

Overgeneralization as a Strategy for the Acquisition of L1 and L2 Noun Morphology (the Category of Number)

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Abstract: *The paper provides an overview of overgeneralization as a path of development in the acquisition of Bulgarian (as L1) and English (as L2) by Bulgarian children of two age groups. It presents and analyses a corpus of overgeneralization L1 and L2 errors related to the acquisition of the inflectional morphology of the category of number of Bulgarian and English nouns. Based upon the excerpted errors and on the observed patterns in the development of the L1 and L2 interlanguage of the study subjects, the paper justifies the idea that children acquire the idiosyncratic features of their mother tongue and of the foreign language earlier than the irregularities.*

Key words: *overgeneralization, child language, interlanguage, L1 and L2 acquisition errors, Bulgarian, English*

INTRODUCTION

One of the central topics in generative language development research in the recent years has been the problem of how learners move from one developmental stage to another and why their grammars develop in a certain fashion. The growing attention to those issues (Slabakova, Montrul and Prévost, 2006; Unsworth, 2006; van Geert, 2008; Benati, 2009, etc.) convincingly shows that *overgeneralization* is a common feature of language development in both first (L1) and second (L2) language acquisition.

Although, the phenomenon of *overgeneralization* has been discussed cross-linguistically on the basis of data from Dutch, French, German and Spanish, most of the authors investigating other languages than English compare their findings with those about English (Garcia Mayo and Hawkins, 2009; Cabrera and Zubizarreta, 2005; Onnis, Roberts and Charter, 2002). Such comparisons help researchers discover the parallels and the consistent differences between the languages in focus. However, the role of overgeneralization in the acquisition of Bulgarian (as L1) and English (as L2) by Bulgarian children has not been given the necessary attention. Therefore, the present paper attempts to add some language specific data for Bulgarian and for English which contribute to the discussion of overgeneralization as a strategy of acquisition of both L1 and L2 noun morphology.

OVERGENERALIZATION AND LEARNERS' INTERNAL GRAMMAR

The starting point for discussing overgeneralization as a L1 and L2 learning strategy is the concept of *interlanguage*, which is considered to be an interim grammar that "learners build on their way to full target language competence" [Ellis, 1994: 30]. Though, introduced by Larry Selinker (1972) and attributed to the theory of second language acquisition, the construct of interlanguage can refer to the exploration of child L1 acquisition. The reason for that is the following: just like L2 learners, children who acquire their mother tongue, are involved in a continual process of formulation of hypotheses about language rules. As new elements of the L1 are acquired, the hypotheses are tested and assessed which brings children closer to the correct use of the language in focus.

Although the interlanguage systems of L1 children and L2 speakers are structurally intermediate in status, the L2 learner's interlanguage system is more complicated than that of a L1 learning child. While the interim grammar of a child who is attaining his/her first language approximates the L1, the interim grammar of a L2 speaker is an intermediate stage between the L1 and L2 in which the learner uses forms from both linguistic systems in order to produce sentences in L2 (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 The interlanguage systems of L1 and L2 learners

In the process of L1 or L2 acquisition interlanguage is a dynamic and constantly evolving linguistic state of L1 and L2 users. In fact it is the complex result of the internal cognitive processes that take place during L1 or L2 acquisition. One of these processes is *overgeneralization*, which allows the learners to make a learning task more manageable to themselves by extending a language rule to linguistic norms where it is not appropriate, or where it would lead to ungrammaticalities due to false analogy with other forms.

Data from research studies on first and second language acquisition (Ellis, 1994; Gass and Selinker, 2008; Lightbown and Spada, 2006 etc.), which explore the mental processes that take place in learning a language, convincingly show that: a) *children who learn their first language tend to overgeneralize grammatical morphemes*; and b) *overgeneralization of L2 rules affects the second language production of young learners*.

In the light of the above mentioned conclusions, the present paper attempts to shed light on the common patterns of linguistic behaviour in the L1 and L2 interlanguage of Bulgarian children. In order to do so it examines the overgeneralization errors of Bulgarian 2-4-year-old children (who are in the process of acquiring Bulgarian as their mother tongue) and of Bulgarian 8-10-year-old children who learn English as a foreign language.

