

ASYMMETRIC FORM-MEANING MAPPINGS IN L2 ACQUISITION OF CHINESE SENTENCE-FINAL PARTICLES *BA*

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates to what extent English-speaking learners of L2 Chinese can establish form and meaning connections in their L2 acquisition of the Chinese sentence-final question particle *ba* (*ba_q*) and suggestion particle *ba* (*ba_s*). As features of the *ba_q* and the *ba_s* in Chinese are configured differently in English, successful acquisition of *ba_q* and *ba_s* by English speakers requires reconfigurations. An acceptability judgment task, a dialogue completion task, a sentence assembly task, and a translation task were adopted in the study. Results obtained from 58 English-speaking learners of Chinese (at intermediate and advanced levels) show that learners do not have much difficulty in reconfiguring features attached to the *ba_s* and the form-meaning connections are established early and easily. In contrast, they show great difficulty in reconfiguring features on the *ba_q*. It is argued that the reconfiguration of features is a prerequisite for the successful form-meaning mapping in L2 grammars and that the ‘one-to-many’ form-meaning mapping imposes great difficulties for L2 learners.

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KEYWORDS

Sentence-final particle Form-meaning mapping Syntactic and discourse features English-speakers' L2 Chinese

1. INTRODUCTION

It has long been the interest of second language (L2) research to investigate how the meanings are connected to the forms in a language to facilitate the more efficient acquisition of the language (VanPatten et al. 2004; DeKeyser 2005; Cintrón-Valentín and Ellis 2016; among others). In acquiring a language, learners aim to understand and convey thoughts (i.e., meaning) through certain linguistic means (i.e., form). L2 studies concerning the form and meaning connections found the L1 knowledge and the L2 input all contribute to the form-meaning establishment (Salaberry 2008; Slabakova 2010; Zhao and MacWhinney 2018). It is also argued in the linguistic literature (Jackendoff 2002; Chomsky 2005) that all lexical items can be divided into primitive features and that features are encoded in the lexicon prior to any syntactic operation. With these advances in linguistic theories, L2 acquisition has entered an era of features. Features as building blocks of syntax have played an important role in L2 research. It is widely accepted in L2 research that cross-linguistic variations actually lie in the difference between feature sets and their configurations (Hawkins 2005). It seems no longer viable to study the circumstances of L2 acquisition from the general parameter re-setting perspective of whether the functional category in question has been acquired or not. A major inquiry in L2 research has shifted to discussion of feature availability as well as feature matching and (re-)assembly (Lardiere 2009a, 2009b). On the basis of recent linguistic and Language acquisition advances, this article reports on an empirical study examining whether learners can establish the form-meaning mapping via feature reconfiguration in L2 acquisition of Chinese sentence-final particles (henceforth, SFPs). SFPs in Chinese, which appear at the end of sentences, instantiate different projections in the CP domain (Paul 2009, 2014, 2015). Of the various SFPs, the question SFP *ba* 吧 (*ba_q* hereafter) and the suggestion SFP *ba* 吧 (*ba_s* hereafter)¹, which are analyzed as carrying syntactic and discourse features, are the focus of our investigation of L2 Chinese reported in this article.

汉语句末助词“吧” 在二语习得中的形式-语义映射的非对称性

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摘要

本研究对母语为英语的汉语学习者在习得汉语句末问句助词“吧”(吧_q)和建议助词“吧”(吧_s)时建立形式和语义的联系进行了探究。由于 吧_q 和 吧_s 的特征在英语中的配置表现与汉语不同,对这些特征的成功习得需要学习者进行重新配置。研究采用了可接受性判断测试、对话补全、句子组装以及翻译等任务。来自58名母语为英语的汉语学习者(分为中级和高级水平)的结果显示,学习者对 吧_s 的特征的重新装配不存在问题,并且较早、较容易地建立了形式-语义之间的联系。相反,学习者对重新配置 吧_q 的特征存在非常大的困难。因此,本研究认为在二语语法中,特征的重新配置是成功建立形式-语义映射的前提,同时,“一对多”的形式-语义映射对二语学习者产生相对更大的困难。

关键词

句末助词 形式-语义映射 句法和语篇特征 英语母语者

The Chinese University of Hong Kong