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Relevance theory and *the* in second language acquisition

Abstract

This article considers the implications of Sperber and Wilson's (1986/95) relevance theory for the acquisition of 'the' by L2 learners whose L1 does not have an articles system. On the one hand, relevance theory provides an explicit characterization of the semantics of 'the', which suggests ways of devising more accurate guidelines for teaching/learning than are available in current pedagogical textbooks. On the other hands, relevance-theoretic assumptions about human communication together with some effects of transfer from L1 provide the basis for some predictions about the pattern of L2 learners' errors in the use of 'the'. I argue that data from previous research (Trenkić 2002) lend support to these predictions, and I try to show that examples drawn from the data I have collected provide evidence for the view that L2 learning is not influenced only by general pragmatic principles and hypotheses about L2 based on transfer from L1, but that learners also devise and test tacit hypotheses which are idiosyncratic to them.

I Introduction

This paper explores some implications of relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/95) for the acquisition of the definite article by learners of English as a second language whose native language does not have an article system. The discussion in the following sections is based on data from native speakers of Serbian (Trenkić 2002) and Croatian (data drawn from the University of Luton English language examination scripts by secondary school students in Croatia). I argue that relevance theory offers a promising way of conceptualising some important aspects of the relation between L2 learning and L2 research and that it provides the basis for a few predictions which are worth exploring through further empirical investigation.

First, the key concepts of relevance theory are introduced and an outline of the relevance-theoretic characterization of 'the' is given. Second, I point out that the relevance theoretic procedural analysis of 'the' is more plausible than a characterization of its semantics in terms of two sets of binary features (see Huebner 1983, Bikerton 1981). Third, as (native) speakers' knowledge of the meaning of 'the' is implicit, rather than explicit, I try to make a case for the view that the acquisition of 'the' by L2 learners could be facilitated by recasting the relevance-theoretic characterization of the semantics of 'the' in intuitive, commonsense terms. Fourth, I consider the possibility that the relevance-theoretic approach to communication and some assumptions about transfer from an L1 which does not have an article system provide the basis for a number of predictions about the acquisition of 'the' by L2 learners. Finally, the discussion of examples drawn from the data I have collected shows that L2 learners' use of 'the' provides some evidence for the view that they make and revise idiosyncratic hypotheses about its meaning and use.

II Relevance and Ostensive-Inferential Communication

Relevance theory (RT) is an approach to communication which builds on the view that people are predisposed to pay attention to phenomena in their environment when doing so is likely to bring about improvements in their belief system. In other words, we tend to pay attention to stimuli which we expect will turn out to be relevant to us. Some stimuli, which include pointing gestures and utterances, are designed to create an expectation that paying attention to them will yield significant cognitive rewards. In other words, they are designed to create expectations of their own relevance. This type of stimuli are called ostensive stimuli and the kind of communication which involves the production and interpretation of ostensive stimuli is called ostensive-inferential communication. Clearly, the notion of relevance is the key to explaining ostensive-inferential communication:

Relevance

A phenomenon is relevant to an individual:

(a) to the extent that the cognitive effects achieved when it is processed in context are large, and

(b) to the extent that the processing effort required for achieving the effects is small.

(adapted from S&W 1986/95: 153)

This definition of relevance provides the basis for two law-like generalizations about human cognition and communication, known as the cognitive and the communicative principles of relevance:

The Cognitive Principle of Relevance

Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance. (S&W 1995: 260)

The Communicative Principle of Relevance

Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance. (S&W 1995: 260)

Presumption of Optimal Relevance

(a) The ostensive stimulus is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's while to process it.

(b) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences. (S&W 1995: 270)

The principle of relevance boosts the cognitive system's efficiency (in its quest for cognitive effects) by steering the interpretation of ostensive stimuli in a particular way:

Relevance-theoretic Comprehension Strategy

(a) construct interpretations in order of accessibility (i.e. follow a path of least effort);

(b) stop when your expectation of relevance is satisfied.

(Note: expectations of relevance may vary across different situations of utterance and with the relative developmental level of the hearer, from an expectation of actual optimal relevance, to more sophisticated and realistic expectations that allow for speakers' fallibility and/or deceptiveness; for detailed discussion, see Sperber 1994.) (taken from Carston 2002: 380)

Ostensive stimuli may contribute to the comprehension process in three main ways. First, they may focus the addressee's attention in a particular direction (e.g. pointing gestures and acts of displaying in general). For example, you ask me how I am, and I produce a sachet of cold and flu powder out of my pocket. In this example, the communicator, by displaying an object to the addressee suggests that it is relevant as evidence of her informative intention. Second, verbal ostensive stimuli typically encode conceptual representations which contribute to the truth-conditional content of the utterance directly.

