

## When Mandarin Meets Romanian: Linguistic Interference Patterns in Chinese Learners' Acquisition of Romanian as a Second Language

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*This study investigates the linguistic interference of Chinese native speakers who learn Romanian as a Second Language, through a mixed-methods analysis, which triangulates the analysis of 9 learner journals and 32 questionnaires, starting from the firsthand observation that Chinese learners face systematic challenges at different linguistic compartments. Thus, morphologically, all participants struggled with Romanian's three-gender system (absent in Mandarin); syntactically, topic-comment transfer produces OVS errors, with questionnaire data revealing persistent L1-mediated processing (M=4.00 "thinking in Chinese first"); lexical interference manifests through overgeneralised light verbs and inappropriate Mandarin obligatory classifier insertion; and pragmatically, Chinese indirect refusal strategies transfer inappropriately to Romanian's explicit communicative norms. Consequently, a critical finding was generated: learners demonstrate metalinguistic awareness without production accuracy, suggesting that spontaneous language use falls behind explicit knowledge, which emphasises the need for precise contrastive language acquisition patterns for grammatical gender, structured morphosyntactic practice, and dedicated pragmatic training for Romanian pedagogy targeting Chinese-speaking learners.*

Keywords: *Chinese-Romanian interference, contrastive analysis, second language acquisition (SLA), multilevel linguistic transfer, Romanian as a Second Language (RSL)*

### 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of linguistic interference stands as one of the fundamental challenges in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), particularly when learners

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attempt to manage the complexities of acquiring a target language that differs substantially from their native tongue. This study examines the specific patterns of linguistic interference that emerge when native Chinese speakers (L1) learn Romanian (L2), focusing on morphological, syntactic, lexical, and pragmatic dimensions of language transfer. The investigation excludes phonetic and phonological dimensions from its analytical scope, the decision reflecting both practical considerations regarding data collection methods and theoretical recognition that written and oral production reveal different aspects of interlanguage development. The morphological analysis examines how Chinese learners cope with Romanian's gender marking, case inflection, article usage, and verbal conjugation systems. The syntactic investigation focuses on word order patterns, relative clause formation, negation strategies, and pronominal systems. The lexical analysis addresses semantic transfer, compounding strategies, and culturally specific vocabulary. Finally, the pragmatic examination considers how Chinese speakers negotiate politeness conventions, speech act realisation, and discourse organisation when communicating in Romanian.

The research questions guiding this study include: (1) What specific morphological challenges do Chinese learners encounter when acquiring Romanian grammatical categories absent in their L1? (2) How do syntactic differences between Chinese and Romanian manifest as interference patterns in learner production? (3) What lexical transfer phenomena emerge from semantic and conceptual mismatches between the two linguistic systems? (4) How do pragmatic norms from Chinese cultural communication patterns influence Romanian language use and behaviour? By addressing these questions through systematic Contrastive Linguistic Analysis (CLA) complemented by learner production data, this study aims to provide a comprehensive documentation of Chinese-Romanian linguistic interference that can contribute to both theoretical understanding of language transfer and practical approaches to acquisition and instruction.

Research on Chinese-Romanian language contact remains relatively underexplored compared to more extensively documented language pairs, such as Chinese-English or Chinese-Spanish. And while pedagogical approaches to teaching Romanian as L2 have been documented (Burbea et al. 2022; Nechifor et al. 2022, 2023), systematic empirical documentation of Chinese-Romanian interference patterns represents a significant research gap. However, previous studies have examined Chinese learners acquiring other Indo-European languages, as well as Romanian acquisition by speakers of other L1s, but the specific challenges emerging from Chinese-Romanian typological distance remain underexamined.

Nevertheless, increasing educational and cultural exchanges between Romania and China have created a growing population of Chinese learners of Romanian, making the systematic investigation of their acquisition challenges increasingly relevant (Wang 2017) and understanding that the specific interference patterns that emerge from this language pairing carries significant implications for language acquisition, pedagogical practice, curriculum design, and assessment development in Romanian language instruction. Against this background, this study addresses that gap through systematic integration of CLA with empirical learner data.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Theoretical Framework: CLA and Language Transfer**

According to Weinreich (1953), linguistic interference, or negative transfer, occurs when features from a learner's first language inappropriately influence production in the target language. The theoretical framework supporting this investigation relies primarily on the Contrastive Analysis Theory/Hypothesis (CAT/CAH), which suggests that systematic comparison of linguistic structures between native and target languages can clarify areas of potential difficulty for learners (Lado, 1957). While early formulations of CAH faced criticism for overpredicting errors based solely on structural differences (Wardhaugh 1970; Odlin 1989), contemporary approaches recognise that contrastive insights remain valuable when combined with empirical observation of actual learner performance. Therefore, the present study integrates CLA with practical confirmation from learner production, from students' learning journals' assessment to students' questionnaire answers' analysis, to document interference phenomena across multiple linguistic levels.