METHODOLOGY

Instruments and subjects

The methodology followed in the research was a combination of quantitative and qualitative means of data collection. The overgeneralization errors in the L1 interlanguage of Bulgarian children aged 2 to 4 are collected through a longitudinal study (2008 – 2010) of the speech patterns of six children, while the overgeneralization errors in the L2 interlanguage of Bulgarian young learners of English (aged 8 – 10) were gathered through the examination of the written works of 312 primary school children from state schools in the town of Ruse during the 2009 / 2010 and 2010 / 2011 school years (Table 1).

Table 1: Profile of the study subjects

Study groups	L1 / L2 learners	Age of children	Number of children	
			Girls	Boys
Group A	Bulgarian L1 speaking children	2 – 4 year old	4	2
Group B	Bulgarian young learners of English as L2	8 – 9 year old	72	55
Group C		9 – 10 year old	86	99

Results

Due to the constraints of the current paper, we will focus our attention on the analysis of those overgeneralization errors in the L1 and L2 interlanguages of the study subjects, which are related to the acquisition of Bulgarian and English noun morphology. Since most of the collected errors concern the use of overgeneralization as a strategy for the acquisition of the inflectional categories of **number** in nouns in the two languages, the discussion below aims at giving a detailed presentation of that.

The inflectional category of *number* in nouns in contemporary English and Bulgarian languages distinguishes two number forms – *singular* and *plural*. Unlike English where almost all nouns form their plural forms through two suffixes: **-s** (e.g. book – books; cup – cups) and **-es** (e.g. box – boxes; bush – bushes), the Bulgarian category of number in nouns is more complex as the choice of the plural suffix depends considerably on the gender of the noun. Still, there are many exceptions, some nouns alter additionally when forming plurals and sometimes the word stress also changes its position.

To illustrate this complexity we will summarize the changes of those Bulgarian monosyllabic masculine nouns which form plurals by the use of the inflections **-ове** and **-и** and of the Bulgarian feminine nouns that form their plural with the suffix **-и** (Table 2).

Table 2: Plural forms of some of the Bulgarian nouns

Plural forms of some of the Bulgarian nouns				
Gender	Ending	Examples	Additional alternations	Examples
Monosyllabic masculine nouns	-ове	хляб – хлябове (bread – loaves of bread)	A change in the position of the stress	гра̀д—градо̀ве (town – towns)
		сто̀л – столо̀ве (chair – chairs)	<я> (in the root morpheme changes to <е>	сто̀л—столо̀ве (chair – chairs)
			Metathesis of <ъ> from the letter group <ръ>	бря̀г – брего̀ве (shore – shores)
			Palatalization of the preceding consonant, indicated by < ь >	врѣх – вѣрхо̀ве (peak – peaks)
	-и	гост – го̀сти (guest – guests)	A combination of all of the above alternations	зет – зѣтьове (son-in-law – sons-in-law)
		зѣб – зѣ̀би (tooth – teeth)	The velar consonants / г, к, х / in word final position change to / з, ц, с / before -и in the plural form	вя̀тър – ветро̀ве (wind – winds) (< я > changes to <е>; loss of < ь >)
Feminine nouns	-и	река – рекѹ (river – rivers)	<я> in the root morpheme changes to <е>	по̀длог—по̀длози;(subject – subjects)
		жена – женѹ (woman – women)	Epenthetic < е > and < ь > are dropped in the plural form	уче́ник – уче́ници (student – students)
		планина – планинѹ (mountain – mountains)	Metathesis of <ъ> from the letter group <ръ>	кожу̀х—кожу̀си; (fur coat – fur coats)
				вя̀ра – ве́ри (belief – beliefs)
				пе́сен – пе́сни (song – songs)
				ми́съл – ми́сли (thought -)
				крѣв – кѣ̀рви (blood)
				врѣв – вѣ̀рви (string – strings)

The elaborate nature of the category of number of Bulgarian nouns and the relatively simple way of forming plurals in English, leads to a higher percentage of overgeneralization errors in the L1 oral production of the study subjects from Group A – 76%, compared to the 24 % overgeneralization errors in the L2 written productions of the study Groups B and C.

