

The Definite and Indefinite Conjugation System in the Hungarian Interlanguage

1. Background

In teaching Hungarian as a foreign language, the grammatical approach currently in use has been fully elaborated. Does this method correspond to the natural route of language acquisition? How does language acquisition function in the case of students not taking part in formal language instruction or only doing so minimally? Interlanguage researchers have been looking for the answers to these questions.

An examination of the students' utterances in a foreign language generally indicates a great deal of errors and mistakes when compared to the accepted normative system of the target language. Language teachers have traditionally attributed these errors to carelessness or a lack of concentration on the part of the student. In other words, if the student paid more attention and tried harder, then he would use the target language more accurately and make fewer errors.

Researchers¹ began to classify these errors in order to understand them and to compare them with errors made by children learning their first language. The investigation of language learners' errors made Selinker² to introduce the term interlanguage. It covers the individual, systematic language developed by students during language acquisition. The concept of interlanguage is based on two fundamental ideas: (1) the language used by the learner is a system in its own right, governed by its own rules, and (2) it is a dynamic system evolving over time. Interlanguage studies moved one step

¹ Brown 1973, Cazden et al. 1975, De Villiers / De Villiers 1973, Dulay / Burt 1973, 1974, 1975, Felix 1978, Lange 1979, Milon 1974, Ravem 1968.

² Selinker 1972.

beyond error analysis by focusing on the learner system as a whole. This approach outlines the framework of the present research.

Hungarian specialist literature on interlanguage has primarily investigated written utterances gathered from questionnaires³ and has not typically examined utterances of spoken language.

1.1 The concept of interlanguage

When comparing target language and foreign language, a recurring conclusion in the research paradigm of interlanguage is that language forms used by language students do not correspond to the target language's normative system. At the same time, studies of the last several decades⁴ have clearly proved that incorrectly used forms which do not conform to the target language show systematicity. In other words, they fall into very distinct patterns. Certain elements of errors and mistakes can be caused by language transfer. However, this can by no means be said of every single one of these.

The interlanguage system changes as one progresses in learning a foreign language, and consequently, it is composed of developmental stages.⁵ These stages extend from entirely rudimentary versions quite divergent from the norms of the foreign language, through gradually more elaborated ones, to versions almost completely identical to the target language. A good example of systematic organisation is users of foreign languages who have attained an advanced level in that language. Their language production can be described by a sequence of rules which, as regards their internal organization, have an integrity of their own. Furthermore, these rules are not just inadequate derivations of the target language's normative rules.

The interlanguage's developmental stages occur sequentially along a defined route.⁶ These stages gradually follow one after the other and clearly take form when going through certain crucial

³ Durst 2009.

⁴ Towell/Hawkins 1994, 5.

⁵ Ellis 1994, 100.

⁶ Ebd., 102.

grammatical phenomena. All language students can travel along this same route, though great differences can appear in the rate.⁷

Although a student's language system has systematicity, permanence is not one of its features. The system is constantly subject to changes resulting in significant and observable variability.⁸ Interlanguage variability is shown by the constantly changing error types in language users' utterances. Moreover, incorrect and correct forms get into the language repertoire and alternate over a long period of time. Eventually one language form more or less solidifies and gradually ceases to be a source of errors. Variability, as described by Towell,⁹ is the main characteristic of students' interlanguage.

The systematicity listed above is closely connected to creativity. Students' surface utterances are guided by a system of rules which, although divergent from the target language, is a considerably simplified schema when compared to it. The prevailing rule system, which at the same time is constantly changing, makes it possible for the student to generate utterances that are both original and textually coherent, even ones that he has never heard before. This characteristic of usage can be described by the term creativity.¹⁰ Creative language use is also observable in the earliest stages of language learning when the student does not yet possess a wide palette of language tools allowing him to make certain utterances. For this reason, he uses a simplified form derived from existing blocks of knowledge. While utterances created in this manner can often be rather distant from the target language's normative system, they can nevertheless be understood by speakers of that language in the given context.

Creative usage is helped by, and in a certain manner, complemented by prefabricated chunks, otherwise known as formulae. These are units which are memorised in their entirety, often without being analysed. Their important feature is that they are available for use in a prefabricated manner. When encountering the appropriate textual context, the language user will activate them.

⁷ Ebd.

⁸ Towell/Hawkins 1994, 5.

⁹ Towell et al. 1996.

¹⁰ Myles et al. 1999.

