

# ***Transfer from L2 to L1 in Syntax: A Case Study on the Chinese Inverted Sentences***

**Qianqian Yang<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Hong Kong, China*

*a. qyangar@connect.ust.hk*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** Based on the empirical research, this project investigates the transfer from L2 to L1 in syntax for Chinese learners, especially looking into the issue of the Chinese inverted sentences. Through the semi-structured interview in the qualitative research, the data is generated from two netizens who commented on the Weibo post about the Chinese inverted sentences. The result shows that the revival of the Chinese inverted sentences reflects a change in Chinese people's language habits, imperceptibly influenced by English syntax and culture. Based on the interaction between English and Chinese and the "multi-competence" of language learners, the usage of the Chinese inverted sentences is beneficial for Chinese development and Chinese learners' English acquisition in general, and yet concerns for confusion for language learners to study English syntax also deserve noting.

**Keywords:** The Chinese inverted sentence, transfer, syntax, culture

## **1. Introduction**

It is well known that Chinese as SVO (Subject - verb - object) language has the subject coming before the predicate, adverb, and then the object and complement [1]. According to Chao, "inverted sentences" refer to sentences with the word order against the standard subject-predicate pattern in Chinese [2]. The placement of numerous preverbal parts at the end of the sentence, including the subject, auxiliary, and adverb, is one notable aspect of the inverted sentences' word order. [3]. Recently, the utterance of the Chinese inverted sentences has been a hot spot on social media and attracted people's attention; what is hidden behind the increasingly frequent usage of the Chinese inverted sentences is some linguistic issues. Here are some examples:

Table1: Examples of the Chinese inverted sentences and some English expressions.

	The Chinese Inverted Sentences	English sentences
Subject postposition	Inverted: 来了吗 他? Normal: 他 来了吗? Translated in English: Did he come?	Here comes, Tommy. Want some food, Lily?
Auxiliary postposition	Inverted: 他是个老师吧 可能。 Normal: 他 可能 是个老师吧。 Translated in English: He is a teacher, probably.	Your father dislikes me, I think. They have finished their work already. He is sick, unfortunately.
Adverb postposition	Inverted: 吃饭了吗 今天晚上? Normal: 今天晚上 吃饭了吗? Translated in English: Did you eat something this evening?	I will not go to school tomorrow. See you next week. I met my old friend yesterday.

As is shown in Table 1, generally speaking, these inverted sentences do not follow the Chinese syntactic interpreting way formally. In contrast, these inverted sentences are kind of similar to expressions commonly appearing in English sentences. Since the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China regulates that English courses should be offered officially starting in Chinese primary schools, English is the most widely spoken foreign language in China and English is the second language of the majority of Chinese people. This social phenomenon seems to indicate that Chinese people's certain language habit is influenced by English.

According to Odlin, the "linguistic transfer" is known as the influence rooted in parallels and distinctions between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps inadequately) acquired [4]. The first language (L1) has an influence on the second language (L2), the process of which is conceptualized as "substratum transfer", occurring in a variety of linguistic features including phonetics, phonology, semantics, syntax, and morphology [5]. Conversely, "reverse transfer" takes place when the direction of linguistic transfer is opposite [6]. Given the language issue and theoretical framework, this study attends to investigate the relationship between the Chinese inverted sentences and transfer from L2 English to L1 Chinese in terms of syntax features.

## 2. Literature Review

The issue of interference, or the unintentional impact of one language on another in bilingual competence and performance is still commonly discussed and hotly debated in the second language acquisition (SLA) field [7]. Pavlenko and Travis pointed out the interaction between the two languages from several angles, referred to as the term "bidirectional transfer" [5]. Based on Odlin's transfer theory, several researchers have conducted extensive theoretical and empirical studies to indicate the instability of L1's "nativeness" and demonstrate the possibility of changes in L1 competence in the adult period [8, 9], providing further explanations of why L2 possess an impact on L1. The concept of L2's impact on L1 originates from the concept of "multi-competence," which was proposed to describe the knowledge of languages in the same mind [10]. Cook argues that rather than being entirely independent systems, since the first language and the other languages all exist in the same mind, they must combine to a linguistic super-system to some extent [6]. In Cook's categorization of possible models to describe the relationship of language in mind, the "interconnection model" is directly related to the interaction between languages. Two models are subcategorized under the interconnection model. First is the "linked-languages model," suggesting

that the separate components of languages interact with one another. Accordingly, this model discusses language transfer research. The second is the “partial integration model,” arguing that one mind has places where the two linguistic systems partially overlap. It examines how the single combined system varies from either language’s monolingual counterparts, though not differentiating between languages that overlap in the same areas. The vocabulary, syntax, or other linguistic skills may overlap or be shared [6].

