

Abstract

This paper examines the personal pronouns in second language acquisition across English and Mandarin, with a special focus on Mandarin speaking English learners. As Mandarin belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language families, the differences in personal pronouns between English and Mandarin distinguish in various ways. For instance, personal pronouns in English have cases while Mandarin does not; it makes English more specific than Mandarin as the cases play an important role in the sentence. On the other hand, Mandarin personal pronouns make greater distinctions between grammatical number and gender than their English counterpart. Language mistakes can be expected with Mandarin speaking English learners in the use of personal pronouns, such as unclear references and gender errors. The primary goal for Mandarin students acquiring English as their second language is to speak English properly and avoid errors. This paper thereby explores the impact of the first language interference towards Mandarin speaking students. Two ways of learning a new language are also analyzed through the problems that occur to Mandarin speaking students while acquiring English personal pronouns. Thus, in order for Mandarin speaking students to learn English personal pronouns effectively and properly, it is necessary to be fully aware of their native language interference and their learning attitudes. The aim and importance of this paper is therefore to offer Chinese Mandarin speaking students a comparison between the structure of their own language personal pronouns and the English one. This is done in order to facilitate their learning process in acquiring English as a second language by making them aware of the crucial differences in context between the two pronoun systems, so that first language interference might be reduced.

Keywords: English, Mandarin, Personal pronouns, Language interference, second language acquisition

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1. Introduction

This is a comparative study of personal pronouns in English and Mandarin, with a special focus on the perspective of second language acquisition. Nowadays, the English-speaking countries continue to play a significant role in the world economy, culture, integration and politics. The developing countries such as China need to hasten integration with the international community. Language is at the core of a culture. It is central to communication and closely related to thought. In order to have a better communication with the English-speaking countries, learning proper English has become one of the primary goals of Chinese people. Among the factors that have made it difficult for students in China to learn proper English, there is the difference in personal pronouns between English and Mandarin. The fundamental rules of the pronoun systems in both languages cannot be ignored if people wants to achieve effective communication. Although the two systems share some similarities in usage and meaning, they differ from each other in what concerns the plurality of personal pronouns. For example, the English plural third person *they* has the equivalent in the Mandarin plural third persons *ta1men*, *ta2men* and *ta3men*.

On this basis, this thesis attempts to analyze pronoun differences such as these between the two languages from the perspective of second language acquisition theory. By comparing the two languages and analyzing learners' errors, it is assumed that learners that learn a second language might be influenced by their first language. There is an important distinction between language acquisition and language learning. Language acquisition is similar to the way a learner acquires his first language, and has a focus on text and communication. Language learning, on the other hand, has a focus on acquiring the correct language form, which learners obtain from the grammar rules of a new language thanks to instruction and exercise. In relation to this, most Chinese English-learners who speak Mandarin, learn English in a Mandarin-speaking environment. Thus, the first language interference may have an impact on Mandarin-speaking students. Since their native language Mandarin differs greatly from English, the negative transfer from their first language might cause them to make many mistakes and not to be very clear in communication. So the aim of the thesis is also to spot the differences between English pronouns and Mandarin pronouns to make it easier for Chinese students to learn English by referring as well to some important linguistic theories about second language acquisition.

The thesis comprises five sections. Section 1 is the introduction, which contains a basic overview of personal pronouns, indicating some theoretical issues. Further, section 1 outlines the structure of the thesis. Section 2 provides a comparative study about personal pronouns between English and Mandarin, and it also gives a general definition of the personal pronouns in each language. Section 3 presents a concrete analysis of English and Mandarin personal pronouns. It is a micro-contrast study on personal pronouns within two languages, which illustrates the similarity and dissimilarities by pairs from different angles. This section also introduces some research on personal pronouns by western and eastern scholars. Section 4 shows some of the linguistic theories which relate to second language acquisition. A variety of the problems with whom Chinese students have to struggle in learning English pronouns will be provided at end of section 4. The last section draws a conclusion from all the previous sections above, giving reasonable suggestions in language study method to Mandarin second language learners.

2. Personal pronouns

2.1. Personal pronouns in English

In English grammar, the personal pronoun system is deemed as a closed system. As the name implies, personal pronouns represent specific people, animals or inanimate object. They are not only used to substitute nouns, but also refer to a specific individual or group (Quirk et al., 1985, 341-342). English personal pronouns are associated with three grammatical persons, and can take on various forms depending on person, number, case and gender. The following table shows the personal pronouns in English.

Table 1: Personal pronouns in English

	First Person		Second Person		Third Person	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
Nominative/ Subjective case	I	We	You	You	Him/her/it	They
Accusative/ Objective case	Me	Us	You	You	Him/her/it	Them
Genitive: Determinative/ Independent case	My Mine	Our Ours	Your Yours	Your Yours	His/her/its His/hers/its	Their Theirs

As the table above shows, English personal pronouns present distinctions between persons. The first person pronouns refer to the speaker or the writer. The second person pronouns refer to the person spoken to or the addressee. Furthermore, the third person pronouns are used situationally, and they refer to persons or things other than the speaker(s) or the addressee. For example, in (1), a husband speaking to his wife and nodding his head towards the children's bedroom, might say:

(1) Are *they* asleep?

where *they* refers to the children.

Moreover, as noted above, each personal pronoun has different forms for grammatical number: singular and plural. For instance, the first person singular *I* is only used for the speaker whereas the first person plural *we* is used for the speaker plus one or more other persons. As the example in (2) below illustrates, the first person pronouns *I* and the third person pronoun *she* are singular forms, and only refer to one person, whereas *we* and *they* are plural forms that refer to two or more people.

- (2) a. *I* like coffee.
 b. *She* is clever.
 c. *We* went home.
 d. *They* played doubles.

