

# A Study on the Presupposition Mechanism and Second Language Acquisition Errors in Specific Chinese Sentence Patterns: Taking Comparative Sentences as an Example

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Manuscript received October 5, 2025; accepted January 4, 2026; published February 28, 2026.

**Abstract**—“Presupposition” is one of the core concepts in pragmatics, generally referring to the background information mutually known by both the speaker and the hearer during communication. In numerous communicative acts involving presuppositions, specific Chinese sentence patterns serve as important linguistic forms that trigger them. Based on this, the present paper uses the theories on presupposition and presupposition analysis from Chen Xinren’s *A Course in Chinese Pragmatics* as its framework, focusing on modern Chinese comparative sentences to analyze their internal presupposition mechanisms through sentence classification and corresponding example sentences. Building on this analysis, the paper strives to integrate Chinese teaching and textbook examples to summarize the types of errors learners may make due to misunderstandings of presuppositions when acquiring comparative sentences, and proposes corresponding teaching strategies. The goal is to guide students in cultivating pragmatic awareness, transforming language learning from merely studying linguistic forms to deep acquisition that simultaneously considers pragmatic functions.

**Keywords**—presupposition analysis, comparative sentences, pragmatic errors, teaching strategies

## I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching Chinese as a foreign language must strengthen training in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, while also appropriately applying relevant pragmatic theories for in-depth analysis [1]. This is because pragmatic competence determines whether learners can appropriately and effectively use language in specific contexts, rather than merely understanding it superficially. In the field of second language acquisition, learners’ errors at the grammatical level are often easier to detect and correct promptly. However, pragmatic competence is more deeply rooted in practical communication and possesses greater concealment, frequently leading to a communicative dilemma where “the grammar is correct, but it sounds awkward or inappropriate”. As one of the foundational concepts of pragmatics, “presupposition” refers to what the speaker assumes to be true or existent before uttering a specific discourse [2]. Although presupposition does not directly manifest literally, it fundamentally constrains the generation and comprehension of discourse meaning.

Chinese is a highly context-dependent language; therefore, many specific sentence patterns not only describe literal information but also inherently contain complex “presuppositions” and corresponding pragmatic conventions. Among them, comparative sentences are a highly representative category. For native Chinese speakers, presuppositions in specific sentence patterns are naturally distinguished and utilized; however, for second language

learners, they may require deliberate study and are highly susceptible to misuse. In some current international Chinese teaching practices, instruction on comparative sentences may still be confined to mechanical structural drills and pure semantic translation. Classroom activities often stop at the formulaic application of structures like “A + *bi* (比) + B + adjective,” lacking sufficient revelation of how presuppositions are triggered, what conditions exist, and the pragmatic functions of the sentence patterns. This can lead learners to directly and mechanically output structures, producing numerous sentences that are “correct in form but wrong in meaning”. Furthermore, when receiving information from a speaker, they may fail to grasp the emotional tone or the “implied meaning” of the discourse.

Therefore, this study will comprehensively employ methods such as literature review, theoretical deduction, and example sentence analysis. Grounded in the presupposition theories from Chen Xinren’s *A Course in Chinese Pragmatics* and combined with relevant research findings, it aims to micro-analyze the presupposition trigger mechanisms of comparative sentences from the perspective of internal sentence classification. Concurrently, through the analysis of erroneous example sentences, abstract “pragmatic failures” will be translated into specific types of “presupposition misunderstandings”. This will provide diagnostic tools and intervention directions for teaching, promoting a shift in grammar teaching toward cultivating deeper “pragmatic competence”.

