

Variability in the Second language learners' acquisition of verb morphology by Shona speakers of English: a developmental analysis.

Muzi Mlambo

Email: muzimlambo@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article seeks to make a developmental study of variability in the acquisition of verb morphology by second language (L2) pupils who learn at an English input impoverished school where variability in learner language is often presumed to be quite extensive. By studying variability in such settings, it is hoped that not only will its non-variability nature be made quite explicit, but also, we can gain considerable insights into the nature of the process of second language acquisition (SLA) itself. Most studies in variability have been product oriented and cross – sectional because they focus on the study of linguistic features at particular points in time. This study differs from those product oriented studies because it is process oriented and examines linguistic phenomena not just at particular points in time but also, overtime. The study of variability also enables us to have a fuller understanding of both learner internal mechanisms as well as the inner logic for the language learners' grammar.

Keywords: *Variability, systematic, vertical, horizontal.*

Introduction

This article makes a developmental study of variability in the acquisition of verb morphology by second language (L2) pupils who learn at an English input impoverished setting where variability in learner language is presumed to be extensive. And by studying verb morphology in such settings, not only will non- systematic variability be made explicit but also, we can gain considerable insights not only into the nature of the process of second language (SLA) itself, but also, as Lantolf (1995:16) puts it, insights into the truth about SLA. Most studies in variability appear to be product oriented and

cross – sectional because they focus on the study of the study of linguistic features at particular points in time. However, this study differs from those product oriented studies because it examines linguistic phenomena not just at particular points in time but also, overtime.

The study of variability is important in several ways. For example, Andersen (1989:46) has suggested ‘...dealing with variation in second language acquisition is not a marginal pursuit but an obligatory part of second language acquisition research itself.’ Furthermore, Hatch (1980: 177) as well as Verpoor, Lawie and Van Dijk (2008) have underscored the importance of variation when they argue that the main idea behind linguistic analysis in second language is to discover systematicity in language and then formulate a framework for analysis that will capture that systematicity. The study of variability provides invaluable insights into the developmental dynamics of the second language learning process.

The study will focus on verbs because they are central elements in sentence structure as heads of verb phrases. Furthermore, Leech and Short (1981: 205) suggest that since verbs occur quite frequently in texts, from a methodological view point, studying them is quite revealing and profitable.

Theoretical Approaches

Variability

The language of learners is characterized by various forms of variability. Variability is a term which is used to explain the various changes that occur to learner language as the learner proceeds along the language learning continuum. As Little (1984:81) has correctly observed, language learners do not switch abruptly from using a language rule incorrectly all the time in one interview to using the same rule correctly all the time in another interview. Researchers have suggested that there are two broad models from which the concept of variability is derived. There is the homogeneous competence model

which contends that all variability is non – systematic and the heterogeneous competence model which contends that variability is both systematic and unsystematic. Variability is systematic if changes that occur to learner language occur in a predictable order depending on the context. On the other hand, Ellis (1985) and (2008) also suggests that variability is non – systematic if learner language changes haphazardly. There are two broad categories on non – systematic variability, free variability and performance variability. Free variability occurs when the learner uses various competing linguistic forms to express the same meaning whilst performance variability occurs when the learner fails to live up to his competence due to performance variables such as fatigue, depression and excitement. Huebner (1979) cited in Mclaughlin (1987:71) and Ortega (2010) have suggested that although the learner’s interlanguage appears chaotic, underneath it is systematic.

Variability is systematic when the use of certain linguistic rules which function as variants can become predictable depending on the context. On the other hand, variability can also be non-systematic when the language user employs linguistic rules or features haphazardly. One of the most interesting distinctions about variability and which is particularly relevant to this study is one that exists between horizontal and vertical variability. Horizontal variability refers to variability, systematic or non-systematic, that occurs at a particular point in time, whilst vertical variability is one that occurs over time.

Grotjahn (1983:235) has observed that variability can be inter – individual i.e. variability that occurs across individuals as well as intra-individual i.e. variability that occurs within groups of individuals. Andersen (1989) as well as Fasold and Preston (2007) consider both systematic and non-systematic variability as central to second language research. However, they seem to consider the study of systematic variability as more central than the study of non – systematic variability. Evidence for that is derived from the fact that they emphasize that whilst it is obligatory for all second language acquisition researchers to know the difference between systematic and non-systematic variability, it is particularly important for them to be able to explain how systematic variability occurs. Furthermore, Andersen, has suggested that, although it does not mean that all variation

can be reduced to invariance several forms of variation can be reduced to invariance because most variation is, in fact, surface variation.

