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Hikyoung Lee

1 Introduction

There has been an increasing number of studies in the past few years concerning sociolinguistics and second language acquisition (Bayley & Preston 1996, McKay & Hornberger 1996 among others), the apparent reason being that these two fields complement one another to provide a holistic perspective of language use. Preston (1996:1) suggests that the relationship between the two disciplines is concerned with variation in language and the sociological and social-psychological aspects of language. In particular, variationist studies in second language acquisition have been flourishing. Variation in the "Labovian paradigm" (Ellis 1994:121, Preston 1996:2) is considered quantifiable where the frequency of occurrences are predictable according to certain terms.

The underlying assumption of this tenet is that the acquisition of language itself implies the change and variation of language skills over time. Language learning according to Labov (1996:245) requires "an understanding of probabilistic and continuously varying behavior." This varying behavior is systematic and reflects the learner's language development up to a specific stage. In this light, variation is considered a manifestation of the learners' performance and not their competence (Tarone 1988: 30).

Systematic variation in second language learners has been incorporated in the theory of interlanguage. Selinker (1969) suggests that interlanguage is an intermediate language system which is deviant from the target language but still influenced by the native language. The deviations and variations are rule governed and can be accounted for in a systematic way. Young (1991) points out that system in interlanguage is defined as a hypothetical relationship between interlanguage forms and the contexts in which they occur which may be explicitly stated and reduced to rule. He also suggests that variation may be due to surface level constraints imposed by the linguistic environment in which the forms occur.

The concept of interlanguage is greatly entwined with the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado 1957, James 1980). This hypothesis claims that if the native language of the learner is similar to the target language, learning may be facilitated. However, if the two languages are different this may impair target language acquisition. Structures considered difficult and marked in

the target language will also be continuously problematic to the non-native learner. In addition, traces of interlanguage may become fossilized and lead to persistent errors.

Errors in second/foreign language acquisition are regarded as the result of the persistence of native language interference. The Error Analysis Hypothesis (Corder 1967) analyzes errors systematically by the various criteria of origin, regularity, predictability, and variability. Errors indicate what aspects of the target language are particularly problematic to certain individual as well as groups of learners.

A common thread which can be seen in the various theoretical approaches to second language acquisition is variation. The present study will mainly be concerned with the variationist approach in examining second language acquisition.

2 The Study¹

The present study focuses on the deletion rate of the English definite article *the* and the indefinite article *a(n)* in Korean speakers of English. The acquisition of an article system is difficult and is often imperfect. One reason may be related to the fact that articles have no clear semantic function. The article is classified as a determiner because it always signals that a noun follows. In addition, the absence of an article in many cases does not provoke severe ungrammaticality. It has been speculated that even native speakers of languages which possess an article system tend to delete articles when they do not regard them as absolutely necessary.

2.1 Learning the English Article System

In Korea, compulsory English education started when middle and high school education became compulsory in 1945. English is taught as a foreign language in Korea, which means that learners are in a non-English speaking environment. In addition, the dominant form of any foreign language teaching in Korea, is still the grammar-translation method. This implies that teaching is focused on grammatical rules as the basis for translation (Brown 1994: 52-53). In this framework, learners are trained in the passive skills of reading and writing with an emphasis on traditional grammar. However, this

¹ I would like to thank Gregory Guy, Kyung-Ja Park, Robin Clark, and Christine Moisset for various comments and suggestions. I also thank the audience at NWAV(E) 27 for their helpful feedback.

way of teaching minimizes the communicative aspects of the language to be learned. Although in recent years there has been a shift towards a focus on spoken language, large segments of English examinations are still devoted to translation.

In Korea, the English article system is learned in the traditional descriptive grammar framework. The use of articles is presented as a set of rules. These rules are based on prescriptive dictation. However, generalizations may seem arbitrary to the learner whose native language lacks an article system. In such languages, alternative means of expression are used in place of articles. For instance, in Korean, definite articles can be expressed by modifiers like demonstrative pronouns, and the indefinite article by numeric modifiers.

In English, the rules for article use are summarized by Fowler & Aaron (1992:748-788, 1995:727-728)² as follows.

- (1) 1. 'The' is a definite article, it precedes a noun when the thing named is already known to the reader.
2. 'A' and 'an' are indefinite articles, they precede a noun when the thing named is not already known to the reader.
3. Use 'a(n)' with a singular count noun and do not use them with a plural noun.
4. Do not use 'the' with a plural noun or a mass noun when the noun refers generally to all representatives of what it names. Use 'the' when referring to one or more specific representatives of what the noun names.

However, these so-called 'rules' do not reflect the wide array of environments where article use is variable. In these cases, native English speakers show variable use and rely on intuition rather than generalized conventions.

2.2 The Subjects

The subjects in the present study were 49 freshmen of the Department of English at a Korean university. All subjects have had 6 years of English education from secondary schooling. The general backgrounds of the students are

² *The Little, Brown Handbook* is described by the authors as being a guide to standard written English (Fowler & Aaron 1995:xvi). Although the book is mainly intended for native English speakers the most recent edition acknowledges English as a Second Language (ESL) speakers.

considered to be relatively uniform in that they all share the same native language and similar academic achievements.³

In a demographic breakdown of the 49 subjects, 24 were male and 25 were female. Of the subjects, 27 came from rural regions and 22 came from urban regions.

