

Study on Acquisition of English Functional Category T Based on Syntax-morphology Interface

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Abstract

Under the framework of feature theory, the study investigates the acquisition of functional category T by English learners from the perspective of syntax-morphology mapping based on the feature reassembling hypothesis, and explores the influencing factors. Taking non-English majors with three different English levels in a university in Zhejiang as subjects, the study analyzes their grasp of functional category T-related features in translation tasks and grammatical judgment tasks. The results show that: the accuracy of the affix mark is positively correlated with the language level of the subjects. Each group can better grasp the regular and non-finite sentences, as well as the position of the thematic verbs in the regular sentences. The results could serve as proofs that English learners already have knowledge of functional T features while morphological variation problems are mainly at the syntax-morphology interface; the complexity of feature assembly are positively related with the mapping from syntax to morphology; interlingual differences, stress and the amount of information processed can also interfere with the mapping.

Keywords

Feature; Functional category T; Feature reassembly; Syntax-morphology mapping.

1. INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of the second language functional category T is one of the common problems of second language learners. There are corresponding rules of morphological inflection in their grammatical knowledge, but the functional affixes in surface syntax they output have variations. The variability is mainly reflected in the absence or misuse of inflected morphological markers of the functional category T in the interlanguage. Compared with English, Chinese is a poorly morphed language. The features of the functional category T have specific inflections in the surface representation of English syntax, but there is no corresponding specific morphological realization in Chinese. Are these features unable to be acquired by Chinese English learners? If this problem can be solved, we could analyze more clearly whether UG is accessible to second language learners. In addition, from a micro perspective, under the interface theory, the discussion on the problem of morphological mapping and feature reassembling in second language acquisition is also one of the research focuses. This article analyzes the learner's mastery of the knowledge of the functional category T and explores the factors that affect the acquisition by examining the markers of the relevant features of the functional category T in the interlanguage of Chinese English learners.

2. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

For a long time, language acquisition researchers have been paying attention to the essential difference between second language acquisition and first language acquisition: although adults spend a lot of time and energy to learn a second language, the effect is still not comparable to

that of native speakers. In comparison, the process of children's acquisition of their own mother tongue is much easier. This difference has led to the research on the causes of general failures in second language acquisition under the theory of generative linguistics. From a macro perspective, the researches explore whether Chomsky's UG is accessible in the second language grammar, and whether the second language learner can successfully reset the parameters. In the 1990s, Chomsky proposed in the Minimalist Program that functional categories and their features are the root of inter-language variations (parameter variations), and second language acquisition actually becomes a process of resetting feature values [1]. In recent years, under the guidance of feature theory, second language acquisition has gradually shifted from macroscopic research to microscopic research. The resetting of microscopic parameters (various features) in language to explain the phenomenon of variability has become a research focus.

2.1. Feature Theory

With the development of the Minimalist Program, according to Chomsky, language is composed of lexicon and computing system. Lexicon includes lexical categories and functional categories. Formal features are regarded as the most basic unit of language structure [2]. Although feature sets are considered universal, not all languages activate or organize features in the same way, which creates differences between languages. Chomsky proposed that language acquisition involves two processes: feature selection and feature assembly [3]. The acquisition of a language does not necessarily select all the features in the UG feature inventory, but based on the language input, select the appropriate features necessary to construct the lexical items to form a feature set. For example, the features of functional category T, such as tense, number, gender, and case, have strong or weak values. The selected features are reassembled on specific lexical items, the syntactic structure is mapped to the morphology of lexical item, and finally a structural representation that matches the meaning and form is derived [4]. In this way, the parameter differences between languages will be derived from feature selection and feature assembly methods. As a result, researchers have diverged on the causes of second language impairments, forming two major viewpoints: the failure of feature selection and the failure of feature assembly.

