

PUNCTUATION IN WRITTEN ENGLISH THAT KNOCK DOWN LITHUANIAN STUDENTS

CASE STUDY OF PUNCTUATION MISTAKES MADE BY STUDENTS OF STUDY
PROGRAMMES OF *BUSINESS ENGLISH* AND *ENGLISH FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS*

Rima Jasnauskaitė, PhD | 2020-12-03

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About research and design

Aim of the research is to identify the most frequent and widely spread punctuation mistakes in written English and suggest theoretical linguistic explanation about their psycholinguistic nature.

Subject of the research is punctuation mistakes in written works in English (academic year of 2018-2019) made by students of study programmes of *Business English* and *English for Public Relations*.

Objectives and design of the research:

- Analysis of mistakes made by students in written assignment texts in English and sorting out according to the criteria of frequency and spread rate.
- Analysis of relevant linguistic theories to reveal linguistic explanation of the nature, typology and psycholinguistic determination of the mistakes.

Methods applied: analysis of theoretical sources and descriptive, contrastive linguistic analysis.

Punctuation mistakes of Type 1

The use of a COMMA before THAT

Defining Relative Clauses

(EN) A little *girl that* I met yesterday was smiling to me.

(LT) *Mažylė, kurią* tądien sutikau, šypsojosi man.

Linking of the main and subordinate clauses

(En) The little girl told *me that* her name was Kate.

(LT) Mažoji *pasakė, kad* ji yra vardu Keitė.

Punctuation mistakes of Type 2

The use of a COMMA between main and subordinate clauses

(En) He was absolutely frank to *himself when* he was writing the book.

(LT) Jis nemelavo *sau, kai* rašė šią knygą.

BUT

(En) When he was writing that *book, he tried* to be absolutely frank to himself.

(LT) Kai rašė šią *knygą, autorius* stengėsi neapgaudinėti save melu.

Punctuation mistakes of Type 3

The use of a DASH in the predicate of the sentence

(LT) *Didžiausia mūsų laikų problema – skubėjimas* gyventi.

(EN) *The major problem of nowadays is a too rapid life pace.*

Punctuation mistakes of Type 4

The use of quotation marks with titles and names

Single vs. Double

(EN) *“Punctuation Cases in Written English that Knock down Lithuanian Students”*

(LT) *„Anglų kalbos skyryba lengvai nukautuojanti studentus“*

Lowcase vs. high case

(EN) *“In the article ‘Punctuation Cases in Written English that Knock down Lithuanian Students’ [...].”*

(LT) *„Straipsnyje „Anglų kalbos skyryba lengvai nukautuojanti studentus“ [...].“*

Punctuation mistakes of Type 5

Different shapes of quotation marks

(EN) ⁶⁶*Grammars of Written and Spoken English*⁹⁹

(LT) ⁹⁹*Rašytinės ir žodinės anglų kalbos gramatikos*⁶⁶

Where to go for the answer?

Psycholinguistics:

- how people acquire language
- how people use language to speak and understand one another
- how language is represented and processed in the brain

Psycholinguistics = psychology + linguistics

Developmental psychology + cognitive psychology+ neurolinguistics + speech science.

Language allows people immense creativity:

- can create and understand novel sentences for an entire lifetime
- every sentence is a brand-new event
- constantly produce novel sentences with no conscious effort

Languages learned or acquired?

