

Nominative case marking and verbal inflection in L2 grammar:
Evidence from Japanese college students' compositions

In recent studies much attention has been paid to the well-documented phenomenon that while second language learners consistently use nominative subjects, they show variability in the production of verbal inflection (Lardiere 1998a,b, Ionin & Wexler 2002, White 2003). As a plausible account, two theoretical proposals have been made in the literature, namely, the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (MSIH) (Haznedar & Schwartz 1997, Prevost & White 2000) and the Representational Deficit Hypothesis (RDH) (Hawkins & Chan 1997, Hawkins & Liszka 2003, Hawkins 2005). The MSIH assumes such learners' variability as an incidence of phonological performance errors, whereas the RDH attributes it to the impairment of certain abstract features in L2. This study explores the issue by comparing the use of 3rd person singular *-s* and past tense *-ed* with the assignment of nominative case in Japanese college students' L2 English compositions. In particular, we present crucial evidence which shows that although syntactic features can be checked off in constructing L2 grammar, it is L1 transfer which hinders the learners from successfully achieving morphological mapping in PF.

We collected 88 free compositions from 44 Japanese study abroad students and divided them into three groups according to their Institutional Michigan Test scores. For a sharper proficiency contrast, the middle group was excluded from the present analysis: 28 compositions in the Low Group A (below 60 points out of 100, average 48.9) and 31 compositions in the High Group B (70 and above, average 77.3). The two groups are significantly different in their scores ($t(57) = -18.98, p < 0.000$). Our analyses of 803 sentences revealed: (a) the correct use of subjects at 99.6% for each of A and B, (b) one error out of 565 nominative subjects, (c) the omission rates of 3rd person *-s* at 55.07% for A and 25.88% for B, and (d) the omission rates of regular verb past *-ed* at 13.16% for A and 24.00% for B. Paired *t*-tests further show that (i) the difference in the omission rates of *-s* between the two groups was significant ($t(48.168) = 2.23, p < 0.030$), whereas the difference in the incorrectness rates of *-ed* was not significant ($t(57) = 0.17, p < 9.87$), (ii) the difference between the *-s* omission rate and the inaccuracy rate of nominative case-marking was highly significant ($t(58) = 6.284, p < 0.000$), and (iii) the difference between the omission rates of *-s* and *-ed* was also significant ($t(58) = 2.98, p < 0.004$).

These results demonstrate that (a) the Japanese English learners have acquired subject raising for nominative case assignment in syntax (Chomsky 1995), (b) they have found the regular verb agreement *-s* far more difficult to acquire than the past tense *-ed*, and (c) their production of *-s* improves as their English proficiency increases. More specifically, the finding (a) is not compatible with the RDH because Japanese does not necessarily require a subject to be raised for nominative case assignment in Spec TP. The finding (b) poses a problem for the prosodic account (Goad and White 2004, Goad 2008) because the two affixes would have given an equal

prosodic difficulty to the learners, contrary to the fact. The finding (c) constitutes evidence against the RDH because 74.12% of the advanced learners could invariably use the agreement morpheme, which is absent in their L1. We understand that the overall results can basically support the MSIH.

More particularly, we argue that Japanese English learners can lower T to dislocate the [3rd person +singular] feature to v (Embick & Marantz 2008) because their L1 does T-lowering for the past tense morpheme affixation, but they fail to insert the morpheme -s in the node because their L1 does not have the agreement morpheme insertion. In short, we maintain that it should be the absence of L1 affix insertion which induces missing surface inflection in L2.

References

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