

## **SYNTACTIC KNOWLEDGE IN CHINESE AS A THIRD LANGUAGE: IS THE FIRST OR THE SECOND LANGUAGE ACTIVATED?**

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This pilot study draws on Vainikka and Young-Scholten's (1994, 1996) Minimal Trees Hypothesis and aims to explore how the grammar of a third language (Chinese) is understood by transferring syntactic knowledge from the learner's first (Hungarian) and/or second language (English). Another aim of the research is to find out whether the selected methodology is suitable for gaining meaningful empirical data that can lend itself to theoretical analysis. First, I will provide a brief introduction to the most important theoretical questions on SLA research, followed by the description of some basic tenets of the Minimal Trees Hypothesis.

### **CONFLICTING THEORIES ON L2 ACQUISITION**

There is no common ground among applied linguists on L2 acquisition theories (Ellis 2010:23). The more specific the statement or hypothesis is, the less likely it is that it will be accepted by all (consider, for instance, the issue of age in L2 acquisition vs. the critical period hypothesis). Some influential acquisition theorists, such as Pienemann (1998) suggested that

language processing is incremental and occurs sequentially. As he claimed in his Processability Theory, stages cannot be left out, and a hierarchy of key structures can be drawn up, which make learner development predictable. Lantolf and Zhang (2015), however, challenged Peinemann's views, asserting that psycholinguistic constraints can be overridden under instructional conditions.

Another controversial topic is how to account for errors in interlanguage: whether they originate from L1 interference, thus are inevitable in language learning, or L1 does not play a significant role in producing ungrammatical forms: they are rather a consequence of language level and will disappear as learning continues. Error analysis is closely connected to theories about rule formation, an aspect of language competence/performance studied by Chomsky, Lado, Corder, or Selinker, to name but a few whose works are comprehensively analysed by Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991).

There are similarly conflicting views on the issue of how accessible UG is to L2 learners. More specifically, positions diverge on the question of the availability of UG in the acquisition process of syntactic structures. It is interesting to notice that although the initial inquiry was based around, and much theoretical and empirical research has been devoted to establishing the existence of (or the lack of) UG availability, after decades of research, linguists seem to be satisfied with the far less comprehensive and rather vague finding that *what cannot be denied is the existence of UG availability* (Tomita 2001).

Cook (1989, 1993) differentiates three positions: Direct Access, No Access, and Indirect Access to UG. Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1994, 1996) took the Indirect Access position. They proposed that the Weak form of the Continuity Hypothesis (Pinker 1984) could be a better approach to explain L2 syntactic acquisition of adults than the Strong Continuity

approach. They collected data from adult Korean and Turkish learners of L2 German, to which further data was added from speakers of Romance languages. At the first stage of acquisition, learners posited a bare VP, the headedness of which was transferred from their L1 syntax. While still in the bare VP stage, they later adopted German syntax with a head-final VP. Common in all four observed nationalities, the next stage of acquisition was a head-initial functional projection. Vainikka and Young-Scholten's conclusion was that, initially, functional projections are not present in learners' syntax: these gradually develop instead, and the process is guided by the X'-Theory.

In order to gain an insight into learners' third language acquisition processes, the theoretical aim of this research was to collect data on how beginner L3 speakers make use of their L1 and/or L2 background knowledge: whether they project the syntax of their mother tongue, or use L2 syntax as reference.

## **THE LEARNING SETTINGS**

Two pools of beginner Chinese language learners were asked to take part in this exploratory research. The first Hungarian mini-group (N=3) is studying Mandarin with the help of a native Chinese instructor who teaches them through English. They are offered two 90-minute language practice sessions weekly. The coursebook and the mode of teaching are based on the traditional grammar-translation method with a focus on all four skills. Their learning process is slowed down by the fact that they also study writing in Chinese. The teacher is from mainland China. She did not get any special tuition on how to teach Hungarians, neither has any linguistic knowledge of Hungarian. Consequently, she cannot anticipate learners' difficulties arising from the differences of the two language systems: these are dealt with on a case by case basis.

The other Hungarian group (N=3) started studying Chinese individually with a mobile application (Duolingo). The students did not start the course at the same time, neither do they spend the same amount of time practising. Based on the completed units, however, they can be considered to have got the same amount of language input as their classroom-instructed peers. Learners using the Duolingo m-learning platform were selected for this research because one of the most interesting features of this application is that it puts great emphasis on syntax, especially on word order, right from complete beginner level. After each character recognition phase, learners have to translate sentences in both directions. They also have to select words (one, two, or three-character length) and form sentences.

In order to make sentence formation more difficult and less of a routine exercise, some extra words are provided which are unnecessary but not obviously so. They are either extra nouns or extra function words, such as unnecessary copula in the case of existential negative statements. The learning materials are divided into very short, recurring units based around one function or notion (e.g. Greetings; Expressing Time; Food; Family). Learner errors are dealt with by adaptive technology, which ensures that no further progress is possible until the mistake is corrected.

The two learner groups are similar in the sense that, while the participants are Hungarian, they learn Chinese through English, thus they need to activate their knowledge of two previously acquired language systems while studying the third language. To align the time of exposure to the Chinese language between the two groups, the pilot research had to take place after two months of the first group's university studies.

## OBSERVED ASPECTS OF THE LANGUAGES

Two aspects of language were explored in the research: the use of copula in the present tense and the position of complex NP expressing time. These aspects were chosen because they are formulated differently in Hungarian, in English, and in Chinese. The following sentences indicate the use of copula.

