

Fossilization in the Learning of the Present Simple Tense

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Abstract

This paper presents cognitive problems of the Urdu-medium learners in their usage of the present simple tense. The term used to label the distorted concepts is fossil. This study was based on Corder's framework of error analysis. The participants were 25 grade-XIII students of an Urdu-medium college. A test of Urdu sentences was administered, and later unstructured interviews were conducted to know the learners' reasons for their faulty usage. Contrastive analysis of the sentences in the test was also performed. The findings of the study were: one-to-one correlations of NL¹ and TL² items, fixation of a specific linear order, confused time scale, and overlooking of intervening items.

Key words: Fossil, Errors, Transfer, Overgeneralization

Introduction

As teachers of English working in various settings and systems, we have found the teaching of tenses as a challenging task. In order to know the hurdles in the learners' mental processing of the tenses, the researchers conducted an interview-based study and tried to access the cognitive reasons for their errors. The idea was that the learners' reasons might help to understand the nature of their distorted concepts, termed as fossils (Selinker, 1972), and to devise more effective strategies to inculcate the concept of tenses. This study latter appeared as a PhD thesis (Khurshid, 2010). Huge data were gathered that accounted for the learners' errors in the usage of English tenses. The current paper provides reasons for the errors of the present simple tense only.

The study seeks answer to the following question:

- What confusion in the learners' understanding hinders them from the correct usage of the present simple tense?

Literature Review

Theoretical Background

The present study is based on Corder's framework of error analysis (Ellis, 1994). This framework suggests four steps of error analysis:

1. *Identification of errors* means selecting the faulty part of the text.
2. *Description of errors* refers to guessing what the learner meant.
3. *Explanation of errors* requires suggesting plausible reason for the error.
4. *Classification of errors* means arranging the errors of similar reasons under one heading.

¹ Native Language.

² Target Language.

Ellis (1994) describes three stages which are common in the NL and TL development. They are: *the silent period*, *formulaic speech*, and *structural and semantic simplification*. The evidence of the use of formulaic speech was found in the present study. It refers to a word combination, or one-to-one correlation that the learners repeat frequently. Lyon (1968, p. 177) believes '*Formulaic expressions are learnt as analysable wholes and employed on particular occasions*'.

Steinberg (1993) gave the concept of *lateralization*. He said that a baby's mind lies as a single whole. Hemispheric split appears in it during the process of maturation. He termed the division of brain into halves as lateralization. Brown (1994) connected this idea with second language learning. He thought that in the early childhood mind existed in the flexible state. Language learnt during that time is different from the language learnt as an adult when the process of lateralization becomes completed. Ipek (2009) writes that at this latter stage, the learners tend to 'overanalyse' the language. The researchers have also traced the evidence of over-analysis in his data.

Selinker (1972, p. 215) gave the concept of *fossilization* in his seminal article on *interlanguage*. Fossils have variously been defined but to satisfy the needs of the current study the concept of 'half concept' or 'distorted concepts' is sufficient. Interlanguage is the hypothetical intermediary stage between NL and TL.

Richards (1971) describes the following sources and causes of 'competence errors':

- *Interference errors* occur because of L1 interference.
- *Intralingual errors* occur because of the faulty generalization or incomplete application of the rules of TL.
- *Developmental errors* occur when a learner tries to form a faulty hypothesis about the TL because of his insufficient experience.

But most of the researchers consider the difference between intralingual errors and developmental errors 'curious' and prefer to operate between transfer errors and intralingual errors (Ellis, 1994, p. 59).

- Richards (1971) sub-divides the intralingual errors into four categories:
- *Overgeneralization* refers to the misapplication of a rule of TL. For example, **She can drives a car*. The merging of two rules may over generalize some structures. The rules underlying the sentences *she can drive a car* and *she drives a car* merge to produce the above faulty sentence.
- *Ignorance of rule restriction* may cause errors. For example, **he made me tosing* results from the over-extension of a rule to *he wanted me to sing*.
- *Errors of transitional competence* occur because of 'failure to fully develop a structure'. Its example is the learners' avoidance of auxiliary inversion in the interrogative sentences of English.
- *A false concept hypothesized* refers to the situation when a learner cannot fully differentiate the identical rules in TL and applies them redundantly. For example, **he was met me in the college*.

