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Potential Causes of Errors in Subject-Verb Agreement in L2 English

英語の主語と動詞の一致に関する誤りとその要因

Key Words: Second Language Acquisition, Inflectional Morphology, Agreement

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浦野 研

Second language (L2) learners are generally known to have difficulty in native-like mastery of inflectional morphology. More precisely, their use of inflection, such as tense and agreement, is often observed inconsistent, with inflectional affixes being sometimes present and sometimes absent (Prévost & White, 2000b, p. 103). In the case of English, L2 learners often produce inflectional errors like an example below¹.

(1) *So he use some difficult words in his songs....

The goals of this study are (a) to describe errors in inflectional morphology made by L2 learners, and (b) to explore potential causes of such errors. Due to the page limit, I will focus on the difficulty in subject-verb agreement in L2 English.

Two Types of Errors in Subject-Verb Agreement

In English, there is only one suffix, i.e., 3rd-person singular *-s*, to overtly mark agreement. Therefore, the task for L2 learners is to decide whether or not to attach *-s* to the verb reflecting the person and number of the subject². In English agreement, two types of errors are possible. One is omission errors, where learners fail to add the suffix *-s* to the verb when the subject is a 3rd-person singular noun. The other type is commission errors, or oversuppliance errors, where learners wrongly put *-s* when the subject is not 3rd-person singular. Together with correct uses, the following four combinations are theoretically possible between subject and verb.

Table 1. Correct and incorrect uses of agreement

Type	Example Sentence
A (correct use): <i>-s</i> attached where it should be	<u>He uses</u> some difficult words.
B (omission error): <i>-s</i> not attached where it should be	* <u>He use</u> some difficult words.
C (commission error): <i>-s</i> attached where it should not be	* <u>They uses</u> some difficult words.
D (correct use): <i>-s</i> not attached where it should not be	<u>They use</u> some difficult words.

As discussed later, the contrast between the two types of errors (Types B & C) has been commonly discussed in the acquisition of L2 morphology. The questions asked are (a) how frequently those errors are found, and (b) what causes such errors. The next section will review two major positions on this issue and relevant empirical findings.

Causes of Inflectional Errors

The issue of inflectional errors has been a target of heated discussion among SLA researchers under the UG (Universal Grammar) framework. I will review two major, and competing, views on this phenomenon. One proposal is usually referred to as the Impaired Representation Hypothesis (IRH), or the Representational Deficit Hypothesis (RDH). Researchers who support this position believe that the representation of L2 grammar responsible for inflection is somehow impaired or missing. In other words, they claim that L2 learners lack implicit knowledge, or native-speaker intuition, of inflection. As a consequence, their use of inflection is expected to be random, and in the case of English agreement, the suffix *-s* would be observed with no consistent patterns. Since the IRH does not presuppose any grammatical representation for inflection, all the four types of correct and incorrect uses of inflection shown in Table 1 are possible. Therefore, the IRH would predict that L2 learners make both omission errors and commission errors. Proponents of the IRH are further divided into two groups: one that argue this impairment is permanent (e.g., Beck, 1997, 1998; Meisel, 1997), and the other who believe the impairment to be temporary (e.g., Eubank, 1993/94).

Another group of researchers question the possibility of such impairment in L2 grammar, and argue that inflectional errors occur at a more surface level of production. They claim that L2 learners are just as sensitive to tense and agreement as native speakers, and that problems with inflectional morphology are attributed to a “mapping problem” between abstract features, or rules, of inflection and actual morphological forms (presence or absence of *-s* in the case of English agreement). This position is often referred to as the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (MSIH), and was first proposed by Haznedar and Schwartz (1997), later followed by other researchers (e.g., Lardiere, 1998a, b; Prévost & White, 2000a, b; White, 2001). According to the MSIH, L2 learners know when to inflect verbs, but they sometimes fail to do so when producing sentences. This hypothesis would predict that most, if not all, learner errors are omission (Type B) errors, and oversuppliance (Type C) errors are expected to be non-existent.

To summarize, there is a clear contrast in prediction between the IRH and the MSIH. While the IRH predicts both commission and omission errors (Types B & C) are possible, the MSIH argues that L2 learners would make omission (Type B) errors, but not commission (Type C) errors.

