

ENGLISH WORD ORDER, ERROR ANALYSIS AND PEDAGOGICAL SOLUTIONS

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The following discussion is based on a corpus of written errors collected from university students of English in Poznań in their first and final years of study. Advanced errors were also collected from recently graduated members of staff. English word order, considered as a general problem, comes high on the list of common errors in advanced students and lower on a corresponding list for first year students. This contrasts with the use of the article which is a major problem regardless of level. The article is of course needed a great deal even in early stages of learning whereas word order increases as a problem with the growing length and complexity of sentences typical of more advanced stages. A Polish student is naturally reluctant to forsake the freer word order of his native language and especially when the restrictions in the target language are redundant or inconvenient as will be shown later.

Three problems will be discussed here. The first one concerns the placement of adverbials within the sentence and the second two concern the premodification of head nouns. Starting from such elementary sentences as:

1. The policeman hit the robber.

the learner progresses to sentences with adverbials such as:

2. The policeman hit the robber *violently*/*with a stick*/*on the head* etc., and sentences with premodified nouns such as:

3. The *fat* policeman hit the *nasty little* robber etc.

In order to produce acceptable English sentences the learner needs to know the restrictions placed on word ordering and in particular certain areas within the sentence where no extra words may be placed or at least where an extra word would create a feeling of clumsiness in the native speaker.

The first problem concerns the separation of verb and direct object in English. Normally this space is inviolable. In 2. the addition of any of the adverbials

would not be permissible if it separated the transitive verb *hit* and its direct object as in:

4. *The policeman hit violently the robber.

Yet this type of order is typical of Polish as in the following examples:

5. Jem codziennie śniadanie.

6. Tomek kocha namiętnie Ewę.

Congruent translations (Marton 1968) of 5 and 6 would be unacceptable. This restriction on English word order is clearly redundant and the learner's native language reveals this redundancy to him. The perception of particular areas of redundancy in the target language as revealed by the native language is one of the biggest stumbling blocks in the learning process (George 1972). The learning of article usage is another example of this. And the situation is not improved by the fact that the learner may indeed find exceptions to general rules. For example the transitive verb and direct object can sometimes be separated by the so-called focussing adjuncts *only*, *also*, *chiefly* as the *Grammar of contemporary English* (Quirk et al. 1972) points out. Another deviance from the general rule is also mentioned: "When the object is a long and complex phrase, final placement for 'end' focus or 'end weight' is possible in SVOC and SVOA types". Two examples of this are given in the book, namely:

7. They pronounced guilty everyone of the accused except the man who had raised the alarm.

8. They moved into the kitchen every stick of furniture that they possessed.

The fact remains that, to put it in informal psychological terms, there is a feeling of reluctance on the part of the native speaker of English to insert anything between the verb and the direct object and that even with words like *also* the first preference is to put them elsewhere in short sentences with no "end focus" or "end weight". Thus

9. I also ate the chicken.

would probably be selected rather than the equally acceptable:

10. I ate also the chicken.

Many Polish learners have not learnt to feel this reluctance themselves which accounts for such errors as are listed below:

- *express fully his feelings
- *to affect badly the health
- *missed very much their cigarette
- *change completely his attitude
- *loses completely faith
- *alter positively their future life
- *spends there a considerable time
- *finds everywhere violence

A pedagogical solution to the above problem might consist at initial stages of

tying together transitive verbs and their direct objects with some symbolic device to represent the (relatively) inviolable character of this "space". A text treated in this way by the student would look like this:

"Gregory loved=Cecilia passionately. He wrote=poems in praise of her and informed=his friends fiercely that they had better not slander=her in any way..."

This fairly mechanical operation could lead to a further exercise where the student is presented with a text and instructed to a. tie together the verb and direct object and b. supply each sentence with a given adverbial (or an adverbial of his own choice). Translation of very short texts containing word order only permissible in Polish might also be used. The conscious analytic nature of such exercises of course depends on the kind of student one is dealing with and these suggestions are mainly relevant to sophisticated adult learners.

The second advanced word order problem concerns premodification. A very typical advanced error which is most apparent in formal academic writing is the placing of prepositional phrases in front of the head noun. This is presumably done on analogy with Polish constructions as:

ustalona przez Jones'a transkrypcja
znieawidzony przez uczniów nauczyciel
dostępne mu informacje

where the English translation would require a preposition even though in the last case there is only the case marking (*mu*). German has this type of construction too as in:

Die auf der Bildtafel dargestellten Einzelheiten

and there is no doubt that it is a very useful succinct way of conveying certain information within the sentence. Unfortunately for the Polish or German learner the English language does not offer the same possibilities. In some cases postmodification is possible as in:

11. He did not make use of the information available to him, although we could not substitute a possessive form (*their*, *her* etc.) for the article *the*. But very often the learner is obliged to resort to relative clauses where he must cope with the additional problem of tense. For example the following could have various English translations according to the context:

POLISH

w uczciwy sposób zarobione pieniądze

ENGLISH

the money which was earned honestly

the money which had been earned honestly

the money which has been earned honestly

No wonder that the Polish or German learner exhibits some reluctance to acquire the English restriction on this type of construction. All the same advanced writing tasks require a solution to this dilemma. One type of exercise

covering this area and including limits on premodification by means of a transitive verb in present participle form plus a direct object (e.g. *a having three children mother) might be of the following part-translation type:

- a. He found the ODDANE PRZEZ NIEGO PAPIEROSY on her desk.
- b. John lost the POŻYCZONE MU KSIĄŻKI on the way home.
- c. The MAJĄCA TROJE DZIECI KOBIEȚA instinctively knew how Mary felt.
- d. The UGOTOWANY PRZEZ NIĄ OBIAD was totally ruined by midnight.
- e. The CZEKAJĄCY NA KORYTARZU OJCOWIE were all smoking furiously.
- f. The UPRAGNIONE PRZEZ WILBERFORCE'A ZNIESIENIE NIEWOLNICTWA was finally achieved.
- g. They met the WRACAJĄCY DO DOMU ŻEGLARZE on the boat train.
- h. The UWIELBIANA PRZEZ TYSIĄCĘ AKTORKA was no longer able to cope with everyday life.
- i. The PODSKAKUJĄCE (W GÓRĘ) SZCZENIAKI could just see their mother over the top of the box.

The students are asked to produce an acceptable English sentence changing the word order of both the English and Polish words where necessary. Note that under the general ban on "prepositional phrase" premodification we include the particles that go to make up phrasal verbs. In i. "jumping puppies" would be acceptable but *"jumping up puppies" would not.

Premodification problems do not exactly end with banning the nonpermissible. There still remains the problem of ordering what is permissible, notably adjectives. Adjectival premodification is admittedly a relatively minor problem due to the fact that nouns by and large go unmodified in this way in natural language and when they are modified it is usually by just one adjective. However in certain varieties of the written language more than one adjective is not so uncommon and the problem of ordering automatically arises. The rules are rather complex once one has established the standard size-age-colour order ("the small old red box") and even accounting for the general rules described in the *Grammar of contemporary English* (Quirk et al. 1972: 922-926) (determiners-general-age-colour-participle-provenance-noun-denominal-head) the discussion there indicates a number of subtle variations which need to be studied by the student in detail, e.g., the change in meaning if "dirty British books" is reordered as "British dirty books". Another interesting fact is that when we come to size, vertical measurement comes before horizontal measurement. Thus "a tall thin man" and "a short fat woman" are much more acceptable than? "a thin tall man" and? "a fat short woman". An easy way to study this problem would be to take a sample text with a reasonable amount of premodification, remove the premodifiers and ask the students to reinsert them in the normal order disregarding the more subtle special effects. The same exercise

may of course be used to study precisely the effects of changing the normal word order but this is advanced level work only. A similar type of exercise is used in Poznań using the fairy story as a humorous vehicle for rather more premodification than is usual. The following is an excerpt from this exercise:

"Once upon a time there was a(n) — — — king (OLD. WISE. FAT) who had a daughter whom I loved dearly. They lived all alone in a(n) — — — castle (OLD. STONE. MAGNIFICENT) in the middle of a(n) — — — forest (PINE. ENORMOUS. DARK). One day the princess was sitting in one of the — — — towers. (ELEGANT. TALL. GREY) dressed in a — — — gown (WHITE. LOVELY. SILK). (.....). Naturally the prince and the princess were soon married and our story has the — — ending (USUAL. HAPPY) because the — — couple (YOUNG. RADIANT) lived happily ever after and had many — — children (OBE-DIENT. GOOD) who always went quickly to their — — beds (COMFORTABLE. NICE) and never woke their parents up too early in the morning".

In the case of alternatives students are told to put short words before long words. In one particular case in this exercise ordering does depend on interpretation: a — — man (OLD. WISE), and provides an example of how Polish and English use different ways of distinguishing between two ideas, English using the grammatical device of word ordering. Thus *mądry starzec* is equivalent to *wise old man* and *stary mędrzec* is equivalent to *old wise man*.

The reasons for the errors discussed above are not clear although it has been implied that interference from the native language plays a major role in that it emphasizes certain areas of redundancy or apparent redundancy in the target language. The pedagogical solutions that have been mentioned are basically remedial. It could be that these errors are also due to faulty teaching and inadequate programming. In this case these three aspects of word order should be taken more into account at earlier stages of learning. Or it may simply be inevitable that with the increasing demands made on the target language by the learner, or at least the Polish learner, incorrect word order figures amongst the most common errors. There is a tendency in advanced levels to concentrate on the more subtle areas of grammar. But even very advanced students make what seem to be simple errors. In fact we often get a reoccurrence of *old* errors as the learning tasks become more complex. The fact of the matter is that a constant revision of basic rules is necessary at advanced stages. And in particular the student must review the problem of English word order.

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