For example, you ask me how I am, and I say: 'I've had this bad cold all week and it just won't go away.' In this example, the words used present much of the evidence of what the speaker intends to communicate by virtue of the concepts that they encode. Third, lexical items may encode procedures (i.e. constraints on or indications of the way pragmatic inference should proceed). Consider (1):

(1) a. He is happy. So, he is laughing.

b. He is laughing. So, he is happy.

'So' encodes a constraint on the way the utterance it introduces should be interpreted in context. In 'So *p*', *p* is relevant as a conclusion (which follows from some salient premises). 'He' encodes some procedural information which helps the hearer form a conceptual representation of the intended referent. So, there are two types of procedural constraints: constraints on the derivation of implicatures (e.g. 'so', 'after all', 'however') and constraints on pragmatic inferences involved in deriving the propositional content of the utterance (e.g. pronouns, tense markers).

III 'The' as a Semantic Constraint on Explicit Content

The definite article 'the' is an example of procedural encoding. It encodes a semantic constraint on explicit content. According to a recent relevance-theoretic analysis:

> … definite descriptions are univocal, with 'the F' providing the hearer with the information that the proposition the speaker wishes to explicate contains an individual concept associated with the information 'is a unique F' (in a pragmatically retrievable context). (Powell 2003: 196)

An individual concept is a mental representation of an individual consisting of a dossier of information taken to be true of a single individual. (Note that on this approach generic interpretations involve retrieving individual concepts which represent type-level individuals (Powell 2003: 204).)

On this account, the definite article contributes to utterance comprehension by indicating that the individual concept denoted by the NP is available in a context readily accessible to the hearer. Consider (2a) and (2b):

(2) a. I want to read a book.

b. I want to read the book.

The indefinite NP ‘a book’, (2a), may be taken to refer to a particular book – so the speaker has an individual concept in mind - but there is no linguistic indication that this concept is available in the hearer’s immediate context. In other words, the speaker may or may not have a particular book in mind, but there is no linguistic indication that forming an individuating conceptual representation would lead the hearer to derive cognitive effects that the speaker considers worth conveying. By contrast, the DP, (2b), indicates that the speaker’s intended representation of an individual concept is available in the immediate context of the hearer. Note that a speaker aiming at optimal relevance would not be justified in using the definite article unless she intended to communicate that the utterance is optimally relevant when the hearer forms an individuating conceptual representation of ‘book’.

This relevance-theoretic characterization of the semantics of ‘the’ is in many ways different from those found in the literature on L2 acquisition, where explanations aimed at learners of English as L2 are either based on the notion of what is clear in the situation (e.g. Chalker 1984) or they are couched in terms of two sets of binary features, ‘specific referent’([+/- SR]) and ‘hearer knowledge’ ([+/- HK]) (originally due to Bickerton (1981) and Huebner (1983), and used in pedagogical grammars of English, such as Swan and Walter (1997), Eastwood (1999)), which specify the following range of possible feature value combinations:

[- SR] & [+ HK]	the, a, Ø (generic)
[+ SR] & [+ HK]	the (referential definites)
[+ SR] & [- HK]	a, Ø (referential indefinites, first mentions)
[- SR] & [- HK]	a, Ø (non-referential nouns – attributive indefinites, non-specific definites)

(taken from Trenkić (2002: 118)

As is generally recognized, neither the more traditional nor the more modern pedagogical grammars are sufficiently predictive to provide accurate guidelines about language use. They draw upon notions of specific reference, speaker knowledge, hearer knowledge and situation, which do not provide clear and reliable grounds for deciding when to use ‘the’.

