

Sensitivity to Misusing Verb Inflections in Both Finite and Non-Finite Clauses in Native and Non-Native Russian: A Self-Paced Reading Investigation

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Abstract : Analyzing the oral production of Chinese-speaking learners of English as a second language (L2), we can find a large variety of verb inflections - Why does it seem so hard for them to use consistent correct past morphologies in obligatory past contexts? Failed Functional Features Hypothesis (FFFH) attributes the rather non-target-like performance to the absence of [\pm past] feature in their L1 Chinese, arguing that for post puberty learners, new features in L2 are no more accessible. By contrast, Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (MSIH) tends to believe that all features are actually acquirable for late L2 learners, while due to the mapping difficulties from features to forms, it is hard for them to realize the consistent past morphologies on the surface. However, most of the studies are limited to the verb morphologies in finite clauses and few studies have ever attempted to figure out these learners' performance in non-finite clauses. Additionally, it has been discussed that Chinese learners may be able to tell the finite/infinite distinction (i.e. the [\pm finite] feature might be selected in Chinese, even though the existence of [\pm past] is denied). Therefore, adopting a self-paced reading task (SPR), the current study aims to analyze the processing patterns of Chinese-speaking learners of L2 Russian, in order to find out if they are sensitive to misuse of tense morphologies in both finite and non-finite clauses and whether they are sensitive to the finite/infinite distinction presented in Russian. The study targets L2 Russian due to its systematic morphologies in both present and past tenses. A native Russian group, as well as a group of English-speaking learners of Russian, whose L1 has definitely selected both [\pm finite] and [\pm past] features, will also be involved. By comparing and contrasting performance of the three language groups, the study is going to further examine and discuss the two theories, FFFH and MSIH. Preliminary hypotheses are: a) Russian native speakers are expected to spend longer time reading the verb forms which violate the grammar; b) it is expected that Chinese participants are, at least, sensitive to the misuse of inflected verbs in non-finite clauses, although no sensitivity to the misuse of infinitives in finite clauses might be found. Therefore, an interaction of finite and grammaticality is expected to be found, which indicate that these learners are able to tell the finite/infinite distinction; and c) having selected [\pm finite] and [\pm past], English-speaking learners of Russian are expected to behave target-likely, supporting L1 transfer.

Keywords : features, finite clauses, morphosyntax, non-finite clauses, past morphologies, present morphologies, Second Language Acquisition, self-paced reading task, verb inflections

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