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The Effects of Linguistic Context on Unplanned Discourse: A Study in Interlanguage Variability

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This study examines the variable realization of the third person singular -s by Shona learners of English at elementary and intermediate levels of proficiency. The study is unlike previous ones, not so much because it controls for differences in discourse mode but because it examines the effects of different linguistic contexts embedded in comparable discourse positions. The paper argues that although the performance of the subjects is elicited from unplanned discourse, different discourse segments might vary in terms of their degree of plannedness. The results demonstrate that very little morphological variability occurs in the production of elementary learners. The little variation exhibited is lexical. Some words attract target-language-like variants more frequently than others.

The performance of the intermediate group shows that the distribution of grammatical variants is sensitive to linguistic context and that, contrary to expectations, second language learners are more likely to inflect verbs to mark the third person -s if the grammatical subject is realized, as opposed to when it is not.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a study into interlanguage (IL) variability and examines how the variability provides insight into the processes of language acquisition among Shona speakers of English.[1] This study is unlike previous research on IL variability for two main reasons. First, most of the research into IL variability has been carried out among subjects with an Asian or Indo-European background. In L. Dickerson (1975) the subjects were Japanese. In Ellis (1989) one of the subjects was Portuguese; the other two were Pakistani. Young's (1989) subjects are from mainland China. The subjects in the present study have Shona as a mother tongue. The aim of using learners coming from a language background which is typologically different from both Asian and Indo-European

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languages is to add to IL studies of non-Indo-European and non-Asian language speakers and to investigate further how IL may vary.

Second, the subjects in this study are at two different levels of proficiency: elementary and intermediate. This paper argues that variability is likely to provide much insight into second language acquisition (SLA), if it is revealed to be a form of language behavior characteristic of learners at different stages of development. Level of proficiency as a potential determinant of IL variability has not been directly addressed in previous studies because learners were typically drawn from the same level of proficiency. In Ellis (1987) the subjects were at what he calls a low intermediate level of proficiency. The possible exception is Young (1989) who had two groups of subjects at different levels of proficiency.

Although the Ellis (1988) study provided evidence that the use of the third person singular is susceptible to linguistic context, his subjects were at the same level of proficiency, unlike the study reported in this paper. My study is also different from the Ellis study because it examines the effects of different linguistic contexts in one discourse mode. The Ellis study mixed data from interviews with the subjects conducted by the researcher and data produced by the subjects while talking among themselves.[2]

My study also goes further than previous research on one important dimension, by examining the effects of different linguistic contexts embedded in comparable discourse positions. The narrative which each subject produced was broken down into three main discourse fragments (discourse initial, medial, and final) and the effects of different linguistic contexts in each discourse fragment were compared. For example, the effects of a pronoun subject + verb were compared with the effects of a pronoun subject + adverbial + verb on the suppliance of the third person *-s* morpheme in the discourse fragment in the initial part of the narrative.

This paper is divided into three main sections. The first part reviews some of the studies reporting the existence of variability in IL performance. The second part provides a description of the subjects participating in my study, the methods of data elicitation, and the modes of analysis employed. The final section reports on the findings of the analysis in the light of previous research.

Literature Review

Some studies attribute variability to task type and others to linguistic context. Those attributing variability to differences in task

type have problems in establishing how much attention each task demands, whereas those attributing it to linguistic context form no consensus on what constitutes the relevant context which induces variability.

When L. Dickerson (1975), W. Dickerson (1976), and Tarone (1979) argue that second language speech varies depending on the amount of attention paid to form, they have theoretically identified an important determinant of IL variability but have underestimated the problems of empirically operationalizing the concept. The common assumption made in all these studies is that different tasks elicit varying amounts of attention to form. For instance, a word-list reading task in L. Dickerson's study is expected to elicit more attention to form than dialogue reading. The least amount of attention to form is expected during free speech. Romaine (1984) argues convincingly that the attention to form each subject pays varies depending on the difficulty each subject has in reading. Thus, contrary to L. Dickerson's claims, a subject with relatively few reading problems is likely to pay less attention to form in word-list reading and more in dialogue reading. The view that free speech is produced with the least amount of attention to form has also been challenged. Rampton (1987) argues that second language learners exposed to the target language (TL) in a predominantly formal environment (such as was the case with L. Dickerson's subjects) may invest more attention to form in order to sound informal.