A. Overgeneralization errors in the L1 oral production of Bulgarian children

The overgeneralization errors observed in the L1 interlanguage of the study subjects from Group A prove that the children have managed to capture the general ways in which Bulgarian nouns form their plural forms. The extension of the rules to items that are excluded from the L1 norms results to errors. For example:

- | | | |
|---|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| (1) (3;8 ¹) <i>Тези *прозореци са мръсни.</i> | < Тези прозори са мръсни. | (These windows are dirty.) |
| (2) (3;1) <i>А *петели има ли?</i> | < А петли има ли? | (Are there any cocks?) |
| (3) (2;6) <i>Много* ловци ...</i> | < [Има] много ловци. | (There are many hunters.) |
| (4) (2;9) <i>*Льоши крадеци.</i> | < Лоши крадци | (Bad thieves.) |

The L1 interlanguage errors presented above show that the Bulgarian children form correctly the plural form of the Bulgarian polysyllabic nouns by using the inflection **–и**. However, the children overgeneralize that rule and do not drop the / **е** / from the suffix **–ец** in the plural form.

A similar type of overgeneralization error is observed in the case when the Bulgarian children but do not change the velar consonants / **к** / in front of the inflection **–и** to / **ц** /.

e.g.

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| (1) (3;7) <i>Дядо чете *вестники.</i> | < Дядо чете вестници. | (Daddy reads newspapers.) |
| (2) (4;0) <i>В цирка има *смешники.</i> | < В цирка има смешници. | (There are clowns in the circus.) |
| (3) (3;2) <i>Вълчо папа *заеки.</i> | < Вълчо яде зайци. | (The wolf eats rabbits) |
| (4) (3;9) <i>*Моряките са на кораба.</i> | < Моряците са на кораба. | (The sailors are on board) |
| (5) (3;1) <i>Нося кофата много *пясъки.</i> | < Нося много пясък в кофата. (plural of пясък – пясъци) | (I am carrying a lot of sand in the bucket.) |

At the same time the observed Bulgarian speaking children tend to apply the above mentioned rule to cases when it is not applicable; thus forming incorrect plural forms.

e.g.

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|--|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (1) (3;1) <i>Гого има мръсни *краци.</i> | < Гого има мръсни крака. | (Gogo has dirty feet.) |
| (2) (2;9) <i>Рисува *блоци.</i> | < Нарисувал съм блокове. | (I have drawn some blocks.) |
| (3) (2;4) <i>Дълги *влаци.</i> | < Дълги влакове. | (Long trains.) |

Moreover, the presence of forms like *ръки* in the sentence *Мечо има ръки* instead of *Мечо има ръце*² clearly demonstrates that in the process of L1 acquisition children make new plural forms on the basis of analogy, which leads to ungrammaticalities, or create new forms which allow them to fill in the gaps in their knowledge of the structure and functions of the language. This can be supported by the excerpted plural forms of the following neutral nouns: *дете* (a child), *око* (an eye) and *ухо* (an ear). For example:

- | | | |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| (1) (3;3) <i>Тука* детенца гаят.</i> | < Тук играят деца. | (Children play here.) |
| (2) (2;8) <i>Отидили си *дететата</i> | < Отишли са си децата. | (The children have gone.) |
| (3) (2;5) <i>Крий *оките.</i> | < Ще си скрия очите. | (I will hide my eyes with my hands.) |
| (4) (2;7) <i>Няма *окенца.</i> | < Няма оченца [куклата]. | ([The doll] has no eyes.) |
| (5) (3;0) <i>Ти имаш ли *ухи?</i> | < Ти имаш ли уши? | (Have you got ears?) |
| (6) (3;1) <i>Зайко има дълги *ухи.</i> | < Зайко има дълги уши. | (The bunny has long ears.) |

A special difficulty in the acquisition of the plural form of Bulgarian masculine nouns that end in a consonant (e.g. *прозорец* (window), *влак* (train), *език* (language) etc.) is the existence of another form marking plurality – the *numerical form*. It is used after cardinal numbers and the adverbs *колко* (how many), *толкова* (this / that / so many; this / that / so much) and *няколко* (several, some, few) and is formed with the endings **–а** and **–я** (Table 3).

¹ In brackets is given the age of the child. For example: (3;8) – three years and eight months old

² *ръце* – irregular plural form of the feminine noun *ръка*

Table 3: Numerical form of some Bulgarian masculine nouns ending in a syllable

Singular noun form	Countable noun form		Regular plural form
	Ending	Example	
град (town)	-а	гра̀да	градо̀ве
ези́к (tongue / language)		ези́ка	ези́ци
прозо̀рец (window)		прозо̀реца	прозо̀рци
теа̀тър (theatre)		теа̀търа	теа̀три
брой (number)	-я	бро́я	бро̀ве
ко̀н (horse)		ко̀ня	ко̀не
пъ̀т (road)		пъ̀тя	пъ̀тища