## II. THEORETICAL BASIS

### A. Definition, Characteristics, and Classification of Presupposition

“Presupposition” is a foundational concept in pragmatics. According to Levinson (1983) and *A Course in Chinese Pragmatics* (2017) edited by Professor Chen Xinren, presupposition is defined as the common background knowledge that the speaker assumes the hearer already knows or is ready to accept before performing a speech act. The core of this definition lies in identifying and analyzing presuppositions within the dynamic process of situational communication, rather than simply treating them as static logical relationships within speech. A presupposition is not a simple, unilateral assumption by the speaker; its existence and validity depend on the shared knowledge of the communicating parties or their common context [3]. For instance, when uttering “Please close the window (请把窗户关上),” the speaker presupposes the state that “the window is currently open” and believes the hearer also knows this state. Thus, this definition provides fundamental support for

analyzing how Chinese sentence patterns operate in real communication.

Based on the definition of presupposition, and by summarizing *A Course in Chinese Pragmatics* alongside other relevant literature and combining this with the analytical needs of Chinese sentence patterns, it is found that presupposition in a narrow sense typically has the following characteristics:

1. Defeasibility: This refers to Professor Chen Xinren's "negation test method," meaning that the presupposition remains in the negative sentence corresponding to the affirmative sentence. For example, "Zhang San is taller than his son(张三比他儿子高)" and "Zhang San is not taller than his son(张三不比他儿子高)" share the same presupposition—"Zhang San has a son". Since presupposition is the premise or background information of a sentence, rather than the focal information, the change to a negative sentence primarily negates the focus and does not affect the presupposition.

2. Mutual Knowledge: Pragmatic presupposition is information hidden in discourse, existing as known information that does not require special explanation, which aligns with the principles of economy and cooperation in language communication[4]. Similarly, in normal communication, when a speaker uses a comparative sentence, they must assume that the background information contained in the sentence (such as the existence of the comparison object in "bi(比)" sentences) is shared and mutually known by both communicating parties. If mutual knowledge is lacking, corresponding remedies are required; otherwise, communication problems may arise.

3. Appropriateness: The appropriateness of pragmatic presupposition means that the presupposition must be closely linked to the context. Presupposition is a prerequisite for speech acts; only when the sentence is uttered in a suitable context can its existence value be realized, otherwise, it will be meaningless[5]. If a sentence's presupposition contradicts contextual facts, the sentence is not only logically disjointed but also pragmatically inappropriate, leading to "the failure of the speech act".

These characteristics are crucial indicators for identifying presuppositions and play an important role in judging whether a presupposition exists and is correct. They also provide a foundation for the presupposition analysis in specific sentence patterns below.

Regarding the classification of presuppositions, historically in academia, there has always been a distinction between "semantic presupposition" and "pragmatic presupposition" based on their nature. Semantic presupposition refers to the surface structure attached to language and is the basis for forming sentence meaning. Its fundamental feature is that regardless of the speech act, the sentence itself and its presupposition should be constant<sup>[6]</sup>. For example, in the sentences "The King of France is bald(法国国王是个秃头)" and "The King of France is not bald(法国国王不是秃头)," to discuss their truth or falsity, one must logically presuppose "there exists a King of France". However, this also determines that it may not explain the limitations of presuppositions in specific communicative contexts because such analysis is divorced from specific speakers, hearers, and contexts[7]. Pragmatic presupposition, on the other hand, is based on actual linguistic structural meaning. It relies mainly on prerequisites deduced from

logical rules; therefore, pragmatic presupposition refers to the prerequisites of discourse inferred from the extra-linguistic context, such as the time, place, setting of the speech, and the speaker's cultural cultivation, knowledge level, and modality. The speaker and hearer can create their own context, and there is no requirement for the truth or falsity of that context, as long as both parties can smoothly complete the communication. It focuses more on the appropriateness of the discourse. It emphasizes whether a sentence is expressed appropriately, suitably, and can be smoothly understood and accepted in a specific communicative situation, rather than concerning abstract truth or falsity.

From the perspective of the semantic content category of the presupposition itself, presuppositions can also be divided into the following types (Jens Allwood):

1. Existential Presupposition: Mainly refers to an assumption about the existence of an entity. It assumes the existence of the referent. For example, "His car is expensive(他的汽车很贵)" presupposes "he has a car," and this car exists.

