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Misunderstandings in Answering Negative Interrogatives in L2 Spanish by Chinese Learners: Pragmatic Interference, Classification and Analysis

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Abstract

The production of an L2/LE could be considerably influenced not only by the linguistic aspects (phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics) of the learner's L1, but also the pragmatic knowledge. The answering patterns of negative interrogations of Spanish differ from several Asian languages such as Chinese Mandarin, which could cause pragmatic interference for native Chinese who learn Spanish as L2/LE. This study is aimed to compare the answering patterns in two languages and to analyze the potential pragmatic interference from Chinese L1 to Spanish L2/LE from pragmatic perspectives. According to our analysis, the Spanish answering pattern prioritizes the minimum cognitive processing effort, which could be described best by Sperber & Wilson's relevance theory, while the Chinese answering pattern prioritizes agreement maximization and conflict avoidance in conformity with Leech's politeness maxims. We classified the misunderstanding in Chinese learners' L2 Spanish was caused by different answering patterns between L1 and L2 according to Hinnenkamp's criteria and Oliviera's guidelines. This type of misunderstanding was classified as type M3 which might disturb the conversation flow, cause negative impressions and require new specifying conversation. Further didactic-orientated analysis indicates that this misunderstanding is culturally related and could have been avoided with appropriate explications.

Keywords

Misunderstanding, L2 Spanish, Negative Interrogative, Pragmatic Interference, Language Teaching

1. Introduction

According to Instituto Cervantes (2008), the concept of pragmatic error refers to an error that "is committed, both in production and reception, because of a lack of knowledge of the norms or socio-cultural values of the language". In other words, such errors occur when the learner speaks a second language while thinking in his or her mother tongue.

This paper aims to discuss the difference between the concepts of affirmation/negation in Chinese Mandarin and Spanish while answering negation-headed interrogatives; identify the cause of the potential pragmatic interference from the perspective of relevance theory and politeness maxim, classify the type of misunderstanding and make a didactic-orientated analysis in Spanish L2 learning by native speakers of Chinese Mandarin.

2. Pragmatic Interference in L2/LE Learning

Escandell Vidal (2009) stated that pragmatics is the study of the principles that regulate language use in communication. Therefore, the pragmatic analysis includes the influence of assumptions and conceptualizations of the world determined by the speaker's belonging to a specific cultural background. Similarly, pragmatic interference occurs when a person transfers culturally established assumptions and communication patterns from his or her L1 to a second or foreign language, as shown by misunderstandings in communication situations between foreigners and native speakers. For L2/LE learners, the lack of cultural knowledge of the target language community is an obstacle to the achievement of complete communicative competence, since the updated version of CEFR established by the Council of Europe (2020) indicates that the communicative language competence encompasses the pragmatic competence, as well as the linguistic competence and the sociolinguistic competence.

Moreover, speaking one language and thinking in the other could be like a "ticking time bomb" following Miquel López (2004) metaphor, since the frames of reference that constitute the socio-cultural context determine what is to be said on certain occasions of verbal interaction and adverse effects arise if one does not say what is expected, as Reyes (2017: pp. 20-21) points out.

Concerning Chinese learners' foreign language study, evidence of L1 pragmatic transfer can be found in several empirical studies. Chang (2009) found that in native Chinese Mandarin speakers' college-level L2 English refusal expressions, the frequency and content of semantic formulas differ from American college students. Wang (2022) analyzed T/V pronominal address use in Chinese learner's L2 Spanish production from the pragmatic perspective, and found that the learners transferred their tendency to use V to express deference and over-utilized this politeness strategy from L1 to L2. House & Kádar (2021) analyzed thank and greet expressions in Chinese and English, since the relationship between expressions and speech acts are different in those languages. Their results suggest that the significance of the pragmatic scope of those expressions could be

related to typological linguacultural distance.

3. A Case Study of Misunderstandings: Answering Negative Interrogatives in Spanish and Chinese Mandarin

The purpose of this study is to investigate the case of misunderstandings caused by the difference between Chinese Mandarin and Spanish in total interrogatives answering patterns, since the pragmatic scope of verb modifiers is completely different in these two languages, and the pragmatic transfer from L1 to L2 might alter totally the meaning carried by the expression and perceived by the native Spanish speaker.

According to Real Academia Española, "total interrogatives present implicitly or explicitly two or more options from which the listener must choose…In those of *sí* (yes) or *no*, two antagonistic options are contrasted Real Academia Española (2009, p. 3152)." Similarly, there are other negation verbs capable of heading the interrogative, such as *jamás* (never), *tampoco* (either), and *nunca* (ever), which require such a selection. The answer to this type of interrogative is simple. In the case of a question such as "¿*No tienes frío*?" (You are not cold?), it is easy to understand that this question only implies two possible types of answer: the affirmative, which indicates that the speaker is cold, and the negative, which means that he/she is unaware of the lack of warmth. Thus, the answer of both *sí* (*tengo frío*, I am cold) and *no* (*tengo frío*) is quite understandable, regardless of whether the content in parenthesis is omitted or not.