'Development' in linguistic analysis

Development can mean two things. It can mean either the manner in which rules of the language are added to the learner's linguistic system or how the learner's linguistic system is made to become more complex. Hanks (2009) has suggested that 'development' can also be synonymous with 'acquisition' and 'learning'. Perhaps the most elaborate distinction between 'acquisition' and 'learning' is one that is made by Krashen (1985) which, perhaps is the single most important linguistic exposition which has largely been responsible for his fame in linguistic circles. Krashen argues that language acquisition is a process whereby linguistic input is obtained by the learner subconsciously and naturalistically. However, when language is 'learnt' input is obtained via conscious learning of linguistic input from the teacher in a classroom situation. Other linguists e.g. Frawley and Lantolf (1985:20), Schinke – Llano (1993:123) and Machado de Almeida (2000:335) have argued that development can be explained in terms of the basic principles of Vygotskian psycholinguistics, which operate on the premise that linguistic facts arise, not as a result of isolated events or products but as a result of other linguistic facts that have occurred earlier. A linguistic study of features overtime constitutes a developmental study of those linguistic features.

Product / Process Research

Classroom second – language development is a process if second – language data shows a continuous pattern of development over a selected period of time. This is why longitudinal studies, which are often product oriented are more revealing than cross-sectional studies which are product - oriented. Classroom second language development research becomes product – oriented when isolated learner utterances are examined without reference to the developmental state to which they belong.

What is crucial in classroom second – language development research, is not necessarily learner utterances as produced at a particular point in time but the actual changes that occur along the developmental continuum. Second language development research has a diachronic rather than a synchronic focus Gass and Mackey (2000) have argued that research methodologies are moving away from a focus on mainly product oriented studies to process oriented studies. Following Gass and Mackey therefore this study is largely process – oriented, even though some learner utterances may be described in isolation .

Subjects, Data and Framework

Subjects for the study are grade 5 pupils from an English input acquisition poor African township of Mbare which is associated with poverty and unemployment. Pupils and teachers are entirely L2 speakers of English who almost never use English in and out of the classroom. There are hardly any libraries here and the learning facilities are poor and inadequate. Naturalistic data was recorded using a tape recorder for about 10 months. Pupils took turns to discuss various topics often selected by the researcher. Each recording period was about 30 minutes. After recording, data was transcribed and analyzed in order to ascertain the nature of the variability that characterize the learner's progress along the developmental continuum. In order to facilitate the analysis of the data, I decided that each day that the data was collected constitute a single Time. If for example, data was collected on January 1, the Time will be assigned the label 1/1 or Time 1/1, where the first 1 represents the day of the month and the second representing the month of the year. The actual time label would be Time 1/1. So, if for example, data was collected on 3 March the label will simply be Time 3/3.

Analysis and discussion: Variability in verb acquisition

In this study I argue that, as learners proceed along the developmental continuum, the acquisition process is characterized by systematic and non-systematic variability. The researcher will also argue that the analysis which will be essentially process rather than

product oriented will involve a description of learner language at various points in time as well as over time. The analysis is based on table 1 where letters a to h represent changes that occur to learner language. The letters do not have a particular linguistic significance but are meant for easy reference to the activities and processes. The major question which is addressed here is, ‘What exactly happens along the developmental continuum with particular reference to certain verbs as L2 learner’s progress towards target language competence’. I will focus on the following verbs: like, drink, came, went, play, saw, tell, give, work, sing and eat because it is their frequent occurrence in several texts that assists us in understanding precisely how variability operates.

a	Realized correctly each time it occurs.
b	Realized correctly and incorrectly within same sentence.
c	Realized correctly and incorrectly within same text.
d	Realized correctly and immediately correctly in same sentence.
e	Realized incorrectly each time it occurs.
f	Realized incorrectly but later correctly in a different passage.
g	Realized incorrectly more than once in same passage.
h	Realized incorrectly more than once in same sentence.

