

FORUM

Sometimes They Use It, Sometimes They Don't: An Epistemological Discussion of L2 Morphological Production and Its Use as a Competence Measurement

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The main goal of all approaches to adult second language acquisition (SLA) is to accurately describe and explain the overall acquisition process. To accomplish this, SLA researchers must come to agree on some key issues. In this commentary, I defend the necessity of the competence/performance distinction and how this relates to why an examination of morphological production presents challenges for SLA research. I suggest that such a methodology is meaningful only when it is dovetailed with procedures that test for related syntactic/semantic knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

There are observable facts about language acquisition that all researchers, irrespective of paradigmatic differences, are obliged to address. Notwithstanding the similarities in the task of language learning for children and adults—the linguistic elements of any given target language are the same whenever one attempts to acquire them—an anecdotal comparison of child first language (L1) and adult second language (L2) acquisitions demonstrates that these processes are decidedly different in developmental path and ultimate attainment. It is widely accepted that, barring pathology, children are universally successful with the acquisition of their primary language while adult L2 acquisition often results in continued within-speaker and across-speaker variability, especially in the production of grammatical morphology (see Lardiere 2006 and works cited within).

Determining the source of this variability is of utmost importance to SLA research. Related to this is the notion of performance vs. competence, which is hardly an uncontroversial distinction. From a generative perspective, the notions of competence—abstract grammatical knowledge—and performance—real-time application of linguistic knowledge/forms—are particularly explanatory insofar as they establish a basis for explaining apparent L2 system knowledge (e.g. knowledge of (un)grammaticality and subtle

semantic nuances) juxtaposed against its use, which in real-time diverges from the underlying system. Although this distinction applies to L1 also, it has proven particularly useful in adult L2 acquisition where variability is more pervasive.

Gregg (1990) maintained that any viable theory of SLA must distinguish between competence and performance, tacitly claiming that variationist models of SLA are invalid. Gregg's position was that linguistic-based theories of SLA could effectively overlook errors in performance (as noise of sorts) since their goal is to determine linguistic competence. Ellis (1990) and Tarone (1990) immediately challenged Gregg's claims, but on different grounds. Ellis disagreed with Gregg's claim that L2 variability is a performance issue, claiming instead that variability represents variable competence. Although conceived differently, Ellis' position coincides with some generative approaches to L2 acquisition that also claim variability is evidenced at the level of competence (within the narrow syntax, e.g. Hawkins and Chan 1997). For Tarone and many others, conversely, the whole notion of competence vs. performance is simply unnecessary insofar as they consider knowledge itself as containing variability.

To date, there is no consensus as to the usefulness of the competence vs. performance distinction in SLA theory broadly defined. The position adopted in this paper is that this distinction enables us to explain seemingly contradictory facts about adult L2 acquisition, and that it is thus worthy of defence. For example, it is uncontroversial to state that adult L2 learners have lingering problems with the use of grammatical morphology. If this ubiquitous problem is indeed a performance issue, especially for very advanced L2 learners, then one would expect that they could otherwise demonstrate robust knowledge of associated syntactic and semantic properties. Empirical research within the generative paradigm has demonstrated just that (see White 2003; Lardiere 2006). And so, the competence vs. performance distinction proves invaluable in that it provides a reasonable explanation of how real-time production can underdetermine the actual L2 system, which is independently demonstrated via complementary empirical testing.

Contrary to Gregg's original claims, catalysed mostly from paradigm-internal debates, contemporary generative SLA research acknowledges that tenable explanations of variability *must* form part of all viable L2 theorizing. Recently, several generative accounts of L2 variability have been put forth, claiming it surfaces from post-critical period competence deficits or represents some type of performance variable (i.e. so-called Partial Access vs. Full Access approaches). The former loosely corresponds to other SLA accounts which claim that L2 acquisition happens explicitly as opposed to the implicit acquisition of an L1. Since they make distinct predictions, these hypotheses can be verified or falsified under empirical scrutiny. To date, there is no shortage of evidence supporting the view that L2 learners who demonstrate

morphological variability in production acquire sophisticated knowledge of related morphosyntax and crucially semantic entailments that should not surface if L2 morphological variability represents indeterminate system knowledge (see Lardiere 2006 and citations within).

In light of this, the present epistemological discussion unassumingly asks SLA researchers to evaluate the practicality of examining the development and use of morphology in L2 acquisition as a primary vehicle to gauge underlying L2 system knowledge. Arguing that variability and even invariability (as rare as the latter is) in morphological production corresponds to a system that is variable or target-like in its linguistic representation respectively, is inherently flawed in that it does not provide empirically rigorous evidence to substantiate such claims. In what follows, I attempt to call the attention of SLA researchers in general to the possible pitfalls of determining competence based on the examination of overt morphological development and its discourse use, discussing what types of additional empirical measurements are needed to substantiate and strengthen such claims.

DISSOCIATING SYNTAX FROM MORPHO-PHONOLOGY

Although not uncontroversial, the syntax-before-morphology position maintains a dissociation between morphological and syntactic development, straightforwardly seen in adult L2 acquisition. Crucially, if variable L2 morphological production represents indeterminate system knowledge, related syntactic and semantic properties should be equally variable. But this is not what has been observed in recent empirical research (see Prévost and White 2000; Schwartz 2003; and Lardiere 2006 for discussion).