Chinese, classified within the Sino-Tibetan language family, represents an analytic linguistic system characterised by minimal morphological inflection, reliance on word order for grammatical relations, and a logographic writing system (Chao 1968). In contrast, Romanian belongs to the Romance branch of the Indo-European language family, displaying rich morphological complexity through case marking, gender agreement, verbal conjugation, and subject-prominent syntax with relatively strict ordering constraints and an alphabet-based orthography (Avram 1997; Chitoran 2002). Therefore, the typological distance between these two linguistic systems creates fertile ground for investigating how fundamental structural differences manifest as interference patterns during the acquisition process.

## 2.2. Morphological transfer

Morphological transfer occurs when learners inappropriately apply L1 morphological patterns – or the absence – to L2 production. Chinese learners face a fundamentally different acquisition task than learners whose L1 already marks similar categories, as rather than adjusting to alternative marking strategies (as Spanish speakers do when learning Romanian gender), Chinese learners must construct entirely new grammatical distinctions absent from Mandarin’s analytic system.

Grammatical gender represents a particularly challenging acquisition domain, as languages with gender systems require learners to acquire three interwoven components: gender assignment rules (determining which gender each noun belongs to), morphological realisation patterns (selecting appropriate gender-marked affixes), and agreement multiplication (propagating gender features across determiners, adjectives, and participles). Learners whose L1 lacks gender struggle with all three components simultaneously (Corbett 1991), with difficulties persisting even at advanced proficiency levels (Ellis 1998).

Romanian’s three-gender system (masculine, feminine, neuter) intensifies these challenges compared to two-gender systems. Particularly problematic is the neuter gender’s mixed behaviour, as neuter nouns display masculine forms in singular but feminine forms in plural (e.g., “scaunul” [the chair – masc.sg] but “scaunele” [the chairs – fem.pl]), determining Chinese learners to simultaneously acquire the abstract concept of grammatical gender alongside the specific morphological patterns Romanian employs.

Article systems similarly challenge Chinese learners, since Chinese expresses definiteness through word order, topic-comment structures, and contextual inference rather than obligatory morphological marking. Romanian’s enclitic definite articles (attached as suffixes: “carte” → “cartea” [book → the book]) further complicate acquisition, since Chinese learners must learn not only when articles are required but also where they attach within nominal phrases.

Case morphology represents another substantial challenge because Romanian maintains five distinct cases (nominative, accusative, genitive, dative, and vocative) with synthetic marking on nouns, articles, pronouns and adjectives, while Chinese expresses corresponding grammatical relations through word order and prepositions without any nominal inflection. Research indicates morphological variability persists even at high proficiency levels, with inflectional morphology representing one of the domains most susceptible to persistent non-target-like performance (Lardiere 2007; Han and Odlin 2006).

### 2.3. Syntactic transfer

Syntactic transfer manifests when learners inappropriately apply L1 word order patterns, constituent structure, or grammatical operations to L2 production, Chinese-Romanian syntactic differences spanning multiple dimensions, which thus create systematic transfer patterns.

Word order represents a fundamental typological difference, as Chinese employs topic-prominent syntax with discourse-significant information appearing sentence-initially regardless of its grammatical relation to the verb (Li & Thompson, 1981), while Romanian employs subject-prominent syntax with relatively strict SVO ordering, with situations accepting or requiring VSO word-order. This creates systematic OSV errors having Chinese learners inappropriately front objects to topic position, producing structures like \**Cartea, am citit ieri* [The book, I read yesterday] rather than target (S)VO *Am citit cartea ieri* [I read the book yesterday].

Moreover, Romanian's rich pronominal system contrasts sharply with Chinese's simpler structure, considering that Romanian employs clitic doubling where direct object clitics appear with verbs even when full objects are present (*Am văzut-o pe Maria* [I saw her Maria] = "I saw Maria"), requires complex relative pronouns with case marking and agreement (*cartea pe care am citit-o* [the book on which I read it]), and maintains pro-drop properties allowing subject omission. Chinese marks none of these phenomena through overt morphology, thus creating acquisition challenges across multiple interlinking systems.

In terms of negation, patterns diverge, as well, as Chinese employs single negation (*我没看见什么* [I not see what] = "I didn't see anything"), while Romanian requires double negation when negative verbs co-occur with negative indefinites (*Nu văd nimic* [I not see nothing]). This parametric difference creates systematic errors, Chinese learners producing single negation in Romanian contexts that require double negation.

### 2.4. Lexical transfer

Lexical transfer occurs when learners inappropriately extend L1 lexicalisation patterns to L2 contexts or when semantic boundaries between translation equivalents differ across languages. Chinese-Romanian lexical differences cover semantic organisation, word formation processes, and lexical specificity.

Chinese employs restricted sets of light verbs combining with nouns to form verbal expressions (*打电话* [hit telephone] = "make a phone call"; *开灯* [open light] = "turn light on") (Huang et al., 2014). While Romanian similarly employs light verb

constructions, verb-noun pairings and semantic extension patterns differ systematically, creating transfer errors where Chinese learners overgeneralise light verb meanings from Chinese to Romanian contexts which require different verbs. Chinese learners inappropriately use constructions like a face X (“to do/make X”) where Romanian prefers single lexical verbs, because Mandarin trains them to build predicates through verb+noun combinations rather than selecting specific verbs.