The categories described above are good to read but not easy to apply. Dulay and Burt (1974) suggested three broad categories:

- *Developmental errors* are similar to NL acquisition.
- *Interference errors* reflect the NL structure.
- *Unique errors* are neither developmental nor interference.

Dulay and Burt's categories are not easy to apply either. Because of the confusions inherent in the above two systems, the researchers preferred to use his own terminology to describe his data. However, the researchers have also referred to the above terminology, where it was relevant.

Contemporary Research

Bennui (2008) analyzed the errors of 28 Thai students of grade-III who were studying English as a minor course. He began with the assumption that L1 interference was one of the chief factors in learning L2. He combined four approaches: contrastive analysis, error analysis, interlanguage analysis, and contrastive rhetoric for analysis. To collect data he used a test consisting of two questions: one about simple and compound structures, and the other about paragraph writing. The list of errors was long. But two of them coincided with the present study:

- Direct translation from NL (Thai) to English
- Faulty subject-verb agreement.

Chan (2004) carried out quantitative research on 710 Chinese adult learners of English. The data from interviews with the students confirmed that EFL students first called upon their NL before producing their English writings. Moreover, most of the errors were closely related to the learners' NL. Chan's research highlights the importance L1 interference in the learning of TL. The current study also displays similar findings.

Chen (1998) studied Taiwanese students. He concluded that his participants were weak at learning English verbs because their Native language, Mandarin, lacked inflections on verbs. Errors because of transfer of verb inflections have also been pointed out in the present study.

Sridhar (1996) studied Kannada (a Dravidian language) speaking Indian female undergraduates of Bangalore. He noted that most of the errors had occurred because of transfer from Kannada language. One type belongs to *subject-verb, and number disagreement*. This error appears in the following ways:

- Singular subject and plural auxiliary.
- Plural subject and singular auxiliary.
- Singular subject and plural pronoun or vice versa. (p.61)

The present study contains data based on the above mentioned errors. The researchers have tried to describe their reasons too.

Rehman (1990) describes the errors of the advanced learners of English in Pakistan. His long list carried the following errors too: *avoidance of auxiliary inversion; omission of dummy auxiliaries; lack of subject-verb agreement*. Rehman describes these errors as the part of process of creolization of British English in Pakistan. However, the researchers assigned them cognitive reasons.

Talif and Edwin (1989) applied Corder's (1967) technique of Error Analysis. They studied the language errors of the Form Four students of Malaysia. They collected data and established the percentage of errors in different areas. But no reasons for the errors were suggested.

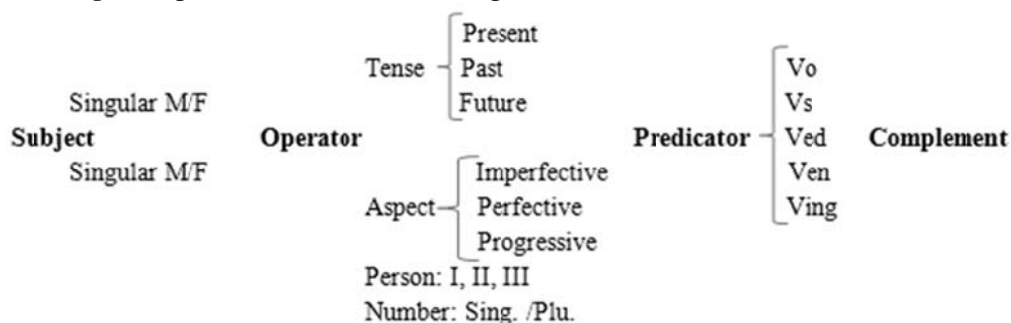
Raza (2016) replicated Khurshid (2010). He closely focused the present simple and the present perfect tenses. He classified his reasons in eleven main categories. Eight of these categories, he has borrowed from the main researcher's thesis. This suggests that the classification of errors which the researcher arrived at in 2010 is valid still in 2016.

Most of the studies quoted above support the idea that mother tongue has an important role in shaping the grammatical structure of target language, especially, if it happens to be the foreign language. The errors pointed out by most of the researchers are similar but their reasons are not suggested. In continuation of the pieces of research mentioned above, the current study undertakes to suggest the cognitive reasons for the learners' errors.