However, native Chinese Mandarin speakers have a different responding pattern regarding this type of interrogative. Chinese adverbs of negation 不 also involve the selection between two elements of opposite meanings, although the value of these is opposed to the Spanish ones, as illustrated in the example below.

这个人不是王先生？

¿Este hombre no ser el señor Wang?

Is this person not Mr. Wang?

是, (他不是王先生)/不，(他是王先生)。

Sí, (*él no ser el señor Wang*)/*No*, (*él ser el señor Wang*).

Yes, (*he not be Mr. Wang*)/*No*, (*he be Mr. Wang*).

It can be seen that the existence of two possible answers involving two verb modifiers 是 (yes) and 不 (no), whose meanings are opposed, do not change the subsequent explanatory statement. On the contrary, they have scope for the whole question. Thus, when faced with the equivalent question in Spanish "¿*Acaso él no es el señor Wang*?" (Perhaps he is not Mr. Wang?), a Chinese learner might answer *sí* (yes) while the message he or she intends to transmit is that this man is not Mr. Wang, and by this way, the wrong information is conveyed to his interlocutor. If the Chinese learner opts for complete answer *Sí, él no es el señor Wang* (Yes, he is not Mr. Wang), which is a literal translation of 是，他不是王先生 mentioned before, ambiguities may be generated. These am-

biguities would make communication even more complicated since misunderstandings may lead to the understanding that the interlocutor does not know how to interpret the communicative intention or does not know how to respond adequately to our stimuli (Merino Jular, 2010). As shown in the example below illustrating a typical classroom instruction environment, the teacher might be perplexed by the contradictory answer provided by the learner. The teacher might question the learner's linguistic competence and suspect his or her honesty after such a conversation. Equally, the learner would feel uncomfortable at the teacher's insistence, believing that he/she has explained him/herself correctly and with sufficient information.

> *Alumno: No he terminado los deberes de la asignatura.*
> Student: I have not finished the course homework.
> *Profesor: ¿Todavía no lo has terminado?*
> Teacher: You have not finished it yet?
> *Alumno: Sí.*
> Student: Yes.
> *Profesor: Entonces, ¿lo has terminado?*
> Teacher: So, have you finished it?
> *Alumno: No.*
> Student: No.

4. Pragmatic Analysis of Spanish and Chinese Answering Patterns from Two Perspectives

It seems that to deal with this discrepancy in the classroom, an E/LE teacher might rely on purely linguistic explanations without referring to the cultural factor. On the one hand, through syntactic analysis, it can be concluded that the difference consists in the fact that in the answering utterance, the Spanish modifiers s*í*/*no* are placed above CP, while the Chinese 是/不 are below TP. On the other hand, it would be feasible to consider that Spanish adverbs are modifiers of the elided utterance, such as no in *No* (*tengo frío* I am cold) while Chinese 是/不 acquire the value of agreeing/disagree. However, these explanations only manage to describe this phenomenon from different perspectives, without being able to discover its origin, since in any case, this type of error stemming from the cultural interference of the L2 in the target language turns out to be pragmatic, as defined above.

The contrast in the two modes of answering that causes misunderstandings would deal with two different pragmatic perspectives. The Spanish reply can be favorably explained from the point of view of relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995), which is based on the principle that human cognition is geared to the maximization of relevance and that utterances create expectations of optimal relevance. In the case of example 1, although the information is entirely new to the talker, this type of answer requires the minimum level of processing effort since only one of the two possible options is needed to interpret a total interrogative.

Therefore, either of the two modifying adverbs of the omissible tag utterance will be able to convey all the required information.

On the other hand, the Chinese answering pattern gives priority to conflict-avoidance rather than minimization of processing effort, which might be better explained by Leech's agreement maxim (Leech, 1983: p. 138), which postulates "to exaggerate agreement with other people, and to mitigate disagreement by expressing regret, partial agreement, etc." Additionally, as Escandell (1996: p. 106) points out, each culture has its verbal system of verbal communication and how to use it to avoid conflict. As for Eastern societies, it has been observed that they are empathy-oriented rather than conflict-oriented. Following this principle, it can be considered that in this case, a series of strategies are employed in an attempt to create empathy. The first step consists of eliminating the interrogative value of the question to treat it as a hypothesis posed by the talker. For native Chinese speakers, the interrogative "这个人不是王先生? (This person is not Mr. Wang?)" implies that the talker believes that this man is not Mr. Wang and asks only for confirmation. Consequently, the interlocutor may say 是 (yes) to agree with the talker by confirming that this man is not Mr. Wang. In opposite cases, even if the answerer disagrees with the talker, giving primacy to the interlocutor and not to the information itself would be considered a sign of respect, and thus the disagreement is mitigated.

Additionally, regarding the response of total interrogatives, this preference for priming agreement and avoiding conflict can also be found in other Eastern languages such as Japanese, while the preference for maximization of relevance can be observed in English. As shown in the example below, the Japanese language also allows similar answering patterns because the affirmation refers to the hypothesis of the talker, just like in Chinese. On the other hand, in English, the answering pattern does not differ from Spanish.