Mechanisms of acquisition and learnability

Theories of acquisition:

prior state of knowledge + particular learning mechanism + new input

Learnability theories:

learner's initial stock of concepts + mechanism of acquisition + new input

Children: acquire a language + constantly draw upon this acquired knowledge for comprehending and speaking

Language acquisition:

- process of going from no language to language
- from one language to a second one
- language use in turn takes from knowing to doing

Language development in children

Language development in children is focused on two important and intimately interconnected properties of human language:

1. it is highly **structured** + humans master a highly complex system in order to use expressions of their native language
2. it is **creative**: humans spontaneously produce and understand expressions they have never encountered before in their linguistic experience

Tools to acquire language

Children are endowed genetically with:

- Universal Grammar (UG) or the Language Acquisition Device (LAD)

UG/LAD consists of a set of innate principles and parameters that are universal at the “initial state”

Presumptions:

- all human languages are alike in a fundamental way
- all human languages are the product precisely of human speakers, whose genetic faculty for language is equipped with the same principles and parameters
- all human languages incorporate the principles and parameters and share basic properties at an abstract level
- variety found in the world’s languages, though not insignificant, is thus relatively superficial

Finite number of tools vs. infinite results

UG and LAD enable to deal with novelty in language

- because every language consists of a set of principles by which arbitrary elements are combined into words
- which in turn are combined into sentences
- relatively small number of principles + a small number of sounds put together to create words = a large but finite vocabulary
- this finite knowledge provides the person with infinite creativity
- the set of possible sentences for a given language is infinite

Knowing a language = knowing its grammar and lexicon:

- knowledge of such a system = the ability to organize ideas into words and sentences
this special kind of knowledge is implicit knowledge
- **implicit knowledge** is represented in the brain and is put to use in the production and comprehension of sentences,
- **but is not consciously available to the individual who possesses it**

Hypothesis-testing or distributional analysis

Hypothesis-testing uses distributional analysis to evaluate the incoming data

Distributional analysis identifies:

- a form of pattern analysis in which learners observe
- what elements of a sequence go
- where and what elements can substitute for other elements
- what elements tend to occur together

Statistical learning approaches: it is the primary source of data from which the child identifies the patterns in their native language

Statistical learning refers to the process of identifying units in the input:

- words or categories
- by discovering what features of the input predict other features
- and grouping features that are likely to co-occur

Language typology searches for cross-linguistically recurrent patterns in synchronic structure

Pragmatic development

- When children are learning language, they must learn **more** than just phonology, semantics and syntax
- Being a skilled language user means **knowing how to use one's language appropriately and strategically in social situations**
- Children need to **learn pragmatic skills**, also referred to as communicative competence
- They must learn how to make language work **in interactions** with their peers, families, teachers and others
- **Many skills are involved in pragmatic competence because language is used for so many purposes:**
 - ✓ need to learn to ask questions, make requests, give orders
 - ✓ express agreement or disagreement
 - ✓ apologize, refuse, joke, praise and tell stories
 - ✓ must know and use the appropriate volume and tone of voice

UG, LAD, MAD and innate mechanisms acquiring subsequent languages

Innate mechanisms that help children acquire their first language also help them **acquire second or subsequent languages**

LAD or MAD as Multilingual Acquisition Device: as innate factors are as crucial for bilingual language acquisition as for monolingual acquisition

Even though different groups of people speak **different languages:**

- all human languages have a similar level of detail and complexity
- all languages share general abstract properties
- all human languages can be analysed as systems consisting of structural units
- with rules for combining those units in various ways

Even though languages **differ superficially**, they all reflect **general properties of a common linguistic system typical of the human species**

BICS and CALP in language development

Another defining characteristic is the place where the languages are learned and used:

1. A home language may serve for primarily conversational purposes: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (or BICS)
2. More formal, academic language, typically learned at school or in formal settings: Cognitive-Academic Language Proficiency (or CALP)

CALP engages all four modalities of language use: understanding, speaking, reading and writing, whereas BICS are more likely oral language only

A phenomenon unique to the bilingual mode is ‘code switching’:

- where two languages are used within the same utterance or
- turn bilinguals switching between languages
- it can happen either between sentences or within sentences at permissible points within a grammatical structure
- the latter is often called ‘code-mixing’

Second-language acquisition

Two systems in one head.

