Dealing with vocabulary problems in the process of EFL writing

This study was designed to examine EFL student writers majoring in English as a foreign language at university level in Iran to describe their vocabulary related problems and the strategies they used to overcome these problems. Thirty EFL students were given a writing task for think-aloud composing. The resulting protocols were coded and analysed. The data were examined in relation to vocabulary strategies and the students’ proficiency. The study showed that:

- EFL writers experience different types of vocabulary problems in the process of writing.
- These problems are either related to their linguistic knowledge (competence) or their ability in accessing and using the linguistic knowledge (performance).

These problems can be categorised into six main types. The first type comprises situations in which the writers are not able to retrieve any word either because the word has never been learned or once learned has faded away from their mental lexicon. Poor subjects have more of this type of problem than average and good writers. The second type comprises situations in which the subjects think they know the word but they cannot retrieve it immediately. There is no significant difference among the poor average and good writers for this type of problem. The third type comprises situations in which the subjects retrieve a word that is only partially known and they are not certain about one or some aspects of it. Average subjects have more of this type of problem than poor and good writers. In the forth situations the subjects retrieve a word but in retrospect reject it as wrong or inappropriate. Average writers have more of this type of problem than good and poor writers. The fifth group includes situations in which the subjects retrieve more than one word for an intended meaning and they have to choose the better word. Good writers have the most number followed by average and poor writers. In the sixth situation the subjects retrieve more than one word but are confused between them and do not know which word is right and which is wrong. Poor writers have the most number followed by average and good writers.

In order to solve these problems the following solutions have been used.

a. Using own-linguistic resources.
b. Using retrieval strategies.
c. Appealing for help, i.e., using dictionary.
d. Avoiding the problem, i.e., cutting the message or ignoring the problem, i.e., leaving the problematic word as it is.

References


AnneMarie Kerkhoff

Hemispheric differences in revising lexically ambiguous sentences: a divided field study

One way in which the two cerebral hemispheres have been shown to differ is in maintaining multiple meanings of an ambiguous word (Burgess and Simpson, 1988). Findings have pointed towards a left hemisphere (LH) role in actively suppressing those meanings of a word that are not consistent with sentence context. In those instances where the initial interpretation of a sentence needs to be revised, right hemisphere (RH) activation of multiple meanings of a word may be beneficial (cf. Faust and Chiarello, 1998; Stowe et al., ms.; Coney and Evans, 2000). Results from single word experiments have supported this claim, but it remains unclear how to generalise to sentence comprehension.

The current experiment was carried out to further explore the role of the right hemisphere in ambiguity resolution within a sentence context. A set of 36 ambiguous nouns was used to create two types of Dutch sentences, containing a sentence-initial homonym followed by a neutral context. This rendered two alternate sentence meanings equally plausible for the duration of several words, after which a sentence-final word disambiguated the sentence to either the dominant (preferred) or subordinate (non-preferred) meaning (de bloem werd door de vrouw meteen geplukt / gezeefd; the flower/flour was by the woman immediately picked / sieved). A set of closely matched unambiguous control sentences was constructed in addition to a set of implausible sentences.

Use was made of the divided visual field paradigm to separate responses initiated by the two hemispheres. Each sentence-final word was presented to either the left or right visual field (LVF/RVF) for 180 msec., while subjects (n=36) maintained central fixation. A plausibility judgement task was employed, providing a direct test of hemispheric differences in sentence integration.

It was hypothesised that a right hemisphere role in sentence revision would lead to better RH performance for non-preferred sentences. If so, the effect of sentence type should be smaller in the LVF/RH. However, if a revision was ultimately performed by making use of LH processes, visual field differences would be as large (or larger) for the non-preferred sentences.

Results show an RVF/LH advantage across sentence types and a large effect of preference across visual fields for both reaction time and accuracy. No differences were observed between reactions to preferred sentences and unambiguous controls. Interestingly, a significant interaction was observed between sentence type and visual field, indicating that the LH advantage in accuracy had disappeared for non-preferred sentences. Thus, the decrease in accuracy for non-preferred sentences was greater in the left than in the right hemisphere.

This can possibly be explained by postulating that the RH uses its proposed ability to maintain alternate word meanings over successive words in a sentence, and does so long enough for it to be useful in sentence revision.

References


Dealing with vocabulary problems in the process of EFL writing

Some aspects of L2 morphosyntax have been shown to be areas of persistent difficulty in advanced L2 speakers. Problems with the marking of tense, gender and number, for example, have been reported in the recent second language acquisition literature (e.g., LARDIERE, 1998a, b; BRUHN de GARAVITO and WHITE, 2000; HAWKINS, 1998; YOUNG, 1989). At present there is no agreement on why this might be so. References

The aim of this paper is to present the sketch of a proposal which attempts to explain persistent difficulties with morphosyntax in mature L2 grammars based on the Failed Functional Features Hypothesis (HAWKINS and CHAN, 1997). The basic proposal is that certain formal features of language are subject to a critical period after which it is very difficult for them to be acquired. Consequently, if the L1 lacks these features, the mature L2 representations will not contain them either.