Also, Chinese employs an obligatory classifier system according to which numerals cannot directly modify nouns but must appear with semantically appropriate classifiers (三本书 [three classifier-for-volumes books] = “three books”) (Chao, 1968). Romanian lacks grammatical classifiers, with numerals directly modifying nouns, yet Chinese learners may inappropriately insert classifier-like elements into Romanian nominal phrases.

Regarding kinship terminology, this one provides another example of lexical mismatch. Chinese kinship terms distinguish relative age, maternal versus paternal lineage, and generation level through dedicated lexical items (哥哥 [older brother], 弟弟 [younger brother]), while Romanian employs less-specific terms dropping such distinctions (“frate” covers both). Thus, Chinese learners must acquire Romanian’s less-differentiated system while understanding that Romanian can optionally modify kinship terms with adjectives to regain lost specificity when communicatively necessary.

## 2.5. Pragmatic transfer

Pragmatic transfer occurs when learners inappropriately apply L1 communicative norms, politeness conventions, or discourse strategies to L2 interaction and Chinese-Romanian pragmatic differences encompass multiple dimensions of language use. For example, politeness strategies differ systematically, Chinese employing indirect refusal strategies using deliberately vague responses that allow interlocutors to infer rejection through implicature (考虑考虑 [I’ll think about it], 下次吧 [maybe next time]), while Romanian employs more explicit mitigated direct refusals (“Nu pot, dar mulțumesc” [I can’t, but thank you]). Due to this, Chinese learners may transfer L1 indirectness patterns, producing refusals that Romanian speakers perceive as insufficiently clear or inappropriately evasive (Beebe et al., 1990; Thomas, 1983).

Address systems and honorifics also differ in scope and application, as Chinese employs extensive honorific marking combining titles, kinship terms used metaphorically, and other address forms to mark social relationships (Pan and

Kádár 2011), while Romanian employs more restricted title systems combined with T/V (*tu* vs. *dumneavoastră*) pronoun distinctions. In this way, Chinese learners may overuse titles or employ formal address beyond Romanian norms.

Gratitude expression patterns show systematic differences, as well, because Chinese speakers may omit explicit thanks in contexts of high familiarity or for very minor acts, particularly among family and close friends (Cheng 2005), while Romanian speakers employ “mulțumesc” more broadly across wider ranges of acts and social distances.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research Frame and Approach**

This study employs a mixed-methods research design combining qualitative analysis of learner journals with quantitative questionnaire data interpretation to investigate linguistic interference patterns among Chinese learners of Romanian and examines interference phenomena across morphological, syntactic, lexical, and pragmatic dimensions.

The study adopts an exploratory-descriptive approach grounded in CLA methodology supplemented by error analysis of authentic learner production. Rather than relying solely on predicted areas of difficulty based on linguistic comparison, this investigation prioritises empirical documentation of actual learner challenges, this methodological choice reflecting contemporary understanding that interference patterns require examination of real learner language to capture the complexity of transfer phenomena (Jarvis and Pavlenko, 2008).

#### **3.2. Research context and participants**

The research was conducted during the 1<sup>st</sup> semester of the 2024-2025 academic year at the Faculty of Letters, Transilvania University of Braşov, Romania. Participants comprised 9 Chinese students enrolled in the Preparatory Year dedicated to learning Romanian, all native Mandarin Chinese speakers with an A1-level of Romanian acquired one year before, at their home universities. Students ranged in age from 18 to 20 years old, all having completed secondary education in China with varying English proficiency levels, while Romanian represented their first sustained exposure to a Romance language and their first experience acquiring a language with rich inflectional morphology. This homogeneous L1 background

made the participant group particularly suitable for investigating Chinese-specific interference patterns.

The programme employed communicative methodologies mixed with technology-enhanced learning components, like gamification, an approach documented through recognised best practices in Romanian language pedagogy at this institution (Nechifor et al. 2023). The pedagogical approach emphasised communicative competence alongside explicit grammar instruction, with digital platforms supporting autonomous practice opportunities.

The syllabus of the preparatory year followed an intensive instructional model with approximately 20 hours of Romanian language classes per week, which were conducted primarily in Romanian with selective use of English for metalinguistic explanation.

### 3.3. Data collection instruments

The primary qualitative data source consisted of learning journals maintained by participants throughout the first semester, the students documenting their language learning experiences, and focusing particularly on aspects of Romanian they found challenging or different from their previous linguistic experience.

Participants completed journal entries in a language of their choice (Romanian, English, or Chinese) to ensure they could express complex thoughts without language barriers. Journal entries varied in format across participants, with some maintaining daily logs, others writing weekly summaries, and some producing longer reflective essays. The total corpus comprised approximately 150 individual entries, providing substantial qualitative material for thematic analysis.

Alongside learning journals, three structured questionnaires quantified interference patterns, targeting morphological and syntactic (n=14 respondents), lexical (n=8), and pragmatic (n=10) phenomena. The number of respondents is higher here, as former students of the Preparatory Year from previous generations were sent the invitation to answer, and several provided their insights. In terms of respondent demographics, they were predominantly aged 18-22 with 1-4 years of Romanian study, self-assessing as beginner to intermediate level. Most reported knowledge of English beyond Chinese and Romanian.