The relevance-theoretic account outlined above fares much better, but it is not sufficiently intelligible for the L2 learner to follow. This is hardly surprising. The definite article encodes procedural – rather than conceptual – content, and procedural knowledge is generally implicit – rather than explicit. As Matthews and Roussel (1997: 19) point out, implicit procedural knowledge probably has some distinguishing properties. Most notably, it is difficult to verbalize, and it is available to consciousness only through reflection. Procedures encoded by particular lexical items are typically not available to consciousness. Although people generally have a hunch about their meanings (e.g. ‘the’ means a specific or the only one existing, ‘however’ indicates some sort of contrast), these reports tend to involve a kind of naïve theorising and provide very incomplete and/or inaccurate insights, unlike answers to questions such as: ‘What is the meaning of the word “dog”?’, to which more intuitive and more reliable answers are readily given. The distinction between implicit and explicit knowledge has been discussed within psychology (see articles in Underwood (1996) and Berry (1997)) as well as in the literature on L2 learning (see Skehan 1998: 54-5; 275-9). One of its main features is that it is used in performing automatic processes (i.e. processes which are unaffected by other ongoing cognitive activities (see Skehan 1998: 30)). In Sperber’s (1996) terms, these processes could be described as encapsulated in terms of processing and – in this sense – modular. In the same vein, Carston (2002: 5-7) considers cognitive relevance-theoretic pragmatics in the context of the distinction between the ‘personal’ and ‘sub-personal’ levels of explanation. She points out that Grice’s approach to conversation, which is grounded in conscious, rational and normative belief/desire reasoning, is pitched at the personal level, in contrast to RT:

> In recent years, the relevance-theoretic account has moved more clearly in the direction of a mechanistic sub-personal theory by proposing that the comprehension system is a mental *module*: it is fast and automatic, and, …, it is domain-specific, in that it is activated exclusively by ostensive stimuli and employs its own proprietary concepts and processing strategies and routines. (Carston 2002: 7)

Procedural linguistic items specify instructions for inferences that are carried out by the (sub-personal) modular comprehension system. Hence, we would expect the procedural meanings of lexical items like ‘the’ not to be available to consciousness. The acquisition of procedural meaning typically relies on implicit learning which ‘involves unconscious induction resulting in the establishment of abstract rules and representations, … and is unaffected by instruction’ (Schmidt, 1995: 172, quoted in Skehan, 1998: 54). As L2 learning largely relies on explicit instruction, the problem of how to teach effectively procedural meaning arises.

IV Relevance Theory and *the* in Second Language Acquisition

The relevance theoretic characterisation of ‘the’ is rather theoretical and L2 learners would find it unintelligible, but can it provide the basis for a commonsense account which L2 learners would be able to follow? Rather than providing a detailed set of ‘rules’ for the use of ‘the’, the pragmatic relevance-theoretic approach would be to introduce the definite article in a way which facilitates the learner’s own implicit reasoning processes. I think the following commonsense paraphrase of the procedure encoded by ‘the’ might be adequate:

> The definite article ‘the’ is used when the speaker wishes to indicate that it is sufficiently clear from the situation which particular thing (animal, person) or group of things (animals, people) the speaker has in mind. Note: the hearer may actually have very little information about the exact thing (animal, person) that the speaker has in mind. What matters is that the speaker has indicated that the little information that is available to the hearer in the immediate situation is all that the hearer needs to know.

The RT based guidelines for the meaning and use of ‘the’ would contribute in two ways to L2 teaching/learning: (a) by shifting the emphasis from the notion of *particular/specific referent* to the notion of a *good enough idea of a particular referent*, and (b) by dispensing with hearer knowledge as part of the meaning of ‘the’. If this could be achieved, then L2 learners could rely on a single coherent strategy for using ‘the’ and it is likely that they would make much faster progress. Consider the contrast between (3a) and (3b):

(3) a. I want to go to the post office.

b. I want to go to a post office.

The speaker who uses (3a) indicates to the hearer that he does not need to think about which post office the speaker wishes to go to even if he does not know. As ‘the’ indicates that the hearer has enough information in the immediate situation, he will assume that additional knowledge on his part is not necessary for understanding the utterance. There are two likely scenarios here. First, it may be evident to both interlocutors that the hearer does not have the background knowledge required for forming an individuating concept of the particular post office that the speaker has in mind. In this situation the hearer is justified to assume that the relevant individual concept of post office identifies the post office as a type, i.e. as an institution. This understanding is generally quite salient, because it has become conventionalized. Second, it may be evident to the interlocutors that the hearer is aware of which particular post office the speaker intends to go to. In this case, the information required for forming an individual concept is likely to be very salient to the hearer. Therefore, the hearer may form an individual concept of the particular post office that the speaker has in mind.

