A corpus-based analysis of the acquisition of the English article system:

Contrasting French, Spanish, Russian and Greek learners of English

Words: 522

The overarching goal of the study is to better understand the processes at play in the acquisition of the English article system by non-native speakers of English, namely French, Spanish, Russian and Greek students. Analyzing usage-based data, we aim to pin down the areas of the article system that pose problems to learners of English and try to identify the possible causes of such problems.

The investigation uses argumentative essays from the International Corpus of Learner English, ICLEv2 (Granger et al. 2009). Since the ICLEv2 lacks data for Greek learners of English, the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki provided some essays from the Greek Corpus of Learners of English (GRICLE), which will be included in ICLEv3.

The analysis is based on Bickerton's taxonomy (1981) and each article, be it correctly used or not, is manually classified according to an improved version of Díez-Bedmar & Papp (2008)'s tagging system. The focus on both correctly and incorrectly used articles makes it possible to get a precise picture of learners' mastery of that specific language feature.

The investigation has put forward that the most problematic area, irrespective of the mother tongue background, is related to the zero article as learners often use a definite article instead of a zero article with non-referential nouns. Results nonetheless show a different error profile for each language group. Russian learners have difficulties in correctly using the definite article with definite referents. They tend to inappropriately use the zero or indefinite article. This suggests that Russian learners, deprived of any signpost in their native language, still experience problems in grasping the correct English pattern of use of the definite and indefinite articles. Greek learners of English mainly produce one type of error, viz. the incorrect use of the definite article instead of a zero article. They perform quite accurately in their use of the other articles. Spanish and French learners of English present a similar error profile as both groups have, besides the shared problematic area, difficulties in correctly using the English articles in generic contexts.

Our analysis of cross-linguistic influences on learners' production has revealed that specificities of the L1 do not necessarily negatively impact the use of the English article system: for instance, Greek students use an indefinite article before proper nouns in their mother tongue but do not irrelevantly use an article before proper nouns in English. Second, apparent similarities between two languages can prove challenging for students. In Spanish, the use of the zero article is accepted in some contexts. Yet results indicate that Spanish students seem confused by this partial similarity between their L1 and English as they produce a larger number of errors in their selection of the zero article. Third, instances of positive transfer have also been clearly identified. Russian learners of English experience fewer difficulties than the other three groups in correctly using the zero article.

The annotation system and detailed results will be presented in the talk and pedagogical implications briefly addressed. The examination of a selection of didactic materials designed for learners of English reveals, for example, that an improvement in the teaching of the so-called zero article would be beneficial.