Less than accurate memorisation can occur. In this case, smaller and/or larger discrepancies may be observed at the time prefabricated chunks are said; however, these mistakes do not interfere with understanding.¹¹ The results of the linguistic research corpus show that formulae and routines play a significant role in the everyday speech of first language speakers.¹² The flow of speech is a complex mixture of prefabricated chunks and creative language elements. It displays an extensive and systematic use of prefabricated chunks, the goal of which is to satisfy ever growing communication needs.

Some language students become blocked in their language study irrespective of type of study, intensity, or quantity. These students do not show any progress in language acquisition. Others do not display stagnation; however, they are unable to master certain linguistic phenomena. Blockages can be noticed with certain elements while progress can be detected in other areas of language. One can observe that the language content at blockage points petrifies and no longer changes. Fossilisation sets in.

It is widely accepted that utterances in a foreign language are influenced by the language previously known to the speaker. For speakers of just one language, this is their first language. In the case of people who speak more than one language, many languages are involved: their first language and foreign languages that they have previously studied. Specialist literature¹³ calls this phenomenon language transfer, though its exact definition depends on the given linguistic approach.

Interlanguage theorists believe that the interlanguage has identifiable and sequential developmental stages which each language student must pass through regardless of his competency in his first language. Mistakes appearing in the course of language study cannot be attributed to the phenomenon of language transfer. Instead, they arise from certain phases of the interlanguage.

The current linguistic approach is clearly shown by the large scale, multilingual research covering 11 languages which was commissioned by the European Science Foundation (ESF). On the basis

¹¹ Myles et al. 2003.

¹² Sinclair 1991.

¹³ Gass 1996, 322.

of research results, ESF researchers are also debating the significance of language transfer in the early stages of language learning. It has been proved that grammatical structures become more complex over the course of study. In this manner, the grammatical system used by language students contains many variations which can be attributed to language transfer. Other researchers¹⁴ are of the opinion that students with different language backgrounds progress at different rates. Moreover, students follow a characteristic acquisition route in certain grammatical areas of the target language, which only proves the existence of language transfer.

1.2 The Definite and Indefinite Conjugation System

I have chosen one of the most defining features of the Hungarian language as the subject of my study. Hungarian sentences and utterances are clearly controlled by the verb. The verb itself and everything covered by its required case-inflection contain a great deal of information. The situation that particularly illustrates this trait occurs when the actor is not indicated or is replaced by a personal pronoun. Subsequently, we shall see why this is the case. Conjugation of verbs is an interesting assessment criterion from another aspect as well since it is closely connected to the transitivity of verbs and consequently, the use of the accusative suffix.

The opposition of the definite and indefinite conjugations constitutes a system entirely divergent from the conjugation structures of Indo-European and other language families in general. The two paradigms jointly fulfil their function when actions or events take place.

The existence of two conjugations is closely connected to whether the action is directed at something, and if so, whether the orientation, or the quality of the direct object, is definite or indefinite. Use of the two conjugations is not just simply a question of classical conjugation congruence depending on formal criteria, but it is also the result of a tri-functional congruence process.¹⁵ Specialist literature describes in various ways the connection or causal

¹⁴ Keller-Cohen 1979; Zobl 1982 cited in Gass 1996, 322f.

¹⁵ Szili 2006, 121.

relationship of the definite object and the definite or indefinite conjugation. Most researchers identify the phenomenon as an alignment of the verb conjugation with the direct object, and they call this congruence. According to Rácz,¹⁶ the main characteristic of congruence is that within the syntagma, the relationship determined by the subordinate part is usually expressed in the form of the superordinate part. In practice, this means that the quality of the direct object determines the conjugation. For example, if the direct object is definite, then the verb conjugation will be definite. The other approach is well illustrated by Papp's argumentation,¹⁷ according to which the direct object determiner refers »upwards« to its basic verbal part. This is a relation since the basic part, the connection determined by the verb, appears in the extension. The definite conjugation form of the verb rather refers »down« to the direct object. The question is what process the speaker goes through at the time the definite syntagma is created up to the point the language unit is spoken. Szili¹⁸ describes this process in a very clear manner during which the speaker arrives at the moment when his utterance is made. According to this, first a recognition of definiteness takes place, a determination of agent and patient, the placement of the accusative suffix. After that, the definiteness of the direct object is determined. Finally, congruence of the verbal form is made according to number, person, and definiteness of the direct object. This picture is coloured by the fact that all of this must be performed exceptionally fast at the time a sentence is created, since in the case of word order using an SVO structure, the verbal operation already comes before saying the direct object. It can be seen that the process outlined by Szili corresponds to the congruence approach proposed by Rácz.