Personal pronouns have different forms based on their grammatical case. The five personal pronouns have a further distinction between subjective, objective and genitive case forms, such as *I/me/my*, *he/him/his*, *she/her/her*, *we/us/our* and *they/them/their*. As the table above shows, the only exceptions are the second person *you* and the third person *it* that do not have distinct subjective and objective case forms. . Furthermore, the choice between subjective, objective and genitive cases is made on the basis of grammatical function of pronouns in the clause. As their name implies, subjective personal pronouns act as the subject and the subject complement; objective personal pronouns function as the object and the object of a preposition; and genitive personal pronouns mark a noun as being the possessor of another noun. The following example show the case functions of personal pronouns:

- | | |
|---|-------------------|
| (3) a. <i>He</i> was late. | (subjective case) |
| b. It was <i>he</i> . | (subjective case) |
| c. Sue likes <i>me</i> . | (objective case) |
| d. I saw <i>him</i> . | (objective case) |
| e. I gave it to <i>him</i> . | (objective case) |
| f. This is <i>my</i> book. It's not <i>hers</i> . | (genitive case) |

As the example in (3a) shows, the second person *he* is in the subjective case because it is in the subject position of the sentence. In (3d), the pronoun *him* is in the

objective case because it stands in the object position, and the pronoun *him* in (3e) is in objective case which functions as a prepositional complement. Moreover, in examples (3b) and (3c), the subjective case form *he* and the objective case form *me* are both used as the subject complement. As Quirk et al. found, the “prescriptive grammar tradition stipulates the subjective case form, the objective case form is normally felt to be the natural one, particularly in informal style” (p. 336). Moreover in (3f), the first person pronoun *my* and the third person pronoun *hers* both stand in the genitive case.

Gender differences occur in English personal pronouns system. The overt grammatical contrast can mainly be identified between personal and non-personal gender. The personal gender includes two sets of distinctions, which occur in the third person singular pronouns. For instance, *he* is used for male referents and *she* refers to female ones. The plural form of the third person pronouns, such as *they* and *them*, are both neutralized in grammatical gender. Neutral gender is restricted to third person singular pronoun *it*, and it is mainly indicated to animals of unspecified sex or to inanimate objects. Besides, the first and second person pronouns are inevitably of personal rather than non-personal gender (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 341).

2.2. Personal pronouns in Mandarin

According to Matthew (2010, 41) Mandarin pronouns are identified in the same way as in English. Mandarin personal pronouns are used to substitute nouns. Just as in English personal pronouns, in Mandarin there are not only certain forms for first person, second person and third person pronouns, but also differences between singular and plural forms. However, there are still great differences between the two pronoun systems.

Table 2: Personal pronouns in Mandarin

	First person		Second person		Third person	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
Subjective/ Objective case	wo	women zanmen	ni nin	nimen	ta (ta1, ta2, ta3)	tamen (tamen1, tamen2, tamen3)

As the table above shows, it is obvious that Mandarin's pronouns present some grammatical differences from their English counterparts. First of all, Mandarin has two different words to represent English first person pronoun *we* in the plural form, *women* and *zanmen*. Likewise, unlike English that has only one second person form, the pronoun *you* being used both for the singular and the plural, Mandarin makes a clear distinction between the forms, with *ni/nin* being used for the singular term and *nimen* for the plural one. Further, *nin* is not only the polite form of *ni*, but also the fusion of *ni* and the plural marker *-men*. Therefore, *nin* only appears in the singular form. However, English is richer in third person singular terms, using *she*, *he* and *it*, whereas Mandarin uses only one term *ta* which refers to all three genders. Although, this poverty in Mandarin third person plurals only applies to the spoken language because in the written language a clear distinction is made. In the written language, *ta* in the masculine is represented by the Chinese character 他 (from herein *ta1*); the feminine is represented by the character 她 (from herein *ta2*) and the neuter is represented by the character 它 (from herein *ta3*). It is therefore only in the written language that the gender is clear; in spoken language the gender differentiation can only be recognized through context:

(4) a. Lisa zai nali? - *ta2* bu zai zheli

Lisa at here - she not at here

‘Where is Lisa? She is not here.’

b. John zai nali? - *ta1* bu zai zheli

John at here - he not at here

‘Where is John? He is not here.’

c. Mao zai nali? - *ta3* bu zai zheli

Cat at here - it not at here

‘Where is the cat? It is not here.’

Moreover, since Mandarin personal pronouns refer primarily to persons, the third person pronoun *ta3* is used to refer to animals, as in (4c), or inanimate entities (Li & Hompson, 1989, p.134). In general, the third person pronoun *ta3* functions similarly to the neuter gender *it* in English, but it is usually omitted when referring to an inanimate entity, as in (5a) the reference already mentioned in the conversation. For example, the

only answer to the question in (5a) below, would only be the answer in (5b) without the pronoun, not the answer in (5c) with the pronoun:

- (5) a. *ni xihuan nei ben shu ma?*
 you like that measure word book question
 'Do you like that book?'
- b. *wo xihuan*
 I like
 'I like it.'
- c. *wo xihuan ta3**
 I like it.
 'I like it.'

Finally, unlike most plural forms of personal pronouns in English, which have different morphological characters from their singular forms, the plural forms in Mandarin are relatively simpler. As shown in table 2 above, the suffix *men* is added to each singular form in order to represent the plural term, such as singular *wo* to plural *wo-men* 'we', singular *ni* to plural *ni-men* 'you', singular *ta1*, *ta2* and *ta3* to plural *ta1men* 'they.masculine', *ta2-men* 'they.feminine' and *ta3-men* 'they.neuter'. For example:

- (6) a. *women bu renshi ta1men.*
 we not know them
 'We don't know them.'
- b. *nimen hao ma?*
 you guys good question
 'How are you guys.'

As table 2 shows, there is no grammatical distinction between subjective and objective case forms in Mandarin personal pronouns. *wo* is the only form for the first person singular in nominative and accusative case, *ni* is the only form for the second person, etc. Further, the Mandarin personal pronoun system does not have the genitive case like in English. In order to represent the same function as the genitive in English, the single particle *de* is added to each personal pronoun. Since Mandarin makes no case

distinction, the grammatical function of Mandarin personal pronouns is rather simple compared to their English equivalents and other European languages. However, the distinction of the grammatical case form appears in syntactic functions. According to Quirk et al. (1985) “The choice between subjective and objective case is made on the basis of a pronoun’s function in the clause” (p. 336). As the example in (7) shows, both the subject and the object in the English counterparts have its own case form, such as shown in (7a) and (7b), where *I* is the subjective case for the first person singular and functions as the subject in the clause, and in (7c) and (7d) where *me* is the objective case for first person singular I and functions as the object in the sentence.

(7) a. Sue you mafan le, wo bangzhu le ta3.

Sue has trouble particle, I helped particle her
 ‘Sue is in trouble, I helped her.’

b. Sue is in trouble, I helped her.

c. ni bangzhu le wo.