Table 1: Types of systematic and non – systematic variability

In table 1, b, c, d and h represent changes to verbs that occur at particular points in time. This has been described as horizontal variability, whilst a, e and f which represent changes that occur over a period of time has been referred to as vertical variability. The study will focus first on those groups of verbs represented at a, c, d, and h. What is in table 1 is that learner language is characterized by both systematic and non-systematic variability. For example, at (b) in table 1, the developmental process is characterized by verbs that are accurately realized in the same sentence. For, example, at Time 27/6 Tamuka says:

1. I wash my face and drank...drink tea.

The verb drank is realized correctly because it is used to refer to a past event. But the verb drink that immediately follows has been inaccurately deployed. This constitutes some form of indeterminacy because Tamuka is not certain whether or not he should use the past or the present form. A phenomenon that is most interesting is one that involves a peculiar form of systematic horizontal variability where a verb gets accurately deployed in the text, but the same verb gets redeployed inaccurately in the same text the rest of the time. What is interesting is that it is the accurately realized verb that occurs first almost all the time and not vice versa. The accurately realized verb is in past form. And its accurate deployment almost all the time signals that somewhere in the vicinity the same verb will recur inaccurately. Table 2 which is an expansion of part of table 1 attempts to capture the systematic horizontal variability that occurs at c in table 1. It is a table that explains events that are taking place in another table. In the first column, the names of pupils are written, followed by column with a past tense heading to indicate that the verb is used in the past form. Below the heading, there are a number of ticks which indicate that the verb has been realized correctly. On the right hand side, there is a column with the heading present to show that verbs under it are used in the present. Under this heading, are a number of crosses to show that the verbs have been deployed incorrectly. The next column after the present column is one that shows the dates on which the data was collected. Lastly, on the right, the sentences in which the verbs occur are presented. The verbs that are focused on here are come, go, play, and sing. In table 2 the verbs in question have been underlined.

Name	Past	Present	Times	Sentences
Kinopa	√	X	7/7	(a) I <u>came</u> to school. (b) The bell rings and we <u>come</u> back into the classroom.
Jane	√	X	28/10	(a) Last week I <u>went</u> to play. (b) I <u>go</u> to church
Mona	√	X	3/6	(a) After eight days I <u>went</u> to Chivhu. (b) I <u>go</u> to stores to buy Something to eat.
Fura	√	X	3/6	(a) Monday we <u>played</u> lot of games. (b) If we <u>play</u> my friend go her at home.
Tamuka	√	X	4/11	(a) Then Rebelta <u>sang</u> a song. (b) He said he <u>sing</u> a song 'Black and White'.
Tiki	√	X	30/6	(a) I <u>went</u> to five miles. (b) He <u>go</u> home.

Table 2: Systematic horizontal variability in verb use.

In table 2, the verb in the first sentence at each Time has been realized accurately while the one that occurs in the second sentence in the same text is inaccurately deployed. For example, at Time 7/7 Kinopa says:

2. I came back to school.

Because she is referring to past event, the verb came can be said to have been accurately realized. But in the same text she says:

3. The bell rings we come back into the classroom.

Grammatically, the sentence appears correct, but from the context, we know that she is referring to a past event and that in fact, she is not aware that she is violating the rules of standard English. She uses the verb come and came interchangeably or indeterminately. At Times 3/6, Fura uses the verb played in the same manner as described above. The same pattern in the use of verbs is what we see at Time 3/6, Time 4/11 and Time 30/6 for Mona, Tamuka and Tiki respectively. Such a deployment of verbs was so common that I decided to represent it diagrammatically as indicated in table 2.

However, to return to table 1, at (d) some verbs are realized inaccurately as well as accurately in the same sentence. For example, the verb give is realized inaccurately while the verb gave is realized correctly.

