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THE LEARNING OF PLURALIZATION RULES
IN ENGLISH BY IRANIAN STUDENTS

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Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to investigate errors in English pluralization made by Iranian subjects while learning English as a foreign language. The types of errors seem to be more variable and frequent than those which have been predicted by contrastive analysis (Vossoughi, 1972).

In this paper, however, an error analysis has been conducted to study the subjects' actual performance and production strategies in the area of pluralization.

This study was stimulated by the questions of some teaching assistants in the TESL Section of UCLA's English Department regarding the Persian language (hereafter referred to as Farsi) and the Iranian students in their ESL classes. A few of their questions were as the following:

Is there any plural morpheme in Farsi at all?

Why don't my Iranian students use the plural morpheme?

I have some Iranian students in my intermediate class who do not use the plural morpheme where they should, and use it where they shouldn't, why?

I didn't have any suitable answers for these questions when they arose, but it is hoped that the findings of this study will shed light on these problems.

The hypothesis of this research, thus, is that there may be a few causes other than interference for the errors committed by Farsi speakers in employing the English plural morpheme, which contrastive analysis has failed to predict. This is an instance of the general assumption first made by Richards (1971a):

Many errors, however, derive from the strategies employed by the learner in language acquisition and the mutual interference of items within the target language. These cannot be accounted for by contrastive analysis.

Subjects

My subjects were twenty-eight Farsi-speaking adult students, twenty-six of whom had been admitted to UCLA for the Fall Quarter, 1977, to pursue different fields of graduate and undergraduate study provided that they met the English language requirement. The other two were juniors in a high school in Los Angeles. Twenty-six of them had not been in the United States or any other English-speaking country for more than three months. Only two of them had been in the United States or England for one year. The twenty-six subjects were randomly selected from among a large group of Iranians who took part in the UCLA English as a Second Language Placement Examination (ESLPE) and were invited to

The second type of context occurs when no plural morpheme should obligatorily have been used but a subject has over used it erroneously or excessively for one reason or another:

*I have been there about one weeks.

*He is studying engineerings.

There are some paradigmatic plural words in English which are not inflected from a singular base, such as "people", etc., or pronouns like: we, us, they, them, etc. These chunk proforms have not been counted in the obligatory contexts or the error inventory. The number agreement relationship between subject and verb or copula and/or linker have not been considered either because the only distinctive feature in this area is the so-called third person singular marker which signals the singularity identification of the present tense verb and doesn't concern us in this study.

Procedure and Description of Errors

First of all, the obligatory contexts of plural morphemes and the actual instances of errors were identified in the corpus and listed for each subject separately. This process was necessary in accumulating the relative number of errors. Then totals and averages were computed for all subjects. This information is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
The Occurrence of the Plural Morpheme in the Data

# of Subjects	# of Relative Contexts	# of Errors	% of Errors	% of Accuracy
28	546	255	46.7%	53.3%

The overall results shown in Table 1 reveal that although the subjects committed 255 pluralization errors, these constitute 46.7% of the total number of the usage of this linguistic element, which are 546 in number and thus the percentage of accuracy is 53.3%.

The situation, however, is significantly different for each individual subject, as revealed in Table 2.

Neither of these tables, however, provides any information about the actual types of errors or can attribute any causal factors to the errors. To fulfill these two requirements, the errors of the corpus were tentatively classified with regard to their structural similarities and distinctive features. Then, after careful evaluation and refinement, ten distinctive error patterns emerged. Each pattern may include either a single particular error or may generalize several variations of one functional error which manifest one common pattern (c.f., first pattern below).

These patterns are introduced and described in Table 2 along with actual examples from the data. They are rank-ordered from the highest level of frequency to the lowest.

co-occurrence-restriction rules or "selectional rules" (Chomsky, 1965), the case is completely reverse in the Farsi noun phrase so that these qualifiers correspond only to the singular form of the head noun. This leads us to think of these errors as interference-based or interlingual in nature. This type of deviation occurred eighty-seven times out of a total of 255 errors.

The second pattern involves a noun which is used in the singular form where it should have occurred in the plural. In other words, the subject has dropped the plural morpheme erroneously while potentially retaining a plural reference. This deviation is absolutely independent of L1 because the subject pluralizes the counterpart of this noun in his/her mother tongue. This is why it is believed that this error is attributable to the subject's poor skill in communicative performance which has resulted in his/her use of simplification strategies. This simplification is referred to by Schumann (1974) as a part of the "pidginization" process. In any case, these can be considered as developmental errors. They occurred sixty-two times and some instances are shown in the following sentences:

- *They were not English language country.
- *It is difficult to understand teacher and student.
- *They even don't want to move their hand.
- *My textbook were in English in my country.
- *You can be creative play with the number.

The third pattern is the case of a countable head noun which is preceded by one of the following five determiners: (a) a, (b) one, (c) another, (d) any (not with a plural reference), (e) every and (f) first. The noun is inflected with the plural form erroneously, but in fact, it refers to a single object and is restricted to the singular form by the selectional rule. This kind of false elaboration committed by learners seems to be the result of an overgeneralization strategy which is applied on the basis of L2 rules.