You helped particle me
 ‘you helped me’

d. You helped me.

Further, the third person pronoun *her* in (8a) and (8b) is the objective case and functions as the object in the sentence, and in (8c) and (8d) where *she* is the subjective case and functions as the subject in the clause. But as in their Mandarin counterparts, *ta3* represents both of *her* and *she*.

(8) a. women bu renshi ta3.

we not know her
 ‘we don’t know her.’

b. We don’t know her.

c. ta3 shi women de pengyou.

she is we particle friend
 ‘she is our friend’

d. She is our friend.

Therefore, in the English personal pronoun system, the subject and object in the sentence follow a very strict rule of case form changes depending on their syntactic functions. However, since Mandarin personal pronouns have no distinctions in case forms, English rule of case form changes cannot be applied to the latter.

3. The use of the personal pronouns

The previous chapter has given a brief overview of different grammatical forms of the personal pronouns in each language, English and Mandarin. Both similarities and dissimilarities can be seen when the two languages are compared. Hence, this chapter will look at the uses of personal pronouns in English and Mandarin in respectively three different grammatical persons. Since Mandarin personal pronouns have no distinctions in case forms, the subjective case will be used in this chapter.

3.1 First person

The comparison of the first person pronoun *I/we* in English and *wo/women*, *zanmen* in Mandarin consists of two parts, singular and plural. We will begin with a discussion of the first person.

3.1.1 *I* and *wo*

As mentioned above, the subjective case *I* is the first person singular pronoun in English, which functions as the subject pronoun. It is usually used by one person to make reference to himself or herself. The pronoun *I* can shift from one person to another if it is used by different people. Likewise, the first person pronoun *wo* in Mandarin shares the same usage and functions as the English pronoun. For instance, in the conversation below, the pronoun *I* refers to *Sue* in (9a) and *John* in (9b) respectively.

- (9) a. Sue: *wo yao qu xiu zixingche le, ni ne?*
 I want go repair bicycle particle, you particle
 ‘I am going to repair bicycle, what about you?’
- b. John: *wo yijing xiu hao le*
 I already repair good particle
 ‘I have already repaired it.’

By comparing the examples in (9) above, there is no difference in terms of the usage and function between the English first person pronoun *I* and the Mandarin first person pronoun *wo*. The distinctions between the two languages can be found with the sequence of the coordinated subject. In the English language, according to McMahon and Aarts (2006, 515), most speakers are taught explicitly to place a first person

singular pronoun last in a coordinated subject. As the example in (10a) illustrates below, although the two participants *Freda* and *I* have an equal status in the clause, it is more acceptable to place the first person *I* in the latter position, after the proper name *Freda*. Even though (10b) is grammatically correct in English, it is nonetheless considered less polite than the order shown in (10a).

(10) a. *Freda* and *I* have finished our work.

b. *I* and *Freda* have finished our work.*

As (11a) and (11b) below illustrate, both sequences are equally acceptable in Mandarin although the pattern ‘I and X’ is the default pattern. Therefore, it is natural for Chinese speakers to use the pattern ‘I and X’ rather than ‘X and I’ in English. In Mandarin the sequence of the coordinate subject can be reversed if the speaker wants less focus and the context’s mainly concerns the other participant.

(11) a. *Freda* he *I* zuowan le women de gongzuo

Freda and *wo* finish particle our particle work

‘*Freda* and *I* have finished our work.’

b. *wo* he *Freda* zuowan le women de gongzuo*

I and *Freda* finish particle our particle work

‘*I* and *Freda* have finished our work.’

3.1.2. *We* and *women*, *zanmen*

Generally speaking, the pronouns *we*, *women* and *zanmen* are the plural forms of the first person pronouns in English and Mandarin. All three refer to the speaker as well as one or more other participants. In the English language, the basic use of the plural pronoun *we* lies in the inclusive *we* and exclusive *we*. The inclusive *we* incorporates both the speaker and the addressee, meanwhile the exclusive *we* includes the speaker and someone else, but not the addressee. For example, the first person pronoun *we* in (12a) is inclusive; it includes both the addressee *you* and the speaker *I*. In contrast, the pronoun *we* in (12b) includes the speaker and someone else, which excludes the addressee *you*.

(12) a. *We* have a lot to talk about, *you* and *I*.

(inclusive)

- b. *You* should take a good rest. *We* will come to you in a few days. (exclusive)

The same usage of the inclusive and exclusive *we* in English can be found in Mandarin. However, unlike in English, as Wen points out (2013, 54) Chinese has separate forms for each: *women* is used as the exclusive *we* whereas *zanmen* is used as the inclusive *we*. For example, *women* in (13b) excludes the addressee *you* whereas in (13a), *zanmen* includes both the speaker and the addressee.

(13) a. Inclusive

ni zuo shang wo de qiche, *zanmen* yiqi da gaoerfu.
 you sit on my particle car we together play golf
 ‘Get on my car and let’s go to play golf together.’

b. Exclusive

women you ren dai lu, bu yong ni dai *women* qu le.
 we have person lead way, no need you lead we go particle
 ‘We have someone to be our guide, we don’t need you to take us there.’

3.2 Second person

In contrast with first person pronouns, there is only one form of the second person pronoun in English, *you*, and it is not distinguishable by grammatical number. The Second person pronoun *you* denotes the person spoken to (the addressee). Because the pronoun *you* appears in the same form in both singular and plural, it is often hard to identify its grammatical number or the reference. In Mandarin, the pronoun *ni* represents the second person singular form and *nimen* stands for the plural form. Furthermore, the pronoun *nin* is a singular form as well, which showing respect for a certain addressee.

3.2.1. You and ni, nimen

Generally speaking, the second person pronoun *you* in English uses the same form both for the singular and the plural. Thus, it is only through context or direct information that it is possible to know the number of the addressee. For instance, without context it is not possible to recognize whether the addressee is only one or more, as in (14a). However, this can be clarified, either by the context or by direct information, as in (14b). In (14c), it may cause ambiguity to whom the pronoun *you* is referring if *two girls* is omitted.

Therefore, as Lenz concludes (2003, 195), the reference to the addressee can easily be inferred from the situational context, and no problem may arise for the interlocutor.

- (14) a. Thank *you*.
 b. Thank *you*, Sue and Fred.
 c. I think *you* two girls are brave enough.