Inflectional Errors in Spontaneous Learner Utterances

Several researchers have conducted studies to investigate the issue presented above, two of which are reviewed below as most relevant studies³. White (2001) collected spontaneous production data from an adult L2 speaker of English whose L1 is Turkish. The subject, SD, had moved to Montreal, Canada with her family when she was 40 and had lived there for 10 years when the study took place. Through four interview sessions over a two-month period, spontaneous production data of 2,168 utterances were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Table 2 shows the frequency and percentage of the four types of utterances that contain a subject and a verb. It should be noted that, between the two types of errors, omission errors (22%) were proportionally much more frequent than commission errors (4%).

Table 2. Frequency of correct and incorrect uses of agreement (from White, 2001)⁴

Type	Frequency	%
A (correct: -s attached where it should be)	145/185	78
B (omission error: -s not attached where it should be)	40/185	22
C (commission error: -s attached where it should not be)	32/858	4
D (correct: -s not attached where it should not be)	826/858	96

Another study was conducted by Ionin and Wexler (2002). Spontaneous production data were collected from 20 child learners of English whose L1 was Russian. The mean age of the subjects was 8;4, and they were all living in the US at the time of data collection. Since their exposure to English was much more limited than that of SD in White (2001), the error rates were generally higher in this study. Nevertheless, Table 3 shows similar findings: compared to omission errors (78%), commission errors were much less frequent (5%).

Table 3. Frequency of correct and incorrect uses of agreement (from Ionin & Wexler, 2002)⁵

Type	Frequency	%
A (correct: -s attached where it should be)	71/321	22
B (omission error: -s not attached where it should be)	250/321	78
C (commission error: -s attached where it should not be)	4/ 80	5

Findings from both White (2001) and Ionin and Wexler (2002) can be considered to support the MSIH over the IRH. The IRH cannot explain noticeable differences between omission errors and commission errors (22% & 4% in White, 2001, and 78% & 5% in Ionin & Wexler, 2002). However, both studies found some (4-5%) occurrence of commission errors, though less frequent than omission errors. Proponents of the MSIH explicitly argue that L2 learners do not make commission errors, and it is not clear whether this small proportion of commission errors can be ignored as some sort of “noise” in spontaneous production data. It is therefore necessary to take a closer look at commission errors and to explore how such errors are made. The present study is an attempt to do this.

The Present Study

Data source

The data for this study were taken from the NICT JLE Corpus (Izumi, Uchimoto, & Isahara, 2004). This learner corpus consists of spontaneous spoken data from an English speaking test administered to 1,281 adult Japanese speakers using English as an L2. The present study analyzed a sub-corpus of 167 speakers in which all grammatical and lexical errors were identified and coded.

Before we proceed, a “problem” of the data needs mentioning. Only errors can be extracted from the error-tagged corpus, which means that error rates are not obtainable unlike the previous studies. Although a large-scale learner corpus is a useful data source for SLA research, the lack of error rates is a potential drawback. Nevertheless, I still believe it is meaningful to analyze errors that learners actually make.

Procedure

All the agreement errors were first extracted from the corpus. A total of 347 errors were then coded using the following criteria.

Table 4. Error coding criteria

Criteria	Categories
Person	1st, 2nd, & 3rd
Number	singular & plural
Subject noun type	pronoun, noun phrase (NP), & “NP and NP”
Verb type	copula <i>be</i> , auxiliary <i>be</i> , & lexical verb

Results and discussion

Among the agreement errors found in the corpus, lexical verbs were involved in 286 cases. In this subgroup of errors, omission (Type B) errors accounted for 240 cases, and the other 46 were commission (Type C) errors. Agreement errors with the copular and auxiliary *be* included, the total errors were 259 (Type B) and 88 (Type C). Although it is difficult to make a clear judgment without error rates, more frequent omission errors may support the MSIH, suggesting that L2 learners are sensitive to agreement but sometimes fail to inflect the verb in production. However, as discussed earlier, the MSIH cannot explain why commission errors were found in the data.

Next, I looked into the commission errors in more detail. Among the 46 commission errors involving lexical verbs, the subject was 3rd-person plural in 35 cases. The second most frequent were cases in which the subject was 1st-person singular or plural (10 cases). Only one agreement error was found when the subject was 2nd-person. Examples from the actual errors found in the corpus are presented below:

- (2) a. *I checks out staff's schedule. (1st-person subject)
- b. ... but *you seems like you are staying inside the sea. (2nd-person subject)
- c. ... and *they plays baseball together. (3rd-person plural subject)

The large proportion of commission errors with 3rd-person plural subjects seems to indicate that L2 learners, at least the Japanese subjects in this study, have difficulty in agreement when the subject is 3rd-person plural. The contrast is even larger if errors involving the copular and auxiliary *be* are included: the error counts for 1st-person subjects, 2nd-person subjects, and 3rd-person plural subjects were 11, 1, and 76, respectively.