In contrast to (3a), (3b) does not suggest that it is sufficiently clear from the situation which post-office the speaker wishes to go to. Therefore, the hearer may feel prompted to wonder whether the speaker knows where there is a post office, or to assume that the speaker has unexpectedly realized that she needed to go to any post office that might be near by. It seems that language learners are sometimes at a loss whether to use ‘the’ because it is not clear which of the textbook instructions they should follow. Here is an example from an English examination student essay (by a Croatian student):

(4) The idea of reintroducing [**the** – repeated self-correction] trams to London seems to be more and more realistic.

The student may well have reasoned along the following lines:

(i) London trams have been mentioned before in the text. So, ‘the’ should be used.

(ii) London used to have trams. If trams are to be reintroduced, then they are not the same trams that were mentioned before. So, ‘the’ should not be used.

(iii) It is (in some sense) clear from the situation which trams the communicator has in mind. So, ‘the’ should be used.

(iv) The trams in question are not particular trams. So, ‘the’ should not be used.

Note that both (5a) and (5b) are grammatical in English:

(5) a. The idea of reintroducing **the** trams to London seems to be more and more realistic.

b. The idea of reintroducing trams to London seems to be more and more realistic.

The hearer who follows the relevance-theoretic comprehension strategy might interpret (5a) and (5b) roughly, as follows: the general idea of trams as a means of transport is conveyed by the plural form of the noun without any articles, (as in (5b)). Native speakers of English generally find (5a) rather odd, because the context in which the definite NP is optimally relevant is not readily available. By using ‘the’, (5a), the communicator indicates that the immediate situation provides enough information about which particular trams she has in mind. Therefore, ‘the’ suggests that the idea of re-introducing particular trams is more important than the idea that trams in general (i.e. trams as a means of transportation) are likely to be re-introduced. This might lead the addressee to conclude that the individual conceptual representation of the set of trams should include some information about the trams that London used to have, and that the proposition expressed by the utterance is relevant when processed in a context which includes some assumptions about the time when London used to have trams. If this is roughly correct, we would expect some additional linguistic indication of the speaker’s intended interpretation to make (5a) seem more acceptable to native speakers of English:

(5) c. The idea of reintroducing the **old** trams to London seems to be more and more realistic.

Examples like (5) point to the importance of pragmatic strategies in L2 learning. Trenkić (2002: 130) takes the view that an effort-driven pragmatic strategy plays a major role in explaining L2 learners’ use of ‘the’ in her data. She observes that omission errors ‘first withdraw from those contexts in which the meanings learners ascribe to them are most difficult to retrieve [e.g. first mention definites], and last from the contexts in which they are easiest to retrieve [e.g. second mention definites].’ She proposes a pragmatic explanation for the way learners decide whether to use ‘the’:

> …, learners' use of articles does seem to be driven by pragmatic considerations, as there is an effect of a least effort principle which instructs them that meaning should not be linguistically expressed if the hearer can infer it at a lower processing cost than it would take the speaker to encode it linguistically (cf. 'optimal relevance', Sperber and Wilson 1986). This pragmatic rule translates into 'do not use articles if what they stand for can be easily recovered from the context: use them if it cannot be easily recovered from the context.'
>
> (Trenkić 2002: 129)

The main merit of these observations is that they point to the importance of pragmatics in interpreting data from linguistic performance in L2. But the details of Trenkić's account are less than convincing. She suggests that the hearer compares the processing cost of interpreting the ostensive stimulus with the processing cost of encoding the stimulus. In other words, the idea is that the hearer compares the processing cost likely to be incurred by him, with that already incurred by the speaker. This is inconsistent both with general relevance-theoretic assumptions about the nature of ostensive-inferential communication, and with the communicative principle of relevance.

RT views communication as a process in which the responsibility for communicative success is not equally shared by the participants. Rather, it is up to the speaker (who is aiming at optimal relevance, within the parameters set by her preferences and abilities) to produce a stimulus which conveys her intended meaning without putting the hearer to unjustifiable processing cost. Note that on this view the hearer assesses the cost of processing the stimulus versus the effort of deriving cognitive (i.e. contextual) effects. Evidence from everyday language use suggests that people make very fine judgements about the effect-effort ratio, expecting extra effects even for small increases in processing effort. Compare (6a) and (6b):

(6) a. It is raining.

b. It is raining now.