Research Methodology

The researchers carried out the current study in Govt. S. E. College, Bahawalpur where, as in every public sector college of Pakistan, English is taught by Grammar Translation Method (GTM). The research participants were 25 adult learners of grade-XIII. Failing to teach tenses many times, the researchers tried to study his students' concepts of tenses.

He started his work with the supposition that the learners had too many choices at every slot which they could not handle properly and committed errors. This idea was drawn from the systemic grammar (Muir, 1972; Berry, 1975, 1977). The researchers framed a model of the paradigmatic choices which is given below:



Model of Paradigmatic Choices in the Declarative Mood

Both the idea and terminology of the above model are borrowed from the systemic approach. However, the terms *Imperfective*, *Perfective*, *Progressive* are borrowed from Generative Grammar (Butt and Ramchand, 2003; Butt and Rizvi, 2008). *Operator* refers to the auxiliary verb, *predicator* means the main verb, and *complement* stands for object NP. *Vo*, *Vs*, *Ved*, *Ven*, *Ving* are abbreviations for the variants of main verb (Leech, 1982). Their examples are: *go*, *goes*, *went*, *gone*, *going* respectively.

The above model led the researchers to design a test that carried a variety of grammatical choices in the Indicative Mood¹ (Halliday, 1994). The researchers prepared an Urdu-to-English translation based test. Each tense was tested in the affirmative, negative, polarity-interrogative, and wh-interrogative structures. The written answers of the participants were assessed, the errors were identified, and the participants were asked to describe their concepts. The researchers took care to include the easiest sentences in the test. Most of the sentences in the test were borrowed from the grammar workbook of grade-IX (Chishti and Hashmi, 2010).

The framework used for analysis was Corder's theory of error analysis that consisted of the identification of errors, description of errors, explanation of errors, and classification of errors. The population of the study was a public sector college of Bahawalpur. The participants belonged to grade-XIII. They were grouped into a convenience sample. The instruments of data collection were a test, and unstructured interviews.

¹Combined name for Declarative and Interrogative moods (Halliday, 1994).

Reliability of the Test was determined by matching the errors with the findings of other researchers whose detail is given in the section literature review. Validity of the findings was strengthened by the results of two more studies Ali (2015) and Raza (2016) who replicated the researcher's main study Khurshid (2010) and explored the reasons in different institutions.

The main study (Khurshid, 2010) tested all the twelve tenses, but the current paper presents the reasons for the errors in the usage of the present simple tense only.

Data Analysis

Corder's framework (Ellis, 1994) was followed for data analysis. Contrastive analysis of Urdu and English structures, and the participants' reasons were used to describe errors and to suggest reasons for errors. With the help of the above mentioned technique, the following reasons were discovered. [ʃʊ'ka]

Inter-lingual Correlations

This is an incomplete concept in which learners make one-to-one correlation between the items, feature, and concepts of NL and TL. In the original study, two major types of Inter-lingual Correlations were listed: one pertains to the correlates of prepositions and the other to those of auxiliaries.

English Correlates of Urdu Auxiliaries and suffixes

This half concept, or fossil (Selinker, 1972), arises when learners do one-to-one translation of auxiliaries and/or suffixes of NL and TL. Bennui (2008) has also pointed out the issue of direct translation. The researchers noted that this fossil appeared in two ways:

Correlation of [hɛ], [hẽ], [hũ] with is/are/am

The variants of the present tense *be* in Urdu are [hɛ], [hẽ], [hũ]. They are normally translated as *is*, *are*, *am* respectively. The learners often over-extend the above correlation to the English present simple tense. The researchers noted 5 errors of this type in 3 learners' answers:

7.1a P1¹

[mera dost - mudʒ-e hameʃa Atʃ-a məʃtər-a - de -t- -a h -ε]
 P.pos.m.1.s. friend.3.s.Nom. P.1.s. Obj. always good.m.s. advice. m.3.s.Nom. give.Imp.m.s. be.pres.3.s.
 My friend always gives me good advice.

