The Acquisition of Grammatical Aspects: A Case from Chinese-speaking learners of English

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Résumé

Building on Lardiere's (2009) Feature Reassembly Hypothesis and Ramchand & Svenonius's (2008) approach to language architecture, Slabakova (2009) proposed that features expressed covertly by context (e.g., tense in Chinese) are more difficult to acquire than features that have overt realizations (e.g., -*ed* in English) for the degree of difficulty in grammatical feature acquisition. The present study expands the testing ground of Slabakova's prediction by examining how L1-Chinese learners of English acquire progressive and perfective aspects that are encoded overtly and covertly, respectively.

In Chinese, *zai* and bare verb express progressive aspect; while perfective aspect is encoded in the suffix –*le*. English uses -*ing* to signal ongoing events, whereas bare verb expresses complete events. According to the cline of difficulty (Cho & Slabakova, 2014), covert to overt mapping is easier than overt to covert mapping. The mapping of progressive aspect from English to Chinese is overt to covert (-*ing* to bare), whereas the mapping of perfective aspect is covert to overt (bare to -*le*). Therefore, L1-Chinese L2-English learners are predicted to have more difficulties acquiring [perfect] than [progressive].

Fifty-three English native speakers and 17 L1-Chinese learners of English completed an Acceptability Judgment Test (AJT). Each item in the AJT contains a story and a target sentence. Participants were asked to judge given the story, whether the target sentence is acceptable or not based on a 4-point scale (1=unacceptable, 4=acceptable). Preliminary results show that both natives and learners (11 advanced and 6 intermediate, according to the proficiency test) differentiated –*ing* and bare form in progressive as well as perfective context. Intermediate learners were accurate in both progressive (expected) and perfective (unexpected) context, suggesting that overt/covertness is not a main factor in aspect acquisition, which disconfirms the cline of difficulty. Data from more intermediate and beginning learners will be presented and discussed.

Mots-Clés: aspects, Chinese, English, overt/covertness

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