2.2. Feature Selection

The "Representational Deficit Hypothesis" believes that the second language impairment is caused by the failure of parameterized feature selection, and the unselected second language features in the native language cannot be acquired after the critical period [5]. That is to say, if the feature in the native language does not have the morphological variation of the corresponding feature in the second language, then the second language learner will not be able to select this feature, and then unable to correctly reset the parameters. For example, Chinese are non-tense language. There is no distinction between finite and non-finite forms [6]. Tenses are reflected in the use of adverbs or auxiliary words of time, such as "guoqu", "zheng" and "le". According to this hypothesis, Chinese English learners will have difficulty in acquiring the morphological features of verbs, because they cannot distinguish between English finite clauses and non-finite ones. The unvalued [finite] and [tense] features of English functional category T cannot be chosen or form a grammatical representation of the second language syntax.

2.3. Feature Assembly

Lardiere believed that the view of feature selection as parameter setting is too "simplistic", especially the view which equates the manifestation of inflection with the acquisition of feature values of functional categories is questionable [7]. She believed that the acquisition of inflection forms is independent of the acquisition of syntactic ability. The feature reassembly hypothesis believes that even if the learner's knowledge of the target feature is not deficit, the second language grammar may be biased, which indicates that the source of the second language

acquisition problem may be located in the process of "feature assembly" [4][7]. The learner needs to split the feature combination of the native language, then reorganize it according to the feature assembly method of the second language, and finally map it onto the specific items. Moreover, the difficulty of acquisition largely depends on the complexity of features and the diversity of feature assembly.

Some scholars have conducted empirical research based on the feature reassembly hypothesis. Y. Song's research showed that the [plural] and [count] features in the second language can be successfully assembled by Korean English learners [8]. Z. Mai & B. Yuan, taking the English it-cleft structure and the corresponding Chinese "shì...de" cleft construction as the starting point, investigated the acquisition of Chinese features by native English-speaking adult learners. The survey showed that the subjects can successfully map the corresponding structure, but in terms of [past] and [telic] feature reassembling, they show different the development stages [9]. These two studies both have conclude that second language learners can successfully acquire a certain feature or structure, which confirms the feature assembly hypothesis, but hasn't further explained the reasons for the failure of second language acquisition from the opposite side. However, we think that finding the reason for the failure of second language acquisition can better explain the explanatory power of the hypothesis. Moreover, neither of them is based on native Chinese speakers. In particular, the subjects of the former are only advanced English learners and they adopted a single task, which could affect the relative comprehensiveness and universality of the research results.

Domestic language researchers are also investigating the second language acquisition situation of Chinese English learners through empirical research under the framework of this hypothesis. For example, A. J. Liu et al. explored the factors in Chinese English learners' article acquisition and proposed that the complexity of features negatively influences the reassembling of features and causes difficulties in learning [10]. But their research hasn't taken the factors such as the amount of information that needs to be processed in the language output tasks into consideration. Z. Li et al. paid attention to the acquisition of tense and aspect category by Chinese English learners. Their research has shown that the subjects have a weak grasp of the progressive aspect, and the difficulty of feature acquisition is related to the complexity of feature reassembly [11]. This study adopted a preference choice task and used a rating scale to measure the degree of preference of the subjects. But this measurement possibly makes subjects rely on guessing and inertness, which makes the results deviate from the original intention.

Previous studies have focused on the acquisition of specific syntax and vocabulary items. In view of this, we consider adopting different tasks to examine the use of functional category T by subjects of different levels to test the results of previous studies and further explore whether there are other influencing factors. Although J. H. Jing and C. X. Tang have studied the use of "do" inflectional form by middle school students [12], they only focused on analyzing whether the interlanguage grammar is impaired, but lacked an in-depth discussion of the factors that cause the problem.

3. RESEARCH

Our research will take the perspective of feature reassembly, and answer the following questions by examining the use of the [\pm finite] features, EPP features, Φ -features and [\pm tense] features of functional category T by Chinese English learners from different English proficiency levels. Here come the two questions:

- a. Can the subjects acquire the relevant syntactic features of English functional category T?

b. In the process of feature reassembly, how does the complexity of reassembling affect the subjects' acquisition of functional category T? In addition to feature complexity, are there any other influencing factors?