Labov (1969) and Ellis (1988), although both accepting that linguistic context plays an important role in producing variable performance in the use of structures such as the copula, disagree on what constitutes the relevant context. For instance, for Ellis the relevant linguistic context inducing variability in the use of the copula is whether the element preceding the copula is a noun phrase (NP) or a pronoun, whereas for Labov the context is much more elaborate, combining both phonological and syntactic environments. The differences in what constitutes the relevant linguistic context arises because of a post-hoc analysis of context (Surreys, 1990). Not only do these studies define context post-hoc, they do not examine the effects of discourse on linguistic context. For example, the same linguistic item may have different effects on grammatical accuracy depending on whether it is part of a rapid give-and-take segment or part of a long turn (Preston, 1989).

Another factor which has not been fully exploited as an important determinant of IL variability is the difference in levels of proficiency between subjects. In Ellis (1988) and Fairbanks (1983)

the subjects are of comparable proficiency. Thus, neither Fairbanks nor Ellis can examine the effect proficiency might have on IL variability. A possible exception is Young (1989), as the subjects in his experiment are at different levels of proficiency.

Andersen (1984, 1989) differs from the studies focusing on the effects of linguistic context and task type in IL variability. He accounts for variability by postulating the existence of Slobin-like cognitive principles. "The relevance principle," "the one-to-one principle," and "the frequency principle" are said to explain the acquisition of the three English *s*'s: possessive *-s*, third person singular *-s* and the plural *-s* morpheme.

As Andersen explains, the relevance principle, originating with Bybee (1985), predicts that the plural *-s* will be acquired earliest because it is the most relevant to the attached noun. The one-to-one principle promotes the use of the plural *-s* because the morpheme consistently entails more than one. The plural morpheme also tends to be much more frequent in the input than the possessive and the third person. The delay in the acquisition of the possessive morpheme may partially arise from its violation of the one-to-one principle because the sequence of possessor + possessed adequately captures the meaning which the possessive expresses. The relevance principle explains why of the three English *s*'s the third person is acquired last. The information in the third person is redundant because it is already encoded in the grammatical subject.

Andersen's work on morphological variability is particularly relevant to my study, since my study provides a test case for the relevance principle by examining the effects of null and pronominal subjects on verbal marking. If the relevance principle is applicable to the learners in this study, then we would expect the verbs to be inflected more frequently when the grammatical subject is null than when it is a pronoun. In the latter case the information encoded in the verb is already carried by the pronoun, which is not the case when the grammatical subject is ellipted.

The study reported here differs from the reviewed research in three ways. First, some of the previous research evidenced problems in determining how much attention to form was paid in different tasks. I avoided the problem by examining variability in one oral recall task. Second, because the same linguistic context may behave differently depending on the type of discourse and the position of the discourse fragment within that discourse, this study, unlike previous research, examined the effects of different linguistic contexts embedded in comparable discourse positions. Finally, to compare the impact of proficiency on variability, the performance of

two groups of learners at two different levels of proficiency was compared.

Defining Discourse Planning

Following Ochs (1979) two criteria for discourse planning were evoked: forethought and design. Discourse is unplanned when it lacks forethought, in other words, when it has not been thought out before expression. Discourse is also unplanned if the speaker has not established the overall design which the discourse will take. Because the speaker has not determined the design or "architecture" of the discourse, she cannot determine in advance the various linguistic ways in which the design will be realized. Ochs sees the distinction between unplanned and planned discourse as a continuum rather than as a dichotomy. Thus, different discourse types will exhibit differing degrees of planning.

