The Influence of Typological Differences on L2 Underuse, Misuse, and Overuse of Errors

A Response to Jennifer J. Chen's "The Development of an Interlanguage: An Analysis of a Chinese Student's English Writing" (Vol. 3, No. 1, January 2016)

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Jennifer Chen's (2016) article, published in Vol. 3, No. 1, calls attention to typological differences between languages as a potentially greater source of learner errors than any other factor involved in second language acquisition (SLA). Chen had conducted a careful analysis of the morphosyntactic errors in six English writing samples produced by a young Chinese immigrant in the United States. The results of the analysis revealed the eight most frequent types of errors: verb inflection, copular verbs, word order, conjunctions, run-on sentences, prepositions, articles, and plural noun agreement. Most of these errors, as Chen pointed out, were found to be interlingual, a mixture of the grammatical characteristics of both English and Chinese occurring in largely systematic patterns. These findings shed important pedagogical implications in that the learner's errors, and hence interlanguage (IL), are systematic in nature, and accordingly, knowledge of such systematicity is likely to provide a basis for a more "constructive language support" in second language (L2) classrooms (Chen, 2016, p. 54).

With a view to complementing the meaningful work of Chen (2016), the present commentary intends to show that interlingual errors may arise not only in the domain of morphosyntax, but also in the interfaces between different linguistic domains such as morphosyntax, semantics, and pragmatics. It should be noted as well that, according to L2 research (e.g., Sorace, 2005), interlingual errors concerning the interfaces tend to be more challenging to learn, and thus require more intricate pedagogical attention.

The discussion focuses on a particular linguistic construction—the passive, which has been in the limelight of morphosyntactic research (e.g., Hinkel, 2002; Keatinge & Kessler, 2009) for the variety of errors associated with it. More specifically, research (e.g., Oshita, 2000; Simargool, 2008) shows that errors concerning the English passive appear to be more prevalent in the IL of the speakers of topic-comment languages (e.g., Chinese). Typologically, topic-comment languages organize their syntax to emphasize the distinction between the topic (i.e., theme) and the comment (i.e., what is said about the topic) in the sentence structure (Li & Thompson, 1976); in contrast, subject-verb languages (e.g., English) organize their syntax to emphasize the grammatical subject of the sentence. These two groups of languages exhibit different morphosyntactic characteristics, including those considered in Chen's (2016) analysis—for example, topic-comment languages are structured in a pragmatic word order, which allows constituents in a sentence to move relatively freely, whereas subject-verb languages have a relatively fixed sentence structure. In addition, the topic-content languages tend to lack articles, both indefinite and definite, common morphological features in subject-verb languages.

As a result of the typological differences described above, speakers of topic-comment languages tend to produce a variety of errors of underuse, misuse, and overuse in the multiple interfaces between morphosyntax, semantics, and pragmatics when learning the L2 English passive. To begin with, the errors of underuse for the passive concern the so-called pseudo-passives, an IL structure the intended form and/or meaning of which is assumed to be that of the passivized construction in English. Put

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differently, the IL pseudo-passive is a carryover of L1 function-form characteristics, and therefore a type of pragmatics-syntactic transfer (e.g., Han, 2000; Schachter & Rutherford, 1979; Yip & Mathews, 1995). As stated above, topic-comment languages rely on a pragmatic word order, and reveal such main characteristics as the suppression of the non-essential subject and the deletion of the co-referential pronominal topic. Consequently, pseudo-passives can be produced when speakers of topic-comment languages map their L1 discourse structure onto L2 English, as demonstrated in the following examples:

L1 Topic—Comment
L2 Noun phrase (topic)—[null subject] + verb phrase
Most of food which is served in this restaurant *have cooked* already.

- [TOPIC Most of food which is served in this restaurant], (they) [PRONOUN have cooked already]. (Simargool, 2008)
- New cars *must keep* inside. (Yip & Mathews, 1995)
- Chiang's food *must make* in the kitchen of the restaurant but Marty's food *could make* in his house. (Schachter & Rutherford, 1979)

Second, speakers of topic-comment languages appear to produce a variety of errors of misuse for the passive construction. For example, they frequently omit the *be* auxiliary; fail to mark tense, aspect, and subject-verb agreement correctly; and have difficulty using the correct forms of past participles. According to Li & Thompson (1976), topic-comment languages lack a compound tense and aspect system comparable to that in English, a subject-verb language. As a result, it is likely that speakers of these languages have low sensitivity to the grammatical elements involved in English verb phrases such as those mentioned above, producing the following examples of morphosyntactic errors:

- The dish *was broke*. (Park, 2009)
- He *was offer* the job but did not accept it. (Lee, 2007)
- Snow boarding *considered* as the most exciting winter sport among teens. (Lee, 2007)

Finally, research (e.g., Shin, 2011; Van Valin, 1990) has reported a number of errors of overuse for the passive, particularly the overpassivization of unaccusative verbs, a type of intransitive verbs whose subjects lack volition in terms of semantics (e.g., *grow, emerge, happen*). Although overpassivization appears to be an intralingual error commonly observed in L2 acquisition (e.g., Lee, Miyata, & Ortega, 2008), Oshita (2000) notes that passive unaccusative errors are extremely prevalent in speakers of languages without a compound tense and aspect system—which, as pointed out above, is a common characteristic of topic-comment languages. In addition, the literature (e.g., Jung, 1999) suggests that the errors of passive overuse produced by L1 Korean learners may be a result of functional transfer, ascribed to the prevalence of emotional, pragmatic functions of the passives in Korean:

- First, the change of life-style *will be happened*. (Ju, 2000)
- However, the Watts riots which *were happened* in 1965 destroyed many Jewish businesses. (Ju, 2000)
- That is, an oil spill by oil tanker which *have been happened* in our sea a few months ago. (Jung, 1999)

In sum, L2 errors are a complex phenomenon, one that, according to Saville-Troike (2006), provides "windows into the language learner's mind" (p. 39). Thus, in addition to noticing "a systematic pattern" of the morphosyntactic errors in learners' output, "understanding the nature and source of these errors" (Chen, 2016, p. 54) appears to be essential in effective L2 pedagogy. In particular, understanding the typological relationship between a learner's L1 and L2 in terms of the different linguistic interfaces involved in the target morphosyntactic errors is likely to facilitate the prediction of the systematicity of the errors, providing a basis for more effective classroom practice. As Chen aptly points out, this claim is crucial in the context of the increasing number of Chinese immigrants who are learning L2 English in the United States; in a similar vein, a rapidly growing number of people are learning L2 Chinese, the second most frequently spoken lingua franca in recent years (Eberhard, Simons, & Fenning, 2019). Therefore, an important direction for future L2 research and pedagogy should entail a finer grained understanding of learners' errors, as well as of the various learner-internal and learner-external factors that may influence the errors.

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