3.1. Participants and Methods

Participants in this study are non-English majors from a university in Zhejiang. They are required to complete two written grammar tests. They are divided into three groups of different English proficiency based on their scores of the college English test Band 4 and Band 6. The first group of 25 students with scores of less than 400 in CET4 is the elementary group, the second group of 25 students with scores of 450-480 in CET4 is the intermediate group, and the third group of 25 students with scores of 450 or more in CET6 is considered as the advanced group. All subjects started their English learning at Grade Three of elementary school under English learning environment in China.

The study requires the subjects to complete 10 Chinese-English translations and 30 grammatical judgments within 45 minutes. The test questions refer to the designs in J. M. Zhang's and X. J. Zhu's studies [13-14]. The Chinese-English translations mainly examine the inflections of verbs (-s/es, -d/ed, irregular inflection) and the morphological variations of verbs in non-finite sentences, with the purpose of analyzing the consistency mark of [finite], [tense], F feature and Φ -feature in the subjects' interlanguage.

For grammatical judgments, if the students think the sentence is grammatical, tick it, otherwise cross it. If they are not sure whether the sentence meets the requirements, draw a circle. In addition, they need to correct sentences that they think are not grammatical. If the judgment and correction are both right, 3 points are awarded. If the judgement is checked as an error, it will be 0. If the judgment is right but the correction is wrong, the score is also 0. If the judgment is right, but the correction given is not completely right, 2 points are awarded. If it is an unsure judgement, award 1.

3.2. Research Results

After the test is completed, 75 copies of all test papers are recovered, all of which are valid. SPSS21 is then applied to analyzing data.

3.2.1 Marking of Verb Inflection

Compared with Chinese, English is a morphologically rich language. As long as the main sentence or clause is finite, the verb will have inflectionally morphological variations. Table 1 shows, in the task of translating finite sentences, the scores awarded to the three groups of subjects who correctly used inflection affixes, the scores when inflection affixes should be used, and the ratios of the two. We use group 1, group 2, and group 3 to represent the elementary group, intermediate group and advanced group respectively.

Table 1. Syntactic-morphological consistency marking in translating present tense

Group	-s	-ed	Total
1	57/195(29.23%)	207/333(62.16%)	264/528(50%)
2	154/196(78.57%)	248/320(77.5%)	402/516(77.91%)
3	146/161(90.68%)	326/343(95.04%)	472/504(93.65%)

Table 1 tells us that in the primary group, the correct marking rates of the inflection form in the present tense and past tense sentences are 29.23% and 62.16%, respectively, and the intermediate group get 78.57% and 77.5%. The correct marking rates of the advanced group are significantly higher than those of the other two.

In order to make full use of the data and get more in-depth research results, this study uses one-way ANOVA to analyze the accuracy of syntactic-morphological consistency marking of verbs in the translation task of finite sentences by the three groups of students. Table 2 gives us the result that there are significant differences between groups in the accuracy of verb morphological variations in terms of present tense. ($F=142.387$, $p=.000<0.05$).

Table 2. One-way ANOVA of Syntactic-morphological consistency marking in translating present tense

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	5.168	2	2.584	142.387	.000
Within groups	1.307	72	.018		
Total	6.474	74			

We further perform LSD multiple comparisons on the data of correctly using the verb inflectional form-s/es, and the results show that there are significant differences between the groups ($p=.000$), which implies that higher English proficiency can help participants reduce the error rate of verb inflectional marking in present tense.

In the same way, a data analysis is conducted on the accuracy of syntactic-morphological markers in translating the past tense verbs in finite context.

Table 3. One-way ANOVA of Syntax-morphology consistency marking in translating past tense

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	1.402	2	.701	51.147	.000
Within groups	.987	72	.014		
Total	2.389	74			

The data in Table 3 surely presents that there is a significant difference among the three groups in the accuracy of syntactic-morphological marking of past tense verbs ($F=51.147$, $p=.000<0.05$). And the multiple comparison results show that there are significant differences between groups ($p=.000<0.05$) [15]. This shows that the students in the advanced group are far better than the students in the other two groups in correctly using the morphologically inflected forms of past tense verbs.