The aim of my study was to elicit discourse responses which could be characterized as lying more towards the unplanned end of the planning continuum. The subjects' responses were unplanned because they heard a story which they had not heard before, their discourse thereby meeting the first criteria of unplanned discourse, lack of forethought. Because their discourse lacked forethought, they could not impose a design on it, fulfilling the second criteria of unplanned discourse, absence of a discourse design.

The advantage of using the construct of planning is that it partially overcomes some of the problems of determining the amount of attention being paid to linguistic form. It is however hypothesized that the more planning opportunities the speaker has, the greater the chances she will be able to attend to linguistic form. The construct of discourse planning is one of the potential ways of operationalizing the concept of attention to linguistic form.

Because the speaker's speech lacks forethought and the discourse lacks overall architectural discourse design, the learner is likely to spend a considerable amount of cognitive energy in trying to locate the necessary linguistic forms to express the content which she will be accessing from memory. The memory search for the information and ways of expressing the content inhibit attempts by the learner to attend to linguistic form.

Rationale for the Selection of the Third Person Singular

Studies by Fairbanks (1983) and Ellis (1988), among many others, have demonstrated that the third person singular is variable.

My reason for selecting the third person *-s* was to assess the extent to which variability was caused by one of the following three factors: (a) the level of proficiency of the subjects, (b) the linguistic context in which the linguistic form is situated, and (c) the type of verb. The study also sought to examine what insight, if any, was gained into language acquisition by studying IL variability.

METHOD

Subjects

The two groups participating in the study were at elementary and intermediate levels of proficiency. The levels of proficiency of the subjects of both groups was assessed on the basis of their performance on an adaptation of the British Council ELTS test, which is administered to overseas students intending to study in the U.K. The components of the ELTS test used to assess the level of proficiency of the subjects were an oral interview and a writing task.

The elementary subjects were in the fourth year of their primary school education. The medium of instruction in their first two years of primary education was Shona; thus the subjects were in the second year in which English was being used as a medium of instruction. The age of the subjects ranged from nine to eleven. There were fourteen subjects (N=14) in the elementary group.

There were sixteen subjects (N=16) in the intermediate group who were all in their second year of secondary education. The youngest member of the intermediate group was thirteen years old and the oldest was fifteen. The data from both groups was elicited towards the end of 1989.

The elementary and intermediate groups were all drawn from rural community schools in Zimbabwe, where the students' main exposure to English was restricted to the classroom, as opposed to their urban counterparts who were exposed to English both in and outside the classroom. There were thus two main reasons for selecting rural students. First, I was interested in examining variability in the production of second language learners whose exposure to English was restricted to the classroom. Second, because rural children's exposure to English was restricted, it was possible to capture learners who were at an elementary level of proficiency.

Data Elicitation

Following is a description of the task which was used to elicit the third person singular. The subjects were asked to listen carefully to a story based on a description of the habitual activities of two brothers, Peter and John (see Appendix for the story). The story describes the activities of the two brothers from the time they leave their home in the morning until their return in the evening on a typical school day. The story was tape recorded and played to the subjects twice. After listening to the story for the second time each subject was given the following instructions:

> John, the elder brother in the story, has just passed his primary school leaving examinations and is now attending a boarding school outside the city. The younger brother will continue attending the same school. Now you tell me what Peter does.

In order to facilitate the production of the third person singular, the subjects were instructed to begin their oral recall with the sentence frame "Every day Peter . . . ." The sentence frame was written on a blackboard.

The task was administered to each subject individually. The same set of instructions was given to all subjects. The instructions were first given in English and subsequently repeated in Shona. It was, however, emphasized that the responses should be in English.

The task was presented as if it were testing how much of the text the subjects could recall, and not their grammatical accuracy, in an effort to divert the subjects' attention away from linguistic form and towards content.[3] The accuracy of the subjects when they were paying a limited amount of attention to linguistic form could then be assessed. After the oral task, each elementary and intermediate student was asked to produce a written version of the oral task. The written task was produced immediately after the oral task. The story was replayed twice to the subjects before the written task.

