Sensitivity to Misusing Verb Inflections in both Finite and Non-finite Clauses in Native and Non-native Russian: A Self-paced Reading Investigation

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Analyzing the oral production of Chinese-speaking learners of English as a second language (L2), we can always find a large variety of verb inflections - Why is it so hard for them to use consistent correct past morphologies in obligatory past contexts? The morphological variability found in L2 learners' production is referred to as non-native-like or non-target-like performance since natives do not make such errors. Failed Functional Features Hypothesis (FFFH; Franceschina, 2001, 2005; Hawkins and Chan, 1997; Hawkins, 1998; Hawkins and Liszka, 2003; Hawkins and Franceschina, 2004; Hawkins and Casillas, 2008) attributes the rather non-target-like performance to the absence of [±past] feature in their L1 Chinese, arguing that for post puberty learners, Universal Grammar (UG) has been constrained due to maturation and, therefore, new features in L2 are no more accessible. By contrast, Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (MSIH) tends to believe that the morphological variability in L2 oral production does not reflect L2 learners' true competence (Lardiere, 1998a, 1998b, 2000, 2003; Prévost and White, 2000a, 2000b; Bruhn de Garavito and White, 2002; Montrul, 2011). The hypothesis argues that all features are actually accessible and acquirable for late L2 learners, whereas due to the mapping difficulties from syntactic features to specific overt forms, computational complexity or even real-time communication pressure, even though they have already acquired [±past] feature successfully, it may still be hard for them to realize the consistent past morphologies on the surface.

However, most of the related studies (Hawkins and Liszka, 2003; Lardiere, 1998a, 1998b; Dong, 2014) are limited to the investigation of verb morphologies in finite clauses and few studies focused on learners' performance or online processing patterns in the domain of non-finite clauses, which may actually further reveal how tense is represented in their mind. Therefore, the current study is going to discuss a new feature [±finite] - the feature itself is not 'new', but rarely mentioned in previous studies, which were more concerned with [±past]. [±finite] overlaps with [±past] in some way but there are differences: Taking Russian as an example, [±past] is selected in finite clauses and the verbs are therefore realized as either present or past morphologies on the surface; [-finite] is selected in non-finite clauses and the verbs are, therefore, realized as the infinitives (i.e. the base forms), while [+finite] is expressed via [±past] in finite clauses, where choices should be made between present and past morphologies, and infinitives should be rejected. Another reason to involve [±finite] is that some researchers (Li. 1990; Hawkins, 2000; Hawkins and Liszka, 2003; Lin, 2011) tend to argue that Chinese speakers are actually able to tell the finite/infinite distinction, even though overt verb inflections are not presented in Chinese (i.e. the [±finite] feature might have been selected in Chinese, even though the existence of [±past] is denied). Therefore, adopting a self-paced reading task (SPR), where the participants will be asked to read sentences in a word-by-word manner, the current study aims to find out if Chinese learners of L2 Russian are sensitive to misuse of tense morphologies

in both finite and non-finite clauses and if they are able to tell the finite/infinite distinction presented in Russian in an online task.

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