However, the investigation is typically limited to L1 transfer, while the SLA literature on L2’s influence, particularly on L2’s transfer to L1, remains quite scarce [11]. Brown & Gullberg criticizes that the bias in favor of L1’s influence on L2 neglects the potential for language systems to interact within a single learner [12]. According to Pavlenko’s reflections, researchers have a bias toward studying transfer from L2 to L1 mainly in terms of phonology, lexicon&semantics, and pragmatics. Only a few look into the morphosyntax aspect, primarily focusing on western languages such as German, Swedish, and Finnish [7]. Since the importance of L2’s influence on L1 is sometimes underestimated, this research focuses on this specific aspect, transfer from L2 to L1 in syntax in terms of the Chinese inverted sentences, in order to fill a research gap. Thus, this research is conducted not only aims to make up the blankness in the linguistic field with theoretical significance but also to promote both the development of L1 and acquisition of L2 for language learners in the SLA field with practical significance. Let alone the issue of the Chinese inverted sentences is a hot topic that has been hotly discussed recently, increasing this research's social relevance. Among finite studies, Cook et al. confirmed L2’s effects on the L1 in syntactic processing [13]. According to the literature review, this research tends to explore if and how L2 English influences L1 in the syntactical feature of the Chinese inverted sentences. The research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. To what extent does the Chinese inverted sentences as one syntax feature of L2 English transfer to L1 for Chinese learners?
2. What is the Chinese learner's perception or practices in the Chinese inverted sentences?
3. What is the Chinese learner's attitude towards reverse transfer between Chinese and English?

In line with Cook’s “reverse transfer” argument and the ‘multi-competence’ notion [6], it is presumed that the Chinese inverted sentence results from L2 English’s transfer to L1 Chinese in syntax and culture’s influence; Chinese learners hold positive opinions towards the Chinese inverted sentences’ influence on Chinese and Chinese students’ English acquisition.

### 3. Methodology

This study conducted qualitative research to collect data. To study Chinese people’s usage of the Chinese inverted sentences, a semi-structured interview was designed to gain information as data. Two subjects are recruited from the netizens who posted comments in posts about Chinese converted sentences on Weibo because netizens who left comments could be someone who has interests and is likely to use the Chinese inverted sentences. The first one (A) was recruited because she commented in the Chinese inverted sentences post that “Unfortunately, I am still bad at English inversion even though I used the Chinese inverted sentences every day” showing that she has noticed that the Chinese inverted sentences may be related to English syntax, and she may realize the certain interacting relationship between L1 and L2. As the control group, the second one (B) was chosen randomly from the post without restrictions of gender, age, education, and other conditions, making this research more scientific, objective, and convincing. She commented that “I guess that everybody talks with inverted sentences nowadays.” which seemed to reflect that many people surrounding her may use the Chinese inverted sentences, while she may not relate the Chinese inverted sentences to English together by herself. The semi-structured interview included the eight primary questions (listed in the appendix), and some additional pertinent questions were added depending on the interviewee’s responses. Examples of the Chinese inverted sentences and similar English expressions in Table 1

are provided for participants to take the interview for reference. The willingness of participants underpinned the entire research process. In order to prevent dishonesty, the participants got explanations of the topic of this research project before the interviews. It is guaranteed that all experiment data was secured, and it would only be used for the study. In order to ensure secrecy and safeguard participant privacy, the survey was also anonymous.