However, in Mandarin, there are two forms for the second person pronoun: *ni* for the singular form, and *nimen* where the plural suffix *men* is added to the singular *ni*. Unlike the English pronoun *you* which relies on the context or direct information to make the singular or plural reference clear, in Mandarin, the grammatical number of the pronoun can be clarified through singular *ni* and plural *nimen*, so the context or direct information is not needed to disambiguate. For instance, the pronoun *nimen* in (15a) presents more than one addressee whereas the pronoun *ni* in (15b), used by speaker B, refers only to one addressee, which is speaker A.

- (15) a. Speaker A: *nimen* shenme shihou huilai?
 you what time come back
 ‘When will you come back?’
 b. Speaker B: women bu zhidao, danshi *ni* yinggai ziji qu xuexiao
 we not know, but you should self go school
 ‘We don’t know, but *you* should go to school by yourself.’

3.2.3 You and nin

In contemporary English, the second person pronoun function as a polite pronoun no longer exists. Dating back to the history of the English language, the second person pronoun was first distinguished in the Old English grammar between singular form *þu* ‘you’ and plural form *ge* ‘you’. Later, it developed in Middle English with *thou/thee* ‘you’ for the singular form and *ye/you* ‘you’ for the plural forms. As Malton notices (2001) the pronouns *ye/you* were used to denote respect, but the polite pronoun *ye* eventually disappeared in the early Modern English period; besides, the pronoun *you* retains its form, even the use of it as a polite form has disappeared, due to the fact that the second person singular pronoun *thou* became obsolete (Lenz, 2003, p. 190).

However, the pronoun is used much more frequently in some Asian languages, where politeness is still largely expressed through linguistic devices (Lenz, 2003, p.190). The second person pronoun *nin* in Mandarin is the polite form of *ni*. For instance, *nin* in (16a) is used for the addressee bearing a high social status, such as elders or superiors, and the pronoun *ni* in (16b) is used for speaking to peers or to an addressee with a lower status, such as youngsters or an employee whose status is lower than that of the speaker.

- (16) a. nihao xiansheng, wo keyi zhidao *nin* de mingzi ma?
 Hello sir, I can know you particle name question
 ‘Hello sir, may I know your name?’
 b. haoba erzi, wo hui gaosu ni
 ok son, I can tell you
 ‘Well, son, I’ll tell you.’

3.3 Third person

In the English language, the third person singular forms *he*, *she*, *it* and the plural form *they* are distinguished by their grammatical number and gender. In Mandarin, *ta* is the third person singular whereas *tamen* is the third person plural. However, *ta* is divided into three different grammatical genders, *ta1*, *ta2* and *ta3*. Since third person pronoun in Mandarin is not distinguished in spoken form, therefore it can be a problem for Mandarin speakers when learning English.

3.3.1 He and ta1

There are two different usages of the third person singular *he* in English. First of all, as the pronoun *he* functions in the clause, it is usually used for referring to male human beings. For instance, the pronoun *he* in (17a) refers to *brother*, whose gender is masculine, and in (17b) it refers to *Jack*, which is a masculine name.

- (17) a. My brother is afraid that *he* will fail the exam.
 b. Jack lied so *he* would not have to go to school.

Further, the masculine pronoun *he* can also function as a default personal pronoun, used to refer to an unknown gender. As (18a) below illustrates, it is understandable for both the speaker and listeners that *who* could refer to either a woman or a man whose gender is unknown. Similarly, the masculine pronoun *him* is used to refer back to *customer* whose gender is unknown.

- (18) a. We don't know *who* started the fire, but *he* will definitely be held responsible.
 b. When a *customer* complains, always agree with *him*.

This usage of the English pronoun *he* can also be applied to the third person pronoun *taI* in Mandarin. For instance, the masculine pronoun *taI* in (19a) and (19b) is used to refer back to the *xiongdi* 'brother' and *keren* 'customer' respectively. Therefore, the pronoun *taI* cannot only be used to introduce a male person, but it can also function as a default personal pronoun just like the English pronoun *he*.

- (19) a. wo de xiongdi haipa taI hui kaoshi shibai
 My particle brother afraid he will exam fail
 'My brother is afraid that *he* will fail the exam.'
 b. dang yige keren zai baoyuan, zongshi tongyi taI
 when one customer at complains always agree he
 'When a *customer* complains, always agree with *him*.'

However, a few exceptions that specifically concern the Mandarin *taI* can be found. First of all, in order to reinforce the manner of speaking, a default personal pronoun *taI* can be added to the clause, which does not have any meaning in itself, but is rather used as a modal particle. For instance, see (20) below:

- (20) rang women wan taI ge tongxiao
 Let us play modal particle measure word overnight
 'Let us play overnight.'

Moreover, as the example shows below in (21), the pronoun *taI* can function as the polite form when it is followed by the predicate of relatives, such kinship terms *father* and *mother*. However, unlike the second pronoun *nin* used to refer to higher

status, the pronoun *ta1* is a polite form that can be used to show respect but also a close relationship. As the example shows, *ta1* in (21a) is followed by *father* whereas in (21b) it is followed by *mother*, thus indicating that the speakers are bound by a close relation, which in this conversation involves two parents.

- (21) a. Speaker A: *ta1* die, mingtian ni qu gongzuo ma?
 his father tomorrow you go work question
 ‘(His father), do you go to work tomorrow?’
- b. Speaker B: bu , *ta1* ma, mingtian wo gen ni qu gouwu
 no his mother tomorrow I with you go shopping
 ‘(His mother), no, I’ll go shopping with you.’

3.3.2. She and ta2

The third person pronoun *she* in English is primarily used to refer to a female person. For instance, the pronoun *she* in (22a) refers to *sister*, which is female, and in (22b) it refers to *young girl*, which is female as well.

- (22) a. My sister is afraid that *she* will fail the exam.
 b. The young girl stared at Jack and said nothing, but *she* seemed scared.