Social Factors	Rural	Urban	TOTAL
Male	17	7	24
Female	9	16	25
TOTAL	26	23	49

Table 1. Demographic information

2.3 Methodology

Data was collected from a spontaneous written composition on the topic of 'My Freshman Lab Class.' The compositions were elicited during a 50-minute time frame. The students had no previous knowledge of what the topic of the composition was, and they were not permitted to use a dictionary. A familiar topic was used in order to eliminate such factors as lack of general knowledge and insufficient English skills regarding expression. There was no restriction on the length of the composition. However, the length ranged from 1 to 2 pages. The fact that the data is in written form may suggest that the register is formal and less resilient to variation. In this sense, the written form is considered static compared to the spoken form which is dynamic. Here, written examples were elicited to test the contemplated efforts of the students and to assess errors of competence.

The MacVarb Variable Rule Program (Guy 1989) was used in this study to quantify the rate of deletion of English articles. The article errors in the compositions of the 49 subjects were analyzed and classified into those which occurred in the definite article *the* and the indefinite article *a(n)*. A total of 638 tokens were collected. This number reflects the environments where the article was deleted and where it was retained.⁴ An initial run of MacVarb was conducted as well as a reanalysis of the factors in an additional modified run.

³ All of the students have similar college entrance examination scores in order to have been admitted to this particular department at this particular university.

⁴ Environments were determined according to Folwer & Aaron (1994, 1995)'s rules and the author's intuition.

(4) Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1

The rate of English article deletion will be considerably higher than the rate of article retention.

Hypothesis 2

Males will delete the English article more than females.

Hypothesis 3

Subjects with rural backgrounds will delete the English article more than those with urban backgrounds.

Hypothesis 4

The deletion rate of the English article will be higher if the articles precede a 'modifier+noun,' rather than directly preceding a noun.

Hypothesis 1 tests whether the deletion rate will be higher than the retention rate. This is a generalization which is formed under the rationale that the Korean language lacks an equivalent of the English article system. According to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, this is considered a hindrance to acquisition. As there is no translation equivalent of the article in Korean, the subjects may be influenced by their native language and delete rather than retain this form. This form would be considered marked to them because it does not exist in their native language.

Hypothesis 2 tests differences according to sex. It is a general belief that females are more sensitive to second language forms than males. Studies in second language acquisition have proven this claim to a certain degree while in sociolinguistics studies, females are considered leaders in linguistic change (Ellis 1994:202-204).

Hypothesis 3 proposes that coming from an urban background will be more advantageous than coming from a rural one. It is widely believed that urban schools in Korea offer a higher standard of education than rural schools.⁵ This holds true in relation to the differences in the socio-economic status of people living in urban areas compared to rural areas. Highschools in urban areas have a higher required score on the highschool entrance examination than rural schools. There is also a general tendency of well-qualified teachers to prefer urban schools to rural ones.

Hypothesis 4 states that an intervening grammatical category such as a modifier will influence the rate of deletion. This assumption is supported by

⁵ Jinmin Park (p.c.1997) provided this observation. She graduated from a teacher's college and is currently a primary school teacher.

the fact that the Korean language does not have an overt article system and incorporates this information in the use of prenominal modifiers. Therefore, if a modifier is already present in the construction the learner is assumed to be affected by native language interference and consequently not use an article. In Korean, the function of the English definite article *the* is reflected in modifiers such as *i* 'this', *ceo* 'that', and *keu* 'that (proximate to hearer)'. On the other hand, the English definite article which distinguishes singular and plural entities is expressed directly by cardinal numbers.

3 Sociolinguistic Variation

The results from the multivariate analyses using MacVarb will be presented in terms of the four hypotheses.

3.1 Deletion vs. Retention (Hypothesis 1)

The subjects showed a surprisingly high degree of proficiency concerning article use. This may be accounted for by the fact that the output of the subjects was in written form.

Tendency	Number of tokens	Percentage
Deletion	129	20.21
Retention	509	79.79
TOTAL	638	100

Table 2. Rates of deletion and retention of articles

The results in Table 2 show that Hypothesis 1 proved false. Of the 638 tokens collected, only 129 were instances of deletion. This indicates a mere 20.21% rate of deletion. The subjects appear to have a surprisingly high level of written language proficiency concerning article usage. Continuous exposure to grammar and written form may have sufficiently provided the setting for article acquisition. The subjects have had the chance to contemplate and correct mistakes because the samples were in written form. Therefore, they may have been consciously aware of the environments where the article must be retained.

3.2 Sex Variation (Hypothesis 2)

Turning to Hypothesis 2, the variable of sex did not prove to be statistically significant. Males showed a higher rate of deletion of the article than did their female counterparts by a difference in factor weight of only 0.12. Table 3 shows the results of the analysis.