For example, Donna Lardiere has reported data from a longitudinal case study of a Chinese adult learner of L2 English for over a decade. She has shown how sophisticated L2 syntactic and semantic knowledge can be, even when correlating morphology is seemingly ungoverned in production. Since theoretically tenable explanations must account for interpretation as well as production, proposing a dissociation between morphological and syntactic development offers a clarification for the otherwise unexpected complexity of L2 syntactic knowledge in learners who demonstrate high variability in associated morphological production. If reasonable, such a position has immediate implications for L2 research methodologies that rely on morphological production as a means to reveal overall L2 system knowledge.

ASPECT AS AN EXAMPLE

There is a significant body of non-generative SLA research that has examined the L2 development/emergence of grammatical aspectual morphology,

mostly in early/intermediate stages of interlanguage development (see Bardovi-Harlig 2000 and Salaberry 2007 for a review of the literature). Common to all non-generative approaches to aspect acquisition in SLA, they each make an implicit assumption that analysing morphological production provides a window through which an underlying linguistic representation of grammatical aspect can be assessed. Much of this research follows the Lexical Aspect Hypothesis, a proposal of aspectual primacy in L2 acquisition whereby verbal aspect morphology (Preterit and Imperfect) is purported to initially mark inherent (lexical) aspect distinction only. The prediction is that L2 grammars are necessarily different from native grammars in their underlying representation of grammatical aspect. This is said to be supported by a so-called pattern to variable morphology-use related to different classes of verbs. More contemporary studies have provided evidence suggesting that the role of lexical aspectual categories is narrower than the Lexical Aspect Hypothesis claims. Also, it is possible that there is a pedagogical effect that explains the productive emergence of aspectual morphology (see Rothman in press). In any case, insofar as these approaches maintain that target-deviant L2 morphological use represents L1/L2 aspectual system differences, they implicitly predict that L2 learners will demonstrate indeterminate knowledge for related semantically entailed properties.

There are several related semantic differences between the Preterit and Imperfect that are not straightforwardly inducted from exposure to input alone. As a result, L2 knowledge of these semantic entailments provides evidence that learners have acquired the underlying syntax of grammatical aspect, even if they make mistakes in their related morphological production. Exploring the interpretive domain of grammatical aspect in L2 acquisition, generative studies have demonstrated that L2 learners do acquire associated *poverty-of-the-stimulus* semantic entailments (evidence of access to semantic universals and their interaction to related movement at the syntax–semantics interface) despite the fact that they continue to demonstrate variability in related morpho-phonological production (see for instance, Slabakova and Montrul 2003 on genericity effects; Goodin-Mayeda and Rothman 2007 on +/- accidental nuances with adverbial quantification).

DISCUSSION

The competence vs. performance distinction is invaluable insofar as it provides both descriptive and explanatory adequacy in the face of seemingly contradictory L2 evidence. If L2 acquisition exemplifies knowledge of grammatical subtleties (syntactic and/or semantic) not readily inducted from input and/or learnable via domain-general learning mechanisms, then L2 acquisition makes use of the same domain-specific learning mechanisms of L1 acquisition. Performance variables can explain at least some L2 variability without resorting to claims of systematic L1/L2 differences, whose necessary implications for related L2 semantic knowledge are either not independently

assessed or are contradicted by other empirical measures (see Slabakova 2006 for a discussion of literature demonstrating keen L2 knowledge of very subtle semantic nuances).

At the same time, it is worth mentioning that research in adult SLA (from all paradigms) pays particular attention to the variable use of target morphology in L2 production. However, little is said about the proper use of target forms. It seems tacitly accepted that the appropriate use of target morphology is understood as being representative of target-like underlying competence. However, it is practical to point out that even if some L2 learners reliably demonstrate target-like use of morpho-phonological forms in a given test or in a particular speech sample, the less reported case by far, such a performance would not necessarily entail target competence for that domain. This is true for the same reason that variable morphological production does not necessarily relate to deficits in L2 system knowledge. That is to say, morphological use alone, even when it appears native-like, is unable to even indirectly indicate whether L2 learners have acquired associated semantic distinctions, which would be needed to claim whether the underlying grammars are fundamentally the same or not.

So where does this discussion culminate? The large body of research that has examined the development and use of morphology in adult SLA is an extremely important one. It has documented, among many other significant contributions, that the developmental sequence of L1 and L2 acquisitions are often quite different. The present discussion simply highlights a possible methodological shortcoming of studies that examine the emergence and use of morphology and assume that what is produced correlates directly to what the speaker's grammar reflects. In light of the present discussion, I join others in suggesting that L2 researchers from all paradigms need to check the implications of any claims based on morphological use by testing subjects on the interpretive side of morphology as well. If variability in L2 morphology reflects variable/indeterminate system knowledge, then related syntactic and semantic properties should also be variable. If there is no variability in morphological use, then there should also be none with associated semantic properties. Dovetailing production tasks with interpretive tasks will empirically confirm claims based on production or reveal motivations for refinement. After all, explanations of L2 acquisition must account for both the use and interpretive capacity of L2 language, the latter of which is able to provide insights into underlying linguistic competence. And so, this discussion supports the claim that the competence vs. production distinction is indispensable. However, it differs from Gregg's original argumentation in that a need for reasonable and falsifiable accounts of L2 variability is believed to be required of linguistic accounts of SLA as much as non-generative accounts have a responsibility to provide multiple-measure evidence that particular L2 variability is not a performance issue or that the performance vs. competence distinction is entirely unnecessary.

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