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A study of Chinese EFL learners’ encoding of motion events in constructions from a linguistic inventory typology perspective

Abstract:
Guided by Goldberg’s Cognitive Construction Grammar and Liu’s Linguistic Inventory Typology, this paper investigates how Chinese EFL learners use constructions to encode motion events, by adopting induced experiments. This study aims to find if the mighty grammatical Inventory means in one’s native tongue will affect his on-line thinking pattern, and consequently have an impact on his L2 construction encoding of motion events. The result shows, L2 learners’ motion event encoding is significantly affected by their L1 on-line thinking pattern, which result from both L1 mighty grammatical categories and L1 information flow structure. This impact is mainly manifested in the Chinese learners’ use of noun verbalization/verb nominalization constructions, static constructions and serial verb constructions.

The subjects of this study are 42 Chinese EFL learners (English majors in a university) and 20 English native speakers (US college students), who are asked to describe 19 video clips of motion events carefully selected by writing down one English sentence for each clip.

The experiment result shows that the Chinese learners’ on-line thinking, restricted by the mighty categories of L1 linguistic inventory, has significantly influenced the subjects’ construction encoding of motion events: (1) Chinese learners have profound production of noun verbalization constructions (eg. Two people are boating…), while native speakers use lots of verb nominalization constructions (eg. …he tried to maintain control of the plane…). It seems contradictory to Liu’s claim that verb is the mighty category in Chinese and noun in English, but when we put the converted words into the syntactic level of constructions, it’s clear that L1 mighty categories do exert an influence on learners’ construction encoding of motion events. From Chinese mighty category verb “hua chuan (row a boat)” to English mighty category noun’s functional expansion “boat (v.)”, semantic function is matching while syntactic structure is simplified, hence such a construction is easily activated in production. And when the situation is reversed, learners have difficulties in production. (2) Chinese learners’ encoding rate of static constructions is higher than that of natives, especially of there-be construction (there-be-NP-doing) which is not seen in natives’ production. It’s the joint work of Chinese information structure projection and Chinese mighty category (“you” construction). (3) As for serial verb construction, three types of corresponding Chinese construction have been proposed: Type I (V1+and+V2), Type II (V1+to+V2 or V1+V2ing), Type III (V1+NP+to+V2), and the experiment shows Chinese learners’ heavy use of Type I and III. Indeed from serial verb construction to Type I, only “and” is added without any inflection
involved, thus it’s easily activated. Type III corresponds to Chinese pivotal structure (a causative construction), while the prototypical English structure with causative sense is caused-motion construction. Therefore, Chinese subjects’ profound use of Type I and III indicates the significant influence of mighty categories in mother tongue’s linguistic inventory.