Questionnaires employed acceptability judgment tasks, self-assessment Likert scales, and production tasks. Regarding the item types, acceptability judgments were employed for sentence pairs which contrasted target Romanian structures with transfer-influenced alternatives on 5-point scales (1=completely incorrect, 5=completely correct). Examples included topic-fronted OSV structures (“Cartea, am citit ieri”) versus standard SVO (“Am citit cartea ieri”), pre-nominal

adjective order (“roșu măr”) versus post-nominal (“măr roșu”), bare infinitives (“Merg cumpăr pâine”) versus required subjunctive (“Merg să cumpăr pâine”), light verb transfer (“a deschis lumina” for “turn on light”), and classifier insertion (“trei bucăți de cărți”). Next, self-assessment Likert scales were used for items which assessed agreement with statements describing production tendencies and metacognitive processes (1=never/completely disagree, 5=always/completely agree). Examples included topic-comment transfer awareness, genitive construction processing preferences, and mental translation habits (“Before speaking Romanian, I often organise sentences in Chinese in my mind first”). Afterwards, production tasks were required under the form of open-ended items asking respondents to generate Romanian utterances for specified contexts, including narrative events, relative clause formation, compliment responses, indirect requests, refusal strategies, and workplace address terms. Responses revealed spontaneous linguistic choices as metalinguistic monitoring was reduced.

As a general perspective, data integration was activated as questionnaires deliberately targeted phenomena documented in journals, creating systematic triangulation between qualitative depth and quantitative span, establishing whether journal-documented patterns reflected shared acquisition challenges or idiosyncratic struggles.

### **3.4. Data analysis procedures**

Journal data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006), involving systematic coding and categorisation to identify recurring patterns. The authors independently coded approximately 30% of the corpus to establish inter-rater agreement, with discrepancies resolved through discussion, while frequency analysis complemented qualitative description by quantifying how often particular patterns appeared.

Questionnaire data analysis employed descriptive statistics that involved calculating mean ratings for Likert-scale items, frequency distributions for multiple-choice responses, and thematic coding of production task responses. For acceptability judgment pairs, mean ratings assessed whether learners showed systematic preferences for transfer-influenced structures. Average scores that learners gave to different sentence types were calculated and if learners consistently gave higher average scores to sentences that show Chinese influence, this would be evidence that Chinese transfer is affecting their judgments of what sounds correct in Romanian. Then, production tasks underwent qualitative analysis examining both structural accuracy and pragmatic appropriateness, with responses

coded for error types reflecting Chinese transfer, developmental processes, or idiosyncratic features.

For the phenomena identified, explicit connections were made between CLA predictions, journal documentation, and questionnaire validation data, providing a three-way integration system which demonstrated how predicted difficulties corresponded to actual learner challenges across multiple data sources.

### **3.5. Ethical Considerations**

All participants provided informed consent for their journals and questionnaire responses to be analysed for research. Students were assured that participation was voluntary, responses would be anonymised, and course grades would not be affected. Pseudonyms are used throughout data analysis sections, based on the European names Chinese learners use when studying abroad. For data analysis, students received explicit information that reflections on challenges were valued as honest documentation rather than judged as deficiencies.

## **4. Data Analysis: Convergent Evidence from Learner Journals and Questionnaires**

### **4.1. Morphological interference patterns**

All nine journal writers mentioned difficulties with Romanian's three-gender system, as Chinese lacks grammatical gender entirely. Veronica expressed this challenge like: "In Chinese we don't have this concept of gender for things. Why is 'book' neuter? It's not male or female, it's just a thing. And then it acts like masculine in singular but feminine in plural – this is very confusing for Chinese learners." Five writers explicitly mentioned confusion about neuter nouns' mixed behaviour (singular patterns with masculine, plural with feminine).

Seven writers mentioned difficulties maintaining gender agreement across constituents. Diana noted: "Sometimes I say the noun correctly with the right gender, but then I forget the adjective needs to match. In Chinese, adjectives never change, so this is not natural thinking for me."

The Romanian article system challenged learners through omission of required articles and confusion about definiteness distinctions. Elena reflected: "I often forget articles because in Chinese we don't use them. For me, if I say 'carte' everyone knows I mean 'the book' or 'a book' from the context, so why do I need to add an article?" Romanian's enclitic definite articles (*carte* → *cartea*) add to these challenges, with two writers mentioning confusion about article placement.

Five journal writers mentioned case difficulties, though fewer than gender challenges. Marina articulated reliance on analytic alternatives: “I learned to say possessive with ‘de’: ‘cartea de student’. But then teacher says we should use the genitive case: ‘cartea studentului’. For me, the ‘de’ structure is easier because it’s more like Chinese - 我的书, using the ‘de’ particle. The case ending feels very foreign.”

#### 4.2. Syntactic Interference Patterns

Questionnaire data showed that topic-fronted OSV “Cartea, am citit ieri” received moderate ratings (M=2.36), while standard SVO “Am citit cartea ieri” scored higher (M=4.14), which denotes a self-reported transfer tendency moderate agreement (M=2.21). Veronica wrote: “In Chinese, if we already talked about something, we put it first in the next sentence. Like 那本书,我昨天看了 [That book, I read it yesterday]. But in Romanian I learned this is wrong word order. However, when I’m speaking quickly, sometimes the topic comes out first because it feels natural.” Consequently, production tasks showed varied attempts at object emphasis, with several producing OSV structures despite metalinguistic knowledge of SVO norms.

