

Roles of Causal Factors and L1 in the SLA of English Prepositions

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Abstract

Do both Japanese speaking learners (JSLs) and Chinese speaking learners (CSLs) find it difficult to master English prepositions? Do they show persistent variability in the second language (L2) English preposition production? Attempting to explore these questions, this study sets to investigate how JSLs and CSLs acquire English prepositions, what roles their first languages (L1s) play, and whether there are other causal factors that can account for variability in L2 acquisition, namely, the Misdevelopment hypothesis, suggested in Bong (2009) or the full L1 transfer/ or learning L2 through L1 suggested by the Prototypicality hypothesis.

Keywords

English Prepositions, SLA, Causal Factors
Lemmatic Properties, Semantic Relations

Introduction

For adult Japanese Speaking Learners (JSLs), and Chinese-Speaking Learners (CSLs) of English as a second/foreign language (L2), it seems to be difficult to master English prepositions. Why are they difficult? Which of the polysemous meanings of or the uses of a preposition would be more difficult than others? Would JSLs and CHLs behave in performing in preposition placement task? Would both learners groups find it difficult to master prepositions in the say way? This talk will pursue these questions, dealing with the most difficult use(s) of the prepositions that have been incorporated in the experimental study carried out to test various hypotheses derived from the two competing theories: that is, the prototype theory based ‘the prototypicality hypothesis’(see Bong 2013), and other hypotheses derived from the minimalist model of language questions (Bong 2009).

This study argues that the prototypicality effects can account neither for developmental patterns of semantics of English prepositions nor for the variability observed in the L2 preposition production by JSLs and CSLs. In order to test the two competing hypotheses (i.e. the Misdevelopment hypothesis, and the Prototypicality hypothesis), the following research questions are formulated: (1) Why some senses of prepositions develop earlier (faster) than others; (2) What roles do the syntactic and semantic properties (in the scope of lemmatic transfer) of L1 (Japanese and Chinese in this study) play?; and (3) Why does L2 preposition production often differ from the target language norm?

This talk begins with a brief overview of theoretical assumptions and tenets followed by a methodology of the current experimental study. Presenting the results, issues related to differential difficulty, variability and L1 roles will be discussed.

1 Theoretical Background

Under the Minimalist view, which assumes innate specification and universality of principles and linguistic features, both first language acquisition (L1A) and second language acquisition (L2A) are governed by the same principles but may differ in causal factors (Bong 2009). Within this framework, in forming a phrase or a sentence (i.e. phases), a particular use of a preposition is determined by a higher projection or an upper head that select a PP (prepositional phrase) undergoing an Agree Operation, and the head P then selects its Complement undergoing an Agree-Operation between the Head P (preposition), and the Complement object (NP (noun phrase) with respect to a set of lemmatic properties (syntactic and semantic properties).

On the other hand, under the Cognitive view, which adopts the prototype theory in the semantics of polysemous words such as prepositions, L1 learners develop English prepositions through body-movement while L2 learners develop English propositions via/through their L1 (See Bong 2013). The prototype theory adopts a graded categorization, postulating that senses of prepositions are hierarchically organized and each preposition has a prototypical sense (or group of senses) which is/are then expanded to other less prototypical senses.

2 Linguistic Background

Chinese has more or less the same word-order as the target language, English, in that both languages are of an SVO (Head-First) type, have prepositions, which are free morphemes, and are semi-analytic. On the other hand, Japanese is of an SOV (Head-Final) type unlike Chinese and English, and have post-positions (particles), which are morphologically bound-morphemes.

(1) Target Language: English

- a. He is at/in school.
- b. He went to school on foot.

(2) Learners' L1: Chinese

- a. Tā shì zài xuéxiào..(他是在学校)
- b. Tā dào bùxíng shàngxué. (他到步行上学)

(3) Learners' L1: Japanese.

- a. Kare-wa gakkō-ni iru.(彼は学校にいる)
- b. Kare-wa aruite gakkō-ni itta.
(彼は歩いて学校にいった。)

3 Methodology

Table 1: L2 Participants: JSLs and CSLs

| | <i>N</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>OPT score</i> | <i>range</i> |
|----------|----------|-------------|------------------|--------------|
| Japanese | 42 | 64.00 | 56-77 | 66.5 |
| Chinese | 8 | 62.50 | 56-77 | .66.5 |
| Total | 50 | | range | median. |

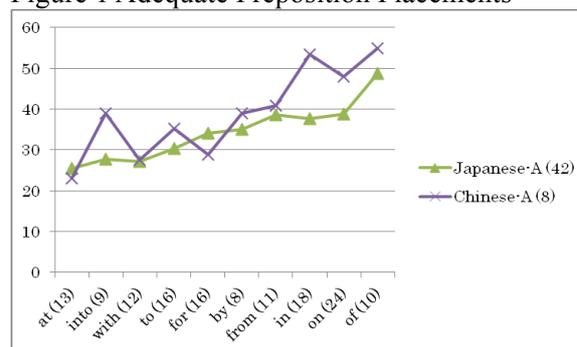
The cloze test was designed to investigate how JSLs and CSLs use prepositions and what elements (parts of speech, verb, adjective, etc) are important in determining the differential difficulty of various senses of prepositions.

- (4) When he got married, he was well () his fifties.
- (5) She has an insight () character of others.
- (6) Lake Biwa is 10 kms () the east of Kyoto.
- (7) The key () the front doors is missing.
- (8) The instant that she saw me, she ran () the opposite direction.
- (9) He was shot () his right arm.

4 Figures and tables

Overall, both CSLs and JSLs performed worse on adequate preposition placement compared to the proficiency test result (OPT, oxford placement test). Figure 1 illustrates which prepositions are more (most) difficult than others. This result is very similar to the results reported in Bong (2011). That is, for both JSLs and CSLs, the preposition *at* seems to be the most difficult among the ten prepositions tested in the experiment, and the preposition *of* seems to be the easiest for both learners.

Figure 1 Adequate Preposition Placements



Interestingly, there seems to be no significant difference between JSLs and CSLs' performance of adequate prepositions placements. Moreover, both learners performed badly on the same type (use) of prepositions. Results of this kind cast doubts on claims of the prototypicality hypothesis, while the minimalist view can provide a plausible account for the results.

5 Concluding Remarks

The predictions on the differential difficulty by the prototypicality hypothesis are not borne out, but those by the minimalist view are supported.

6 References

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