In Mandarin, the third person pronoun *ta2* does not have a long history. Chinese linguistic scholars share a common assumption about the origin of the pronoun *ta2*, which has probably been influenced by some European languages. Back in the ancient times, there is no gender distinction in the third person pronoun; the only form in the third person pronoun was *ta1*, which could refer to masculine, feminine and neuter gender. Thus, there was no distinction made in the third person pronoun, neither in spoken nor written language. However, according to Kane (2006, 107), the Chinese language was Europeanized in the first half of the twentieth century. Due to this factor, the old Chinese character *nv* ‘女’, which stands for Chinese word that can be translated into *women*, has been transformed in the personal pronoun system into the present *ta2*, similar to the feminine gender pronoun *she* in English. But only in the written language. This did not change in the spoken language. Therefore, as the Mandarin *ta2* is partly based on European languages such as English, behaves in a similar way to the English

she. For instance, as (23) below illustrates, the pronoun *ta2* refers to the female *jiemei* ‘sister’.

- (23) a. wo de jiemei haipa *ta2* hui kaoshi shibai
 My particle brother afraid she will exam fail
 ‘My sister is afraid that *she* will fail the exam.’

3.3.3. It and Ta3

The English pronoun *it* and the Mandarin pronoun *ta3* share similarities in their usage and function. Both pronouns, *it* and *ta3*, can indicate animate and inanimate entities. For instance, the pronoun *it* in (24a) and (24b) refers to *work* and *watch* respectively both of which are inanimate entities. The Mandarin sentence in (24d) is similar to the English sentence in (24b), as *ta3* refers back to the inanimate *watch*. Furthermore, the Mandarin sentence in (24e) is the translation of the English (24c), where *it* and *ta3* indicate the animate entity *dog*.

- (24) a. It’s a hard work, but I enjoy *it*.
 b. I dropped my watch and *it* broke.
 c. There is a dog? *It’s* beautiful.
 d. wo de shoubiao diao dishang le, *ta3* huai le
 I particle watch drop ground particle, it broke particle
 ‘I dropped my watch and it broke.’
 e. naer you yi zhi gou, *ta3* hen piaoliang
 there have a measure word dog, it very beautiful
 ‘There is a dog? *It’s* beautiful.’

Moreover, Quirk et al. (1985, 348) demonstrate another special usage of the English pronoun *it*, which has been called ‘prop it’. They point out that the neuter gender pronoun *it* may be used as an empty subject, such as in expressions denoting time, distance, or atmospheric conditions. The example below shows the prop it usage:

- (25) a. What time is *it*? *It’s* half past five.
 b. *It* is warm today. *It’s* been fine weather recently.
 c. *It’s* getting dark. What day is *it* today?

d. How far is *it* to York? *It's* a long way from here to Cairo.

(Quoted from Quirk et al., 1985, p. 348)

However, differences emerge when we look at the Mandarin equivalents. The Mandarin pronoun *ta3* may be omitted if the references are neuter, such as time and atmospheric conditions, as Quirk et al. suggested for English. For instance, as illustrated below, neither instance of *ta3* in (26a) and (26b) has any function; they are therefore omitted from the sentence. In contrast, in English such pronoun drop is ungrammatical and the subject *it* must be articulated.

(26) a. xian zai ji dian le? (**ta3*) wudian le
 now is what time particle, (It) five particle
 'What's time now? (It) Five o'clock.'

b. jintian (*ta3*) ting nuanhe. (**ta3*) zuijin tianqi dou ting hao
 today (it) very warm (it) recently weather whole very good
 '(It) is warm today. (it) fine weather recently.'

3.3.4 They and tamen

Both the English third person plural *they* and the Mandarin *tamen* can be used to make a reference to a certain group or entities. However, the languages do differ. The English pronoun *they*, is used to refer to entities of all genders, whether masculine, feminine or neuter. In Mandarin, however, the genders are distinguished in the written form; such as the masculine *ta1men*, the feminine *ta2men* and the neuter gender *ta3men*. It is necessary to mention that just like *ta1* in Mandarin and *he* in English. *ta1men* functions as the default personal pronoun, used when a group includes both men and women, as well as when the gender is unknown. For instance, the pronoun *they* in (27a) refers to a certain group whose gender is mixed or unknown and in (27b) it refers to both *John* and *Sue*. In the Mandarin sentence in (27c), the pronoun *tamen* is used for both references, the masculine *John* and the feminine *Sue*.

(27) a. These expressions are often used interchangeably, but *they* do have different meanings.

b. John and Sue phoned. They are coming round this evening.

- c. Yuehan he Sue da dianhua le. ta1men jin wan yao lai.
 John and Sue make telephone particle .They today night will come
 'John and Sue phoned. They are coming round this evening.'

In addition, another difference between the English and the Mandarin third person plural has to do with gender equality, such as when the pronoun *they* is used as a neuter gender singular *they* in the written form. In contemporary English, the singular *they* is used to introduce an indeterminate antecedent. But this does not apply to Mandarin pronouns, whether it is *ta1men*, *ta2men* or *ta3men*. As the example below illustrates, *who* in (28a) is the singular interrogative pronoun that acts as the antecedent, whose gender and number is indeterminate. Therefore the plural pronoun *they* acts as a singular *they*. But Mandarin (28b) does not follow this use, so that the third person singular *ta1* is used.

(28) a. Who thinks *they* can solve the problem.

- b. Shui juede ta1(ta1men*) neng jiejie wenti
 who think he(they*) can solve problem
 'Who think he(they*) can solve the problem.'

To sum up, this section introduced a brief comparison between the English *they* and the Chinese *tamen*. As it has been pointed out, some relevant differences occur between the English third plural pronoun and the Chinese one, especially for what concerns gender antecedent. The next section will further analyze the issue of reference in the sentence by introducing a discussion concerning anaphoric and cataphoric reference in the two pronoun systems.

3.4 Anaphoric reference and Cataphoric reference

According to Quirk et al. (1985, 351), English pronouns have specific references, which can be divided into anaphoric reference and cataphoric references. To put it briefly, an anaphoric reference is a word or phrase in a text that refers back to other ideas in the text for its meaning. In comparison with anaphoric reference, a cataphoric reference is a unit that refers to another unit that can be found later on in the text. Most of the anaphoric and cataphoric references are distinguished by the third person pronouns. For instance in (29) shows anaphoric references,

- (29). a. *My sister* is afraid that *she* will fail the test.
 b. We have an *excellent museum* here. Would you like to visit *it*?
 c. I went out with *Sue* on Monday. *She* looked awful.

The anaphoric reference is the most common type of textual reference in English. As the examples above show, *she* and *my sister* in (29a) are coreferential; likewise in (29b) *excellent museum* is the antecedent of the third person pronoun *it*; therefore *it* and *excellent museum* are coreferential. Finally, *she* in (29c) refers back to *Sue*.