I will present theoretical arguments suggesting that this approach is desirable on considerations of parsimony, generality and design efficiency. I will also show that the approach is empirically viable as indicated by evidence on selective L2 fossilization. I will further suggest that this approach could serve as a basis for research programmes on other areas of language acquisition such as impaired or delayed L1 acquisition.

References


Mohammad Alhamad

The acquisition of agreement inflections of the Noun Phrase in Arabic as a second language

This presentation is a part of my PhD thesis. I will examine to what extent second language learners (Chinese and Russian in this case) of Arabic succeed in acquiring the agreement inflections of the noun phrase (NP). Previous studies suggest that advanced learners acquire the agreement properties in the abstract level, but not in the surface (morphophonological) level (Lardiere, 1998a, 1998b and 2000). In my study I will examine this hypothesis.

Arabic is known as a rich agreement language (Mohammad, 1987, Fassi-fehri, 1993). It has rich agreement in the verb phrase (VP) and in the NP. This includes features such as case, person, number and gender.

In this presentation I will show some results of my study. Intermediate and advanced learners, with Chinese and Russian L1s, of Arabic as an L2 have been tested in the acquisition of the NP. Chinese is considered to be a poor language in inflections; while Russian is a rich one. Both written and oral tasks were given to the informants. The written task consists of retelling stories and describing pictures. Interviews were made with the subjects to elicit spontaneous production.

The aim of this presentation is to answer the following questions:

1. Does L1 play a significant role in the acquisition of agreement inflections in Arabic? In other words, would learners with rich agreement languages (Russian) be better than those who have no much agreement in their languages (Chinese).
2. What sort of development is there over the time spent in learning Arabic? Are the advanced learners much better than the lower level as expected? And in what aspects?

The results will be shown and discussed
Leah Roberts

Sentence processing in the L2: a study of relative clause attachment preferences in Greek learners of English

The acquisition of a second language (L2) has often been characterized by its lack of ultimate success, in contrast to first language (L1) acquisition. Much research in the field of the second language acquisition of syntax has focussed on whether or not, or to what extent, adult learners still have access to the parametric options of Universal Grammar (UG) available in L1 acquisition (e.g., Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996, Hawkins & Chan, 1997, Clahsen & Muysken, 1989). Evidence used to support the different views (which range from full-access to no-access accounts) have often been gathered from tasks which assess whether learners are able to judge certain structures as grammatical or not, and therefore how far a learner’s knowledge of the L2 corresponds to that of a native speaker.

his study addresses a different question, that is, given their knowledge of the relevant structure in the L2, do adult learners process (or parse) this structure in real time in the same way as native speakers do? This is important to second language acquisition research in general, because if learners employ different parsing strategies to those of native speakers, then this may be a critical barrier keeping them from achieving full success in the acquisition of the second language.

The focus of the current study is on how Greek learners of English parse structurally ambiguous sentences such as ‘The dean observed the researcher of the professor who was never happy’, where the relative clause (RC) ‘who was never happy’ can be attached to either of the NPs in the preceding complex; the first ‘the researcher’ or the second ‘the professor’. This structure is used because they have been found to have divergent preferred interpretations in different languages (e.g., Cuetos & Mitchell, 1988, Gilboy, Sopena, Clifton & Frazier, 1995, French-Mestre & Pynte, 1997). This suggests a possible dissociation between the grammar and the parser (syntactic processor), and therefore that certain parsing strategies may have to be learnt by experience.

In native English studies, speakers prefer to attach the RC low, that is, to the second NP (e.g., Carreiras & Clifton, 1999), whereas in native Greek studies, a high attachment preference has been found (Papadopoulos, D, in press).

40 adult Greek advanced learners of English, and 40 English controls took part in the study, comprising a grammaticality judgement task, a questionnaire, and an on-line self-paced reading experiment. Results showed that the Greek learners performed almost identically to the native English speakers in the grammaticality judgement task, with respect to the acceptance or rejection of grammatical and ungrammatical examples of the structure under investigation. Despite this, they appeared to process these sentences differently to native speakers, both in the off line questionnaire, and in the real-time self-paced reading experiment. L2 processing studies are few, but the results from this study support the evidence from these others, which suggest that learners may have to use alternative parsing strategies to those highly automated ones used in the processing of their native language (e.g., Juffs & Harrington, 1996, 1997, Fernàndez, 1999).

References


European Portuguese pronouns and the role of Morphology

The existence of clitics that interact morphophonologically with their host has challenged the standard assumption popular in syntactic theory that clitic pronouns are X° which either head projections of their own (Sportiche, 1992) or are adjoined to an existing head (Kayne, 1994). For European Portuguese (EP), previous syntactic accounts, as proposed in Barbosa (1996), Madeira (1992), Duarte et. al (1995) share the view that object pronouns constitute a set of special lexical items that are placed through movement operations and attached post-syntactically to the verbal host. One of the shortcomings of this view is its failure to explain why pronouns in this language a) exhibit non-productive allomorphic variation, b) trigger idiosyncratic stem allomorphy on the verb, and c) may intervene between the verb stem and the tense/agreement marker:

(1) a. As crianças sentirão a falta dos pais.
   the children will miss their parents
   ‘the children will miss their parents’

   (1)b. As crianças senti-la-ão.
   the children feel-acc.3.sg.fem-fut
   ‘the children will miss them’

   b’. As crianças “sentir-a-ão.