Here are the main 8 questions of the interview:

1. Do you often use the Chinese inverted sentences? In what situations do you use the Chinese inverted sentences? In the oral way or in the written way? Formally or informally?
2. What kind of the Chinese inverted sentence do you use the most frequently? Subject postposition, auxiliary postposition, or adverb postposition?
3. According to examples, do you think there is any similarity between the Chinese inverted sentences and English sentences?
4. Are you familiar with other English expressions similar to subject postposition, auxiliary postposition, and adverb postposition in the Chinese Inverted sentences?
5. When did you begin to use the Chinese inverted sentences more and more frequently? Is it related to the frequency you use English or your English proficiency?
6. Why do you use the Chinese inverted sentences more and more frequently? Is this related to the English culture you have known?
7. Do you think the Chinese inverted sentences promote or hamper the development of Chinese?
8. Do you think the Chinese inverted sentences promote or hamper Chinese people to learn English?

The whole process of two interviews was conducted in the Weibo chat box in the written form or the oral form according to the participants' preference, and the interview's content was recorded and used as data for this research under the interviewee's consent. The entire interview was manually transcribed and translated for data collection.

#### 4. Data Analysis

According to the interview, both participant A and participant B used the Chinese inverted sentences frequently, mainly in the case of oral speaking or daily online chat with friends. They both learned English officially in class several years and English is their second language. Two interviewees both have both coincides and dissents about the Chinese inverted sentences. They agreed that the Chinese inverted sentence has some similarities with some English sentences in syntax and thus was affected. Their usage of the Chinese inverted sentences both owed to the changes in language habits under the subliminal influence of English culture, aiming to add supplementary statements after the primary content they wanted to express in the conversation.

Participant A realized the similarities by herself because she had previous knowledge of English expressions where subject, auxiliary, adverb, or phrase are placed at the end of the sentences such as attributive clauses and adverbial clauses. She learned these English expressions at school, and now she had only some vague English syntactic knowledge. She recalled that she might first use the Chinese inverted sentences when she was in secondary or high school, and since that time, she has gotten in touch with the above English expressions more and more frequently. So she admitted that her English frequency and proficiency did influence her usage of the Chinese inverted sentences, ie. English transfer to Chinese in syntax. From the perspective of culture, she thought that both the Chinese inverted sentences and some English expressions helped highlight the main points that the speaker wanted to express. Therefore, she claimed that changes in her speaking habit of Chinese word order took place under the subliminal influence of some similar English syntactic expressions and the communication purpose of emphasis. In her opinion, the utterance of the Chinese inverted sentences does better than harm in daily life for speakers to answer questions or express ideas more briefly,

more harm than good in some formal occasions for the consequence of showing disrespect to some extent. She believed that Chinese people could use the Chinese inverted sentences freely in daily life for communication convenience, only to keep in mind avoiding use on formal occasions. Consequently, she claimed that the usage of the Chinese inverted sentences is beneficial for the development of Chinese because of the excellent inclusiveness of Chinese culture. She also admitted that it is likely for Chinese students who are learning English to learn English faster since students familiar with the Chinese inverted sentences may have more acceptance of similar English syntactic structures. However, she was concerned that Chinese students might have difficulty studying English syntax in class initially because the Chinese inverted sentences only had partial similarities with some English expressions instead of complete consistency, resulting in confusion and mix-up.

When it comes to participant B, she viewed herself as a “terrible analyzer” of English grammar or syntax, and she did not notice word order in English sentences when she studied at school. She didn’t recognize that part of the Chinese inverted sentences was similar to some English expressions in syntax until comparing the examples in the provided materials carefully. She also admitted that the Chinese inverted sentences may be kind of influenced by English syntax after being reminded of other similar English expressions such as attributive clauses and adverbial clauses. Nevertheless, since she herself didn’t realize the similarities between Chinese and English in syntax previously, she preferred to owe the Chinese inverted sentences to culture’s influence much more than syntax’s transfer. In her understanding, what went before the postpositional element in the Chinese inverted sentences was the content that the speaker had planned initially to convey. Meanwhile, she thought that from the perspective of purpose, people inverted some content for supplement statements to express themselves faster and more briefly in daily dialogue. And she believed that the supplement statement in the inverted part has the role of explaining or clarifying misunderstandings, aiming to make the listener receive the speaker’s information as soon as possible. But she herself neither noticed when she first used the Chinese inverted sentences nor related it to her usage frequency of English frequency or English proficiency. Thus, she argued that some English syntactic expressions and culture subliminally influenced the Chinese inverted sentence in syntax, while speakers like her may speak the Chinese inverted sentences subconsciously without realizing the influence. She thought that in the fast-paced information age, the frequent utterance of the Chinese inverted sentences helps people to spend less time communicating and improve efficiency, so it does better than harm for Chinese development. In addition, she claimed that since the Chinese inverted sentences share the same function of supplementary statements with some English expressions, students who use the Chinese inverted sentences frequently might get familiar with the similar logical thinking mode in English. Hence, the Chinese inverted sentences facilitate Chinese students to learn English by promoting their English understanding in the semantic aspect. However, she thought that the formal learning of English knowledge was mainly through systematic and professional interpretation by teachers and consistent practice by students, so similarities in syntax may have no positive effect on language learners neither negative.