Strong metalinguistic awareness was shown through questionnaire data, with pre-nominal “roșu măr” rating low (M=2.21), and post-nominal “măr roșu” rating high (M=4.21), for example. Diana noted: “I know adjectives usually come after the noun, and for adjectives I use a lot like ‘mare’ and ‘mic’, I usually remember. But sometimes with new adjectives, when I’m trying to speak quickly, the Chinese order comes out first.”

For genitives, learners rejected bare “Maria de carte” (M=2.21) yet showed moderate-to-high agreement (M=3.57) that Chinese “de” structure influences Romanian possessive planning. Marina: “For me, saying ‘cartea de Maria’ feels very natural because it’s like Chinese 玛丽亚的书. I know Romanian prefers ‘cartea Mariei’, but the ‘de’ version is easier to remember and produce quickly.”

Bare infinitive “Merg cumpăr pâine” received very low ratings (M=1.71), while correct subjunctive received near-ceiling endorsement (M=4.71). However, Diana noted that spontaneous errors persist: “I know I should say ‘Merg să cumpăr,’ but sometimes when I’m speaking fast the ‘să’ just gets dropped.” This exemplifies the lag between metalinguistic knowledge and automatized production.

For copula omission, “Casa mare” received surprisingly high acceptability (M=3.93), suggesting that many learners perceive copula-less structures as acceptable, direct questioning about copula necessity showing moderate uncertainty (M=2.43).

Intonation-only “Tu mergi la școală?” received relatively high ratings (M=3.93), while inverted “Mergi la școală?” scored higher (M=4.50), self-reported Chinese-style formation showing moderate agreement (M=3.07). Nevertheless, an interesting aspect was noted by Elena regarding register-dependent complexity: “In Chinese we just change our voice tone. In Romanian sometimes I do the same thing. My teacher says this is okay in conversation, but in writing I should use inversion. So now I’m not sure what’s correct.”

Single negation “Nu văd ceva” received moderate ratings (M=2.79), while correct double negation rated high (M=4.64), self-reported forgetting showing moderate agreement (M=2.71). Still, Irina: “The double negative is very strange for Chinese students. In Chinese, we say 我什么都没看见 [I didn’t see anything at all.], with just one negative. But Romanian says ‘Nu văd nimic’ – two negatives. In the English class, they taught us two negatives make a positive, but Romanian is different.”

Bare relative “carte am citit” rated low (M=2.07), while full structure “Cartea pe care am citit-o” rated high (M=4.43). Production tasks revealed varied accuracy: “Persoana pe care am văzut-o ieri” (target), “Persoana care am văzut-o ieri” (omitting preposition), “Cine am întâlnit ieri” (using question word), this variation demonstrating that learners must simultaneously acquire relative pronoun selection, case-marking prepositions, and resumptive clitics.

For clitic doubling, the non-doubled “Am văzut pe Maria” rated very low (M=1.93), while the doubled “Am văzut-o pe Maria” rated high (M=4.43). However, pronoun positioning difficulty rated high (M=4.00) with Marina jotting down: “The pronouns in Romanian are so complicated. In Chinese, we just say 我看见了玛丽亚 [I saw Maria], but in Romanian you have to say ‘Am văzut-o pe Maria’ - there’s an extra ‘o’ on the verb.”

### 4.3. Lexical Interference Patterns

Chinese light verbs create transfer when learners overgeneralise semantics. “Deschis lumina” [opened light] rated relatively low (M=2.50), showing awareness that “deschide” doesn’t extend to lights, while “pornit televizorul” rated appropriately high (M=4.12).

Chinese obligatory classifiers create systematic insertion, as “Trei bucăți de cărți” [three pieces of books] received surprisingly high ratings (M=3.75), suggesting many learners perceive inserted classifiers as acceptable, reflecting deep internalisation of Chinese classifier grammar.

Serial verbs showed moderate acceptability, with “cânt un cântec” rating M=3.62, “Aduce cartea aici” rating M=3.62, and “Vino și adu” rating M=3.50, which suggests that learners perceive serial-verb-like structures as partially acceptable.

For kinship terms, even though “Fratele meu” showed high acceptability (M=4.50), Irina noted: “In Chinese we have different words for older brother and younger brother, so when I speak Romanian and just say ‘frate,’ it feels like I’m leaving out important information.

As a partial overview, both questionnaires revealed extremely high rates of L1-mediated processing, the one dedicated to syntax registering “thinking in Chinese first” at M=4.00 agreement, and the lexical one having had 6/8 respondents select “frequently” translating from Chinese. The aspect is doubled by five journal entries which mentioned this explicitly. For example, Veronica wrote: “I always think in Chinese first, then try to translate to Romanian.” and Diana acknowledged that: “When speaking Romanian, my brain works in Chinese language first. Sometimes the Chinese sentence structure influences my Romanian sentence even though I know it’s different.”