In a situation in which an utterance of (6a) evidently refers to the time of communication - and, therefore, has the same propositional content as (6b) would have if uttered on the same occasion - (6b) would make more manifest some implicatures about the contrast between the time of speech and some relevant situations in past or future occasions on which it was not raining. Within RT these implicatures are explained in terms of the hearer's expectation that the extra processing effort required for decoding a linguistic item ('now') - which is redundant for recovering the propositional form of the utterance - will be offset by extra cognitive effects. Note that it is only the hearer's processing effort which guides utterance comprehension in these examples. The processing costs incurred by the communicator play a role only in rather special circumstances, when the addressee is aware that the communicator's personal abilities (and/or preferences) need to be taken account of. Text messages sent from mobile phones provide a good example of the type of situation where the addressee makes allowances for the communicator's limited ability (limited in that the processing cost of encoding would vastly exceed the benefits to the addressee) to produce a signal which would be optimally relevant.

In the light of these remarks on the relation between effort and explicitness in RT, the communicator's choice of ostensive stimulus could be seen as guided by the following strategy:

Relevance-theoretic production strategy

Given your preferences, choose the least effort-demanding option for the hearer.

In view of these observations, Trenkić's pragmatic strategy should be modified, roughly, along the following lines: use 'the' only when the processing effort required for decoding is likely to be offset by the savings in the processing effort required for interpreting the utterance in context (most importantly, for forming a conceptual representation of the intended referent by drawing upon the immediately available context).

Trenkić seems to overlook the significance of the fact that the speaker-hearer's judgements about degrees of explicitness are based on the choices available within the language code being used for communication. Compare (7a) and (7b):

(7) a. He put his hand in his pocket.

b. *He put hand in pocket.

In interpreting (7a) the native speaker-hearer's expectations of relevance are not informed by ungrammatical utterances, such as (7b), which are less explicit and would – if they were grammatical - be easier to interpret in context. The hearer monitors the choices available to the speaker within the language code that the speaker is using. Since the range of options specified by the English language code does not include those made in (7b), (7a) will not be interpreted as more explicit than is necessary. This has a direct implication for Trenkić's claim that the use of 'the' by L2 learners is guided by a relevance-theoretic effort-driven strategy. This pragmatic strategy explains L2 learners' behaviour only provided that Ø-article is taken as the default option, or in examples like (4), where there is a genuine choice. Note that native speakers of English find 'the' in (4) stylistically marked, deriving additional effects to offset the extra processing costs incurred. But the effort-driven pragmatic strategy will lead only those L2 learners who take Ø-article as the default option to omit 'the'. It seems quite reasonable to assume that Trenkić's (2002: 130-1) data can be explained in terms of the Ø-article-as-default-option strategy and the revised relevance-theoretic effort-driven pragmatic strategy. The Ø-article-as-default-option strategy is a transfer effect from L1 where L1 does not have an article system. Examples like (8) show that learners seem to use this strategy:

(8) When you arrive in China, you should learn how to read map of city.

The student essay from which (8) is taken shows that the learner does use articles, but often omits them. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume the she is following the Ø-article-as-default strategy. In fact, the omission of articles in (8) seems to follow naturally from this strategy and the relevance-theoretic production strategy, as a number of article-NP combinations would make (8) grammatical and appropriate in readily conceivable contexts:

(9) a. When you arrive in China, you should learn how to read *the* map of *the* city.

b. When you arrive in China, you should learn how to read *the* map of *a* city.

c. When you arrive in China, you should learn how to read *a* map of *a* city.

d. When you arrive in China, you should learn how to read *a* map of *the* city.

The communicator who follows the relevance-theoretic production strategy and the Ø-article-as-default strategy may find the omission of articles (as in (8)) justified on the grounds that the extra effort required for processing any of (9a) to (9d) would narrow down the interpretation more than is desirable from the speaker's point of view.

The definite article ‘the’ poses three main difficulties for L2 learners: (a) to figure out the meaning of ‘the’; (b) to abandon the Ø-article-as-default-option strategy, and, (c) to learn in which (linguistic) contexts the use of ‘the’ is regulated by convention, rather than following from the procedure it encodes. Let me examine briefly the way the first two difficulties are likely to affect the learning process.

