Tense Unmarking in native Karen speakers acquiring the English Tense-Aspect System

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**Overview**

**Big Question:** What is the linguistic explanation for English second language learners producing verbs in the present tense when they should be in the past tense?

**Study:** Oral narratives from sociolinguistic interviews of 9 Karen refugees living in North Carolina and learning English as a second language.

**Conclusion:** The linguistic explanation is two-fold: phonological make-up and inherent verb qualities such as lexical aspect have significant effects on the production of past tense verbs in native Karen speakers learning English.

**Literature Review**

- **Wolfram & Hatfield (1984)**: Vietnamese refugees acquiring English.
- **Bayley (1996)**: Mandarin English speaking graduate and ESL students.
- **Anderson & Shirai (1995)**: First and second language learners of English.

**The Phenomena**

Verbs contain Grammatical and Phonological information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grammatical</th>
<th>Phonological</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tense</td>
<td>Consonant cluster (CC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When the action is described as completed.</td>
<td>2 or more consonants in succession within a word. In English verbs, word final CCs often appear after past tense and have been added.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>CC and SING unmarked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td>Rate of FIN and SYLL unmarked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbs fall into 4 different classes:</td>
<td>Rate of SUP, DUB, and INT unmarked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>Rate of STAT unmarked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Rate of ACH/ACC unmarked</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Question**

Do native Karen speakers learning English produce verbs that should be in the past tense in the present tense because of word final consonant clusters and/or verb qualities known as lexical aspect that concern how the action is completed?

**Study Population**

- Vietnamese refugees acquiring English.
- Mandarin English speaking graduate and ESL students.
- First and second language learners of English.

**Contribution**

- Grammatical and phonological processes in verbs (i.e. CCs), in that order, are applied resulting in the spoken output.
- Both grammatical and phonological processes occur as competing constraints on -ed deletion.

**The Main Gap:** Tense Unmarking and Consonant Cluster Reduction should be studied with the additional theoretical lens of the Aspect Hypothesis as well as with a recent refugee population whose native language is structurally different from English.

**Methods**

**Interviews**

- Transcribed oral narratives
- 9 native Karen living in N.C.
- 5 male, 4 female

**Coding**

- Verb Type
- Past Tense Type
- Lexical Aspect

**Analysis**

- Verb presence in present tense
- Verb presence in past tense
- Verb presence in both present and past tense

**Results**

**Expected results:**

**Lexical Aspect:**

- Rate of CC and SING unmarked
- Rate of FIN and SYLL unmarked
- Rate of SUP, DUB, and INT unmarked
- Rate of STAT unmarked
- Rate of ACH/ACC unmarked

**OBSERVED RESULTS:**

**Trends by Verb Type:**

- CC and SING: higher rates of being unmarked.
- FIN and SYLL: higher rates of being unmarked.
- SUP and INT: higher rates of being marked.
- DUB: higher rates of being unmarked.
- STAT: high rates of being unmarked.

**Trends by Lexical Aspect:**

- ACH: high rates of being marked > STAT rate of being marked.
- DUB: high rates of being marked > STAT rate of being marked.
- ACC: high rates of being unmarked > STAT rate of being unmarked.

*Both variables yielded statistically significant p-values in a Pearson Chi-squared test of independence.*

**Conclusion**

Patterns of past tense unmarking are a function of the effects of:

- Inherent semantic qualities of verbs (i.e. lexical aspect)
- Phonological shape of a verb when marked for tense (i.e. verb type)

Results are consistent with hypothesis formed based on previous literature on:

- The Aspect Hypothesis
- Consonant Cluster Reduction

**Implications & Further Research**

- Attempted to update older theoretical models in linguistics.
- Utilized data from an understudied language population.
- Recognized the implications related to the sociological reality of being a refugee and learning a second language.

**Future Research Should:**

- Include socioeconomic factors into their analysis.
- Use a larger set of data for analysis.
- Continue to exhibit commitment to understanding the refugee's experience in America.

**References**