- (1a) *Tā shì lǎoshī.*  
 He is a teacher.  
 Ő tanár.
- (1b) *Tā bù shì lǎoshī.*  
 He is not a teacher.  
 Ő nem tanár.
- (1c) *Tā hen gāo.*  
 He is/very tall.  
 Ő magas.
- (1d) *Tā bù gāo.*  
 He is not tall.  
 Ő nem magas.

In Chinese, even though *hen* is not considered a copula, but an adverb meaning *very*, in existential statements, when it is followed by an adjective, it takes the role of *is* and/or *very*. If the copula is followed by a noun (1), *shì* is used meaning *be*. In affirmative sentences the copula is compulsory. In negative sentences *shì* is compulsory, *hen* is forbidden. In Hungarian, in 3rd SG copula is forbidden both in affirmative and negative sentences.

Learners have to make several decisions when forming Chinese sentences:

- (i) they have to decide whether they want to form an affirmative or negative sentence, i.e. whether they need a copula or not;

- (ii) based on the argument (noun or adjective) they have to decide which of the two copulas to use.

The next problematic issue is how to form sentences with complex NPs expressing time. This research examines the uses of complex phrases, such as *every day at 6 o'clock*; *on Tuesday at 8 o'clock*, as well as similar structures comprising a longer and a shorter time period. These structures have a very strict word order in Chinese, which is the following:

*S – time phrase referring to longer period – time phrase referring to shorter period – V – O.*

- (2a) *Wǒmen měitiān wǎnshàng liù diǎn hē chá.*  
we every evening six o'clock drink tea  
*Minden este hat órákor teát iszunk.*  
every evening six o'clock-at tea-OBJ drink-1PL

In Hungarian, the word order can be different:

- (2b) *Minden este hat órákor iszunk teát.*  
every evening six o'clock-at drink-1PL tea-OBJ

In the study materials there were two kinds of S: a pronoun and a NP (e.g. *my elder brother*). The S – VP separation by the time phrase is problematic for L1 Hungarians who are also L2 English learners for four reasons.

The main issues for students are:

- (i) The relative order of these two adverbial phrases is similar in Hungarian and Chinese but different in English.  
(ii) In English the position of these complex time phrases would be either at the beginning of the sentence or at the end.  
(iii) In Chinese we either put the time phrases into initial position, or separation is necessary between the S

and the VP. English does not allow the separation of the S and the VP by time adverbials.

- (iv) Hungarian differentiates between having a pronoun or a N(P) as the S: the pronoun is dropped unless it is emphatic, and the conjugated V indicates finiteness. Therefore, in Hungarian the sentence can start with the time phrases if the S is a pronoun (which is dropped). Additionally, in Hungarian the focus is on the phrase in front of the V. Thus, the meaning of sentences (2a) and (2b) are slightly different.

The research aim was to find out which language's syntactic knowledge was triggered, therefore two tasks were used: a translation and a grammaticality judgement exercise. Three learners (two from the classroom learners and one from the mobile learners) were asked to translate sentences from Hungarian to Chinese and from English to Chinese, while verbally commenting on what they were doing. The rest of the learners were asked to comment on the grammaticality of several Chinese sentences. They were shown a set of sentences, some containing mistakes. The students' task was to comment on whether the sentences were possible in Chinese or not, based on their existing knowledge.

Both groups had been instructed to say anything that came to their mind while doing the exercise. They were also told that they could use all three languages, even switching codes. In these comments three features were paid attention to: first, what they explicitly mentioned; second, what mistakes they made in the tasks, and whether they corrected these mistakes or not, i.e. they were aware of them or not; and last, what features of the sentences they did not mention at all. All this information was meant to provide some data on learners' linguistic awareness. The hypothesis was that learners were aware of the differences concerning copula use and word order among the three languages and would be able to verbalise these

differences. It was also assumed that learners would be influenced by the two different syntactic rule sets. A further, tentative assumption was that the sight of sentences from Hungarian to Chinese would serve as a kind of priming to elicit Hungarian word order and the sight of sentences from English to Chinese would elicit English word order.

## **RESULTS AND CONCLUSION**

The results indicated that syntactic knowledge of both the first and the second language was used to complete the tasks.

This assumption is based on the following evidence:

- (i) While they were verbally commenting on processing the sentences, they used a mix of the two languages: English and Hungarian. Several times, they were switching codes.
- (ii) The mistakes they made reflected both Hungarian and English syntax.

No clear evidence was found for a preference to activate either language. The most problematic for beginners was the S (pronoun) + NP (longer period) + NP (shorter period) + V + O word order, which is only grammatical in the third language.

As regards the data collection methods, both the tasks and the think-aloud protocol are appropriate for gaining data that can be qualitatively analysed. Some limitations need to be acknowledged, however, concerning the concept of grammaticality in these particular grammar points. In the case of the first examined issue (the copula use), grammaticality is more straightforward and can be confirmed more easily. With word order, however, it can be argued that even though certain positions of complex NPs expressing time are unusual, yet they cannot be considered ungrammatical. Therefore, further theoretical research is necessary into the question of grammaticality in the case of word order. Also, perhaps a larger group of



language users need to be asked as an empirical reinforcement before subsequent think-alouds are conducted on a larger group of learners.

On a theoretical level, however, whether these results can be connected to SLA theories at all, is doubtful at this point. The fact that the language input of both student groups is guided and controlled, resulted in language output which is very different from the examples provided in any of Vainikka and Young-Scholten's studies (1994, 1996, 1998), where learners seemed to go through stages of natural language acquisition. Consequently, further literature review is necessary to see if SLA theories are capable of answering questions driven by instructed language learners' data.

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