Conclusion

The results of the questionnaire revealed the popular habit of word-by-word translation among the students. What’s more, a large number of students blamed their errors on the teaching at school: they had not been taught or introduced the so-called topic-comment structures at school before. Some students having a chance to study the structures before admitted their lack of practice prevents them from translating successfully. As a common structure in information structure system and in communication, STCSs cannot be ignored in the learning and teaching of both English and Vietnamese. We hope that this study will become part of contribution to the process of teaching and learning English.

Future Research

If the further research is conducted in this direction, the following aspects will be taken more consideration and investigation:

- How to improve Vietnamese students’ skills in comprehending the source sentence in Vietnamese-English translation.

- The influences of cultural aspects on the use of TCSs.
- A contrastive analysis of Comment and Predicate between Vietnamese and English.

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