4. I give money and he gave me bread.

At this point, the focus of the analysis shifts to a, e and f which represent vertical variability i.e. changes to verbs that occur over time. The analysis will focus on the verbs like, wash and eat. In table 1 (a) represents verbs which are deployed accurately each time they occur in sentences and in texts. Most of such verbs available in the data are those that are used in the present form. For example, Fura realizes the verb like correctly at Times 3/3, 29/7 and 30/9 as shown in the following sentences:

5. A film I like is Macgyver.
6. I like to eat bananas.
7. I like to play with my friends.

At (e) this form of variability has been referred to as systematic vertical variability because some verbs are realized incorrectly by some learners each time they are deployed. For example, at Time 3/6/ where Tamuka is narrating his holiday experiences, he deploys the verb wash as in (8) in the present habitual instead of the past form:

8. In the morning I wash my face.

And at Time 27/6 Tamuka is telling us about a party he attended and he says:

9. I wake up and was my body.

Out of context sentence (8) like sentence (9) does not appear to be ungrammatical but when put in context, it becomes clear that it is explicitly ungrammatical. More on this later. And lastly, at (f) some verbs are realized incorrectly but correctly at a later Time. For instance, at Time 3/6 Fura uses the verb eat in the present rather than in the past but at Times 28/10 the correct form ate is realized.

It is important to stress that although some sentences such as (3) (8) and (9) look like instances in which the conversational historic present tense is used, this, in fact, is not the case. Before I elaborate on this issue, it may be helpful to make a brief description of how the conversational historic present tense is used. Leech and Svartvik (1992:69) argue that the ‘historic present is used in narrative discourse to describe events vividly as if they are happening in our presence. The excerpt below, according to Milroy (1987:55) illustrates how the Conversational historic present is used:

...So the woman went to sleep – found nothing, nothing missing,
so she went to sleep and locked the door and the next morning,
she gets up, same routine, comes back at the end of the day, the
doors’ open again. So you know, twice is a little too much.

(Milroy 1987 : 55)

In the text above, the verbs gets, comes, and is are used in the historic present tense. However, the pupils for this study use verbs in sentences such as (3), (8) and (9) not in ‘historic present’, but inaccurately. In order to further illustrate this claim, it is important to consider the excerpts below, in which Fura is describing his holiday experiences, a film he has watched and the party he has attended respectively:

(a) My grandmother visit me...and she give me money...

And my brother say, come...

(b) Mcgyver help people and Macgyver give people money

And he kills people.

(c) Sister cook, cooking rice and chicken and buy some cakes

And then eat rice.

In the three excerpts above, the regular verbs help, visit and cook as well as the irregular verbs give, buy and eat have obviously been used inaccurately even if they are analyzed according to standard English rules that pertain to the correct use of the Conversational Historic Present. This is so because the morpheme /-s/, which is obligatory in the verbs above, has not been used. Some scholars, such as Godfrey (1980:94), have even suggested that speakers should not necessarily switch haphazardly from one tense to another. When such switches become necessary, they need to be executed systematically:

It is not the case, however, that speakers can switch indiscriminately from one tense to another, they must obey discourse level constraints on tense continuity if their production is to be acceptable...A contextual rule states that once initiated, the ongoing tense cannot be interrupted without appropriate signaling... Once a tense is used the tense will continue until the topic with which it is associated is exhausted. (Godfrey 1980:94)

Godfrey has also argued that the change in verb form is often signaled by time adverbial. In Milroy's text cited above, the change from past to historic present tense form is signaled by the time adverbial, next morning. But in Fura's texts, such linguistic devices are absent.

It therefore appears reasonable to suggest that, it may be the case that these learners acquire unmarked verb forms before they acquire marked ones, a point Ellis (1992:15) makes clear when he argues, 'the first verb structure learners acquire is the simple form'. And, as we can see from the texts above, Fura's use of the verbs cook and cooking instead of cooked suggests that he is clearly ignorant of the rules of Standard English pertaining to verb use. Further evidence to suggest that these learners lack competence in verb use, may be inferred from the observation that these learners proceed from 'not

knowing' 'to knowing' and that there is no evidence to suggest that the learners are making a deliberate attempt to use historic present tense forms. The argument above is reinforced by Frawley and Lantolf (1985) who have argued:

It is also recognized that when beginning second language learners engage in narrative discourse, they do not typically make use of tense distinctions...
(Frawley and Lantolf 1985).