2. Factive Presupposition: Mainly presupposes that a certain state, event, or proposition is an established fact and comments on it. For example, "He regrets telling a lie(他后悔说了谎)" presupposes the established fact that "he told a lie". This is particularly important when analyzing the standard item in comparative sentences.

3. Categorical Presupposition: Mainly presupposes that the object of discussion belongs to a set with a certain attribute. For example, "He was happy to hear the news(他听到这个消息很高兴)" presupposes that "he" belongs to a category capable of emotional behavior.

This classification method is primarily based on the intra-discourse semantic features and relies more on specific semantics; early research on presupposition mostly adopted this classification.

#### B. Trigger Mechanisms of Presuppositions

Presuppositions do not appear out of nowhere; they are usually induced by specific linguistic forms known as presupposition triggers. According to Professor Chen Xinren in *A Course in Chinese Pragmatics* (2017), triggers are divided into lexical triggers, phrasal structural triggers, and syntactic triggers. The research object of this paper, the comparative sentence, belongs to a typical syntactic structural trigger mechanism, possessing distinct Chinese characteristics.

Through the syntactic configuration where "relationship" and "standard" coexist, Chinese comparative sentences primarily trigger existential and factive presuppositions. Regarding existential presuppositions, the syntactic structure of the comparative sentence itself forcefully presupposes the existence of the comparison object (Y). For instance, "Zhang San is more diligent than Li Si(张三比李四更勤奋)" presupposes that "Li Si must exist". As for factive presuppositions, this manifests in certain contexts where the comparative sentence already presupposes the occurrence or existence of an established fact. For example, "He is happier than before(他比以前更快乐了)" not only compares the degree of happiness between "before" and "now" but also triggers the factive state presupposition that "his degree of happiness was lower before".

### III. ANALYSIS OF PRESUPPOSITION MECHANISMS IN DIFFERENT TYPES OF COMPARATIVE SENTENCES

The Chinese comparative sentence is not a single structure but rather a sentence group centered around differential comparison while encompassing other sentence patterns with comparative functions. Structurally, a typical comparative sentence generally consists of four parts: the comparison items (the entities participating in the comparison, including the antecedent and consequent items); the point of comparison (the specific aspect being compared); the comparison marker (also called the comparison word); and the conclusion item (indicating the result of the comparison) [8]. Due to variations in these components, the presupposition trigger mechanisms of different sentence patterns within comparative sentences have different focuses, demonstrating systematicity and internal divergence.

#### A. Differential Comparative Sentences “A bi (比) B X” and Their Negative Forms

In the structure “A 比 B X”, a multi-layered presupposition structure is constructed. Ma Ning’s (2009) research reveals that the triggering of presuppositions in this sentence pattern is conditional: “If X denotes a negative meaning... it often triggers the presupposition of B-X [9]”. That is, the sentence presupposes that the compared item B possesses the negative property X, or is at least the reference standard for discussing attribute X; simultaneously, A and B must belong to the same comparable category for this sentence pattern to be used. This is essentially the combined result of factive and categorical presuppositions. For example:

1. Today is colder than yesterday (今天比昨天冷).

This sentence triggers the presupposition “yesterday was cold”. If yesterday was not inherently cold, saying “today is colder than yesterday,” while logically true (today is relatively colder), is pragmatically unnatural. Only when “yesterday was cold” serves as a presupposition does the comparison hold pragmatic value.

When degree adverbs like “geng” (more - 更) or “hai” (still/even more - 还) are added to this structure, “A 比 B 更/还 X” reinforces the presupposition that the compared item B already possesses the attribute. For example:

2. Xiao Wang is more diligent than Xiao Li (小王比小李更勤奋).

This sentence explicitly presupposes “Xiao Li is diligent”. The presupposition “Xiao Li is diligent” is reinforced, and by contrasting the degree, it demonstrates the fact that Xiao Wang is more diligent; the presupposition holds, and the pragmatics are appropriate.

