Relativisors and animacy in L2 English

Theodora Alexopoulou[1], Jeroen Geertzen[1], Anna Korhonen[1], Detmar Meurers[2]
[1]DTAL, University of Cambridge and [2]University of Tuebingen

We focus on the finding that Chinese, Russian and German learners of L2 English (henceforth RCGs) systematically avoid animate heads for "that"-Relative Clauses ("women that work in this office....") a fact setting them apart from "Romance" learners of L2 English (Brazilians, Mexicans and Italians). This finding indicates an erroneous generalisation made by RCGs learners which cannot be explained neither as a case of direct transfer from L1 nor as directly inferred from input. It raises the question of how animacy affects generalisations of learners regarding Relative Clauses (Rcs) in general and why this effect is visible only on Russian, Chinese and German learners but not Romance learners.

A set of 8,760 sentences containing an RC were drawn from a parsed[1]subcorpus of EFCAMDAT (EF Cambridge Open Language Database) of intermediate learners (CEFR B1) from Brazil, Mexico, Italy, Russia, China and Germany. There are some significant differences in the use of "that"-Rcs by RCGs in comparison to "Romance" learners.

(I) RCGs use fewer "that"-Rcs than Romance learners: only 30% of Rcs by RCGs are introduced by "that", against 70% by Romance learners. (There is no native language effect in the overall rate of RC production, unlike Schachter 1974).
(ii) RCGs avoid animate heads in "that"-RCs ("women that work in this office …."), a statistically significant difference from Romance learners.
(iii) Chinese learners do not use nested "that" relatives, unlike Brazilians with 15% nested Rcs (e.g. "a girl with his father that played with an instrument to take money that people that listend to pay in Paris").

Regarding the contrasts in use of "that"-Rcs, we argue that intermediate Chinese, Russian and German learners of L2 English fail to acquire the properties of "that" as a relativisor. Rather, they expand the use of an underspecified subordinator to apparent relative clauses (Rcs) relying predominately on the wh-strategy for relativisation. By contrast, Romance learners draw from the RC complementisor in their L1 using "that" as a relative clause subordinator (hence the nested relatives, no animacy restriction and higher production rates). RCGs cannot draw from their L1 as they lack an English-style RC complementisor. We hypothesize that they use "that" as a general subordinator rather than a relativisor: hence the absence of nested structures and overuse of the wh-strategy for relativisation.

Relativisation of animate nouns systematically triggers the wh-strategy for RCGs (unlike Romance learners). It's worth noting here that learners tend to "hijack" interrogative wh-structures for their Wh-RCs, leading to the production of many non-target headless Rcs like "wins who gets the most points". The use of such structures in conjuction with the grammaticalisation of animacy in the wh-pronoun system of English, and more generally in the pronouns system of English (he/she vs. it) could provide some explanation for the overuse of the wh-strategy with animates. It, nevertheless seems to be the case that L2 learners rely on more general semantic/cognitive features like animacy "ignoring" distributional properties of the input regarding less semantic features (see Tsimpli and Dimitrakopoulou 2007). Note that learners of L2 French tend to misinterpret the qui/que distinction in French Rcs as an animacy rather than case distinction (Hawkins 2007), indicating a process not specific to English.

We formalise these ideas by assuming absence of a +Rel feature for "that" used by RCGs. We further capture the salience of animacy through underspecification for wh-pronouns regarding the syntactic envirnoment (REL, Question), therefore leaving their animacy feature as the salient one.

1The subcorpus was parsed with C&C Combinatory Categorial Grammar (Clark and Curran 2007).