- 熱くないですか? Can't Tom come?
- *Aren't you hot*? No, (he cannot).
- はい.
- Yes, sir (Yes, to agree with the talker).

5. Classification and Analysis of Misunderstandings in Chinese Learner's L2 Spanish Conversation

The pragmatic nature of this type of misunderstanding allows pragmatic analysis in intercultural interactions. To understand the communicative style, the management of topics, and the attitudes and actions concerning the context, space, and time of the misunderstandings while answering total interrogative in L2 Spanish, we adopt the classification criteria established by Hinnenkamp (2001) and the problem diagnostic guideline planned by Oliveras (2005).

According to Hinnenkamp (2001), misunderstandings can be classified into seven basic types, ranging from "over misunderstandings" like MU1 and MU2 to "latent" ones such as MU 6 and MU7 with "covert" types in between. This type

of might is classified into the type M3, defined by the author as "a gradual recognition of a misunderstanding," indicated by "disturbances in the conversational flow" or simply by "the indication of uncomfortable moments, until one interlocutor becomes aware that some kind of misunderstanding has occurred" (2002: 216). This type of misunderstanding can be seen in the hypothetical conversation that occurred in a burger restaurant between a native speaker of Spanish (waiter) and a Chinese learner of Spanish (customer) when the Spanish waiter is not immediately aware of the misunderstanding but notices it through repetitions of questions or explanations or paraphrases of the customer. The reparation of this kind of misunderstanding requires a new conversation that begins with "Do you want ketchup on the hamburger or not?" and ends with an explicit and complete specification such as "I do not want to ketchup on my hamburger."

¿Quieres ketchup en tu hamburguesa?
Do you want ketchup in your hamburger?
¿Ketchup? No.
Ketchup? No.
¿No quieres ketchup en tu hamburguesa?
Don't you want ketchup on your hamburger?
Ah... sí.
Ah... yes.
Entonces, ¿quieres ketchup en tu hamburguesa o no?
Do you want ketchup on the hamburger or not?
No quiero ketchup en mi hamburguesa.
I don't want ketchup on my hamburger.

Regarding the analysis of this type of misunderstanding, we adopt a didactic-orientated proposal created by Oliveras (2005) to solve intercultural misunderstandings in the L2 Spanish classroom. According to the author, three fundamental questions are needed to interpret a misunderstanding:

1) What failed in communication? In other words, what was the informant's intention? How was it interpreted?

2) The misunderstanding is related to the cultural difference in expression and appreciation (of space, time, context).

3) Could the misunderstanding have been avoided? How? What strategies or skills could have been used?

In line with these questions, it can be assured that in the example above, the intention of the Spanish L2 speaker was to try to achieve empathy by focusing on his interlocutor rather than on the question itself, as argued above. The information he understands is not about the reality but the attitude (hypothesis) of the questioner. However, this intention could cause mistrust when the misunderstanding could be interpreted by a native Spanish speaker as a lack of attention, bad jokes, and even negative considerations about his competence in the Spanish language when it is believed that he cannot express himself adequately.

There is no doubt that this kind of misunderstanding is culture-related in the expression and appreciation of the context. As mentioned above, the values are held by the different perspectives, which are the one that focuses on the interlocutor to achieve agreement and the one that concentrates on reality to achieve greater relevance. The language instructor could use linguistic practices such as forced-choice practice to improve learners' familiarity with Spanish affirmation and negation adverbs like *sí* (yes) and *no* in Spanish language classrooms with adequate didactical intervention.

However, this type of misunderstanding could have been avoided if the origin and the different roles of affirmation and negation in both languages had been sufficiently explained in real communication simulations such as role-playing games. Additionally, the learner should be clarified that when he or she is not able to avoid completely this type of pragmatic error, a clear explanation would be the most reasonable solution to compensate for the damage to the person's image caused by the misunderstanding.

6. Conclusion

Pragmatic interference could cause unfavorable effects on the communication activities that an L2/LE learner and a native speaker attempt to carry out, since the verbal system of a language, just like its gestural system, is patterned by its own culture. Thus, the misunderstandings generated by the different ways of answering negative interrogatives could make communication difficult and cause adverse effects.

The negative interrogative answering patterns of Chinese and Spanish are different, which could cause pragmatic interference in conversations between a native Spanish speaker and a Chinese learner of Spanish. Through pragmatic analysis, it is understood that misunderstandings answering negative interrogatives may be due to the difference between the primacy of minimalizing cognitive processing effort adopted by Spanish native speakers and the priority of conflict avoidance by Chinese native speakers. These types of errors could be difficult to eradicate if only linguistic solutions are applied without investigating and explaining their socio-cultural origin.

However, we have to admit that we are only able to examine a particular case of pragmatic transfer only from a theoretical perspective. We thus propose future studies with empirical methods, such as data collection from real conversations between Chinese learners and native Spanish speakers or through questionnaires, and quantitative or qualitative data analyses, as L2 Spanish production and perception by Chinese learners are still not a thoroughly investigated area with an insufficient number of background studies.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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