Looking at its negation, the “A meiyou/buru (没有/不如) B X” (A is not as X as B) pattern is not simply a direct negation of “A 比 B X”; its presupposition structure is unique. This pattern directly triggers a strong factive presupposition: it is true that “B possesses X”, and the result of the comparison concurrently highlights that the compared item B possesses this property. For example:

3. This piece of clothing is not as expensive as that one (这件衣服没有那件贵).

This sentence presupposes that “that piece of clothing” possesses the attribute of being “expensive” and sits at a higher position on the scale, whereas “this piece of clothing” is relatively cheaper, representing an objective negation.

This pattern has another negative form, the “A bu bi (不比)

B X” (A is not more X than B) pattern. Unlike the “meiyou/buru(没有/不如)” structure, “bu bi(不比)” leans towards subjective refutation, while “buru(不如)” leans towards objective comparison. However, the presupposition remains the same as the affirmative form, retaining the foundational presupposition that B possesses property X. For example:

4. This year’s math test is not harder than last year’s (今年的数学题不比去年的难).

In this sentence, the presupposition “last year’s math test was hard” remains, but it emphasizes the speaker’s subjective negation that “this year’s math test” exceeds “last year’s” regarding the comparison point of “difficulty”. It expresses the speaker’s subjective attitude towards the difficulty of the two rather than an objective, fair comparison.

#### B. Equative Comparative Sentences “A is the same as B...” (A跟B一样……) and “A has/does not have B...” (A有/没有 B……)

The presupposition of the “A is the same as B...(A跟B一样……)” pattern is usually an evaluation where the speaker places event A and event B on the same scale, believing this comparison is reasonable but unexpected. Therefore, it contains two layers of presupposition: comparability and “counter-expectation”. The former implies that A and B are placed in equivalent positions for a fair comparison; the latter implies that the speaker suggests this “same” result might differ from the hearer’s original thoughts or was unexpected by the speaker, making it worth highlighting. For example:

1. Mike’s spoken language is as fluent as a Chinese person’s (麦克的口语跟中国人一样流利).

This sentence first holds a premise presupposition—“Chinese people speak Chinese fluently,” which is a universally recognized standard. Returning to the equative sentence itself, the sentence presupposes that “Mike” and “Chinese people” can be symmetrically compared on the scale of “oral fluency”. We wouldn’t say “Mike’s spoken language is as fluent as a desk” because it fails the comparability presupposition. Simultaneously, this sentence carries a tone of admiration or surprise. It presupposes that the hearer might have originally thought “as a foreigner, Mike’s spoken language should not be as fluent as a Chinese person’s”. The current result violates this expectation and is surprising.

The “A has/does not have B...” (A有/没有 B……) sentence often appears as “A has/does not have B + so/that + adjective”(A有/没有 B 这么/那么+形容词). This pattern does not merely place A and B together for objective comparison; instead, the speaker presupposes B as a specific “standard” to measure whether A has reached the degree subjectively determined by the speaker. It is worth noting that the affirmative and negative forms of this pattern have different semantic and pragmatic functions: the affirmative generally indicates an equal or similar result and is an objective description; the negative generally indicates an unequal result and is often used for derogatory comparisons[10]. For example:

2. The child is as tall as the desk now (这孩子现在有桌子这么高了).

In this sentence, “desk” serves as the reference, and its height is mutually known and visible. It presupposes “the desk is tall”. The desk’s height serves as an appropriate

reference standard in this context, expressing the speaker's subjective assessment of the "child's" height (the child is also tall) and the speaker's subjective sense of pleasant surprise.

3. The younger brother is not as diligent as the older brother (弟弟没有哥哥勤快).

This sentence omits "zheme" (so/that) ("弟弟没有哥哥这么勤快"), following the economic principle of spoken language. Here, both parties are clear that "the older brother is diligent," which is the strongest presupposition of this sentence pattern. The entire sentence is also a derogatory subjective evaluation (meaning lazy) and comparison made by the speaker toward the "younger brother" based on the standard of the "older brother".