Data Scoring

The third person morphology was elicited using an oral recall task in which the subjects were expected to narrate the habitual activities of one of the participants in the story. The story consequently created obligatory contexts (o/c's) for the production of the third person singular because in order to respond to the

question of the interviewer, the subject was compelled to use the third person singular. It was therefore felt that the o/c measure was an appropriate measure of analysis. All the other verb forms produced in the narrative were seen as variants of the third person singular from the learner's perspective, because they were produced in an attempt to describe the habitual activities of one of the brothers. In other words, the variants had an identical semantic function. It was expected that the following would be alternants of the third person singular in the production of the learners: *-s*, zero, and *-ing*.

In (1) are some examples of the use of the variants of the third person taken from the data (an asterisk indicates that the italicized form is ungrammatical):

(1) a. He lives in Belvedere.

b. *If he has money left, he *board* a bus.

c. *After school *ending* he boards a bus back home.

The zero and *-ing* were scored as deviant, as were cases in which the *-s* morpheme had been supplied inappropriately, that is, overgeneralized. By counting cases of overgeneralization the analysis avoided inflating the competence of the subjects, as the ability to use a rule involves not only knowing when to apply it, but knowing when not to use it (Long & Sato, 1984; Huebner, 1983; Tarone 1987, 1989).

Each verb form was therefore scored as either correct or deviant. Since repetitions were quite common in the oral narrative, when the same verb was repeated with an identical variant in the same clause, it was counted only once. However, when the same verb was repeated with two different variants, irrespective of whether the first was correct and the second deviant or vice versa, both attempts were included in the scoring--one counted as correct and the other incorrect--as in (2):

(2) a. After school Peter waits, waits for the bus.

b. *. . . and he *see*, sees clothes in the shops.

c. *. . . he plays, *play* football.

Although the discourse fragment in initial position in the narrative was unplanned, the segments in different discourse

positions in the narrative may have differed in terms of their degree of plannedness. The degree of discourse plannedness was assessed on the basis of the speaker's rate of articulation. The articulation rate was calculated following Towell (1987) by simply subtracting the total amount of time spent pausing from the speech rate. The articulation rate was an indirect measurement of the degree of speech automatization (Faerch & Kasper, 1984). A high rate of articulation suggests an increase in the degree of plannedness while a lower rate of articulation suggests a decrease in the degree of plannedness. The rate of articulation was used as an indicator of the degree of plannedness of the discourse. Interest in this study was, however, restricted to unplanned discourse .

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Elementary Subjects

The fourteen subjects from the elementary group produced a total of 125 verbs in o/c's requiring the use of the third person singular. The number of contexts produced varied from three to seven contexts with an average of five contexts per subject. Context was syntactically defined, by referring to the NP preceding the verb, whether realized as an NP, pronoun, or ellipted. A predominant number of the verb tokens in the recall task were uninflected. In other words, the dominant variant was the zero form. In the oral recall task, of the total number of 125 verbs produced there were only eleven *-s* variants and seven *-ing* forms (see Table 1):

TABLE 1

Third Person Singular Forms Used
in Unplanned Discourse

Elementary (N = 14)

	-s	ø	*-ing*	hybrid forms	Total
All contexts	11 (9%)	102 (81%)	7 (6%)	5 (4%)	125 (100%)

Other than the majority of zero forms, there were a few instances in which "hybrid" forms were produced. The hybrid forms consisted of a few occasions in which irregular past tense verb forms were inflected producing verb forms such as *wents*, *gots*, *rans*, and *boughts*.

The occurrence of hybrid forms suggests that irregular past tense verb forms such as *went* and *got* are not seen as past tense verb forms of *go* and *get*. The hybrid forms indicate that the irregular verbs are being treated separately in the lexicon. A similar phenomenon has been reported in child language studies by McDonough (1986).