- First-language acquisition involves starting with no language and arriving at knowledge of a language
- Second-language acquisition in turn involves adding a language to one's already-existing repertoire

There are parallels between the two acquisition processes and the problem is the same:

- there is a discrepancy between the language input that the learners are exposed to
- and what they are able to comprehend and produce:
- model and replica are mismatched

If the learners simply imitated the input, their production would consist of error-free replicas of what they have heard and nothing else

This is **not** what actually happens, their production is **selective of the input**

Learners do not only produce what they heard: their production includes novel forms as well

Selective imitation and creativity in learners' production

The selectivity issue boils down to the order in which various aspects of the target language structures are gradually absorbed by the learner

The creativity issue in turn involves finding the sources of errors:

- ✓ forms that deviate from the target language
- ✓ and noting the changes in these deviant structures over time

Learning something new involves a change in the mental set of the learner: it is generally a difficult and stressful process

It is therefore likely that learners will unconsciously or consciously try to reduce the task by making it as easy for themselves as possible:

1. learners are likely to want to **minimize the difference** between the target skill and what they already know by trying to apply their existing skills to the new area
2. they hope that the new skill is more or less the same as the old one and when this expectation is not borne out, **they will make mistakes**

Second-language acquisition

It is a plausible hypothesis that the L1 – the language the learner already knows – would influence on how the L2 (the target language) is acquired

A way in which learners may try to reduce the task of learning a new skill is by “cutting corners” – that is,

- by substituting simpler structures for more complex ones
- simplification may involve abbreviation: rather than memorizing long phrases

The two tendencies

– **using the familiar for the unfamiliar and using the simple for the complex** –
both alleviate the burden of acquiring new skills in L2 acquisition as well

A similar process applies to all areas of human competence and performance:

- having internalized a skill is one thing;
- implementing this knowledge in behavior is another

Knowing a language does not mean that we can speak and comprehend every bit of it with equal ease

Contrastive analysis hypothesis about mistakes

It will **be more difficult** for the learner to acquire aspects of the L2 that are **different** from L1 than to acquire those properties of L2 that are the same as in the L1

Matching features will be acquired **before differing features** and learner's errors will occur in the areas of mismatches

The difficulty in learning a new language is directional:

- given a structural difference between two languages, acquiring the target structure may be easy when coming from one of the two languages
- but it may be difficult in the other direction

It is predicted that **learners will not make many errors**

- if they have to learn unmarked structures in L2
- and they will make more errors if the L2 structures are marked

Clever and creative language learners: summing up

Based on **learning processes** in general theories regarding the nature of learners' languages claim:

- some aspects of interlanguages would reflect what is **familiar** to the learners
- and other aspects would be the result of **simplification**
- look for a **preference of the familiar over the unfamiliar** in external and internal transfer:
- learners **transfer constructions** from their L1 and from already-acquired parts of the L2
- and show the **preference simple over complex**

Conclusions

- Analysis of punctuation mistakes in English made by students of study programmes of *Business English* and *English for Public Relations* revealed the most frequent mistake types that occur in the use of commas in separation of clauses and the use of inverted commas (their functions, types and shapes).
- These mistakes are predetermined in the works of young writers in English as their corresponding syntactic structures and applications in written Lithuanian are different.
- Making mistakes is an inseparable part of a natural language learning and acquisition process either in case of L1 or L2 (or SL = subsequent language).
- Language learning and acquisition is an innate human ability that is based on the same universal language features (systems and structures) and equipped with the same devices of universal application: UG, LAD and MAD.

Conclusions

- Language learning and acquisition is a mentally difficult process and learners tend to be creative to make the process easier by exploiting skills, knowledge and experience gained in acquisition of L1 (a previous language).
- It is genetically determined that language users creatively chose an easier way to be language efficient by transferring unmarked structures of L1 to SL, i.e. what is familiar and simple substitute what is unfamiliar and complex.
- These universal parameters and mental tools account for the typological similarity of mistakes made by majority of language learners of the similar demographic and linguistic group.

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