### C. *Progressive Comparative Sentences "Yuelaiyue" (越来越-More and More)*

The key to the presupposition of progressive comparative sentences lies in depicting a unidirectional, continuous process where this change progresses continuously in one direction over time. The presupposition of progressive sentences can be analyzed from three aspects: the time process (presupposing the existence of an observable continuous time period); the direction of change (presupposing that the change proceeds in a single direction without reversal); and the dynamic change of the baseline (presupposing that the baseline is constantly moving forward). For example:

1. Housing prices in Beijing are getting more and more expensive (北京的房价越来越贵了).

It can be seen that the speaker presupposes Beijing's housing prices over a period, rather than a simple comparison between today and yesterday. Secondly, during this period, the trend of housing prices is presupposed to be rising unidirectionally and continuously, excluding scenarios of "overall rise but with major fluctuations in between". Finally, this sentence also presupposes a dynamic comparison—current prices are more expensive than a month ago, and prices a month ago were more expensive than before that... The presupposed baseline for comparison is constantly changing.

## IV. TYPES OF PRESUPPOSITION ERRORS IN COMPARATIVE SENTENCES AND TARGETED TEACHING STRATEGIES

Based on the previous analysis of presupposition mechanisms in different types of comparative sentences, this chapter categorizes learners' potential presupposition errors into four types, directly mapping corresponding teaching strategies beneath each type to form a complete closed loop from detection to intervention.

### A. *Category Errors Caused by Violating Comparability Presuppositions*

The cause of such errors may be that learners fail to identify whether the comparison items belong to the same comparable category, leading them to forcefully compare items that do not belong to the same category or omit necessary category-limiting elements. For example:

1. His idea is taller than me (他的想法比我高).

This sentence first presupposes that "idea" and "I" belong to the same category and can be compared, and then forcefully pairs the abstract entity "idea" with the physical adjective "tall (高)", which is inherently a presupposition error. The word "tall (高)" in the sentence usually points to

physical height. Transferring it to an abstract domain requires specific collocations (like "high level" or "high state"), rather than directly connecting it with "idea". The sentence violates category presuppositions, resulting in semantic incoherence.

To address these errors, "categorization comparison" can be used to build category awareness. Teachers can design categorization tasks such as "find the odd one out" in teaching, allowing students to establish the awareness that "the two sides being compared must be items of the same kind" before using the "bi (比)" sentence. For instance, a teacher can present "idea, height, weight," guiding students to discover that "idea" is an abstract attribute and should not be directly compared using physical dimension adjectives like "tall" or "short". This training intends to let learners discover the boundaries of comparability on their own through cognitive conflict.

### B. *Errors in Understanding the Attribute State Presupposition of the Compared Item*

The core of this error type is that learners inaccurately grasp the attribute state presupposition of the comparison baseline B, primarily manifested in the misuse of the degree marker "geng (更 - more)". For example:

1. Beijing is more northern than Guangzhou (北京比广州更靠北).

This sentence uses the degree adverb "geng(更- more)", thus explicitly presupposing that B possesses the attribute X, namely, "Guangzhou is northern". However, according to common knowledge, Guangzhou is located in the southern tip of China, and being "northern" is not its attribute. This presupposition conflicts with common sense, leading to extremely low acceptability of the sentence and turning it into a presupposition error.

To solve such problems, teachers must explicitly teach the presupposition rule for "geng (更)". Through contrasting example sentences, teachers can guide students to discover: if "geng" is used in a comparative sentence, the speaker mentally defaults to the presupposition that "B already possesses that attribute". Teachers can set paired scenarios, such as "Yesterday was -5 degrees, today is 0 degrees" versus "Yesterday was 30 degrees, today is 35 degrees," asking students to judge which scenario can be described as "Today is hotter than yesterday (今天比昨天更热)". Through matching exercises like this, students will remember to ask themselves before using "geng": "Is B already...?". There is no need to memorize the term "presupposition"; mastering this judging standard is sufficient.