Despite the fact that cataphoric referencing takes place under limited conditions and less frequently than anaphoric reference, Quirk et al. (1985) noted that anaphoric references can also be found where cataphoric references occurs (p. 352). For example, (30a) below illustrates a normal case of cataphoric referencing where the third person *she* refers to Sue which shows up later in the context. In (30b) the pronoun *she* refers back to *Sue*, which is an anaphoric reference. (30a) and (30b) are synonymous sentences but the position of the antecedent and the personal pronoun is reversed.

- (30) a. Before *she* joined the Navy, *Sue* made peace with her family.
 b. Before *Sue* joined the Navy, *she* made peace with her family.

To sum up, in Quirk et al.'s view, both anaphoric references and cataphoric references occur in the English pronoun system, but cataphoric references are less common than anaphoric references. What is more, personal pronouns that function as a cataphoric reference usually appear in formal contexts.

Chinese scholar Wang (1994) studied the usage of cataphora in Mandarin third person pronouns. Wang compares English and Mandarin anaphoric and cataphoric references starting from three different approaches: (1) the position of the pronouns, (2) the relationship they bear in sentence structure and (3) the result. Further, he claims that in general references in Mandarin usually appear as anaphoric, and rarely as cataphoric (1994, 37). He demonstrates this by giving the Mandarin equivalents of the Quirk et al. examples, showing the non-existence of cataphoric reference in Mandarin:

- (31). a. zai *Sue* canjia haijun zhiqian, ta2 he jiaren yanguiyuhao.
 at Sue joined Navy before, she and family make peace

‘Before Sue joined the Navy, she made peace with her family.’

- b. *zai ta2 canjia haijun zhiqian, Sue he jiaren yanguiyuhao.
 at she joined Navy before, Sue and family make peace
 ‘Before She joined the Navy, Sue made peace with his family.’

As the example shows, it is clear that the third person pronoun *ta2* in (31a) refers back to *Sue*, so that they are coreferential. But in (31b), Wang states that it is ambiguous to whom the third person pronoun *ta2* refers. Since one cannot tell that *ta2* refers to *Sue* because *he* is mentioned later in the sentence, it is more reasonable for the pronoun *ta2* (31b) to refer to a different person than *Sue*. Thus, Wang (1994, 38) found that cataphoric references are not used in Mandarin.

Xu and He (2007, 5) points out that there exists a rare occurrence of cataphora in Mandarin; in Mandarin, the discourse cataphora only appears in titles and captions, whereas in English it occurs mainly in contexts other than titles. In his study, although he observes the rarity of cataphora in Mandarin, he further develops his data analysis based research and concludes that cataphora does indeed exist in Mandarin, but rather appears in empty form in the clause.

3.5 Pro-drop

Generally speaking, the English language is considered a non pro-drop language, where certain classes of pronouns, such as personal pronouns, cannot be omitted. However, according to Weir (2008, 2), pronouns may be omitted in spoken English, even though there is a wide range of restrictions. Weir studies the possibility of English personal pronoun drop based on the phenomenon called ‘diary drop’, that allows the subject pronoun drop in either spoken language or written language. However, Weir points out that the personal pronouns can only be dropped in the subject position with a certain number of limitations. For instances, the pronoun *he*, *she* and *they* can be omitted in (32a). In (32b) *it*, which refers to the weather, can also be dropped.

(32) a. Speaker A: Why didn’t *he/she/they* come to the party?

Speaker B: (*he/she/they*) Didn’t fancy it, I suppose.

b. (*it*) Always rains on Mondays. (Quoted from Weir, 2008, p. 7)

Nonetheless, there are a few forbidden configurations of pronoun dropping. First of all, the subject pronoun drop is not permitted, not only in interrogative sentences, but also in embedded clauses. Secondly, it is also not allowed to drop the pronoun in cases where there is preposed material: That is why the pronoun X in (33) cannot be omitted.

(33). *Tomorrow, X won't be in the office.

Moreover, personal pronouns are required as initial subjects if they are followed directly by the verbs *be*, *have*, *will*, *would* and *had*, as shown in the examples in (34):

(34) a. She is going to the party.

b. It will rain tomorrow.

Huang (1989) interprets the contrast of pronoun drop in the pronominal systems of English and Chinese with a special focus on the latter. Huang demonstrates the occurrence of a null pronominal by giving examples of subject positions in infinite clauses. He further examines the idea called 'identification hypothesis' which assumes "a pronoun may drop from a given sentence only if certain important aspects of its reference can be recovered from other parts of the sentence" (Huang, 1989, p. 185). Chinese is a pro-drop language, which can allow not only the null subject to be pronominal in the sentence, but also allows the pronominal to act as the null object. Throughout the article, both null subject pronominal and null object pronominal are introduced by giving several examples in Chinese, comparing them to their English counterparts, which do not follow the same pronoun drop principles. As in the examples below, *ta* in (35b) and (35c) might be allowed to be omitted whereas their English counterparts could not.

- (35) a. Zhangsan kanjian Lisi le ma?
 zhangsan see Lisi particle question
 'Did Zhangsan see Lisi?'
- β. (ta1) kanjian (ta1) le.
 he see he particle
 '(He) saw (Him).'
- c. wo xiang (ta) kanjian (ta) le

I think (he) see (he) particle
 'I think (he) saw (him).' (Quoted from Huang, 1989, p. 187)

Furthermore, because of the distinction between null subjects and null objects, Huang also gives presents some details based on 'identification hypothesis'. Huang points out that in Chinese, the null subject can either refer to the matrix subject or to others whose reference is understood in the discourse, whereas the null object must refer to the discourse topic but not to the matrix subject (Huang, 1989, p. 188). Finally, he concludes that the identification hypothesis is essentially correct for the Chinese language, but that it must be interpreted more broadly.