As the lack of error rates might overestimate or underestimate the difficulty in 3rd-person plural agreement, I went back to the data from White (2001) for additional support. As shown in Table 2, 32 commission errors were found in 858 relevant contexts. Among the 32 errors, 1st- or 2nd-person subjects were involved in only one case, and the error rate was 0.15% (1/656). The other 31 commission errors all involved 3rd-person plural subjects, with the error rate of 15% (31/202). From these results, it is undeniable that L2 learners make more commission errors when the subject is 3rd-person plural. The question then arises as to what causes such a difference.

General Discussion: Why Is 3rd-Person Difficult?

This paper has shown that L2 learners make more oversuppliance errors in English agreement when the subject is 3rd-person plural. Neither the IRH nor the MSIH have an explicit explanation for this phenomenon. Considering that omission errors, which are even more frequent, also involve 3rd-person (singular) subjects, it may be worthwhile to consider the possibility that inflection is difficult when the subject is 3rd-person, singular or plural. This new hypothesis is not without additional support. Previous studies investigating L2 learners' sensitivity to agreement errors found similar tendencies. Wakabayashi (1997) conducted a grammaticality judgment task to 44 Japanese learners of English. The subjects read English sentences containing omission or commission errors in agreement. Reaction-time to the judgment task suggested that the subjects were more sensitive to commission errors when the subject was 2nd-person than when it was 3rd-person (plural). A more recent study by Wakabayashi, Fukuda, Bannai, and Asaoka (2007) found similar results. Using the event-related potential technique, this laboratory study tested Japanese learners' sensitivity to 1st- and 3rd-person agreement errors in English. Results generally suggested that the subjects reacted to only 1st-person agreement errors while native-speakers were sensitive to both 1st-person and 3rd-person agreement errors.

All the studies reviewed in this paper, including the present study, suggest that L2 learners have difficulty in inflection when the subject is 3rd-person. Why is this the case? Wakabayashi (1997) proposes that it is not the person but the number of the subject that causes the difficulty. More precisely, he proposes that (at least Japanese) learners of L2 English are sensitive only to person agreement, and not to number agreement. If this were the case, learners would inflect the verb when the subject is 3rd-person regardless of the number (singular or plural). This would result in more frequent commission errors when the subject is 3rd-person plural. When the subject is 1st- or 2nd-person, learners do not add the suffix *-s*, again regardless of the number of the subject, which would result in near non-existence of commission errors with 1st- and 2nd-person subjects. This proposal seems to be compatible with all the empirical findings presented in this paper.

The question still remains as to why only person agreement is intact in L2 grammar. One of Wakabayashi's (1997) explanations relies on the distinction between inherent and optional features of noun. Inherent features are features like person and gender, which are intrinsically tied to the meaning of the noun. On the other hand, optional features, such as number and case (e.g., nominative, genitive, and accusative), are set outside the meaning of the noun itself. Wakabayashi (1997) argues that L2 learners

are sensitive only to inherent features of the subject. Although this seems to be a plausible explanation of the phenomenon investigated in this paper, much more additional support is necessary to strengthen the argument. For example, if L2 grammar indeed lacks number feature of noun, learners may make oversuppliance errors in plural marking (e.g., *I have a sisters.)⁶. Further studies in these relevant issues will bring about a clearer picture of L2 grammar, especially in the domain of inflectional morphology.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate errors in subject-verb agreement in L2 English. My tentative conclusion is that L2 learners are sensitive to person agreement but not number agreement, and that this is because L2 grammar lacks optional features of noun, as Wakabayashi proposed. The present study was exploratory in nature and therefore no explicit remark can really be made on L2 grammar without further studies. However, I believe that this paper has shown that it is worth continuing investigations along this line.

(Hokkai-Gakuen University)

Notes

1. Taken from a free composition by a third-year university student in Japan.
2. For the sake of simple description, I do not consider tense here.
3. Scopes of these studies are wider, so I will report only relevant data.
4. Note that Type A and B utterances do not include the copula and auxiliary *be* while Types C and D utterances do, as the original study reported the result in this way.
5. Ionin and Wexler excluded the auxiliary and copular *be* as well as irregular lexical verbs in the data, so the table shows the frequency of only regular lexical verbs.
6. I thank Hideki Yokota for his comment on this possibility.

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