#### **4.4. Pragmatic Interference Patterns**

Vague refusals rated moderate (M=2.50), with moderate-to-strong agreement (M=3.80) that direct-but-mitigated refusals are more polite than vague deferral. Production tasks revealed variability: “Mulțumesc pentru invitație, dar nu pot veni” (direct), “Poate altădată, sunt ocupată” (vague), demonstrating varied strategies that reflect mixed L1-L2 influences.

Self-reported title overuse showed moderate-to-high agreement (M=3.90), while formal address in informal settings showed very high agreement (M=4.40), suggesting transfer from Chinese’s more extensive honorific marking. For gratitude in intimate contexts, high agreement (M=4.30) indicated awareness that Romanian uses thanks even for small acts.

Chinese-style habitual “Da, da” backchanneling showed high agreement (M=4.00), while Romanian discourse marker familiarity showed moderate agreement (M=3.00), the overall pragmatic processing: “thinking in Chinese first” receiving high agreement (M=4.10).

Multiple metacognitive items revealed strategic patterns, as “focus on meaning over form” received M=3.93 agreement, while “errors don’t affect understanding” showed M=3.64 agreement. As Marina confessed, “Sometimes I know my sentence structure is not perfect Romanian, but if my meaning is clear, I continue. Later I can work on making it more accurate, but first I need to be able to

communicate.” This reveals learners consciously tolerate transfer errors preserving communicative meaning while prioritising features with clearer communicative consequences.

## **5. Discussion and Interpretation of Findings**

### **5.1. Synthesis of Chinese-Romanian Interference Patterns**

The convergent evidence from learner journals and questionnaires establishes systematic interference patterns across four linguistic levels, confirming that typological distance between Chinese and Romanian generates predictable acquisition challenges. However, even if the documented patterns align with CLA predictions they reveal additional complexities that contrastive comparison alone cannot fully capture.

At the morphological level, grammatical gender emerged as the most widespread challenge, affecting all nine journal writers and showing persistent difficulty even at intermediate proficiency stages. This finding supports Corbett’s (1991) observation that gender systems pose particular challenges for learners whose L1 lacks this grammatical category, yet our data revealed that the challenge extends beyond simple category acquisition to encompass the cognitive load of maintaining agreement across multiple sentence constituents. Thus, Chinese learners must simultaneously acquire gender assignment rules (memorising individual noun genders), morphological realisation patterns (selecting appropriate affixes), and agreement multiplication (propagating gender features across determiners, adjectives, and participles), which creates a complex acquisition burden absent from learners whose L1 already encodes grammatical gender. Romanian’s three-gender system (masculine, feminine, neuter) enhances this challenge compared to two-gender systems, particularly because neuter nouns are formed ambiguously (masculine singular, feminine plural), creating additional cognitive load.

Article omission and case morphology similarly reflect the fundamental analytic-synthetic typological divide between Chinese and Romanian, as the former expresses definiteness and grammatical relations through word order, topic-comment structures, and contextual inference rather than obligatory morphological marking, consequently creating persistent uncertainty, while the latter requires overt articles and case inflection. Learners’ strategic reliance on analytic alternatives (prepositional phrases with “de” rather than synthetic genitive case) demonstrates how they exploit structural overlaps between Romanian’s

optional analytic constructions and Chinese patterns as communicative bridges before fully mastering synthetic morphology.

Syntactic interference patterns reveal fundamental differences in information structure organisation between topic-prominent Chinese and subject-prominent Romanian. Topic-comment transfer (OSV structures) persists despite learners' metalinguistic awareness that Romanian favours SVO/VSO word order, suggesting that discourse-pragmatic tendencies to place important information first compete with syntactic constraints. Questionnaire data showing that OSV structures received moderate acceptability ratings (M=2.36) rather than categorical rejection, combined with learners' self-reported tendency to "think in Chinese first" (M=4.00), indicate that L1 organisational schemas remain active throughout L2 processing even when learners possess explicit knowledge of target patterns.

Relative clause formation, clitic pronoun systems, and double negation requirements represent areas where Romanian's morphosyntactic complexity substantially exceeds Chinese's analytic simplicity. Chinese marks none of these phenomena through overt morphology (no relative pronouns, no clitic doubling, single negation), yet Romanian requires complex coordinated systems involving pronoun selection, case marking, verb agreement, and syntactic positioning. The data extracted from the production task showed varied attempts at relative clause construction – some omitting prepositions, some using question words instead of relative pronouns, some lacking resumptive clitics – thus demonstrating that learners struggle not with single acquisition targets but with integrating multiple interdependent morphosyntactic systems simultaneously.

Lexical interference patterns centre on systematic mismatches in how Chinese and Romanian encode semantic content across lexical items, light verb overgeneralisation, classifier insertion, and serial verb transfer reflecting attempts to maintain Chinese-style lexical organisation in Romanian production. The surprisingly high acceptability ratings for classifier-like structures (M=3.75 for "trei bucăți de cârți") suggest that some transfer patterns may persist longer than others because they exploit ambiguous distributional evidence in Romanian – structures that are non-target but not impossible given that Romanian employs "de" constructions for other purposes. This finding aligns with MacWhinney's (2005) Competition Model, which predicts that transfer errors receiving inconsistent corrective feedback or operating in ambiguous distributional contexts will resist restructuring more stubbornly than errors that produce consistently negative evidence.