It is this uniqueness of learner language, as Tarone and, Swerzbin (2009) maintain, that has fascinated second language acquisition researchers for a long time.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to make a developmental study of variability in the acquisition of verb morphology by ten year second language pupils. I have argued that there appears to be some justification in the assertion by McLaughlin (1987:71) that learner's interlanguage appears chaotic but underneath it is systematic. I have suggested that variability in contexts where English input is restricted is more no-systematic than it is systematic. I have also observed that the learner's developmental process is characterized by both vertical and horizontal variability but that it is vertical variability which is more relevant to this study because it explains 'development' rather than horizontal variability which explains variability at particular points in time. It has been argued that, as Grotjahn (1983:235) also observes, variability is inter-individual (within groups) as well as intra – individual (within individuals) and that both forms can contribute to 'development' particularly if they are 'vertical'.

References

Alright ,D and Hanks, J. (2009). *The Developing Language Learning: An Introduction to Explanatory Practice*. Basingstoke. Palgrave: MacMillan.

- Andersen, R. (1989). The theoretical status of variation in interlanguage development. In S.M. Gass, C. Madden B.P. Preston and L. Selinker (eds), Variation in Second Language Acquisition. Psycholinguistic Issues. 47 – 60. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Cook, V. (2008). *Second Language Learning and Teaching* London: Hodder Arnold.
- Ellis, R.(1984). *Classroom Second Language Development*. Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (1985). Sources of variability in interlanguage. *Applied Linguistics* 6/2. 131-181.
- Ellis, R. (1989). Sources of intra-learner variability in Language use and their relationship to second language acquisition. In S.M. Gass C, Madden, B.P. Preston and L. Selinker (eds), *Variation in second language acquisition*. Psycholinguistic Issues. 13-22 Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Ellis, R. (2008). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition* .Oxford: University Press.
- Fasold,R. and Preston, D. (2007). The Psycholinguistic Unity of inherent variability. Old Occam Whips out his razor. In R. Bayley and C. Lucas (Eds.) *Sociolinguistic variation: Theory, methods and applications* (45 – 69) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Frawley, W. and Lantolf, J. (1985). Second language discourse: a vygotskyan perspective. *Applied Linguistics* 6/1. 19-44.
- Gass S. and Mackey, A. (2000). *Stimulated Recall Methodology in Second Language Research*. New Jersey : Mahwah, N.J. Lawrance Erlbaum Associates.
- Godfrey, D.L. (1980). A discourse analysis of tense in adult ESL monologues. In D. Larsen – Freeman (ed). *Discourse Analysis in Second Language Research*. 92 – 110 Rowley M.A: Newbury House Publishers.
- Grotjahn, R. (1983). On the use of quantitative methods in the study of interlanguage. *Applied Linguistics*. 4/3 235 – 241.
- Hatch, E. (1980). Second Language acquisition – avoiding the question. In Felix (ed) (1980a).
- Krashen, S. (1985). *The Input Hypothesis*. London: Longman.
- Lantolf, J.P. (1995). *Second Language acquisition theory building*. Clevedon. Multilingual Newbury House.
- Leech, G. Short, M.H. (1981). *Style in Fiction: A linguistic Introduction to English Fiction Prose* Harlow: Longman.

- Littlewood, W. (1984). *Foreign and Second Language Learning: Language acquisition Research and its Implications for the classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Machado de Almeda, A. (2000). A vygotskian approach to evaluation in foreign language learning contexts 54/4. 335-344.
- Mclaughlin, B. (1987). Theories of Second Language Learning. Kent: Edward Arnold.
- Milroy, L. (1987). *Observing and analyzing natural language: a critical account of a sociolinguistic method*. Basil Blackwell.
- Ortega, L. (2010) *Understanding Second Language Acquisition. Critical concepts in Linguistics*. London: Routledge.
- Schinke – Llano, L. (1993). On the value of a vygotskian framework for SLA theory. A view of research. *Language Learning* 43/1 121-129
- Tarone, E. (2009). A Sociolinguistic perspective on interaction in second language acquisition. In A. Mackey and C. Polio (Eds.) *Multiple Perspectives on Interaction: Second Language Research in Honour of Susan M. Gass*. New York: Routledge.
- Tarone, E. and Swierzbin, L. (2009) *Exploring Learner Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Verspoor, M. Lowie, M. and Van Dijk, M. (2008). Variability in second language development from a dynamic systems perspective. Modern Language Journal. Vol 2. 214 – 231.