Morphological learning in spontaneous conversation of L2 Estonian

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The paper adopts an interactional linguistics approach to the study of second language morphology. This paper investigates both the spontaneous production of morphological forms as well as the interactional role of inflectional morphology as a learning focus and the potential of Uralic languages to contribute to second language research (Suni, 2012).

Background

Morphological Underspecification Hypothesis (e.g., McCarthy, 2012) predicts that L2 learners produce underspecified forms, including those considered unmarked. In the development, saliency, complexity, and frequency, possibly L1 as well as other factors, incl. interactional and socio-cognitive may have a role in development (Gor & Cook, 2010; Larsen-Freeman, 2010). Estonian differs from other languages where morphology learning has been studied in the extent to which it combines agglutination, inflection and analytic forms. Stem changes are part of the inflectional system where “more than one ‘principal part’ may be required to determine the inflectional paradigm of a lexeme” (Blevins 2004: 53). This paper demonstrates how these characteristics result in special interactional practices, observed in L2 (semi) instructional settings.

Data and Method

The study uses spontaneous production data from conversation-for-learning (Kasper & Kim, 2015) setting, which combines language pedagogy as well as mundane conversation. The data come from a 20-hour audio-recorded corpus of multi-party talk between American L2 learners of Estonian, their L1-speaking instructor and other L1 speakers. L1s of the learners are English and in case of one participant, Korean. The data were transcribed and analyzed following Conversation Analytical conventions, with the linguistic focus on morphological repair (self- and other repair, including morphological searches, e.g., Kurhila, 2006). The analysis centered on cases where inflectional morphology is attended to by the participants, i.e., where it is a learning or teaching focus.

Analysis & Results

The L2 speakers used the following target-language specific practices of “doing morphology” (Kurhila, 2006): 1) “base-form recital-drill” insertions, 2) accenting the normally unaccented case suffix, 3) isolating verb tense/agreement suffixes as meaningful units in searches, 4) treating inflections as turn-constructional units.

The practice of “doing morphology” is a display of learning behavior allowing an insight into the cognitive states of L2 learners (cf. Mori & Hasegawa, 2009) and their emergent grammar, and simultaneously a social practice, an interactional and interpersonal resource. Collaborative “doing morphology” by learners and instructor provided the scaffolding for learner talk but also served as listener feedback and alignment marker. Additionally, the repair sequences featured
heightened attention to the lexical items involved, thus enabling peripheral participants to join in the talk by providing them with ready-made linguistic material.

Interpersonal concerns, such as presenting oneself or a co-participant as a “good language learner,” “competent conversationalist,” “cultural expert” or “institutional moderator” motivated L2 speakers’ orientation to morphology and included displays of learner autonomy as they pursued self-defined learning goals. Inflectional affixes not only emerged as demonstrable learning objects but were afforded indexical value as markers of learning or teaching activity within the conversational context.

The learners’ repairs oriented primarily to case suffixes, verbal agreement and tense suffixes but additionally also stem changes. The form searches occasionally treated verbal inflections as turn-constructional units that were searched for, proffered and repeated similarly to lexical items (not commonly observed in L1 speech, cf. Fox et al. 2017).

The paper makes tentative observations concerning morphological production and development based on spontaneous interaction data from a small number of learners, and needs to be followed up by further research. The paper contributes to the study of second-language morphological learning, study of second language interaction in various learning settings and study of Estonian as a target language.

References


