The Acquisition of (In)Definiteness: From L1 Mandarin to L2 English
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1. Background

- Omission and substitution of articles ‘a’ and ‘the’ in L2 English are common occurrences, especially for learners whose L1 does not have articles (e.g. Ionin, Ko & Wexler, 2004; Goad & White, 2006; Ionin & Montrul, 2011; Zoltenko & Paradis, 2011) —> Ambiguity Hypothesis
- Semantic models of article-less languages propose that bare nouns can be either definite or indefinite in their interpretation (Lübker, 1985; Heim, 2011) —> Ambiguity Hypothesis
- Under an L1 transfer hypothesis, this would explain the widespread phenomenon of article omission, i.e. using ungrammatical bare nouns in English (“So...”)
- But a closer look at article-less languages like Hindi and Mandarin suggests that bare NPs do not behave ambiguously re definiteness —> Unambiguity Hypothesis
- Rather, their distribution is constrained by discourse context and syntactic position

2. (In)Definiteness Diagnostics

1. **Anaphoricity** — bare noun ok
   - jiaoshou li zuo zhe yi ge nansheng yi ge nvsheng, classroom inside sit Prog one CI boy one CI girl
   - ‘There is a boy and a girl sitting in the classroom, the boy looks like twenty-year-old or so.’

2. **Partitive Specificity** — #bare noun
   - you ji-ge xiaohai zai fangjian-ii. #Nanhai he nvhai zai wan zhipai, exist some-CL child LOC room-in boy and girl PROG play card.
   - ‘There were several children in the room. The boy and the girl were playing cards.

3. **Discourse Referent Introduction** — #bare noun
   - hen duo nian qian, (?yi-weil) nianlao de nvren ceng zhuai zhe-dong fangzi-ii, very many year before one-CL old DE woman used.to live LOC this-CL house-in
   - ‘Many years ago, an old woman used to live in this house.’

Caveat 1: Pseudo-incorporation in direct object position
- anu zheng-zi zhaokan xiaohai.
  - Anu right.now-PROG look.after child
  - ‘Anu is babysitting.’

Caveat 2: Pseudo-incorporation blocked by an antecedent
- zheli you wu-ge xiaohai, ?Anu zheng-zi zhaokan xiaohai.
  - here exist five-CL child Anu right.now-PROG look.after child
  - ‘There are five children here. Anu is babysitting.’

3. Research Questions

- Is the erroneous use of bare nouns in L2 English (omission of articles) guided by the same principles that guide the use of bare nouns in the article-less L1?
- Do context and position constrain the use of bare nouns in L2 English?
- Do other semantic, pragmatic, or syntactic factors constrain the use of bare nouns in L2 English?

4. Methodology

- **Participants**
  - L2 English Learners
    - n = 24
    - L1: Mandarin
    - Age: 18-54, M=28.7 (9.4)
    - Proficiency: Intermediate
  - Native English Speakers
    - n = 20
    - L1: American English
    - (Relatively) Monolingual
    - Subset of stimuli

- **Design**
  - Context
    - Anaphoricity
    - Partitive specificity
    - Discourse referent introduction
  - Position
    - Object
    - Subject
  - Grammaticality
    - Article (gram)
    - Bare (ungram)

- **Procedure**
  - Acceptability judgment task (AJT)
  - German participants were more acceptable than bare subjects in the DRI context, suggesting pseudo-incorporation of bare objects.

5. Sample Stimuli

1. Anaphoricity (ANA-D)
   - a. S: A student and a teacher are talking. Student is holding a pen.
   - b. O: A necklace and a bracelet are on sale. A woman is buying necklace.
2. Partitive specificity (PAS-I)
   - a. S: There are many cats in the house. Cat is scratching a couch.
   - b. O: There are many shirts in the store. A girl is buying shirt.
3. Discourse referent introduction (DRI-I)
   - a. S: The beach is sunny today. Child is wearing a hat.
   - b. O: The lawn needs more plants. A worker is planting tree.

6. Results

- Acceptability by Position & Context – L2 Learners

7. Summary & Discussion of Results

- **Expected Findings**
  - Bare Subjects: ANA-D > PAS-I & DRI-I
  - ANA-D: Bare Subjects = Bare Objects
  - DRI-I: Bare Objects > Bare Subjects

- **Unexpected Findings**
  - Bare Objects: ANA-D = PAS-I = DRI-
  - Bare Objects > Bare Subjects

- L1 Mandarin speakers accept *bare nouns in L2 English to a higher degree in those contexts where a bare noun is preferred in the L1
- *Bare subjects were accepted to a higher degree in the definite context than the indefinite contexts, suggesting a definite interpretation
- *Bare objects were more acceptable than bare subjects in the DRI-I context, suggesting pseudo-incorporation of bare objects
- Unexpectedly, bare objects were more acceptable than bare subjects in the PAS-I context, when pseudo-incorporation should be blocked
- This may be due to an interpretation of maximality

8. Maximalty

- Sentence-Picture Matching Task
  - The girl flew kite.
  - Predicted: ‘a kite’
  - ‘some kites’
  - ‘the kites’

9. Conclusions

- Acceptability of ungrammatical bare NPs in L2 English is not even across contexts and positions, contra the Ambiguity Hypothesis
- Rather, it follows a pattern similar to that in the article-less L1, predictable by semantic diagnostics for definite and indefinite interpretations
  - Transfer? Universal pattern?
  - When examining patterns of article errors in L2 English, we should control discourse context and syntactic position

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