3.6 Summary

From the comparison of personal pronouns between English and Mandarin we can conclude that although some common features between the two languages are found, there are still differences concerning the context in which pronouns are used. Mandarin pronouns make more distinctions in writing in grammatical number and gender than their English counterpart, such as the singular *ni* declined to the plural *nimen*, and the singular *ta* to plural *ta1men*, *ta1men* and *ta3men*. However, Mandarin pronouns lack some core functions that English pronouns serve, such as when the neuter gender pronoun *it* is used as an empty subject to denote time, distance or atmospheric conditions. Further, by comparing the scholars' studies mentioned above, we can conclude that textual reference of personal pronouns exists in both languages. In English, the reference can be divided into anaphoric reference and cataphoric reference, where anaphoric reference is more frequently used than the latter. Meanwhile, textual reference in Mandarin can also be separated into anaphoric reference and cataphoric reference. However, as we have seen, while Chinese scholars share the same stance about anaphoric reference, cataphoric reference seems to hardly occur. As the studies by Xu show, cataphoric reference is rather dropped in the clause. What is more, the English language is considered to be a non pro-drop language, whose sentence structure is highly restricted by the syntax and grammar. Thus, generally speaking, English does not allow personal pronouns to be omitted from the sentence, although some exceptions are found in informal language, both spoken and written. On the other hand, Mandarin is considered a pro-drop language, where the personal pronoun can frequently be omitted.

Unlike the restrictions in English, Mandarin personal pronouns can be omitted in both subject and object positions.

4. Difficulties in learning pronouns in second language learning

As mentioned in the previous chapter, some differences exist between the personal pronouns in English and Mandarin. For Mandarin-speaking English-learners to use the English personal pronouns accurately and properly, it is necessary to have some knowledge of second language acquisition theory. In this chapter, two ways of acquiring a second language will be introduced, and both of them have an impact on Mandarin students learning English. Besides, first language interference may also have a huge impact for Chinese students acquiring pronouns. Thus, as a consequence, the problems encountered by Chinese students learning English pronouns will be provided at the end of this chapter.

4.1 Language acquisition and Language learning

According to Krashen's second language acquisition hypothesis (1981, 5), there are two independent ways for people to improve their ability in a second language, which he calls subconscious language acquisition and conscious language learning. The process of second language acquisition is similar to the process of first language acquisition as it requires speakers to be concerned with the messages that they express and understand, but not with their forms. Thus, in second language acquisition, "the error correction and explicit teaching of rules are not relevant to language acquisition" (Krashen, 1981, p. 1). To put it in other words, in the learning process, the speakers are unconsciously acquiring a second language, which is the natural target language for communication. On the other hand, unlike language acquisition, the learned system mainly focuses on error corrections and the presentation of explicit rules (Krashen, 1981). That is, learners achieve the correct mental representation through study of grammatical rules with supplementary conscious exercises. To compare and contrast the language acquisition and learned system, Krashen concludes that these two systems are interrelated in a definite way but are not equal. Language acquisition is not language learning, even the fluency of the speaker within second language learning is a consequence of native language acquisition. In language learning, the aim is to obtain formal language knowledge of a second language before or after the utterance is produced; the main aim has to do with improving language accuracy.

Both language acquisition theory and language learning theory play a role in the development of second language competence, such as the ability to use proper pronouns. However, Krashen believes that only language acquisition is directly related

to the ability to master a second language. As he claims, “subconscious acquisition appears to be far more important” (Krashen, 1981, p. 5). On the one hand, since second language competence develops through it, language acquisition is responsible for generating language and its fluency. On the other hand, people gain language competence through learning, since the language learning process, as Krashen calls it, can modify the language generated by acquired language competence. By comparing personal pronouns in English and Mandarin, differences can be found, and it may cause difficulties for the second language learners when using the proper personal pronouns of the target language. Moreover, for most Mandarin speaking English-learners, language acquisition may not be as important as language learning, since one of the main goals behind their study of English is to pass school exams. Therefore, from Krashen’s point of view, in order to acquire a language and avoid errors in second language acquisition, it is necessary to gain formal language knowledge to improve language accuracy, while continuing to be subconsciously exposed to a language.

4.2 First language interference

The study of first language interference has played an important role in second language acquisition research and practice. As Krashen (1981, 68) presumes, the major source of syntactic errors in adult second language performance is due to their first language interference. Second language learners from different linguistic backgrounds may perform various errors that are not traceable in the structure of their first language. Those errors are influenced by the speakers’ first language, which in Krashen’s point of view “the first language influence fits in the theoretical model for second language performance” (Krashen, 1981, p. 64). Further, the consequence of first language interference on second language performance can be summarized. First of all, the errors made by second language learners appear in the translations of phrases and complex word order. As Duskova (1969, 18) suggests, the interference from speakers’ mother tongue is obvious in errors of word order and sentence construction. Secondly, if “the first language is weaker in bound morphology” (Krashen, 1981), then the second language learner can make certain kinds of errors, such as lack of plurals to nouns, lack of subject-verb agreement, and adjective-noun agreement. Thirdly, first language influence appears strongest in poor acquisition environments where there is a lack of natural second language stimuli for learners.

Thus, Yang states (2001, 3) that native language knowledge may consciously or unconsciously transfer to the second language learning process. Some of the language transfers are positive while some may be negative. As seen in the previous section concerning English and Mandarin personal pronouns, mistakes occur in the spoken and written English of Mandarin learners, mainly due to the fact that the grammar and writing system of the two languages are so different. Mandarin speakers might expect learning difficulties while acquiring English as a second language, such as how to use correctly pronouns. Hence, learners would resort to their first language structures for help (Bhela, 1991). But to successfully learn English, Mandarin speaking learners have to preclude their first language structures from the English learning process and improve language proficiency. As Bhela suggests (1991, 23) most successful second language learning derives from being able to distinguish as much as possible one language from the other.

4.3 Problems of Chinese students learning English pronouns

4.3.1 Matching problem

As Lay (1975, 57) claims, it is very important in English to be consistent and clear in one's reference. But for the Mandarin speaking student, since in his language pronouns in subject and object position have the same form, identifying the pronoun referent is a relatively difficult task. For instance,

(36) a. **I* asked *he* to come.

b. *That would make *I* wonder and surprise. (Quoted from Lay, 1975, p. 58)

Due to the influence of Mandarin, Chinese students find it difficult to use the proper English pronouns. In the Mandarin language, the subject and object can be usually absent in the sentence, and vague references, such as the third person singular *it* and the third person plural *they*, are usually used, making the sentence pretty unclear about its reference. In order to obtain the appropriate reference, it is common for Mandarin speaking students to depend on the context. As Mandarin pronouns are mainly anaphoric, due to the rare existence of cataphoric reference, the difficulty is increased for Mandarin students to read the context. For instance, (37a) illustrates the cataphoric reference where the third person pronoun *she* refers to Sue which exits later

in the context. (37b) is similar to (37a), however, the pronoun *ta2* appears in empty form in formal context such as scholar Xu suggested for Chinese cataphora.