The semantics of ‘the’ is complex in that the procedure that it encodes involves the notions of conceptual mental representation, particular reference, and availability in context. Although procedural knowledge is implicit, and, therefore, not directly accessible to consciousness, not all procedural meaning is equally difficult to figure out and express explicitly. For example, personal pronouns encode procedures on explicit content which are reasonably amenable to consciousness: ‘I’ means the communicator, ‘he/she’ means a person who is neither the speaker nor the hearer, and so on. One part of the meaning of ‘the’ seems easy to recognise: unique reference (usually paraphrased in pedagogical grammar textbooks as ‘a particular or the only one existing’). It seems plausible to assume that unique reference appears as the meaning of ‘the’ at relatively early stages of L2 learning. If this is indeed the case, one would expect ‘the’ to appear in contexts in which the learner assumes that the NP picks out a particular referent. Therefore, at these stages ‘the’ is expected to be overused and to appear in contexts in which ‘a’ (which is not incompatible with specific reference) would be felicitous. Another prediction is that ‘the’ (and ‘a’) should be omitted in a significant proportion of obligatory contexts throughout the stages of learning at which the learner follows the relevance-theoretic production strategy and the Ø-article-as-default strategy.

Existing research provides evidence of the joint effects of these two influences which pull the L2 learner in opposite directions. The negative transfer effect is most evident in the initial stages of learning characterised by complete absence of articles, but it remains rather significant even after eight years of learning (final year secondary school students omit ‘the’ in over 20% and ‘a/an’ in over 30% of obligatory contexts). These data suggest that the transfer effect is rather persistent. The proportion of errors involving the use of ‘the’ where ‘a/an’ would be more appropriate suggests that even fairly advanced learners tend to assume that ‘particular reference’ is the (dominant) meaning of ‘the’. Trenkić’s (2002: 122-3) data show that ‘the’ appears in indefinite contexts in the four groups of learners that she collected data from. Secondary school students (in their seventh years of learning English) used ‘the’ in over 30% of indefinite contexts. Moreover, learners’ improvement seems to be very gradual. Thus, pre-final university students who have studied English for eleven years still substitute ‘the’ for ‘a/an’ in almost 20% of indefinite contexts, and even in their final year of university studies, this figure is somewhere between 10% and 15%. If ‘particular reference’ is the learners’ only or dominant meaning of ‘the’ and if their communicative behaviour is guided by the relevance-driven production strategy, then we ought to expect a significant percentage of errors where ‘the’ is substituted for ‘a/an’, especially in contexts in which ‘a/an’ would indicate particular reference. More research is needed to test this prediction.

Some examples of substitution (taken from data I collected from English language examination scripts by L2 learners, native speakers of Croatian, which does not differ from Serbian in any respects pertinent to the aspects of L2 learning discussed here) seem to confirm this view. Others point to the significance of transfer. Consider (8) and (9):

(10) First of all, Brilton in the UK is a small rural town with **the** population around 2230 in 1992, …

(11) On the right side near the sitting-room is a small bedroom with the small bed, …

As ‘Brilton’ is the name of a particular town, the NP ‘population’ takes a particular referent: the set of all people who live in ‘Brilton’. The use of the definite article in ‘the small bed’ in (11) is also consistent with the ‘particular reference’ semantics of ‘the’: The bed in question is the only one in the room, it is the one that belongs in that room, and is, in this sense, specific or particular. The grammatical and appropriate use of the indefinite article (‘a small bedroom’) is perhaps more puzzling. I think it may be due to transfer from L1, because in Croatian the indefiniteness would need to be indicated explicitly in this context by the use of the numeral ‘one’ (in the feminine singular nominative form ‘jedna’), to pre-empt the interpretation on which the bedroom in question is the only one in the house. It seems reasonable to assume that the definite article is incorrectly used in ‘the small bed’, not only because the bed is the only one in the room, and is in this sense particular, but also because in L1 the indefiniteness of the NP would not need to be indicated explicitly. So, negative transfer from L1 could affect performance in L2 in this way too (in addition to the Ø-article-as-default strategy). These examples suggest that it may well be worth investigating to what extent L2 learners tend to use ‘a/an’ only when it appears as the translation equivalent of the numeral ‘jedan’ (‘one’), and to what extent their use of the definite article is informed by the ‘particular reference’ hypothesis about its meaning. This idea possibly receives further support from examples like (12):

(12) The floor of my bedroom is pink. In the middle of the house is [the] dinning-room. There is [a] round black table surrounded by six black chairs. In the corner is [a] big shelf full of china glasses and plates. On the white wall is one picture witch I made today. On the right side of the house is [the] library. There are very big book-shelves full of books.