The verbs attracting the *-s* variant most were *go*, *play*, *live*, and *stay*. This partially indicates that all verbs are not necessarily inflected for the third person singular at the same stage of IL development. The hypothesis that some verbs attract the *-s* variant earlier than others is convincingly demonstrated by Abraham (1984).

However, although the verbs *go* and *play* attracted the *-s* variant, they also occurred with the zero form in identical linguistic contexts. For example, the learners alternated between supplying the *-s* form and zero form when the grammatical subject was a full NP, as demonstrated by the examples in (3) from the elementary subjects:[4]

(3) a. Peter plays with his friends . . .

b. * Peter *play* with his friends after school.

That *go* and *play* attracted both the *-s* and zero forms while other simple verbs such as *eat* and *walk* attracted the zero forms arose only partly from the fact that the two verbs are highly practiced (they occur with a high degree of frequency in the textbooks which constitute the main source of TL input to the subjects). The verbs might also be perceived to have a high communicative value in a formal classroom environment.

However, it is also interesting to note that when the subjects were asked to produce a written version of the oral task the majority of the verb forms were still uninflected. The written version can arguably be regarded as more planned than the oral recall task, because the subjects not only had more time to carry out the task but, more importantly, they were more familiar with the requirements of the task, having previously carried out the task orally.

The predominant use of the zero form may be explained by two factors: the learners' perception of the TL facts and the communicative value of the structure under investigation. In the TL, it is only the third person singular which is inflected, whereas the verb forms for all the other persons are uninflected. This may lead the learners to omit the *-s* when producing the third person singular. On the strength of the relevance principle, the learner may not feel the need to inflect for the third person because the information which the inflection would convey is already carried in the grammatical subject.

The predominant use of the zero form is also corroborated by Fairbanks (1983), who reports that his Japanese learner in casual speech largely used the zero forms. However, it is not clear from the Fairbanks study whether the extent to which the use of the zero form by his subject was facilitated by an interaction of the subject's perception of TL facts and the learner's native language.

Intermediate Subjects

The analysis of the intermediate subjects concentrates on the effects of different linguistic contexts in comparable discourse positions. Not only should studies control for discourse type, but discourse position as well. It is important to emphasize that the analysis in this study is on medially positioned discourse fragments only.

Two types of subject pronouns were identified and coded. For the first type of pronoun the subject pronoun immediately preceded the verb. In the case of the second type of pronoun, the

pronominal subject was separated by an adverbial from the verb. Examples of the two types of pronouns in subject positions in the middle of the narrative are cited in (4):

(4) a. He goes to the shops after school.
b. *He usually *go* to the shops after school.

There were 101 responses of the subject pronoun + verb type. There were only 6 responses of the subject pronoun + adverbial + verb type. Results are shown in Table 2:

TABLE 2

Third Person Singular Forms Used in Contexts
Pronoun + Verb/Pronoun + Adverbial + Verb
in Unplanned Discourse

Intermediate (N = 16)

Contexts	*-s*	ø	*-ing*	Total
Pronoun + Verb	34 (33%)	67 (67%)	0 (0%)	101 (100%)
Pronoun + Adverbial + Verb	1 (25%)	5 (75%)	0 (0%)	6 (100%)

Table 2 displays the overall suppliance of *-s* variants in frequencies and percentages in the two types of pronominal contexts in unplanned discourse. An analysis of the data shows that the experimental subjects were more likely to supply the *-s* variant when the pronoun immediately preceded the verb than when the verb was separated from the pronoun by an adverbial. The results, however, have to be treated with caution because of the very few examples of subject pronoun + adverbial + verb available in the data.

Parallel Coordinate Constructions

This section reports on an investigation into the effects of different linguistic contexts on the suppliance of TL variants. Of the responses collected 74 were produced as parallel coordinate constructions. (5) is an example of a coordinate construction taken from the data produced by the intermediate subjects:

(5) *Every day he climbs a bus and he *get* off at the bus stop near the pub.

