

## Subject-Verb Agreement in the Second Language Learner of English

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### Introduction

The process of second language acquisition has been extensively researched by scholars in the various fields of Applied and Theoretical Linguistics, Psycholinguistics, and English as a Second Language (ESL) Pedagogy. In many studies, the second language (L<sub>2</sub>) learner himself has acted as a primary source of information as in the studies of reported speech and metalinguistic awareness (Selinker, 1972), and in the work of Error Analysis (EA), a method of analysis that draws its conclusions about the L<sub>2</sub> performance from an analysis of the L<sub>2</sub> learner's errors (Corder, 1971; Burt and Dulay, 1972; Burt and Kiparsky, 1974; Selinker, 1972; Richards, 1971; to name a few).

This paper is a report of a diary study of one ESL learner from Japan who had studied English in school for ten years, since age 12.0, using primarily a grammar-translation method. At the age of 25.5 years, upon her arrival in the United States in July, 1980, she began the study of ESL conversation formally for three hours per week. At the beginning of this study, she had been in the U.S. for about three months.

### Purpose

This study was designed to look at the errors of the L<sub>2</sub> learner's interlanguage (IL) to determine any systematic patterns and their underlying cause(s). The author proposes a model (shown below) that introduces a hierarchy of difficulty of rule-types which should be a direct function of error type. There appear to be implications for an order of the process of rule-type acquisition (not specific syntactic transformations) that may serve as a tool of pedagogical diagnostics and remediation.

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The model proposed is not based on isolated words, phrases, or even sentential components, but rather on the discourse level. It assumes that the basic grammatical rules (morphological and syntactical) have already been instilled in the IL system, and, to a point, resolved by the learner, through some method of induction. Because the IL of a learner at any one point in time may be considered unstable (Corder, 1971; Selinker, 1972), there may be a few exceptions to the hypothesized IL system. But, in general, some stunning regularities were found in this learner's system that make it easy to classify her errors into three types: mechanical, perceptual, and conceptual.

This paper does not reflect the view of Contrastive Analysis (CA) or its implied error source, interference ( $L_1$  transference). Instead, an EA approach was employed regarding only the Subject-Verb (S-V) agreement system, whereby the system was expanded to account for other forms of number agreement.

The proposed model, in summary, offers the following applications of  $L_2$  EA. These applications are described in more detail later.

1. It suggests a hierarchy of difficulty of English rule processing from the easiest, the mechanical errors, then to the perceptual errors, and finally to the most difficult--the conceptual errors.
2. It shows a direct relationship between the errors made and the errors most likely to be recognized and self-corrected by the learner.
3. It suggests an order of acquisition for rule-types defined on a cognitive level.
4. It suggests which rules will be used most accurately in performance and those not likely to be used well, even at the competence level. It may be evidence of a true learner error, as opposed to a haphazard mistake.

Ultimately, the author intends for the paper to put the claims of theoretical empiricism to practical use in the classroom.

### The Sample

The data collected over a period of 2.5 months consisted of eight written essays of 8-15 sentences in length composed under a time constraint and four hours of spontaneous oral productions in a three-way conversation among family and friends. The time constraint of the written part and the spontaneity of the oral section were devised in order to secure a true representation of intuitive, unconscious production, presumably a performance level where most of the mistakes would be made.

The oral speech was recorded, transcribed, and then typed up along with the written copies, everything in its original form. It was then presented to the student for revision and self-correction, similar to proofreading. This editing technique theoretically should simulate a competence model of the student's language under ideal circumstances. Obviously, there are some technical difficulties with these instruments resulting from such assumptions. Another problem arises from the combined use of the spoken and written forms. No attempt has been made to compare or distinguish between these two production modes.

### Method of Analysis

The sample data was treated by EA for the S-V number agreement errors in the L<sub>2</sub> learner's IL. A linguistic analysis formulating the student's grammatical system is then stated as hypotheses and an argument follows, providing the evidence from outside the S-V agreement system. As final evidence for the claims, the author reviews the self-corrections of the student to see if any further justification can be given as supplemental proof of the mistake-error distinction and the order of difficulty.

### What Do Errors of S-V Agreement Really Indicate ?

#### Hypothesis I

S-V agreement errors are all indications of strict *mechanical* errors due to faulty knowledge or incorrect use of the grammatical rules of English with regard to number agreement as evidenced by faulty conjugation (morphological endings for number). The *concept* of number is not a factor.