Pragmatic interference patterns reveal cultural and communicative norm differences extending beyond structural-grammatical transfer. Thus, Chinese preferences for vague refusal strategies, extensive honorific marking, and selective gratitude expression create pragmatic transfer whereby learners may appear

overly formal, insufficiently direct, or communicatively inappropriate by Romanian standards even when their morphosyntax approaches target norms. The high agreement ratings for pragmatic behaviours – title overuse (M=3.90), formal address in informal settings (M=4.40), habitual backchanneling (M=4.00) – indicate that pragmatic patterns remain under strong L1 influence, potentially because they operate at lower levels of conscious awareness than morphosyntactic patterns, which receive more explicit instruction and feedback.

### **5.1. Language Acquisition Implications**

The documented patterns support refined versions of CAH, whereby structural comparison predicts areas of difficulty but cannot fully determine error frequency, persistence, or developmental trajectory. Our findings align with Kellerman's (1983) psychotypology framework: learners perceive certain structural differences (grammatical gender, articles, case) as fundamentally foreign and language-specific, thus recognising them as requiring new category construction, while other phenomena (word order, information structure, pragmatic norms) may be perceived as more universal or neutral, potentially remaining below conscious awareness as transfer sources.

The persistent L1-mediated processing documented through metacognitive self-reports (M=4.00 "thinking in Chinese first") suggests that even at (lower-)intermediate proficiency (1-4 years study), Chinese learners have not achieved direct Romanian L2 conceptualisation but continue relying on translation-based strategies. This finding has important implications for understanding the documented transfer patterns: many errors may reflect not just abstract structural transfer but rather direct translation processing according to which learners formulate utterances in Chinese and then attempt to transpose Chinese structures onto Romanian forms. This processing architecture potentially explains why certain transfer errors persist despite metalinguistic knowledge – learners know the correct Romanian structures but rely on Chinese organisational schemas under time pressure.

The strategic prioritisation documented through self-reports (M=3.93 "focus on meaning over form"; M=3.64 "errors don't affect understanding") reveals that learners consciously tolerate certain transfer errors that preserve communicative function while prioritising acquisition of features that carry clearer communicative consequences. This strategic orientation may explain why some transfer patterns (copula omission, classifier insertion) persist longer than others (purpose clause marking, double negation): learners implicitly assess which deviations compromise

intelligibility versus which deviations leave core meaning identifiable and understandable, allocating acquisition effort accordingly.

## 5.2. Pedagogical implications

The documented patterns carry direct implications for Romanian language pedagogy with Chinese-speaking learners. First, instructional materials should explicitly address the typological differences underlying persistent interference patterns rather than treating errors as random mistakes. Contrastive presentation of Chinese and Romanian grammatical organisation can help learners understand why certain Romanian structures feel incongruent with L1 patterns while providing metalinguistic frameworks for monitoring their own production.

Second, the finding that metalinguistic knowledge develops earlier than automatised production (evidenced by high correct-answer ratings on questionnaire judgment tasks combined with persistent production errors documented in journals) suggests that instruction should emphasise extensive structured practice rather than solely metalinguistic explanation. Learners need opportunities to automatise Romanian structures through repeated contextualised use, gradually building fluency that reduces reliance on L1-mediated translation strategies.

Third, the strategic orientation through which learners prioritise communicative effectiveness over formal accuracy suggests that error correction should distinguish between errors compromising intelligibility versus errors preserving core meaning. While all target deviations deserve eventual correction, instructional emphasis on high-stakes morphosyntactic features (gender agreement, case marking, relative clause formation) may produce greater communicative gain than extensive focus on lower-stakes phenomena (copula inclusion, classifier avoidance).

Fourth, pragmatic interference patterns operating below conscious awareness require explicit sociocultural instruction addressing Romanian communicative norms, politeness conventions, and discourse strategies. Since pragmatic patterns receive less overt correction than grammatical errors and may persist even when morphosyntax approaches target norms, dedicated instructional attention to pragmatic appropriateness becomes essential for Chinese learners' development of socio-linguistically competent Romanian.

Finally, the extensive mental translation documented across learners suggests that instruction should explicitly promote direct L2 thinking strategies rather than assuming learners will spontaneously abandon translation-based processing. Activities requiring rapid Romanian production without time for translation planning, extensive exposure to authentic Romanian discourse

cultivating direct comprehension without L1 mediation, and metacognitive training helping learners monitor their processing strategies may facilitate the transition from translation-based to direct L2 conceptualisation.

## **6. Conclusions, Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This study has documented systematic linguistic interference patterns emerging when native Chinese speakers acquire Romanian, providing convergent qualitative and quantitative evidence across morphological, syntactic, lexical, and pragmatic dimensions. Analysis of learning journals combined with targeted questionnaires established that typological distance between Chinese and Romanian generates predictable acquisition challenges reflecting fundamental differences in grammatical organisation, information structure, and communicative norms.

