Interlanguage Variation: Past-marking in English Compositions by Korean Students

This paper investigates variation in the past-marking of verbs observed in English compositions by Korean college students. What distinguishes this study from most previous research (e.g., Wolfram & Hatfield 1984, Bayley 1994, Adamson et al. 1996) is that this study is focused solely on written data.

This study examines three important claims on past-marking. The first is Wolfram’s (1985) principle of saliency, which holds that the more distinct the past form is from the present form, the more likely the verb is to be past-marked by ESL/EFL learners. The second is the aspect hypothesis (Andersen 1989, Robison 1990, Bardovi-Harlig 1998) suggesting that past-marking of verbs by ESL/EFL learners is significantly influenced by lexical aspects of verbs (or verb phrases), learners (especially in their early stages of learning) favoring achievement and accomplishment verbs for past-marking over state and activity verbs. The third is Wolfram & Hatfield’s (1984) ‘frequency hypothesis’ holding that frequently occurring irregular verbs are more frequently past-marked than infrequent irregulars.

The data for this research was collected from 107 Korean students who were taking the ‘English Composition’ course at Dankook University in Cheonan, Korea. The students were instructed to compose an essay entitled “My highschool days” in 80 minutes and submit it on a diskette. 2785 tokens of past-marking of verbs are analyzed using the variable rule analysis focusing on morphological types and lexical aspects of verbs, and past-marking rate levels of students. The factor group of ‘morphological verb-type’ had 11 factors: be, go, have, do, come, Irr(V+t,d), Irr(V), Reg(I+ed), Reg(V+ed), Reg(C+ed). The factor group of ‘lexical aspect’ had four factors: achievements, accomplishments, activities, and states. The final factor group of ‘past-marking rate level’ had three factors: higher, middle, and lower level learners in past-marking.

The results of the data analyses do not clearly support the principle of saliency. There were no significant differences in probabilities of past-marking among different types of irregulars and also between irregulars and regulars. Also frequently used irregulars did not show significantly higher probabilities of marking than infrequent ones, failing to support the ‘frequency hypothesis’. Lexical aspect, however, was analyzed as an important constraint on past-marking. Achievements showed the highest probability of marking, followed by accomplishments, activities, and states and in that order. This result was obtained not only from the whole data, but in the separate analyses of the data of the three ‘past-marking rate level’ groups of learners.

It is suggested that it is probably due to the nature of the data, i.e., written data, that the principle of saliency is not supported. Input differences between ESL and EFL situations are suggested as a possible explanation as to why the Korean students’ data do not support the frequency hypothesis (cf. Kang 2004). The results of this study also suggest that the potential constraint of lexical aspect needs to be included for a better explanation of variability in past-marking in the future variable rule analysis of ESL/EFL data.
References


Andersen, R. "The Acquisition of Verb Morphology". Los Angeles: University of California. Published in Spanish as La Adquisicion de la Morfologia Vebal. Linguistica 1, 1989. 90-142.