In the process presented, another phenomenon also comes into play at the time the agent—patient relationship is determined, namely how Hungarian suffixation mechanisms differ from those of other languages. In general, personal pronouns form an integral part of suffixation, from which the following verb form usually

¹⁶ Rácz 1991.

¹⁷ Papp 1964.

¹⁸ Szili 2006.

remains unchanged in different persons. In this manner, personal pronouns become the only identifier of acting persons. In contrast to this, in Hungarian each individual person has his own grammatical marker and suffix, and personal pronouns are only present for emphasis. Therefore, students have to master two things: 1) the six personal suffixes, and 2) the manner of identifying actors so as to designate them by attaching suffixes to the root of the verb. The described phenomenon though causes somewhat less difficulty than mastering the two conjugations (definite and indefinite).

During language acquisition, mastering the indispensable characteristics and transitiveness of verbs is of primary importance. Transitiveness determines whether one must address the problem of the direct object's quality or simply use the indefinite conjugation. When recognising definiteness, students must recognise whether the verb is transitive, and whether its transitive characteristic appears in the given situation. If yes, then the definiteness of the direct object must be determined. The content side of the direct object – when and in what cases and situations it is used – determines whether the definite or indefinite conjugation must be used. Hegedűs¹⁹ gave the definition of the direct object in the following manner: »The direct object specifies the entity towards which the activity expressed in the verb is directed in an intense manner: it comes about and changes as a result of its effect...« The presence of the direct object in the verbal structure means the transfer of action to the patient or to the one enduring the action. In this manner, verbs generally get two nominal extensions, the agent and the patient. In Hungarian, a morphological element, the accusative suffix, designates the latter. The only case in which the direct object is completely without marking is when the direct object is an infinitive (e.g. *szeretek úszni*). However, there is another instance in which the direct object can be without marking: in the case of possessive suffixes for 1st and 2nd person singular (e.g. *kérem a tollam*). With regards to the quality of the direct object, we can speak of two types: definite and indefinite. If the direct object is not unique and not specific, then it is indefinite. The direct object of a sentence can

¹⁹ Hegedűs 2004.

be unique and specific, namely definite. Both cases can be described by grammatical phenomena (see Table 1). In addition to its peculiarities of form, definiteness is also a situational category: that which is definite is what we are able to identify precisely, what each participant in the conversation knows exactly, and what can be shown.²⁰

1.3 The goal of this study

The goal of this study is to see where the errors made by second language learners came from. They are neither first language-like nor target language-like. Therefore, they must originate in the learner. This research investigated language development of non-native Hungarian speakers at three different levels and focused on the definite and indefinite conjugation systems.

2. Methodology

The framework used in the research construct is a combination of error analysis and interlanguage investigation. Error analysis is a systematic study of second language learners' errors. The language produced by the learner came to be seen as a system in its own right. Corder²¹ was the very first to focus attention on the importance of learners' errors since it became evident that not all of them originated from the first language. Contrastive analysis²² predicted that all errors are caused by the first language interference, but these predictions were shown to be unfounded. Many studies convincingly demonstrated that the majority of errors cannot be traced back to the first language and also that the areas where the first language should have prevented errors were not always error-free.

The constructs of the study were defined by the framework, the predictors, and the sample population. The framework of the re-

²⁰ Hegedűs 2004, 279.

²¹ Corder 1967.

²² Fries 1945 cited in Dulay et al. 1982, 98.

search was error analysis, which made it possible to identify the learners' language development stages regardless of the first language. The predictors were the different levels of language knowledge. The outcomes were the characteristics of the speakers' use of the definite and indefinite conjugations. The sample population of the constructs was non-native Hungarian speakers at three different levels.

The variables were defined as follows. The independent variable was the three different levels given. The dependent variable was that at certain levels, the speakers formed certain structures and used specific forms to express or fail to express the definiteness or indefiniteness of a verbal conjugation. The sample was a group of language users between the ages of 34 and 45, with the number of males equalling that of females. The first languages of subjects in the study were Chinese, English, French, German, Portuguese, and Russian. All the speakers were monolingual.

