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. Jedziemy śniadanie.

6. Tomek kocha namigenie Ewę.

Congruent translations (Marton 1969) 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 focusing adjuncts *only, also, chiefly* as the Grammar of contemporary English (Quirk et al. 1972) points out. Another deviation 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 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

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covering this area and including limits on premodification by means of a
transitive verb in present participle form plus a direct object (e.g. "I 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 POZYCZONE MU SKŁADZIKI on the way home.
c. The MAJĄCA TROJE DZIECI KOBİETA instinctively knew how Mary
d. felt.

d. The UGOTOWANY PRZEZ NIA OBIAD was totally ruined by midnight.

e. The CZŁOŚCI NA KORYTARZU OJCOWIE were all smoking furiously.

f. The UPRAWNIONE PRZEZ WILBERFORCE A ZNIESIENIE NIE-WOLNICTWA was finally achieved.

g. They met the WRACAJĄCA DO DOMU ZEGLARZE on the boat train.

h. The UWIERZBANA PRZEZ TYSIĄCE AKTORKA was no longer able to
eope with everyday life.

i. The PODSKAKUJĄCE W GÓRĘ SZCZENIACKI 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 "postpositional 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 nonper-
missible. 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-denominial-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 measure-
ment. 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 premod-
ification, remove the premodifiers and ask the students to insert 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 Poznan 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 (TINE, ENSO-
MOUS, 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, RADENT) lived happily ever after and had many — — — children (OBSE-
DIENT, GOOD) who always went quickly to their — — — beds (COMFORTABLE,
NICHE) 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 inter-
pretation: 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 "mamy starsze" is equiva-
lent to "wei old man and starś mądrze" 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
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 see a resemblance 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.

REFERENCES

SAP 1, 53-82.
Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G. and Svartvik, J. 1972. A grammar of contemporary
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