#### Hypothesis II

S-V agreement errors are errors beyond syntactic rules of conjugation and may be more indicative of the mass-count *concepts* of plurality in English.

#### Hypothesis III

S-V agreement goes beyond mere conjugational rules of English grammar and involves a *perceptual* factor indicated by any of the following--individually or in combination:

- a. Distance between the subject and verb
- b. Reordering transformations
- c. Reduction/deletion transformations.

### The Argument

#### Part I

The following sentences show examples of apparently pure S-V agreement

## errors:

- (7) There is some equipments.
- (8) . . . so sometimes, German change in Japan.
- (10) Because every person close the door and shut the window, stay in the home.
- (12) People is under 18. . .
- (14) Because her parents is thin. . .
- (16) So the ass understand.
- (17) One day, the fox see the crow has a pile of cheese between his beaks.
- (19) Little by little, he change.
- (24) . . . when somebody break it.
- (25) . . . when somebody apologize me again and again.

A brief look at this reveals the following:

1. 9 cases of a similar subject (5) where an action verb in the present tense changes:

S Ø(deleted) appears as a plural form.

2. 3 cases of plural S taking a singular form of the verb, *to be*:

S pl + *are*      S pl + *is*

## Part II

If this were a pure mechanical problem of S-V agreement, then the only kind of error one would expect to find would be the morphological rule of S-deletion from all singular action verbs in the present tense. Similarly, one would not necessarily expect to find any errors with the irregular present tense verbs such as *to be*, because chances of a purely mechanical morphological error are minimal: the three forms *am*, *is*, and *are*, morphologically, vary significantly. Yet there are errors in number with the verb *to be*. Examples (7), (12), and (14) indicate this.

Next, examine the following sentences:

- (30) The parents has twin.
- (37) Japanese people has much problem with economic situation.
- (38) Japanese smokes more than Americans do.

There seems to be a problem of agreement with collective items where:

parents=1 unit

people=1 unit

Japanese=1 unit

and therefore take a singular verb.

### Part III

The problem of collectivity is apparent elsewhere. Observe the following sentences:

(1) No Japanese is fat.

(3) I think many Japanese is not as fat as American people.

and the most obvious case:

(2) Every Japanese is, are, I'm confused about that.

Backtracking a moment, let us review sentences from the first group, such as (8) where the word *German* may have been used to indicate plurality and, in that case, the correct form of the verb was used. More about this case and similar ones will be discussed at a later point. Examples (10), (24), and (25) involve the modifiers *every* and *some*, many of which have been interfering factors in the concept of plurality.

Also, notice the complimentary distribution of *people/person*, as in:

	(s)	(pl)	
(10)	every person	close shut stay	(Every) <i>person</i> used in plural.
	(pl)	(s)	
(10)	people	is	<i>People</i> used in singular.
(37)	people	has	

As with sentences (24) and (25), perhaps an interfering factor is the word *some*, and like *every*, it creates a plural concept.

### Part IV

The problem of collectivity can also be found in the student's grammar in other forms of number agreement besides S-V agreement. This is revealed in the

following set of sentences:

- (5) Maybe you are a group of skinny one.
- (6) . . . because, as you know, Japanese women don't have big breast and hip as Americans so they have more weight.
- (※7) There is some equipments.
- (11) I think you must study all four word.
- (13) And we must buy more gloves, more skiwear, and hat.
- (17) . . . between his beaks.
- (18) Her clothes is Indians.
- (22) I think the clothes she is wearing is Indian.
- (26) Klimt has many different kinds of skill.
- (31) They had a twin although the wife was expecting one child.
- (35) . . . that he is a special kind of investigators.
- (37) Japanese has much problem with. . .

Some of the above examples show a lack of agreement where a collective notion is concerned: (5), (6), (11), (13), (17), (18), (22), (26), and (35). The idea of what is collective and what is not is a difficult concept and must be learned through individual lexical identification and memorization. In (18) and (22), *clothes* is used in the singular, as perhaps the concept of *clothing* is understood as singular. (31) and (32) indicate that the word *twin* is a collective item used singularly. (37) shows that *problem* is a mass noun that is not countable and therefore takes *much* as a modifier. (7) shows that *equipment* has been memorized as a countable noun.