In general, by investigating the marking of inflectional affixes of verbs in finite sentences in the translation task, it can be concluded that the elementary group is most likely to have syntactic-morphological inconsistencies. However, as the grammatical level improves, the subjects are more likely to gradually improve their performance on using inflectional affixes. It can be inferred from the test results that both the advanced group and the elementary group have actually mastered the grammatical rules of present tense and past tense in the second language, but they miss the knowledge of reflecting the syntactic rules of verbs on lexical morphology, which results in the failure of producing correct morphological forms of verbs. It can be seen that the problem that leads to morphological variation appears on the syntactic-morphological interface. However, with the improvement of language proficiency, subjects can more proficiently select and assemble the syntactic-morphological consistency features of functional category T in the process of deep syntactic computation, and their surface syntactic performance become closer to the result of syntax operation of second language. All in all, the mastery of the assembly methods of second language features increases with the improvement of grammatical level.

3.2.2 The Use of Finite Verbs in Non-finite Sentences

Chinese syntax has no distinction between finiteness and non-finiteness. Is it true that Chinese English learners cannot choose the [finite] feature of English functional category T? Table 4 shows the scores awarded for correctly using verbs after modal verbs, auxiliary verbs, and “to” respectively, and the scores when verbs should be correctly used. The percentages refer to the ratios of the two (verbs correctly be used and should be used).

Table 4. Use of non-finite verbs in translating non-finite sentences

Group	modal verb+	auxiliary verb+	to+
1	112/121(92.5%)	38/38(100%)	132/137(96.3%)
2	117/123(95.1%)	34/34(100%)	142/149(95.3%)
3	112/114(98.2%)	41/41(100%)	173/176 (98.3%)

The data in Table 4 displays that in translating non-finite sentences, the subjects score higher in all the three cases of using the verb. Especially in the case of using the verb form after the auxiliary verb, the three groups of subjects all reached 100% correctness, which basically explains that they have better distinguished English finiteness and non-finiteness, and they have mastered the knowledge of the correct use of non-finite verbs. We use a chi-square test on the data of two items that do not get a perfect score, and have found that there is no significant difference in the use of modal verbs + non-finite verbs among the three groups (Pearson chi-square value was 0.102, $p=0.950$); There is also no significant difference in “to” + non-finite verb use (Pearson chi-square value is 0.040, $p=0.980$). This analysis can show that for Chinese English learners, the finite and non-finite contexts are distinguishable, and students of different English proficiency will not arbitrarily use finite verbs in non-finite sentences. It can be inferred that the second language learners have fully mastered the relevant knowledge and can successfully select the [finite] feature of the functional category T and map it to the lexical items.

3.2.3 Position of Thematic Verbs in Finite Sentences

The F feature of English functional category T not only requires that there must be an explicit subject in English, but also that the thematic verb must remain in the VP. In order to observe the F feature markers of the functional category T in the interlanguage, we have analyzed the students' performance in the grammatical judgment tasks, mainly focusing on the positional relationship of thematic verbs with adverbs, negative words and their position movement in questions.

Table 5. Scores for grammatical judgement

Group	NEG+ V.	V.+NEG	Adv.+V.	V.+Adv.	V. in-situ	V. raising
1	5.92	1.08	5.08	0.92	0.80	3.20
2	6.18	0.82	5.84	0.16	0.68	3.32
3	6.68	0.32	5.88	0.12	0.32	3.68

The data in Table 5 shows the placement of correct and incorrect positions of the thematic verbs with negatives, adverbs, and in questions. It could be obviously observed that there are significant differences in scores of every pair. To be specific, the subjects are able to grasp the positional relationship of the thematic verbs in the finite sentences more successfully, and the correct rates are much higher than the error rates. This is a solid evidence to reflect that English

learners have a good grasp of the F feature knowledge, and will not randomly change the position of the thematic verbs.