These deviations are independent from the L1 and the communicative performance of the learners. They seem to have taken place because of the subject's "failure to learn conditions for rule application" (Schachter & Celce-Murcia, *ibid.*) and are related to the subject's "Interlanguage" (Selinker, 1972) or "Idiosyncratic dialect" (Corder, 1971) of the learner. This type of error occurred thirty-three times. An example of each case is given below:

- *(a) It is a sports.
- *(b) I have been there about one weeks.
- *(c) I can get the same goods for them through another channels.
- *(d) I haven't seen any things such this.
- *(e) What he does, he look every things.
- *(f) First years, they are like juniors.

The fourth category comprises a singular noun which should have been pluralized. The subjects, however, have not inflected it with the plural morpheme because they use the singular form as the equivalent in their mother tongue. All these errors are evidence of the subjects' L1 affecting his/her performance in the L2. These errors occurred twenty-two times and the following examples illustrate them very well:

exposure to it." (Schachter & Celce-Murcia, *ibid.*) Thus these kinds of deviations are assumed to be developmental. Seven such instances have been detected in the data, including the following examples:

- *All of the professor and teacher have another job, I think.
- *Sixty-five per cent reduction for young, all the Iranian student.
- *We had all day and all night. One night I'm in charge of the baby and next night my wife is in charge of baby.

The ninth kind of error occurs when the student inflects "work" with the plural morpheme ignoring that it is not countable in English while its counterpart /kâr/ in the native language is. This idiosyncratic performance is another case of interference and three examples have been found in the corpus:

- *Doing the works for coming to United States.
- *No, just inspecting the works and the relation between the troupes of army.
- *I only did my works for coming here.

One may be tempted to assume that these errors are the result of an over-generalization strategy if (s)he is not familiarized with the word /kâr/ in Farsi.

Although the tenth category of errors is the least frequent one, it falls into two types. The first is caused by replacing a false regular variation of the plural morpheme for the proper irregular one. There is only a single example of this type in the whole corpus:

- *In Iran always the womans makes what they need like sheet.

This is yet another case of overgeneralization. The other error is formed with a false suffix which is substituted for the appropriate plural suffix of the reflexive pronoun. Only two examples of this phenomenon appeared in the data because these reflexive pronouns did not occur frequently at all. They are counted as developmental errors and are as shown below:

- *For themselves are not glad, for me are.
- *She like us to be ourself.

All the error types described in the ten patterns above can be categorized into three major groups according to their sources or their causal factors. These sources of errors (which have been proposed by Selinker and Corder and subsequently discussed and illuminated by Schachter & Celce-Murcia) are (a) interference or interlingual, (b) developmental and (c) intralingual. Table 3 below illustrates this categorization and the frequency of each type.

Table 3
Source of Error Categories

Sources of Errors	Patterns of Errors	Total E. Frequency	% of Errors
Interference	1, 4, 5, 9, 10a	129	50.58%
Developmental	2, 3, 6	108	42.35%
Intralingual	7, 8, 10b	19	7.45%

This table illustrates that for nine subjects, interference (negative transfer) is the most troublesome domain and the developing process comprises the most difficult source of deviation for five subjects. For the other fourteen subjects interference and developmental factors have approximately an equal effect. In one instance, the intralingual elements emerge as more influential than the other two causes.

This table, moreover, summarizes, in detail, the frequency of each error type, the frequency of obligatory contexts, cause and area of the error sources, the percentage of error and the percentage of accuracy for each individual subject.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the pluralization errors committed by this homogeneous language group are as follows: firstly, they are systematic since they cluster into ten patterns; secondly, they are reasonable as far as the theoretical sources of errors and the nature of second language learning are concerned; and thirdly, they are informative for any instructor who focuses on the learner's intake and processing strategies rather than on input and teaching techniques. They also inform us as to what stage the learner has reached and what should be taught to him/her next.

It is not surprising that the teaching assistants in the ESL classes at UCLA had doubted the existence of a plural morpheme in Farsi. This concern triggered the questions listed on the first page of the paper. These questions were justified because 207 items out of 255 errors resulted in the omission of the plural morpheme (cf. patterns 1, 2, 4, 5, 6 and 8). Forty-six of the remaining errors were produced due to the overusage of the plural morpheme (cf. patterns 3, 7 and 9). The other three instances of errors were caused by the usage of either a false plural morpheme or a false suffix. These frequencies of deletion and addition of plural morpheme can, very well, account for those questions.

It was shown that the major sources of errors are (1) interference from the mother tongue and (2) the developmental strategies of the learning process. The data of this study, then, minimize the significance of the intralingual area as being a source of errors. But, on the other hand, the hypothesized interlanguage is confirmed to be an unstable idiosyncratic dialect for each learner, which may be characterized by all three types of errors: interlingual, developmental and intralingual.

FOOTNOTE

1. Hossein Farhady, an Iranian graduate student in the TESL Section at UCLA, who was involved in a research project on testing, made this selection and the necessary arrangements for the interviews. The recorded interviews were transcribed and used for this study.

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