#### Part V

Further evidence of a mass/count noun problem is demonstrated in what the author calls *distributional errors* and *cohesive errors*, such as in:

- (15) The horse and an ass were traveling together with his master. (Note: the master owned both the horse and the ass).
- (30) The parents had a twin. Unfortunately, they are Siamese.
- (32) The twin was a Siamese. They however loved them and went around Chicago block with their children.

- (33) But the fireman insisted on coming. . . And they came with. . .
- (34) Next day they went to see the quarters and decided to lend it.

## Part VI

The above text argues for Hypothesis I. Evidence for Hypothesis III lies in the following examples showing a linear distance between the subject and the verb. Such sentences reveal that when the S and the V are not adjacent, a perceptual error may occur. X is an intruding variable between S and V.

- (4) Even most fattest *people* / in Japan / *is* ...  
                                   S                  X          V  
 (Note: This may also be a problem of collectivity.)

- (9) . . . , a **woman** / who / **attend** a party. . .  
S X V

- (21) What is the *power* / that / *pull* us. . .

- (22) I think the ***clothes*** / she is wearing / ***is***. .  
S X V

- (23) . . . that an *appointment* / of an enemy never / *keep*.  
S X V

Numbers (9), (21), and (22) may also be a function of a transformationally embedded clause, deleting the lower subject which may lead to the perceptual problem, "What should the verb agree with?"

## Part VII

An instance pertaining to subject-deletion is apparent in example (36), from instructions for a cake recipe:

- (36) . . . Then put the batter into a pan. Take one hour.

The first sentence is in the imperative, with the subject deleted. The second sentence also deletes the subject indicating that perhaps it is not quite so clear to the L<sub>2</sub> speaker what the subject really is.

Another example of a perceptual problem is encountered in transformations

that reorder the regular S-V order, as in:

(7) There is some equipments.

S

#### Part VIII

A word about the strict mechanical errors noted in some of the sample data should be given. For instance, examples (8), (16), (17), and (19) are all in discourse which would indicate a preference for past tense over present. If this were true, these S-V agreement errors may be looked upon as more than mechanical errors, perhaps when

Ssing + Vpast tense

is meant, it is inaccurately expressed as

Ssing + Vpres tense pl. (-s)

where the verb lacks the final *s* indicating a third-person-singular present tense verb (expressed as (-s)).

Although a present form of the verb is used, a past form may have been implied. Here, the speaker may be employing a past tense rule using a present tense verb form. Therefore, the final *s*, (-s), is omitted.

Perhaps two rules are contributing to the one result of the verb (-s), and may be expressed as follows:

Ssing + Vpres tense

Vpres tense + (-s) = intended Vpast tense

#### Part IX

There are a few instances of S-V agreement errors that do not seem to fit into this scheme very well. Such exceptions include:

(9) . . . , because many witchie, many fairy attend  
and have a party.

(27) . . . artist who can easily changes his style,  
never success to establish his own style.

(29) . . . Its look like a spongecake.

In (9), the agreement is made between *many* and the verb, and although there



is no plural inflection for the subject, the concept of plurality is maintained.

As this was an oral utterance, this may be a phonological problem. (27) is what the author calls *modal intrusion* which shows up in the self-correction of (23) as:

(23') . . . that an appointment of an enemy would never  
keep.

In (29), there is the wrong distribution of the final s morpheme which is later corrected as (29'). The reason is not known.

(29') . . . It looks like a spongecake.

### Conclusions and Learner Theory Predictions

From the argument outlined above, it seems clear that what the  $L_2$  learner may be encountering are problems other than mere mechanical difficulties, such as conceptual and perceptual factors. The author contends that these difficulties are in a hierarchy continuum such that mechanical errors are fewest in number and easiest for the student to recognize and master. It therefore holds that rules for strict S-V agreement are easiest to master, whereas perceptual and conceptual difficulties are harder to self-correct, are more abundant, and the rules pertaining to them are more difficult to master. In the case of conceptual types, the rules are lexical and involve individual memorization of an incredible number of nouns. The perceptual types are a function of generated distance and transformations, which in theory are unlimited, but in actuality are limited to the cognitive capacity of the language learner.

