



Optionality and Ambiguity in L2 English Article Meanings

Linguistics Seminar

Prof Roumyana SLABAKOVA
(University of Southampton)

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The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Abstract:

An interesting case of optionality in L2 grammars is presented by semantic properties where the linguistic form is the same but the meanings it expresses are subtly different. A case in point are the meanings of the English definite article. Based on semantic analysis and cross-linguistic evidence, the notion of definiteness is comprised of two independent meanings: *familiarity* (the referent is familiar to the speakers) and *uniqueness* (the referent is unique in the situation) (Birner & Ward, 1994; Schwarz, 2009, 2013). However, a closer look shows that *anaphoricity*, pointing to a previously mentioned antecedent, also constitutes part of the notion of definiteness. This subtle meaning configuration, together with the expressions of those meanings in the L1, create a challenge for the acquisition of English *the* in all its uses.

Anaphoric familiarity is directed to different antecedents: with *that*, the target NP is anaphoric to the *immediately* salient antecedent; with *the*, the target NP is anaphoric to the *most* salient antecedent. This means that both *that* and *the* are felicitous in contexts in which the antecedent for the target NP happens to be both most salient and immediately salient, as in (1). In contrast, only *that* is felicitous in contexts with two equally likely antecedents (2). In the partitive indefinite (3), the target NP is anaphoric to a set through being its non-unique part.

- (1) Ken went to a small art gallery yesterday, where he saw nine paintings. They were very unusual, and he looked at one of the paintings for a long time.
Finally, he bought *the/that* painting for his wife.
- (2) Simon enjoys cycling, and last year he bought two bicycles. One of the bicycles was heavy and difficult to ride. But the other bicycle was very light and easy to ride.
He rode *#the/that* bicycle to work every day.
- (3) Betty decided to get a kitten, so she went to a pet shop. The pet shop had five kittens, and she played with them for a while.
Then she chose *#the/a* kitten.

We tested L1 Mandarin Chinese and L1 Russian speakers' interpretation of *the* in L2 English, using an Acceptability Judgment Task with sentences as the ones above. The L2 learners across all proficiency groups were target-like in accepting *that* in (1) and (2). As predicted, the L2 learners were target-like in accepting *the* in (1), but they incorrectly allowed *the* in (2) and (3). The L2 learners across all proficiency groups accepted *the* in (2) but not in (3), as expected. Unexpectedly, however, the English natives allowed *the* 47% of the time in (2), where it should be infelicitous. We speculate that the English speakers considered the last mentioned antecedent in (2) to be salient enough to allow the use of *the*. Overall, our results suggest that L2 English learners from article-less L1s are affected by anaphoricity in their interpretation of *the*. Moreover, the effect of anaphoricity seems to be stronger for L1 Russian speakers than for L1 Chinese speakers, and more persistent in intermediate learners.

Speaker:

Roumyana Slabakova is Professor and Chair of Applied Linguistics at the University of Southampton, UK, and a Research Professor II at the UiT The Arctic University of Norway. Previously, she taught at the University of Iowa, USA. Her research interest is in the second language acquisition of meaning, more specifically phrasal-semantic, discourse, and pragmatic meanings. Her monographs include *Telicity in the Second Language* (Benjamins 2001) and *Meaning in the Second Language* (Mouton de Gruyter 2008). She co-edits the journal *Second Language Research* (SAGE) and is the founding co-editor of *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*. Her textbook entitled *Second Language Acquisition* was published by Oxford University Press in 2016.

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