The overgeneralization of the rules for forming plurals of masculine nouns and the fact that the numerical form of masculine nouns is not a particularly early acquisition results in forms such as:

- (1) (3;6) *Два мечове имаме да < Два меча имаме, за (We have got two swords to*
боцкаме с тях да се бием с тях. fight with.)
- (2) (3;2) *Колко прозореци светят? < Колко прозореца (How many windows are lit?)*
светят?
- (3) (2;9) *Толкова пръсти? < Толкова ли пръста? (That many fingers? (to show*
how old he is))

The gathered overgeneralization errors in the L1 oral production of the 2-4-year old Bulgarian children also show one interesting phenomenon – children's creativity in language acquisition which finds expression in the coinage of innovative word forms. The novel forms that children produce do not only strike the ear, but also give evidence that the child is actively using the rules in his/her grammar to produce word forms that are not in the language of adults. Such innovations are the plural forms of the Bulgarian monosyllabic masculine nouns *нож*, *стол* and *слон* in the sentences:

- (1) (2;4) *Дай ножов. < Дай [ми] тези ножове. (Give me the knives.)*
- (2) (2;6) *Няма столов. < Няма столове. (There aren't any chairs*
here.)
- (3) (3;9) *Много слонов бягат. < Много слонове бягат. (Many elephants are running.)*

These plural noun forms, which do not exist in Bulgarian language and in adult grammar, demonstrate that the children have mixed the inflection for marking the plural forms of masculine nouns **-ове** with the inflection **-ов** which is part of some Bulgarian adjectives (e.g. *гото́в* (ready), *суро́в* (raw), *масо́в* (mass) etc). This suggests that the acquisition of the morphological system of the language involves learning which rules belong to which level.

B. Overgeneralization errors in the L2 written production of Bulgarian young learners of English

The fairly simple system of inflectional morphology in English for distinguishing the singular and plural forms of nouns, does not pose much difficulty for Bulgarian young learners of English as a foreign language. That is perhaps the reason why only two basic types of L2 overgeneralization errors are observed:

1. Application of the L2 rules for forming plurals to uncountable (mass) nouns

Most of the overgeneralization errors (about 40%) that have been excerpted from the written works of the study subjects from groups B and C, show that children apply the regular rules for forming plurals to uncountable nouns which in English do not have a plural form. For instance:

- I write my *homeworks at home.*
- We have many *homeworks.*
- I like *fruits.*
- *She like fruits.*
- *Fruits are cherries.*
- I like many *foods*
- This are foods.*
- My dog eats *meats.*
- His *luggages are here.*
- My friend has long *hairs.*

- *Apples and bananas are* fruits.*
- *I don't have moneys.*
- *Two *butters, please.*
- *There are many cheeses.*
- *I want two* milks.*

The ungrammaticalities in this case are a result not so much of the overgeneralization of the L2 rule for forming plurals, but rather a direct interference of the L1 as in Bulgarian nouns such as *плод* (fruit), *домашно* (homework), *месо* (meat), *мляко* (milk), *сирене* (cheese), *коса* (hair) and *пари* (money) may have a plural form.

2. Application of the L2 rules for forming plurals of nouns which have irregular plurals

About 10% of the overgeneralization errors of the Bulgarian young learners of English give evidence of the fact that children's L2 acquisition is governed by the rule types of the foreign language. The existence of incorrect plurals such as:

- *mans* (instead of *men*);
- *womans* (instead of *women*);
- *foots* (instead of *feet*);
- *childs* (instead of *children*);
- *tooths* (instead of *teeth*)

shows that the children have command of the regular plural rule in English. What is more, this also suggests that in the process of language acquisition the idiosyncratic features of the language are learned earlier than the irregularities. This pattern in the development of language awareness is used as a basis for the development of primary school coursebooks in foreign language used in the Bulgarian classrooms which is why the number of the excerpted words is so limited.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

The presented results of the role of overgeneralization as a strategy for the acquisition of noun morphology of the category of number in the L1 and L2 interlanguages of Bulgarian children, suggests that children follow the constraints of the language and tend to apply the already acquired rules of grammar when they form new plural forms of nouns. However, in the process of L1 and L2 language acquisition children pass through different stages in which their internal grammars accommodate to the fact that in a language noun may have irregular forms or forms which do not comply with the regularities already learned. Only the consistent exposure to positive evidence, i.e. the irregular forms or exceptions of the rule, will help learners replace the incorrect ones.

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