The set of coordinate constructions which were investigated was restricted to those sentences in which the conjunction was overtly marked and the grammatical subject was a pronoun. When the subjects did not use a zero anaphor (an ellipted pronoun), the tendency was to use a pronoun. Results are shown in Table 3:

TABLE 3

Third Person Singular Forms Used in
Parallel Coordinate Constructions in Unplanned Discourse

Intermediate (N = 16)

Clause	*-s*	ø	*-ing*	Total
First Clause	18 (49%)	19 (51%)	0 (0%)	37 (100%)
Second Clause	11 (30%)	26 (70%)	0 (0%)	37 (100%)

Table 3 shows the overall suppliance of *-s* variants in first and second clauses in parallel coordinate constructions. The spread of TL variants may be regulated by two factors. First, the amount of attention which a learner pays to linguistic form may fluctuate during the process of production. A learner might not be able to pay as much attention to linguistic form in a second clause as she can in the first clause. The decline in the amount of attention may thus partly explain why the level of grammatical accuracy is lower than in first clauses in parallel coordinate constructions.

constant pressure to attend to other aspects of the task, such as situational appropriacy. Because second language learners have limited amounts of information processing capabilities, long utterances are likely to make heavy demands on their processing abilities (Skehan, 1987). Therefore, because of the heavy demands on their retrieval mechanism, they are likely to attempt to perform what Towell (1987) calls a "balancing act," in which they assign more effort to language retrieval at the expense of other aspects of linguistic cognition such as grammatical accuracy. This balancing act manifests itself in a decline in accuracy in second clauses, implying that attention is clause bound. If attention is clause bound, as I am suggesting, then contrary to Tarone (1979, 1982), the degree of attention a learner pays to speech may not only vary between styles but within the same style depending on the linguistic complexity of the utterances in the style.

The sentences in (6) provide an example of a zero anaphor in a second clause from the production of one intermediate subject:

(6) a. *Everyday he plays football and then *go* home.

b. He likes to play football and after that catches a bus home.

Table 4 shows how the *-s* and zero variants were spread depending on whether the subjects used a zero anaphor or a pronoun in a second clause:

TABLE 4

Third Person Singular Forms Used in Second Clauses in the Contexts Pronoun + Verb/Zero Anaphor + Verb in Unplanned Discourse

Intermediate (N = 16)

Contexts	*-s*	ø	*-ing*	Total
Pronoun + Verb	10 (38%)	2 (17%)	0 (0%)	12 (100%)
Zero Anaphor + Verb	2 (8%)	24 (92%)	0 (0%)	26 (100%)

As Table 4 reveals, the intermediate subjects in this study used more *-s* variants in a second clause when there was a pronoun immediately preceding the second clause verb than when there was a zero anaphor. It is interesting to note the use of more TL variants when there is a pronoun in the second clause than when it has been ellipted. On the basis of the "relevance principle" (Andersen, 1989), one would expect the intermediate subjects to inflect the verb more frequently when the pronoun has been ellipted than when it has been supplied. The relevance principle is based on the assumption that the subjects frequently omit the third persons *-s* because in most cases the information provided by the *-s* is already present in the grammatical subject. If the relevance principle were applicable to the data from the intermediate subjects, we would expect the intermediate subjects to inflect verbs more frequently when using a zero anaphor because the information would be relevant in marking the third person as a grammatical subject. This, however, does not imply, as Poplack (1980) and Young (1988) suggest, that the functional hypothesis as formulated by Kiparsky (1972) is fundamentally flawed. It simply suggests that there is evidence against the redundancy principle when it is applied to second language learners, particularly the group examined in this study. Kiparsky's functional hypothesis was not formulated with second language learners in mind.

Evidence against the relevance principle is not restricted to the third person singular but can also be found in other

morphological areas, particularly in the marking of plurality. Young (1988) reports that the presence of a morphological marker of plurality in the NP favors plural marking on the noun, and, conversely, the absence of a marker of plurality inhibits inflection on the noun. Similarly, in my study the presence of a pronoun or NP triggers inflection, while the presence of a zero anaphor triggers a zero morpheme.[5]

The decline in accuracy between clauses can be traced back to the general preference by the subjects to use zero anaphors instead of pronouns in parallel coordinate constructions. An IL transfer argument is also possible here. In Shona, it is grammatical to supply a person and number prefix on the verb in the first clause and not on the second.

