

## **We Agreed to Disagree:**

### **Subject-Verb (Dis)Agreement Patterns in L2 English**

This paper presents results of a Ph.D. project with a focus on L2 English in Norway. One of the goals of this project is to categorize and analyze subject-verb agreement error patterns occurring in English interlanguage produced by young Norwegian learners. Agreement errors are quite common in this learner population despite the relatively high fluency and complexity of their texts (usually B1-B2 on the CEFR scale). Similar error analyses have been performed on both Norwegian and Swedish data produced by university students of English (Johansson, 2008; Thagg Fisher, 1985), but there is very little data available on younger learners. The data used in this paper consist of written texts of 60 Norwegian high school students, each followed for one school year. The texts are compiled into a corpus which is screened for subject-verb agreement errors. Found instances of the erroneous agreement are further analyzed based on the type of subject (pronominal, full NP with/without post-head material, coordinated NPs, clause as subject) and the type of verb (*BE* or other) to uncover possible error patterns in the interlanguage.

Learners of English often have problems with the marking of the third person singular in the present tense (Cook, 2008). Young children acquiring English as their first language also acquire the third person *-s* as one of the last inflectional morphemes (Radford, 1990). However, both these learner groups normally omit the morpheme in the contexts where it is required before they learn the correct use. Young Norwegian learners consistently over-produce the third person *-s* in all persons in both singular and plural. Furthermore, this overgeneralization pattern often prevails even after ten years of English instruction and there is no improvement recorded during the collection period of the current sample. Out of the agreement errors detected in this learner corpus, 56.3% are occasions of plural subjects or first and second person singular subjects combined with verbs with the third person singular morpheme *-s*. When only NPs are considered, 64.4% of plural NPs (523 instances) are followed by a singular verb and 238 instances are plural head-final NPs followed directly by a third person singular verb.

Recurring patterns of non-standard syntax can have several explanations. They could be part of the general acquisition process; in which case, similar patterns should also be detected among learners of other languages at a similar proficiency level. Alternatively, they could be signaling transfer from the first language; in which case similar patterns should be detected among learners whose L1 is closely related to Norwegian, such as Swedish or Danish. The current paper advocates for the latter: i.e. that the deviating agreement could be ascribed to the L1 influence in young Norwegian learners. The Norwegian learners may be influenced by the verbal pattern in their first language and use it as a null hypothesis in their L2 learning. Norwegian uses the suffix *-r* for all persons in the present tense, while the suffix-less verb form is only allowed in infinitive constructions. The young learners' English production in this study seems to follow this pattern.

## References

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