According to the “feature selection hypothesis”, the F feature of English functional category T requires that a sentence must have an explicit subject. However, an empty subject is permissible in Chinese, which clearly contradicts with that in English. Hence, it is plainly speculated that Chinese English learners will fail in feature selection and approve empty subjects in finite context of their interlanguage.

In order to test whether this speculation is correct, we have counted the personal pronouns as the subject in the translation tasks (excluding “you” for it can be either subject or object). It has been found that the nominative cases appear in the designated position of the finite sentences, and even the nominative case “it” is correctly filled in the sentence where Chinese permits empty subject. This reflects that the students have completely mastered the related knowledge and successfully selected and reassembled the F features.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Success or Failure in the Acquisition of the Functional Category T of the Second Language

Whether the English learners can acquire the relevant syntactic features of the English functional category T is the first question we have to answer. Through the application of translation and grammatical judgment tasks to test the learners’ marking of the related features, we could see, based on the results, that except for the elementary group’s poor grasp of the feature combination of functional category T ([+tense]; [+3rd person]; [+number]; [+EPP]), the syntactic representation of other features can be better reflected in their interlanguage. And with the improvement of their language ability, learners are able to better output the features, which indicates that the learners’ interlanguage grammar levels can follow syntax operation mechanism of the second language. In other words, they can select appropriate features, reassemble them and map the corresponding inflections to the morphology, and as a result, gradually approach the psychological representation of the second language syntax. Consequently, syntactically correct and morphologically appropriate form can be successfully output. Therefore, the interlanguage development of learners presents a gradual development trend, which could reflect on the case that the accuracy of the students’ marking of the functional category T features gradually increases with the improvement of their grammatical knowledge.

4.2. Factors in the Acquisition of Second Language Functional Category T

The second research question is about the influencing factors of the acquisition of functional category T. Can our research confirm the relationship between the complexity of feature reassembly and acquisition mentioned in the previous literature? In addition to feature complexity, are there any other factors playing a role in the acquisition process? The results of this study support the feature reassembly hypothesis, and believe that the complexity of features will diversify feature assembly and increase the difficulty of acquisition as well.

According to the Minimalist Program, as a core category, the functional category T has [finite], [tense], [EPP], and [person], [number], Φ -features, etc. Among them, [finite] or [tense] features are interpretable features, while Φ -features and [EPP] are uninterpretable features [1]. Feature checking must be carried out between T and V, for uninterpretable features must be assigned value by the corresponding interpretable features. V carries uninterpretable tense features that have not been assigned value, and T carries interpretable tense features. The interpretable tense feature on T assigns value to the uninterpretable feature on V, and the uninterpretable

tense feature is checked. The two features match each other, and the uninterpretable feature is deleted after being checked.

Chinese English learners need to split the formal feature representation that have been acquired in the Chinese way, and select the formal features of the English functional category T, reassemble them according to the computing requirements of the second language, and remap them to thematic verbs or auxiliary verbs. For example, when the position of the Specifier of TP is third-person singular, T needs to undergo Agreement to check the uninterpretable features by raising *v* to T or [present] position, and delete the Φ -feature of functional category T. If the deep syntactic features can be successfully reflected on the specific lexical items, the explicit marks of the finite verbs on the surface syntactic representation are -s /-es affixes. However, in Chinese finite clauses, the combination of original verbs and time adverbs expresses different time concepts, and the above features are not selected when computing. Therefore, when Chinese English learners learn English functional category T, they must master its related features and their interpretability, so that they can recognize, reassembly or raising the related features in accordance with the English grammatical requirements.

The different combination of features will make the lexical items take on different morphological forms. For example, only when the [number: singular] feature of the English functional category T is combined with the [+present] and [+3rd person] features, the specific verb items have the explicit morphological affix -s/-es. But there's no difference in morphological inflection when the [number: singular] feature is combined only with the [+past] feature and with the combination of [+present] and [+3rd person] features, that is, in both cases, the thematic verbs appear in +ed form. Thus, learners generally choose more features in the present tense than in the past tense when acquiring the English functional category T. Subsequently, the complexity of assembling features in present tense is greater than that in past tense, which makes the acquisition of present tense more difficult. This conclusion can also better explain what has been shown in Table 1, the students' performance on verb marking of past tense is better than that of present tense. According to the research results, we conclude that the acquisition difficulty of the second language functional category T is directly and positively correlated with the reassembling complexity of formal features.