The tendency to inflect the verb when using pronouns rather than zero anaphors may arise from the fact that the presence of a pronoun signals to the learner that the upcoming verb has to be inflected. The signal is likely to be lost in the presence of a zero anaphor. The use of pronouns as signals for inflection may be a strategy which the subjects use arising from their classroom language learning experience. In the language classroom, the subjects are taught verbal paradigms by practicing inflections with pronouns, such as *I play*, *he/she plays*, *we play*, *they play*, and so on. This type of classroom instruction partly accounts for the saliency of pronouns as signalling upcoming *-s* marking.

Ellis (1988) reports that his subjects were more accurate when the grammatical subject was a pronoun than when it was a full grammatical subject. An attempt to examine the effects of NPs and pronouns on verbal inflection was abandoned in my study for the following reasons: First, the intermediate group produced more pronouns than NPs; the few NPs occurred at the beginning of the narrative when the subjects clearly sounded nervous, evident in the way their voices shook. It was felt that variables such as the emotional state of the subjects had intervened, which made it likely to make suspect the results of a simple direct comparison of the findings from the Ellis study.

The other reason which partially explains why it was inappropriate to compare the effects of NPs and pronouns on verbal inflection has to do with the position the NPs and pronouns occupied in the narrative. The position which a linguistic item occupies in a text is likely to have an impact on whether the verb after the subject is inflected or not, or indeed how frequently it is inflected. For example, it is possible to speculate that an NP in grammatical subject position in a segment in discourse-initial

position may have a more powerful effect when attracting verbal inflection than when the same linguistic item occurs in medial and final discourse positions, because the learner's capacity to control verbal inflection may be susceptible to the position the item occupies in the narrative. Discourse-initial, medial and final positions, as pointed out earlier in this paper refer to the position the items occupy in the entire discourse (a multi-sentenced stretch of talk) and not to the position occupied in a single utterance.

The articulation rate followed what might be called a U-shaped planning curve. Learners started off with a high rate of articulation which subsequently declined in the segments in the middle of the narrative. There was, however, a marked increase in the rate of articulation towards the end of the narrative, suggesting an increase in the degree of plannedness towards the end of narrative.

It can be argued that even in unplanned discourse, initial discourse segments are much more salient in the mind of the learner (as evidenced by the high rate of articulation) and hence tend to be much more planned than segments in medial positions. Inasmuch as a learner may produce more planned narratives in discourse-initial positions, it is quite likely that the same learner may also have pre-planned how to bring her discourse to an end, as evidenced by an increase in the rate of articulation. Thus, linguistic contexts in segments which are in final positions in a narrative may be more accurate than those in discourse positions which are in the middle of a narrative because the former are more highly planned than the latter.

CONCLUSION

The experimental subjects of most of the studies on variability come from Asian and Indo-European language backgrounds. It is therefore interesting to report that variability also occurs in the IL speech of speakers of Shona, a language typologically different from both Asian and Indo-European languages.

Level of proficiency seems to be a fairly strong determinant in generating morphological variability. The intermediate group is much more variable than the elementary group. The elementary group has a single invariable rule for verbs: applying the zero morpheme to verbs (e.g., *go*). This rule seems to be prompted by a

cluster of factors. The elementary learner's reading of TL rules leads to the use of the uninflected forms even for the third person. The effects of cognitively deploying the relevance principle inhibit inflection when the information it carries is redundant. The influence of the subjects' native language reinforces the strength of the relevance principle. The elementary learners' performance is not susceptible to differences in linguistic context, unlike the intermediate group.

