Tracing the Developmental Repertoire of the Progressive: Evidence from L2 Construction Learning

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Abstract : Research investigating language acquisition from a constructionist perspective has demonstrated that language is learned as constructions at various linguistic levels, which is related to factors of frequency, semantic prototypicality, and form-meaning contingency. However, previous research on construction learning tended to focus on clause-level constructions such as verb argument constructions but few attempts were made to study morpheme-level constructions such as the progressive construction, which is regarded as a source of acquisition problems for English learners from diverse L1 backgrounds, especially for those whose L1 do not have an equivalent construction such as German and Chinese. To trace the developmental trajectory of Chinese EFL learners' use of the progressive with respect to verb frequency, verb-progressive contingency, and verbal prototypicality and generality, a learner corpus consisting of three sub-corpora representing three different English proficiency levels was extracted from the Chinese Learners of English Corpora (CLEC). As the reference point, a native speakers' corpus extracted from the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays was also established. All the texts were annotated with C7 tagset by part-of-speech tagging software. After annotation all valid progressive hits were retrieved with AntConc 3.4.3 followed by a manual check. Frequency-related data showed that from the lowest to the highest proficiency level, (1) the type token ratio increased steadily from 23.5% to 35.6%, getting closer to 36.4% in the native speakers' corpus, indicating a wider use of verbs in the progressive; (2) the normalized entropy value rose from 0.776 to 0.876, working towards the target score of 0.886 in native speakers' corpus, revealing that upper-intermediate learners exhibited a more even distribution and more productive use of verbs in the progressive; (3) activity verbs (i.e., verbs with prototypical progressive meanings like running and singing) dropped from 59% to 34% but non-prototypical verbs such as state verbs (e.g., being and living) and achievement verbs (e.g., dying and finishing) were increasingly used in the progressive. Apart from raw frequency analyses, collostructional analyses were conducted to quantify verb-progressive contingency and to determine what verbs were distinctively associated with the progressive construction. Results were in line with raw frequency findings, which showed that contingency between the progressive and non-prototypical verbs represented by light verbs (e.g., going, doing, making, and coming) increased as English proficiency proceeded. These findings altogether suggested that beginning Chinese EFL learners were less productive in using the progressive construction: they were constrained by a small set of verbs which had concrete and typical progressive meanings (e.g., the activity verbs). But with English proficiency increasing, their use of the progressive began to spread to marginal members such as the light verbs.

Keywords : Construction learning, Corpus-based, Progressives, Prototype