These are typical properties of affixes which do not follow from general principles of syntax. In addition, the pronominal cluster exhibits a wide range of idiosyncrasies, such as a) rigid linear order, b) idiosyncratic co-occurrence restrictions, c) syncretism and d) portmanteau forms. The inherent properties of clitic clusters and the nature of their attachment to verbs clearly indicate that we are dealing with a morphological phenomenon. Based on this evidence, it will be argued that the data cannot be accounted for simply on the basis of normal syntactic mechanisms and that a morphological analysis of clitic pronouns in EP must be preferred (Crysman 1997).

This paper adopts the Paradigm Function Theory of morphology proposed by Stump (2001) which assumes a realizational approach to inflection (Anderson 1992, Aronoff 1994, Matthews 1972). Under this view, affixes are treated as morphophonological realisations of morphosyntactic features. Following the recent work of Spencer (2000, 2001) on Bulgarian and Macedonian clitic clusters, it will be shown that the Paradigm Function Theory can be successfully extended to account for the realisation and placement of pronominal clitics in EP. Cluster-internal idiosyncrasies are explained by using already available morphological mechanisms that account straightforwardly for the invariant order of pronouns and cluster-internal allomorphy, as in (2a), as well as for syncretised portmanteau forms, given in (2b):

(2) a. no-lo (*nos-o)
   dat.2.pl-acc.3.sg.masc
   lhos = lhe+os, lhes+os
   dat.3.sg-acc.3.pl masc, dat.3.pl-acc.3.pl masc

Finally, it will be argued that mesoclitic verb forms, in which the cluster occurs in medial position before the future/conditional marker, shown in (1b), do not require any syntactic stipulation, as proposed in Duarte 1995, but rather follow from a more general process of morpheme reordering (Stump 2001).
Epenthesis constitutes one of the most common strategies to make imported foreign words conform to the native syllable structure of the target language. Indeed, vowel epenthesis is a much more frequent repair strategy with loanwords and L2 errors than consonant deletion or segmental change. This obviously reveals a drive by speakers to maximally preserve the original input, and an intuitive construal of epenthesis as the implementation of the smallest distortion in the source words.

Epenthesis of \[u\], as in (1), and that of \[i\], as in (2), is triggered by the preceding labial and palatal consonant, respectively, while the most unspecified vowel \[\] appears elsewhere.\[1\] The central concern of this paper is vowel epenthesis in Korean loanword phonology. I will argue that this process is driven by an attempt to preserve native Korean syllable structure and comply with its phonotactics. In addition, I will show that the identity of the epenthetic vowel is determined by the place of articulation of the preceding consonant. The paper is organised as follows. First, the patterns of epenthesis in Korean English loanwords will be presented. Then, each specific case of epenthesis, with vowels such as \[u\], \[i\], and \[\], will be discussed. Crucially, the epenthesis of \[u\], as in (1), and that of \[i\], as in (2), is triggered by the preceding labial and palatal consonant, respectively, while the most unspecified vowel \[\]

In order to account for these patterns, I will adopt an OT framework (Prince & Smolensky 1993). This will allow an account of all the patterns under a single constraint hierarchy, with a parallel evaluation of the output. This result will be shown to be in contrast to a derivational analysis, which requires different rules to tackle the eccentric behaviour of \[u\] and \[i\]. Derivational theory thus cannot account for the different patterns with a single grammar. I shall demonstrate that only Optimality Theory can account for consonant-vowel interaction in Korean loanword phonology, and that the analysis it provides is superior to the derivational alternative. I will also compare consonant-vowel interaction in Korean epenthesis with Turkish labial attraction (Inkelas et al, 1997) and with Korean Umlaut (Hume, 1990), arguing that certain consonants attract specific vowels, and vice versa. The conclusion will be that loanword phonology illustrates yet another case of emergence of the unmarked.

(1) \[u\] triggered by labial consonants:
blouse [pu \].ra.u.s
golf [kol.phu]

(2) front high \[i\] and back high \[u\] triggered by palatal consonants:
a. palatal- \[i\] b. palatal- \[u\]
Bench [pen.chi] Shrimp [\Sigma u.rim.ph? ]
Coach [kho.chi] Slazenger [\Sigma u ]k.l.le.jin.j
Page [phe.i.ji] Einstein [a.in.\Sigma u.tha.in]
Massage [ma.s'a.ji] Tree [chu ]i.r
Orange [o.ren.ji]
Country [kh? n.chu.ri]

(3) default vowel [\]
Christmas [kh] trump [t\].ma.s\?]ri.sh?.rum.ph?]
 .t\strike [sh? .ra.i.kh.t\?] style [sha.il]
 .wi.c\n.dosandwich [s'hi] .b\rightarrow i] serve [s'
kiss [kh]\n.so] dance [t\]i.s
] card [k\].g\Theta.j]\zigzag [cI.gh]\a.d
References