### C. *Errors in "You" (有) Sentences Caused by Inappropriate Reference Standard Presuppositions*

These errors are concentrated in the "A you/meiyou B name/zheme X" (A 有/没有 B 这么/那么 X) structure. Learners often improperly grasp the presupposition conditions of the reference standard B, mostly shown by B lacking attribute X, or B acting as a standard but lacking standardization, causing presupposition problems. For example:

1. His new phone is as new as my old phone (他的新手机有我的旧手机那么新).

In the presupposition trigger mechanism of the "you (有)" sentence, B is required to serve as a reference standard and must possess the property described by the adjective X. However, in this sentence, the core attribute of the "old phone"

is “old”. Using it as a standard for “new” severely conflicts with the presupposition, causing pragmatic incongruity.

The “you (有)” sentence requires that the reference standard B must fully possess the comparative attribute X. This inspires us to utilize visual aids such as physical objects and pictures in teaching to achieve “standard visualization”. For instance, a teacher can hold up a thick dictionary and say, “This dictionary is very thick,” and then hold up a thin notebook and ask, “Is this notebook as thick as the dictionary?”. Through visual comparison, students intuitively understand that the dictionary fully possesses the attribute of “thick” and acts as the standard for “thick”. Transitioning to comparisons of other items later, such as “He is as tall as Yao Ming,” students can naturally deduce: Yao Ming is the standard for “tall”.

#### D. Errors Caused by Process Presupposition Conflicts in the “Yuelaiyue” (越来越) Sentence Pattern

The presupposition of the “yuelaiyue” (more and more-越来越) sentence pattern demands a “unidirectional continuous change process”. When some learners use this pattern, presupposition errors occur, potentially manifesting as contradictory directions of change, and sometimes issues where X is a non-gradable structure. For example:

1. The weather is getting hotter and hotter, today is cooler than yesterday (天气越来越热了, 今天比昨天凉快).

This sentence triggers the presupposition that “the weather is unidirectionally changing toward hot,” requiring the property of “hot” to be unidirectional and continuous on the timeline. The second half, “today is cooler thanThe “yuelaiyue (越来越) “ sentence pattern requires X to be an adjective denoting a property or state that can be continuously accumulated to serve as a presupposition. However, “testing well(考得好)” is a verb-complement phrase describing the result of a one-time action; it lacks the aforementioned characteristics and conflicts with the sentence pattern’s presupposition.

“yesterday,” negates this presupposition, creating a contradiction.

2. His grades are more and more testing well (他的成绩越来越考得好).

When teaching, teachers should clarify to students that not all words can enter the “yuelaiyue X” framework, and should explicitly summarize that X must be a qualitative adjective (like “good,” “hot”) or a psychological verb (like “like,” “hate”), and cannot be a verb-complement phrase, a verb-object phrase, or a specific action. Furthermore, regarding the unidirectional process issue, attention should be paid to visualizing the “unidirectional continuous change” presupposition for students. Visual methods like drawing arrows on a timeline can be used to emphasize to students that “yuelaiyue (越来越) “ is a dynamic trend line that does not turn or regress.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Using the presupposition theory from Chen Xinren’s A Course in Chinese Pragmatics as a framework, this study

conducted a classified analysis of the presupposition mechanisms in Chinese comparative sentences. Based on this, it investigated the types and causes of errors made by international students when acquiring these sentence patterns, subsequently proposing targeted teaching strategies. Research indicates that comparative sentences are not purely syntactic structures; they carry complex background presupposition information and are typical syntactic presupposition triggers. Essentially, learners’ errors do not stem from a lack of syntactic competence but rather from a lack of presupposition awareness caused by a failure to fully comprehend the background information and cultural consensus relied upon by the sentence patterns. Therefore, how to transform presuppositions from implicit theoretical knowledge into observable, operable, and rehearsable pragmatic rules is an indispensable part of language teaching.

Of course, this study remains a preliminary exploration. There are still other sub-types within comparative sentences that have not been fully unpacked, and the effectiveness of the teaching strategies awaits empirical testing in the classroom. It is anticipated that future research can continuously advance deeper explorations across a broader scope of sentence patterns.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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