(37) a. Before she joined the Navy, Sue made peace with his family

b. zai (*ta2*) canjia haijun zhiqian, Sue he jiaren yanguiyuhao.
 at she joined Navy before, Sue and family make peace
 'Before (she) joined Navy, Sue made peace with his family.'

The difficulty is raised for Mandarin speaking student to identify the pronoun referent when in writing formal English context. As Chinese student used to make sentence that either clarify the subject of the clause at beginning of the sentence, or uses vague references. Their logical order of making a sentences is much based on anaphoric references, and it is hard for them to make in such sentences where the pronoun or the subject that appears in later context as the example of cataphoric reference.

4.3.2 Pronoun drop

Pronoun drop is considered as one of the problem that may cause difficulty for Mandarin speaking English-language learners. Mandarin belongs to pro-drop languages, and the pro-drop phenomenon mostly occurs in personal pronouns. As demonstrated in last section about pronoun drop, personal pronouns can be dropped in both subject and object position. In Mandarin, the omission of pronouns in subject and object position makes the sentence usually unclear about its reference. In order to obtain the pronoun referent, it is necessary to rely on the logical understanding of the context for Mandarin speaking people. Also, it is usually normal for them to identify the subject and the object out of context. For instance illustrate below in (38), Mandarin speakers might create incorrect an ungrammatical English sentences. The first pronoun *I* is dropped in (38a), and in (38b) the object *her* is dropped in the clause. Likewise, in (38c) and (38d), both the pronoun *I* and *her* are omitted from the sentence. Despite the unclear subject and the object, Mandarin speaking people are able to recover the pronoun referent such as in (38d) unconsciously. However, it is not possible in English in such circumstances.

(38) Speaker A: Did you see Sue?

Speaker B: a. *I think (I) saw her.

b. *I think I saw (her).

- c. *(I) think I saw (her).
- d. *(I) think (I) saw (her).

Mandarin allows unclear personal pronoun to appear in the sentence. Thus, Mandarin speakers tend to unconsciously perform a new language in a vague way due to their native language interference. As Yang claims (2011, 4) adult Mandarin learners speaking English seem to perform English in a vague way. Thus, it is important and necessary for Mandarin speaking students to be aware of this differentiation to make their study of English more effective. Also, in order to improving their second language accuracy, it is necessary to learn English systematically. That is, to obtain formal language knowledge of English with supplementary conscious exercises and specially focus on English grammatical rules.

4.3.3 Gender error

As mentioned above, Mandarin personal pronouns do not distinguish grammatical gender in the third person singular; the pronouns *he*, *she* and *it* are expressed by the same pronunciation as [ta:] in oral language. Dong et al. (2014) suggest that “Mandarin speaker do not usually process biological gender for linguistic purposes” (p.1). As a result, Mandarin-speaking English-learners may not use the third person pronoun properly. In spoken language, gender errors are prevalent within Mandarin-speaking English-learners. Either a beginner or an advanced learner may produce the pronoun *he* when he intends to use *she* to refer to a female person. Researchers believe that gender problems with Mandarin learners of English is a result of their first language transfer (2014, p. 3). Since Mandarin third person pronouns do not distinguish grammatical gender, thus, in oral forms, *ta1*, *ta2* and *ta3* share the same pronunciation as [ta:] for its counterparts in English such as *he*, *she* and *it*. In other words, gender in Mandarin third person pronouns is unmarked while it is marked in English. Further, due to pronoun drop in Mandarin, the frequency of using personal pronouns to refer to an antecedent in Mandarin is not as common as in English. Mandarin native speakers therefore habitually use fewer pronouns in a target language, such as in the process of acquiring English as a second language. For instance, Mandarin-speaking English-learner may create sentences in oral English such as illustrate in (39a) and (39b), which misuse the third person pronouns by gender.

- (39) a. *I went out with Sue on Monday. *He* looked awful.
b. *My brother is afraid that *she* will fail the exam.

Since Mandarin-speaking English-learner uses Chinese thinking to acquiring English, thus, their first thought is the pronoun *ta* when they make expression in English. To avoid gender errors in third person pronouns, it is important to improve students' proficiency of English and be aware of the gender distinctions. Also, to avoid gender errors in the language conversion process, it is necessary for Mandarin-speaking English-learner learn to uses English thinking directly to make expression, not in Chinese thinking. Meanwhile, always keep in mind that English personal pronouns have gender distinctions between *he* and *she*. What is more, in the process of acquiring English as a second language, Mandarin speakers should make a deliberate effort to avoid such mistakes.

5. Conclusion

This paper conducted a detailed and comparative analysis of personal pronouns across English and Mandarin. The results show that personal pronouns are used quite differently in English and Mandarin. These differences may cause Mandarin-speaking English-learners to use improper forms of the third person pronouns, even making the referent of a sentence unclear and ambiguous. Furthermore, first-language interference can play a negative role for the learners. As a consequence, a large number of errors may occur in Chinese students' use of English personal pronouns. Thus, in order to study English pronouns effectively and properly, Chinese students should be fully aware of their native language interference and should put an effort in acquiring a new language through a comprehensive and systematic study of it. As has been pointed out throughout this paper, relevant differences distinguish the two pronoun systems, the majority of which have to do with context and references, as in the case of the use of the third plural pronoun *tamen* and in the use of anaphoric and cataphoric references. Moreover, the fact that Mandarin is a pro-drop language further complicates things for Mandarin students, besides the gender differences between the two systems. The comparison between the two pronouns structures here proposed, can thus be seen as a starting point for students committed to learning English as a second language in order to avoid mistakes and be aware of the most complicated differences between Mandarin and English pronouns that can compromise their learning process. Evidencing these differences would contribute to help reduce first language interference into the second language learning process and enhance the efficiency of learning outcomes. However, as has also been pointed out in the section examining language acquisition, an intense study of grammar is not enough for Chinese students to be proficient in English. This has to be accompanied by a continuous practice in a learning environment where they are exposed only to the target language stimuli, and where they can understand how the peculiarities of English pronouns work in specific contexts. This is why I deem this paper to be a serious contribution inasmuch as it is conceived not only as an abstract elaboration, but as useful tool for immediate practical purposes.

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