One point that cannot be ignored is that in the translation test, the learners sometimes cannot perfectly present the inflection of the surface morphology, such as writing "drove" as "driven" and "bought" as "buyed". These cases of missing inflection affixes or producing wrong inflections cannot be simply attributed to the damage of the learner's second syntactic system. On the contrary, these mistakes offer an evidence to show that the subjects have mastered the [past] feature. It is very likely that the learner did not associate the abstract syntactic features with the specific lexical items, thus the syntax is not perfectly mapped to the morphology. This may lead us to an inference that the problem lies in the syntactic-morphological interface. However, according to research data, as learners' language proficiency improves, their mastery is also improving, indicating that the ability of feature reassembly could be gradually developed, and in the same manner, the syntactic-morphological mapping ability will increase as learners' language proficiency improves. It is consistent with the research results of Li Zhi et al. on tense and aspect category [11].

Although we speculate based on previous studies that interlingual differences will affect the acquisition of functional category T, the greater the interlingual differences there are, the greater the impact they have. But what is interesting is that there are obvious interlingual differences between Chinese and English in the form of finiteness, the students are able to distinguish almost perfectly finiteness from non-finiteness and correctly output verb morphology in the two tasks. The most convincing thing is that the learners do not lose the subject in the target sentences where the subjects are allowed to be missing in Chinese. On the

contrary, they fill in the subject position with the virtual subject “it”. Therefore, from the results of the research on the use of non-finite verbs and the position of the thematic verbs in finite sentences, interlingual differences have a much weaker influence on acquisition than feature complexity.

By comparing the use of verb inflection morphological affixes in the two tasks, it is found that the performance of morphological marking of different language proficiency groups on grammatical judgment tasks exceeds their performance on translation tasks. As case in point is that, the students write “He give up the opportunity to study in this university” in translation task, but the same students pointed out the mistake in the sentence “Ellis give a paper to his teacher yesterday” and changed “give” to the correct form “given” in this context. Regarding the form of irregular verbs, the correct rates of grammatical judgment tasks are higher than that of translation tasks. It possibly shows that the amount of information in processing tasks would affect the syntactic-morphological mapping. The possible reason may be that the students have to consider the semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic differences between the native language and the target language when doing translation, which has far exceeded the concerns that the students have to consider in syntactic judgment tasks. Therefore, when the students are translating, because of the heavy task and the various factors that they have to take into account, they are more likely to make mistakes in outputting the right lexical morphology. It may help to explain the inconsistent reactions to the same syntactic representation in the translation and the grammatical judgment. So, it could be safely inferred that the amount of information and processing pressure of the task would interfere with the syntactic-morphological mapping, and in order to avoid mistakes when uncertain, learners would prefer to adopt the default form of the original verb.

This research analyzes the performance of Chinese English learners’ acquisition of functional category T, and finds that learners can successfully acquire knowledge of functional category T. The morphological variation originates from the mapping problem in the syntax-morphology interface. The inequality in the realization of the specific morphology of the thematic verbs indicates that the diversification of features leads to complex recombination, which also interferes with the syntax-morphology mapping, and thus it is reflected on the students’ different morphological marking performance. However, with the improvement of English proficiency, the marking of inflectional affixes in interlanguage has been improved. This reflects that the learner’s ability to reassembling features could be gradually improved, the syntactic-morphological mapping would also become perfect, and the realization of the syntactic morphology would also be close to the target language.

The study has further found that interlingual differences would affect the accurate output of morphology, but its influence is far less powerful than the complexity of feature reassembly. In addition, when learners have acquired knowledge of the second language functional category T, the amount of information processing and the difficulty of the task would also probably affect the perfect mapping of morphology.

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