The elementary and intermediate groups responded to the same factors in different ways. While the elementary learners seek to limit redundancy by omitting the third person singular, the intermediate group works in the opposite direction. They increase redundancy by inflecting the verb when a pronoun is present.

Differences in discourse mode were controlled for because all the data was elicited from an oral recall task. This study suggests that even in the same narrative, different discourse segments may vary in terms of their degree of plannedness; I also propose that differences in plannedness may be indirectly assessed on the basis of the speaker's rate of articulation.

Three main limitations of this study relate to the structure which was selected for analysis and to the way the analysis was carried out. First, future studies may greatly benefit from studying not only the third person singular but also from an analysis of how the ability to inflect the third person singular is connected to the use of pronouns as grammatical subjects. For example, I argue that the pronoun or NP triggers inflection. A contrary position could easily be adopted, namely, that the presence of inflection triggers the suppliance of nouns. The controversy as to whether the presence of pronouns triggers inflection or whether inflection leads to the suppliance of overt grammatical subjects could potentially be resolved, ideally in a longitudinal study which investigates how pronouns and verbal inflection are interrelated, focusing not on a group as a whole but on individuals. The second limitation has to do with the method which was adopted for analysis. The results of the subjects were all added together; thus the possibility of examining whether the pattern observed for the group was also true of each individual was not explored. The third limitation arises from the absence of a more fine-tuned analysis of the data. An expansion of this study might also examine the extent to which variability is a result of gender differences.

NOTES

[1] Shona is a Bantu language spoken mainly in Zimbabwe and is, together with English, one of the country's official languages. It is also the medium of instruction in the early years of primary education in the rural schools, after which the medium switches to English in the latter stages of primary education.

[2] The 1988 Ellis study is different from his 1987 one in which he carefully controls for differences in discourse type by comparing the effects of manipulating planning conditions on IL grammatical accuracy.

[3] Arguably the attempt to manipulate the subjects' performance by diverting their attention away from linguistic form towards the content of the story might not have succeeded as well as originally intended because the language learning environment from which the subjects are drawn is a normative one which emphasizes grammatical accuracy over fluency. Possible indicators that the subjects were paying more attention to linguistic form than expected by the researcher are the number of syllables produced per minute by each subject and the articulation rate. The high frequency of repetitions, self-corrections, and lengthening of syllables reflects a fairly high degree of monitoring during actual production.

[4] The observation that verbs such as *go* and *play* attract the *-s* variant and the zero form may reflect variation among individual learners in the elementary group, as opposed to general patterns across the whole group. If one or two learners could have very different IL systems, this would confound the data.

[5] Contrary to the argument presented in this paper that the presence of pronouns or nouns triggers inflection, Jaeggli & Safir (1989) argue that it is the presence of inflection which triggers the suppliance of nouns.

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APPENDIX

The Elicitation Instrument

Instructions

You are going to hear a story about two brothers. Listen carefully because the story is going to be played to you only twice. After the second replay you will be asked some questions.

The Stimulus Story

My name is Peter and I've an elder brother called John. We *live* in Belvedere. We both *go* to the same school together by bus and *get* off at the Police Station near the beer hall. Before entering school we *visit* a grocery shop where we *buy* some buns and bottles of coca cola. As soon as we *arrive* at school we *join* different classes. John is in grade 7 and I am in grade 5.

On most days we don't *meet* until lunch time. I *eat* my lunch with John, and then we *play* a game of football with our friends.

When classes *finish*, we *meet* outside the school gates but we don't *go* straight home. Instead John and I *walk* to the shopping centre. We *watch* people passing and *visit* some clothing shops. We *don't* usually *buy* anything, but just *admire* the clothes. If we still have money we *get* on a bus and *go* back home.

Instructions Given After Second Replay

John, the elder brother in the story, has just passed his primary school leaving examinations and is now attending a boarding school outside the city. The younger brother will continue attending the same school. Now you tell me what Peter does, beginning with "Every day Peter . . . " We are not interested in how grammatically accurate your English is; we want to know how much information you can recall in English.