Binding of reflexives in second language acquisition: The relevance of finiteness morphology

One important finding and longstanding generalization in the research on binding of reflexives in second language acquisition (SLA) of English is that SLA learners more readily allow for non-local binding across a non-finite clause than across a finite clause. That is, they are typically more willing to allow for the coreference of *himself* and *George* in 1a than *herself* and *Helen* in 2a. This is known as the “tense-infinitive asymmetry” in SLA reflexive binding and is even attested in SLA of other languages, e.g. Norwegian (cf. Busted, forthcoming). Several attempts have been made to explain this observation, by means of syntactic theories and from more semantic views.

In this paper we take as our point of departure the study on binding of reflexives by Japanese SLA learners of English reported in Matsumura (2007). The experiments in this study were set up so as to reveal the exact scope of the tense-infinitive asymmetry, and Matsumura concludes that the explanation for this asymmetry must be sought, not in syntax, as is rather common, but in semantics. Indeed, the asymmetry is caused by the SLA informants being sensitive to the degree of factivity expressed by the embedding and embedded predicates involved in depicting the situation described by a particular embedding configuration, the author argues. By varying the degree of factivity expressed by the predicates in the individual sentences presented to informants, the author claims to achieve interpretational differences reflected by the willingness of informants to violate the otherwise rather strict locality requirement of reflexives in the English target language (cf. the examples in 1ab versus the examples in 2ab).

In our talk, we examine closely the individual test sentences in Matsumura’s study and show that the alleged variation in degree of factivity is not the only relevant difference in these sentences. In fact, the varying degree of factivity, as the author defines it, strictly and in fact quite strikingly correlates with the occurrence and combination of complementizers, auxiliaries and main verbs in these English sentences. Thus, the author ignores and fails to exclude potentially very important variables which are basically syntactic, not semantic, in nature.

To explain the patterns attested by Matsumura, we exploit the finiteness theory of Eide (2008, 2009ab) who claims that the morphological finiteness feature in modern English is unevenly distributed across main verbs and auxiliaries, such that main verbs do not productively show finiteness distinctions, unlike the auxiliaries *have* and *be*. Modals and auxiliary *do* are always finite, with no nonfinite forms. In addition to Eide’s finiteness generalizations, we will use the theory of Nordström (2010), who argues that the subordinators *IF* and *THAT* in Germanic languages are syntactic expressions of subjunctive and indicative moods, respectively. Combining these theories, we reject Matsumura’s claim that SLA learners prevailingly use semantic cues in deciding the relevant locality binding domain of reflexives. Instead, we will build a case that the attested cues are, in fact, all syntactic.
Examples (from Matsumura 2007: 332).

1. a. George wants the manager to praise himself.
   b. Patti wants Judy to talk about herself to the manager.

2. a. Helen knows that her mother always sees herself on television.
   b. Jim knows that Bill is blaming himself.

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