Akm: *My friend is[hɛ] always give^s me good advice.*

7.3p P1

[kɪja voh - rozana do seb - kʰa:-t- -a h -ε]?
 Int. P.3.Nom. daily two.m.s.Nom. apples.m.s.Nom. eat.Imp.m.s. be.pres.3.s.?
 Does he eat two apples daily?

Akm: *Is [hɛ]^(Does) he eat two apples daily?*

Zaf: *Is [hɛ]^(Does) he eat apple daily?*

¹ 7.4 is the question number; w stands wh interrogative; P1 represents the present simple tense.

7.4w P1¹

[uoh - kja - kʰa: -t- -a h _____ -ε]?

P.3.Nom. what.3.Nom. eat. Imp.m.s. be.pres.3.s.?

What does he eat?

Shb: ^(What does) Is[hε] *he eats?*

Zaf: ^(What does) Is[hε] *he eat?*

The Urdu auxiliaries [hε], [hẽ], [hũ] are the literal translations of *is*, *are*, *am* respectively. But the problem is that the English present simple tense lacks *be* while its Urdu equivalent needs it. As a matter of fact, [hε], or its variants, are the present tense markers. The above participants transferred the meaning of [hε] from the Urdu present simple tense to its English equivalent.

Correlation of [t̪a] and does

In Urdu, phoneme [t̪] is the imperfective marker. It marks the verbs. [t̪] combines with [a] to assign singular and masculine sense to the corresponding subject NP. In English, *do* and *does* are the dummy auxiliaries that stay to fulfil the structural need of the negative and interrogative sentences. Some learners prefer the usage of *does* to *do*. Though the researchers could find only one such example in the present study, yet in his professional experience he came across this confusion many times.

7.2n P1

[m -ẽ is ʌdʒnəbi ko nəhĩ dʒa:n -t- -a h -ũ]

P.1.s.Obl. this.mod. stranger.m.3.s Acc. not know.Imp.m.s. be.pres.1.s.

I do not know this stranger.

Dil: I ^(do) does not know this unknown person.

The learner linked the auxiliary *does* with every singular subject NP of the interrogative and negative sentences of the present simple tense. In Urdu the corresponding verbs are marked with [t̪a]. In this way the learners developed a correlation between *does* and [t̪a]. But this correlation failed when the above participant yoked *does* with [t̪a] in case of the first person singular. The reason for the above error is overgeneralization of an inter-lingual correlation.

Remedial Strategy

Teachers should give extensive drills in subject-verb agreement.

Mental Associations

In the last section, the researchers discussed the fossils which belonged to the inter-lingual correlation. In this section, another fossil with similar shortcut link will be discussed. Here, NL is not involved. Learners develop a fixation with two items/features/concepts of TL alone. For example, if a learner has developed a fixation for *I am* combination, he will write

¹ P= Pronoun; 3= Third Person; Nom= Nominative Case; Imp= Imperfective; m=masculine; s=singular; pres.=present tense

it every time he has to use *I*, in any tense. The researchers has named this fixation Metal Association. In the original study, 141 errors of this type by 25 participants were listed. 10 of them by 6 participants belong to the present simple tense. In the original study, *mental associations* had 3 sub-categories: *continuity associations*, *co-occurrence associations*, and *Conjugations*. They were further sub-divided into 4, 3, and 2 categories respectively, but the errors of the present simple tense belong to the *continuity associations* only.

Continuity Associations

Some learners over generalize collocation between two lexical items. They want to put those items together in a linear order. When they extend that combination to an unfitting situation, errors occur. In the original study, 76 errors of this type by 19 participants were listed. 10 of them by 6 participants belong to the present simple tense.

Person Agreement Continuity

Such errors occur because of a learner's effort to maintain subject-verb agreement. They restrict it to person agreement only, and ignore number agreement and tense agreement. When they ignore tense agreement, such errors occur. Rehman (1990) has mentioned instances of lack of agreement in subject and verb. Sridhar (1996) has also pointed out similar errors under the heading of *subject-verb, and number disagreement*. Raza (2016) who replicated Khurshid (2010) has also listed many instances of such errors under the same title. In the original study, 31 errors of this type by 13 participants were listed. 10 of them by 6 participants belong to the present simple tense.