[square brackets indicate omitted articles]

The indefinite article is not used at all in this example (but note the numeral in 'one picture' which suggests transfer from L1). The use of 'the' in 'The floor of my bedroom', 'the middle of the house', 'the right side of the house' may be influenced by the partitive construction as a linguistic, explicit, indication of particular reference and learned as an obligatory context. The omission of 'the' in 'dining room' and 'library' could be accounted for in terms of the Ø-article-as-default strategy, evidenced by the complete absence of the indefinite article in L2. Although the partitive relation is not explicitly indicated in 'the corner' and 'the white wall', it is highly salient: 'the corner' is 'the corner of the room' and 'the white wall' is the white wall of the room. Other learners' performance supports the view that they largely rely on idiosyncratic strategies in using 'the'. Consider (13):

(13) I am staying in [a] friend's new house. [the] House is big and it is in the wood. There are two rooms, a kitchen, living room and bathroom in that house. [the]Living room is large and there are two sofas. There is [a] big carpet on the floor. On the walls there are many shelves with books. The kitchen is not very big. There are many pictures on the walls. The bedroom is nice and comfortable. There are two chairs, a bed and one big wardrobe. There is also a TV set. [the]

Landscape around the house is beautiful. There are many trees and grass around the house. There is [a] table and chairs behind the house. There is [a] garden around the house. Not very far, about 2 km of [the] house is the [a] lake and we go to swim there.

The omission the indefinite article in (13) could be accounted for by the Ø-article-as-default-option strategy. Assuming that the learner also follows the RT driven production strategy, their use of 'the' could be seen as determined by an idiosyncratic way of deciding how salient the particular reference meaning of the definite NP is. It would appear that the local context for the use of 'the' is determined in terms of linear closeness: if the NP is co-referential with an NP in the immediately preceding sentence, 'the' is not used (possibly because particular reference is sufficiently salient in the context). This might account for 'House …' instead of 'The house …', 'Living-room …' instead of 'The living-room …', and '2 km of house' instead of '2 km of the house'. The correct use of 'the' in other contexts follows from the RT production procedure and the Ø-article-as-default-option strategy.

These observations on just a few isolated examples do not demonstrate anything conclusively, but they do suggest that the patterns of the use of 'the' by L2 learners are largely predictable on the basis of a few assumptions about the role of pragmatic procedures, transfer from L1 and differing degrees of accessibility to consciousness of particular aspects of the procedure encoded by 'the'. Moreover, these predictions seem to me to allow naturally for individual variation in learners' use of 'the' which are idiosyncratic to them. Further empirical research is needed. Clearly, the tentative conclusions presented in this paper should be evaluated in the light of developmental data collected specifically for this purpose. Another line of enquiry concerns the role of pragmatic procedures in L2 learning in general, and performance on set tasks, in particular. The discussion presented in this paper takes their role for granted, but this decision may not be entirely justified. Within the framework of RT human communication is seen as a process of interpreting evidence of intentions in context, not as a process of encoding and decoding messages. Therefore, the assumption that learners' performance in L2 (especially on set tasks) is guided by pragmatic procedures is far from self-evident. We can be reasonably sure that L2 learners are deliberately (i.e. consciously) trying to master the language code and to demonstrate that knowledge when performing set tasks. But how confident can we be that communicative effectiveness is equally important to them in this sort of setting? Within RT the cognitive mechanisms of human communication are characterized as modular, i.e. as mandatory, automatic and fast. This suggests that the deliberate production of ostensive stimuli for whatever purpose will be influenced by pragmatic competence, but, again, more research is much needed.

V Conclusion

Second language acquisition is a process open to many influences, and yet research on 'the' in L2 learning reveals a clear pattern of acquisition, which appears to result from systematic effects of a few fairly general interacting factors. In this paper I have tried to show how the framework of RT and some fairly uncontroversial assumptions about transfer from L1 provide the basis for a natural explanation of the generally observed developmental trends in the learning of 'the' by learners of English whose L1 does not have an article system. I have also tried to show that this approach has clear implications for future research and language teaching/learning.

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