Sex	Deletion		
	N	%	Factor weight*
Male	81	24	0.56
Female	48	16	0.44
N=129, log likelihood=-308.228			

* MacVarb results, N=number of tokens.⁶

Table 3. Sex variation in article use

3.3 Geographical Variation (Hypothesis 3)

As for Hypothesis 3, this variable was thrown out during the step up/step down analysis and thus turned out to be insignificant. This seems to be the result of the subjects having similar academic achievements regardless of geographic background in that they all entered the same university. Table 4 shows the results.

Region	Deletion		
	N	%	Factor weight
Rural	77	24	0.52
Urban	52	17	0.48

Table 4. Geographical variation in article use

As can be seen, the difference in factor weight was a mere 0.04.

⁶ Subsequent tables will omit total number of tokens and log likelihood.

3.4 Grammatical Variation (Hypothesis 4)

The most important finding of the present study was the significance of the grammatical environment immediately following the target article. A low deletion rate occurred when the article directly preceded the noun it was modifying. Table 5 shows the results.

Article	Following categories	Deletion		
		N	%	Factor weight
the	+ noun	39	14	0.34
	+ adjective + noun	44	24	0.50
	+ adverb	6	33	0.60
a(n)	+ concrete noun	8	18	0.41
	+ abstract noun	12	31	0.58
	+ adjective + count noun	10	26	0.52
	+ adjective + mass noun	7	44	0.70
	+ adverb	3	14	0.34

Table 5. Deletion rates according to following categories

The variables showed mixed results. A slight tendency was apparent in that the subjects seemed to delete the article more when it preceded an adjective or an adverb than when it preceded a noun. This provides evidence for Hypothesis 4. The subjects also deleted more when the following noun was an abstract noun than when it was a concrete noun. This triggering of deletion may be due to the notion of the general use of the indefinite article as an indicator of singular concrete nouns. In this sense, it may be difficult for the second language learner of English to relate the indefinite article to abstract entities.

3.5 Reanalyses

Next, the initial run was modified so that some of the linguistic constraints were conflated. Adjustments were made to see whether a significant difference existed according to whether the article was definite or indefinite. In addition, article use in general and the effects of linguistic environments were examined. The new adjustments in the factor groups showed varied results.

3.5.1 Type of Article

The first reanalysis micro-analyzed the article according to type. The results showed that there was no significant difference in distinguishing between the definite article *the* and the indefinite article *a(n)*.

Type	Deletion		Factor weight
	N	%	
Definite 'the'	89	19	0.46
Indefinite 'a(n)'	40	25	0.54

Table 6. Deletion rates according to type of article

The subjects appeared to be prone to deletion of the article regardless of its particular grammatical usage. This finding also somewhat indirectly indicates that the subjects view articles in a general manner and may unconsciously group them as one category.

3.5.2 Modified Grammatical Environments

The second reanalysis conflated the grammatical environments following the article as well as the type of article. In particular, the distinction between count nouns and mass nouns was disregarded.

Grammatical order	Deletion		
	N	%	Factor weight
article + noun	59	16	0.40
article + adjective + noun	61	26	0.55
article + adverb	9	23	0.54

Table 7. Deletion rates of general article use

The results indicate that in general article use the lowest deletion rate is seen when the article directly precedes a noun. The finding reinforces Hypothesis 4, as the deletion rates were found to be higher when the article precedes an adjective or an adverb.

4 Summary and Conclusions

The data examined in the present study showed the various sociolinguistic factors which affect the deletion of the definite and indefinite article in Korean learners of English. The overall low article deletion rate seems to suggest that the subjects have acquired the article system to a large degree. Errors are made when the use of the article is arbitrary and obscure.

The results also showed that only one of the four research hypotheses posited were confirmed.

(5) Hypotheses testing results

<u>Hypothesis</u>	<u>Proposal</u>	<u>Status</u>
Hypothesis 1	deletion > retention	disconfirmed
Hypothesis 2	males ≈ females	disconfirmed
Hypothesis 3	rural > urban	disconfirmed
Hypothesis 4	+ modifier + noun > + noun	confirmed

Deletion of both the definite and indefinite article appears to be systematic and sensitive to both internal and external factors. Males showed similar rates of deletion as females. There was no apparent significance regarding the geographical background of the subjects. In addition, there was no substantial difference in the deletion rates of the definite and indefinite article.

Significant differences were found in the linguistic environment the article appeared in. There was a tendency of higher deletion when the article preceded an adjective or an adverb than when it directly preceded a noun. This can be explained by native language transfer, as the role of the article is played by modifiers in the subjects' first language of Korean. Since the position where an article should appear is already occupied with a modifier, the subjects might have overlooked the fact that an article might be necessary in this context. In the case of the indefinite article, the deletion rate was higher when the article preceded an abstract noun than when it preceded a concrete noun. This may be explained by the nature of concrete nouns as being relatively more countable than abstract nouns.

It is concluded from the present study that the phenomena of article deletion in Korean learners of English seems to be greatly influenced by the learners' native language. The study has thus attempted to incorporate variationist methods in order to unveil the nature of article use in the written language of Korean learners of English.

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