The most common morphological challenges – grammatical gender, article systems, and case marking – stem directly from Chinese’s analytic structure lacking these grammatical categories, requiring learners to construct entirely new linguistic knowledge rather than simply establishing correspondences between different realisations of shared categories. Syntactic challenges centre on topic-prominence versus subject-prominence, with Chinese learners persistently transferring topic-comment structures, experiencing difficulty with Romanian’s pronominal systems (relative pronouns, clitic doubling), and struggling with phenomena requiring morphosyntactic coordination absent from Chinese (double negation, subjunctive purpose clauses). Lexical challenges reflect systematic mismatches in how Chinese and Romanian distribute semantic content across lexical items, creating light verb overgeneralisation, classifier insertion, and serial verb transfer. Pragmatic challenges extend beyond structural-grammatical transfer encompassing cultural differences in refusal strategies, honorific marking, gratitude expression, and discourse management.

From a critical point of view, the study establishes that documented patterns represent shared acquisition challenges across learner populations rather than individual struggles. The convergence between high-frequency patterns in journals and systematic quantitative patterns in questionnaires provides robust triangulated evidence. Moreover, learners demonstrate substantial metalinguistic awareness of many transfer patterns, yet this explicit knowledge does not immediately translate into consistent target-like production, with learners reporting persistent L1-mediated processing (“thinking in Chinese first”:  $M=4.00$ ) and strategic prioritisation of communicative effectiveness over formal accuracy.

Subsequently, these findings carry important implications for Romanian language pedagogy with Chinese-speaking learners, as instruction should explicitly address typological differences that underline persistent interference, thus emphasising extensive structured practice rather than metalinguistic explanation exclusively, distinguishing between high-stakes errors compromising intelligibility and lower-stakes deviations preserving core meaning, providing dedicated sociocultural instruction addressing pragmatic appropriateness, and explicitly promoting direct L2 thinking strategies to facilitate transition from translation-based processing.

Moreover, the study contributes to the relatively underexplored domain of Chinese-Romanian language contact research, demonstrating how systematic CLA combined with empirical learner data can explain acquisition challenges specific to this language pairing. As mentioned in the Introduction, while previous research has examined Chinese learners acquiring other Indo-European languages (English, Spanish), on the one hand, and Romanian acquisition by speakers of other L1s, on the other hand, this investigation uniquely documented the specific interference patterns emerging from the Chinese-Romanian typological configuration.

Nevertheless, several limitations diminish the potential to generalisation of these findings. First, the learner sample represents a relatively narrow demographic profile – predominantly young adult university students (ages 18-22) at beginner to intermediate proficiency levels (1-4 years of study), with most having additional L2 English knowledge. Findings may not extend to heritage learners, older adult learners, advanced-level learners, or learners without prior experience with Indo-European languages. That is why, future research should examine whether documented patterns persist at advanced proficiency levels or whether certain interference phenomena eventually undergo complete restructuring with extensive exposure.

Second, the study's exclusion of phonetic and phonological dimensions leaves an important gap regarding the understanding of Chinese-Romanian interference, since pronunciation challenges likely create significant additional acquisition burdens. Future investigations incorporating acoustic analysis of learner production could document phonetic and phonological transfer patterns complementing the morphosyntactic, lexical, and pragmatic phenomena examined here.

Third, while the study documents interference patterns, it does not systematically examine developmental trajectories – the order in which learners acquire different Romanian structures or the time course over which specific interference patterns diminish. Longitudinal studies tracking learners across multiple proficiency stages would provide essential insight into acquisition sequences, potentially informing instructional sequencing decisions.

Fourth, the questionnaire data, while quantifying patterns observed in journals, cannot fully capture the dynamic, context-dependent nature of language production. Experimental tasks eliciting spontaneous production under controlled conditions, combined with corpus analysis of extended authentic discourse, would provide additional perspectives on interference patterns as they manifest in natural communication.

Fifth, the study does not systematically compare Chinese learners' Romanian acquisition with that of learners from other L1 backgrounds. Comparative research examining whether documented challenges are specific to Chinese-Romanian typological distance or represent more general difficulties all Romanian learners face would help isolate L1-specific versus universal acquisition phenomena.

Finally, while the study documents learners' strategic prioritisation of meaning over form, it does not determine which pedagogical interventions most effectively address the interference patterns. Future research could examine whether gamified learning environments (Nechifor et al. 2022 and 2023) or mobile-assisted language learning approaches incorporating cultural content (Nechifor and Dimulescu 2024) prove effective for challenging domains like grammatical gender and article systems, with particular attention to whether technology-enhanced approaches facilitate the development of automatised morphosyntactic processing.

Despite these limitations, this investigation establishes a foundation for understanding Chinese-Romanian interference patterns, demonstrating the value of triangulating qualitative and quantitative evidence while grounding findings in both CLA and empirical learner data. As educational and cultural exchanges between Romania and China continue expanding, systematic documentation of Chinese learners' Romanian acquisition challenges becomes increasingly essential for developing effective, evidence-based language acquisition methods and pedagogical approaches addressing the specific needs of Chinese candidates to learning Romania as a Second Language.

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