## 5. Results and Findings

Overall, participant A thinks that the Chinese inverted sentences could be regarded as a change in Chinese people’s language habits under the subliminal influence of English both in syntax and culture. Chinese and English interact with each other, and they have both advantages and disadvantages for the development of Chinese and for Chinese learners to study English. Participant B holds that more and more Chinese people speak inverted sentences as an acquired language habit because of the subtle influence of English, partially in syntax and mainly in culture, but Chinese people themselves just say it subconsciously without realizing the English influence. Generally speaking, participant B takes



a positive attitude towards the Chinese inverted sentences' impact on Chinese development and Chinese students' English learning.

## 6. Discussion

In general, participant A and participant B reach the consensus that Chinese people speak the Chinese inverted sentences under the subconscious influence of English syntax and culture. This might be reinforced by Porte's claim that interference episodes typically operate subconsciously and are invasive since the speaker is not aware that the features they are creating do not conform to accepted monoglot norms [14].

Evidence from two perspectives could explain why the Chinese inverted sentence is significantly influenced by culture. It is generally acknowledged that language and culture are inextricably linked. Language is a component of culture; as such, it reflects culture, as well as being shaped by it [15]. On one hand, Chinese people approve of the positive function of some English expressions in communication, actively accept this part of English culture, and autonomously adapt it into Chinese culture. Looking from the perspective of the Common Underlying Conceptual Base [16], the Chinese inverted sentence matches the specific social context in that Chinese people use the specific language pattern, and thus Chinese people form their new language habits. The Common Underlying Conceptual Base (CUCB) is a collection of mental images that comprise knowledge and concepts that are either language- and culture-neutral or peculiar to a particular language and culture [16]. When new information enters the CUCB through both language channels, it is faced by the language learner's sociocultural legacy and prior knowledge. Real-world knowledge combines with scholarly expertise to generate what is usually referred to as "socio-cultural background knowledge" [16]. Date back to the history of the Chinese inverted sentences. Inversion structure is a language pattern in Archaic Chinese. As a specific syntactic matching phenomenon and a common rhetoric method for ancient Chinese people, the inverted sentence in Archaic Chinese is worth great cultural and pragmatic value, with the function of attracting listeners' attention by emphasizing important information [17]. From the perspective of sociolinguistics, following the trend of historical development and social evolution, it is a political choice that classical Chinese was replaced by vernacular in New Culture Movement, and finally, develop into Modern Chinese. Besides, in comparison to characteristics, classical Chinese is succinct and abstract, while vernacular is straightforward and easy to understand. To express the same meaning, vernacular usually contains more characters than archaic Chinese for a detailed explanation [18]. So people of that era themselves were willing to eliminate Classical Chinese and accept vernacular as well, to satisfy their communicative purpose in a more popular way. With the increasingly frequent contact among countries around the world, some features of languages of various countries transfer to Chinese and gradually develop into Modern Chinese, which is more expressive and accessible, containing characteristics of multiple languages. The usage of the Chinese inverted sentences meets people's requirement of daily communication through a supplementary statement to emphasize or clarify, resulting that Chinese people re-choosing the Chinese inverted sentences. Nowadays, the re-appearance of the Chinese inverted sentences not only indicates more and more frequent cultural exchanges between China and English-speaking countries, but also reflects the logical thinking mode of inversion that matches the fast-paced society in modern China. It could be regarded as Chinese culture's adaption of available English culture, or the "renaissance" of inversion in classical Chinese. This reinforces that human thoughts and ideas originate from CUCB, and then are mapped onto linguistic symbols to reach the social phenomenon through any language channel [19]. The social situation of cultural exchanges and merges worldwide precipitate Chinese people to accept the continuous changes of Modern Chinese, while the progressiveness of Modern Chinese endows

Chinese people with the cultural confidence of Modern Chinese, then driving Chinese people to commit themselves to the development and the inheritance of both language and culture.