### Self-Correction

The self-made corrections indicate that the above predictions are correct. Of all the S-V agreement errors that were located and corrected by the subject, only (7), (9), (16), (24), and (27) were correctly changed, as follows:

- (7') There are some equipments.
- (9') Witch is a woman and attends a party. . .
- (16') . . . so the ass understood.
- (24') . . . , when somebody breaks it. . .
- (25') . . . when somebody apologizes me. . .
- (27') . . . artist who can easily change his style.

(7'), (9'), and (27') were perceptual problems, while (16') was a tense problem.

(27') was also a *modal intrusion*. (24') and (25') were what were originally called collective problems, but they may also have been straight S-V agreement errors. It remains to be proven either way: there is not enough available data to further validate either claim.

### Implications for Language Pedagogy

Such an analysis has important implications for diagnosis and remediation of productive language skills. Firstly, the introduction of an error continuum to describe error types and expectations about these types have important consequences for the ESL teacher in promoting the most efficient and effective lessons. If an error is diagnosed as solely mechanical, then perhaps the mechanical drills of memorization and repetition may be exactly what is needed to encourage fluency. If the error is perceptually-based, then the teacher need not work on simple mechanical drills, but might try a meaningful and highly-guided exercise giving the L2 student practice in detecting and using the more sophisticated, and therefore less-perceptible syntactic forms. If the error is conceptual, perhaps communicative exercises might be used in pointing out specific semantic or lexical problems as they arise. This paper is not intended to espouse an individual pedagogical methodology, but rather, to alert the ESL practitioner to the premise that the remediation of a problem lies in its origin, and that while problems may appear identical on the surface, they may be totally different at the roots. Rather than devoting error-correction exclusively to the surface error, it is far more effective to apply remediation to the heart of the problem.

### Errors Made in Spontaneous Samples

#### Oral

1. No Japanese is fat.
2. Every Japanese is, are, I'm confused about that.
3. I think many Japanese is not as fat as American people.
4. Even most fattest people in Japan is not as fat as the most fattest people in America.
5. Maybe you are a group of skinny one.
6. . . . because, as you know, Japanese women don't have big breast and hip as much as Americans so they, have more weight.
7. There is some equipments.
8. Japanese imported medical science from Germany, so sometimes, German change in Japan.
9. Witch is a lady, a woman who attend a party at Halloween because Hallo-

ween is a very awful day because many witchie, many fairy attend and have a party.

10. Because every person close the door and shut the window, stay in the home.
11. I think you must study all four word because when you are sad, you are called by four words. They teached four letter words.
12. People is under 18 not to come.
13. And we must wear more gloves, skiwears, and hat.
14. But I think, maybe, he will not again the weight, because her parents is thin even if he is.
15. A horse and an ass were traveling together with his master.
16. So ass felt envy to the horse but after big battle, and the horse died by his fighting. So the ass understand.
17. One day, the fox see the crow has a pile of cheese in her (his) mouth between his beaks.
18. Her clothes is Indians.
19. But to draw a Japanese skill, a very old and traditional artist used this skill. But so maybe he changes the style. At first he is like. . . His style is like art deco. Little by little he change.
20. I think she is very fat as a Japanese but she's not as fat as Americans.
21. What is the power that pull us, everything into the center?
22. I think the clothes she is wearing is Indian.

### Written

23. So the wolf thought that an appointment of an enemy never keep.
24. On the contrary, when somebody break it, I don't feel so sorry.
25. I am a little embarrassed when somebody apologize me again and again.
26. Klimt has many different kinds of skill.
27. Usually this type of artist who can easily changes his style, never success to establish his own style.
28. I think it is one of the most important reason of his success.
29. "Kasutera" is a name of a cake. Its look like a spongecake.
30. The parents had a twin. Unfortunately, they are Siamese.
31. They had a twin although the wife was expecting one child.
32. The twin was a Siamese. They however loved them and went around Chicago block with their children.
33. She called to the fire department. But the fireman insisted on coming and checking up, and they came with three big cars and a big noise.
34. Next day they went to see the quarters and decided to lend it.
35. One day Mr.Sherlock Holmes told him that he is a special kind of investigators.

36. . . . Then put the batter into a pan. Take one hour.
37. Japanese people has much problem with economic situation.
38. Japanese smokes more than Americans do.

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