Acquisition of transitivity by English-speaking learners of Chinese

Abstract:
Verb-argument structure in regard to transitivity is crucial to the abstractness of linguistic structure. This paper examines L2 acquisition of transitivity in Chinese Verb-Object (VO) construction from a usage-based approach. The compositional nature of word formation raises our concerns about Chinese VO construction in which the verb takes a dummy object to fulfill the transitive form while the dummy object bears weak/null semantic relation to the verb. Many Chinese linguists tried to describe this particular type of verb construction with both syntactic and semantic properties (Chao 1968, Li and Thompson 1981, Haung 1984, Packard 2000, etc.) based on the syntactic and/or semantic properties of the construction. No study has tested L2 Mandarin learners’ generalization on the Chinese V-O construction. Sometimes, the VO construction cannot take an additional NP as its object which can serve as the real theme/patient to the action verb (e.g. *jump-dance Ballet ‘to dance Ballet’). Sometimes, the VO construction allows an additional NP (e.g. carry-heart him ‘to worry about him’). The usage-based grammar theory hypothesizes that users of language categorize tokens of language use into chunks at varying degrees of abstractness in their language experience. (Bybee 2006) This hypothesis predicts that L2 learners’ cognition of Chinese VO construction tends to be more like an unanalyzable chunk. If this is the case, the current study predicts that learners tend to add another object to the existing VO construction, when the communication involves a specific object to provide more information.

The current study questions if Chinese L2 learners will over-generalize on the first type of VO construction (intransitive ones) to the transitive use of VO construction as one unit. 26 college students were recruited from the same language program to participate in the study. Participants were asked to participate in one production test and one grammaticality judgment test. The results showed overgeneralization existed for few trials in the production test. The grammaticality judgment tests further indicated that participants were better at judging correct uses of VO construction than incorrect uses of VO. This paper argues that both language input frequency and cross-linguistic transfer account for L2 learners' incomplete knowledge of the VO construction. As far as language input is concerned, the token frequency of VO construction is higher than the same verb used with other objects. In terms of cross-linguistic transfer, the word form gloss in English hinders learners’ further analysis on the VO construction and reuse of the two parts in new chunks. We suggested the language program to increase token frequency and type frequency of VO construction in learners’ language input.