The data were collected from the sample population, which was made up of non-native Hungarian speakers classified in three different proficiency levels. These levels were defined by a level-assessment instrument, which was capable of placing the speaker in a level system through the scores achieved in the testing procedure. After the level-placement, the speakers were asked to give a 20 minute interview to the researcher. During the interview, they answered questions posed by the interviewer about their everyday life, work, hobbies, their holiday memories, their plans for the future, as well as their origin and family roots, their education, and language knowledge.

The research was fundamentally corpus based. Two corpus units were produced from the participants' utterances in the experiment: one oral and the other written. Transcription and data collection were done using the Exmeralda corpus handling programme. Annotation categories were as follows: correct definite, incorrect definite, correct indefinite, and incorrect indefinite. In addition, an indication of language background also figured. Corpus analysis was done using AntConc – Anthony's Concordancer corpus analysing programme.

The results of the concordanced texts were examined according to the annotation groups as follows: to see where errors occurred

and to determine which levels experienced certain errors. After studying the existence and characteristics of the errors, the source of the errors were defined by concordancing each error type with the first language background information.

3. Results

In the course of mastering the definite and indefinite conjugation, the differing language competency between certain language levels and their extent were clearly visible.

Among those in the first level study group, use of the indefinite conjugation dominated. Elements of the definite conjugation only occurred in prefabricated chunks (e.g. *tudom, mondtá, kérem a számla, köszönöm*). The accusative suffix (-t) was properly used in conjunction with certain frequently occurring verbs (e.g. *kér, lát, kérek egy kávét.*). Moreover, in the case of certain nouns, the accusative suffix (-t) always appeared (e.g. *kenyért, sört*). A particularity of the accusative suffix's use was visible when it did not appear after verb forms requiring it (e.g. *kérem a számla, tudom a lány*). In the last case, a lexical problem occurred at the time that the elements *tud* and *ismer* were transposed.

In the second level study group, the indefinite conjugation still had a stronger presence than the definite conjugation. The use of suffixed forms revealed a deviation with respect to number and person. In the first and third person singular, the suffix choice was correct. However, in the second person singular, there were incorrect forms (e.g. *látol, futol*). Suffixes in the plural were extremely rare. Thus, it is not worth drawing any conclusions from them. An understanding of the definite conjugation's rules had begun to form. It could be observed with increasing frequency that the speaker stopped speaking at those points where he was thinking about the choice between the two conjugations. Prefabricated chunks dominated the definite conjugation in the first level. In the second level, a developing understanding of the rules was overwritten by the usage of prefabricated chunks in the case of frequently occurring verbs in the definite conjugation (e.g. *mondtá, mondja, látja, látom, értem, tudod*).

The phenomenon of overgeneralisation also indicated rule acquisition, which in the current case could be observed in the use of the definite conjugation. In accordance with this, transitive verbs received suffixes of the definite conjugation because there was a definite article following them, even though there was no direct object in the sentence (e.g. *főzöm a konyhában*). Another situation indicating this same phenomenon occurred when intransitive verbs received suffixes of the definite conjugation as a result of being followed by structures beginning with the definite article (e.g. *futom a parkban*).

In the language usage of the third level study group, whose level of knowledge approached that of native speakers, the use of the accusative suffix did not cause problems in the case of verbs occurring in everyday usage. The paradigms of both conjugations had been mastered. However, the speaker was slowed down when approaching the verbal paradigm borders; he made a break, thus giving himself enough time to choose the correct form. Rules governing the definite conjugation did not cause any problems in simple sentences and in co-ordinating compound sentences. In the case of subordinate compound sentences, mistakes, hesitation, and incorrect choice of form frequently occurred. (e.g. *Azt akarok, hogy a családom elutazzon. Abban a városban nyaralunk minden évben, amit gyerekkorom óta ismerem.*)

The search for language specificity was performed in the corpus by linking different errors of the three language levels to the language background of the speakers. The control screening performed in this manner did not show anything other than the result of the combined search. Namely, the transfer effect for language specificity could not be detected. It could be concluded that each language could have its own recognisable mastery rate. However, this could not be clearly shown since data were not available for all test subjects with respect to language exposure.

4. Summary of results

The test results partially verified the hypothesis. In light of the results, it was clear that the differences between the three groups were evident in the use of the accusative suffix, the knowledge of rules for the definite and indefinite conjugations, and the application of this knowledge. In this manner, a specific system took form which the language student used in the course of studying Hungarian. We were not able to deduce any language specific signs from this system. In other words, no matter what the students' language background was, they all followed the same path. In addition, it could not be stated clearly that groups composed of people having backgrounds in different native languages would begin using the examined grammatical units at different language levels.

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