On the other hand, speakers are required to recognize different cultural signals conveyed by the Chinese inverted sentences or formal Chinese and then decide which one to use appropriately on different occasions, from the perspective of contrastive pragmatics. According to Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, universal pragmatic knowledge is shared across languages and explains how the same fundamental tactics, such as direct, traditionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect or hints, are employed in various languages. The choice, distribution, and implementation of speech acts vary in interactional styles and significantly among languages [20]. Due to the nature of conversation as social interaction, participants must coordinate not just in terms of topic selection and turn-taking, but also in terms of language use at the semantic and syntactic levels [21]. In order to express their intentions to their listeners, speakers in a conversation must choose the most proper linguistic structures [3]. People use Modern Chinese in formal occasions to show respect while choose to use the Chinese inverted sentences in casual dialogue in daily life to express ideas quickly and briefly, reflecting that Chinese people blend English culture and Chinese culture well and improve their language performance. This further supports that language acquisition contributes to the formation of CUCB, which explains the distinctive traits of “multi-competence” and the interaction between several languages at various levels [22], including the linguistic or cultural levels.

In comparison, participants A and B held different opinions about English syntax’s influence on the Chinese inverted sentences. Participant A has adequate knowledge of English syntax at school, so she could realize the syntactic similarities between the Chinese inverted sentences and some English expressions by herself and then approves of English syntax’s influence on the Chinese inverted sentences. Since participant B does not have enough knowledge of English syntax, she keeps a conservative attitude towards English syntax’s effect on the Chinese inverted sentences, although she could figure out the similarities after comparing the provided materials and being suggested other example. According to Audi’s epistemology, there is a close connection between thought and language (or at least conceptualization), and belief depends on our conceptual resources in a way that perception does not [23]. Participant A’s belief of L2’s influence on L1 in syntax depends on her existing concept of both L1 and L2 syntax knowledge. In contrast, participant B could perceive the relationship between L1 and L2 in syntax based on present observations or her being provided suggestions despite little conceptual knowledge. Still, she has limited belief in how much L1 relates to L2 in syntax. Participant B’s propositional belief, if any, would be that the Chinese inverted sentence is influenced by English syntax in a limited way. According to Audi, this propositional belief as it is portrays what she sees as the degree of L2’s influence on L1 in syntax in a way that requires her to have such a concept. The same is true for participant A. Consequently, to some extent, it is controversial if they know what it is they have this true belief about, since knowledge of (perceptible) properties is more basic than human being’s knowledge of the substances that have them [23]. This gives reasons why participant A and participant B vary in how much the Chinese inverted sentence is influenced by English syntax, which is the limitation of this qualitative research. Suggestions for future research to study to what extent the Chinese inverted sentences are influenced by English syntax are as follows. Researchers could recruit more pairs of participants with different levels of English proficiency, supposing that participants in each pair as a control group have a similar concept of English syntax. Researchers could also conduct quantitative research by designing tests to gain data.

## 7. Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussions, this research approves that the Chinese inverted sentence results from L2 English’s transfer to L1 Chinese in syntax structure, but to what extent is the Chinese

inverted sentence influenced by English syntax requires further verification. This research confirms the previous assumption that Chinese people change their language habits greatly influenced by culture in a subliminally way. Considering the interaction between Chinese and English and the “multi-competence” of language learners, the utterance of the Chinese inverted sentences benefits the development of Chinese, and it has both advantages and disadvantages for Chinese learners to study English.

This research has implications for language development in the sociolinguistics field. With more and more frequent cultural exchanges among countries, languages interact with each other constantly and change by absorbing some features of other languages. The key to promoting native language development and improvement is to make the changes in the native language suitable in the social context and meet personal communication requirements in pragmatics simultaneously. This research also has implications for language learners in the SLA field. Taking advantage of familiarity with similar structures in English syntax, teachers could encourage students who are starting to learn English syntax to utilize the logical thinking mode of the Chinese inverted sentences to generally understand English sentences’ semantic meanings. But teachers should focus more on drilling exact grammatical knowledge into students and strengthening students’ practices to avoid confusion.

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