7.2n P1: **Akm:** *I did^(do) not know this unknown person.*

Bil: *I am^(do) not know his stranger.*

Nav: *I am^(do) not^(know) his stranger.*

Wse: *I am^(do) not know this stranger.*

7.3p P1: **Kas:** *^(Does) Has he eat an apple?*

Was: *Does he eats two apples daily?*

Wse: *^(Does) Is he^(Does he) eats two apples daily?*

7.4w P1: **Was:** *What^(Does) he eats.*

Number Agreement Continuity

In the present case, a learner tried to maintain agreement of number only, and ignored person agreement and tense agreement. In the original study, 8 errors of this type by 5 participants were listed. Only one of them belongs to the present simple tense.

7.3p P1: **Nav:** *What^(Does) he eats two apples daily.*

Nav said that he had not used *does* because it did not agree with the plural NP *two apples*.

Remedial Strategy

The subject-verb agreement requires the agreement of Person, Number, and Tense. In the above two sections, the participants tried to maintain subject-verb agreement on the basis of one factor only, and ignored the other two completely. This is the form of another fossil.

Aux-Negation Continuity

Some learners were found making collocation combination of the element of negation *not* with an auxiliary of their own choice. In the original study, 14 errors of this type by 6 participants were listed. Only one of them belongs to the present simple tense.

P1: **Sha:** I ^(do)did not know this ^(stranger) alian.

Remedial Strategy. T

His fossil is different from the last two. It has emerged from the learner's urge to maintain a linear order with the negation element. Some learners may have a preference for a particular auxiliary to put in front of *not*.

Confusion of Time Scale

Languages differ in the concept of tense and aspect. So are Urdu and English. Learners take the time scale of their NL as the natural and absolute time scale. Their existing situational time frames also go side by side. They often transfer their NL time scale and their situational time frame to the text of TL. In the original study, 70 errors of this type by 21 participants are listed. This type is divided into 13 sub-categories. Only one of them belongs to the present simple tense.

The Present Simple Tense Treated as the Past Simple Tense

This fossil resulted from the learner's weak understanding of the English time scale. Only one example of this type was noted.

P1: **Moh:** I did^(do) not know this stranger.

Moh said he had written *did* instead of *do* because the act of *knowing* occurred in the past. The learner associated the act of *knowing* with the past tense. Probably, he wanted to suggest that the act of *knowing* was linked to some pre-existing *mental image* (Finch, 2000) that helped us to extend our older understanding to new items.


Remedial Strategy.

Teacher may adopt the following strategies to get rid of this problem:

- Drills in the understanding of the ERS¹ system (Michaelis, 2006).
- Teaching of tenses on time line.

Overlooking

This is the name of the confusion that causes this type of errors. The fossil resulting from this confusion occurred when one or more items in a structure were either dropped or just ignored in order to maintain a link between two focused items like subject and verb. For example, in a structure of 3 items, a learner wants to make a link between item 1 and item 3. He either drops the intervening item 2 altogether or just ignores it as if it did not exist. In the original study, 10 errors of this type by 6 participants were listed. Only one of them belongs to the present simple tense.

7.1a P1: **Jam:**  *My friend give^s me good (advice) adias always.*
overlooked

¹ ERS is the abbreviation of Event time, Reference time, and Speech time respectively (Michaelis, 2006).

Jam said he avoided singular marking on the verb *give* because of the presence of *my*. In his opinion the DP head *my*, assigned the plural marking to the finite verb *give*. Therefore, in his effort to link the possessive *my* with the finite verb *give*, he overlooked the intervening NP *friend*.

Suggested strategy.

Extensive drills in the structures of all the tenses.

Discussion and Conclusion

The above discussion gives us some understanding of the process of fossilization that hampers the learning of the present simple tense. The underlying reasons we have come across are:

- (1) One-to-one translation of auxiliaries/suffixes.
- (2) Focus on maintaining any one of person, number or tense agreement, and ignoring the other two.
- (3) Fixation to use only one auxiliary in front of *not*.
- (4) Confused time scale.
- (5) Attempt to maintain between two items by ignoring the effect of the intermediary items.

To counter the fossils of *mental associations* and *inter-lingual correlations*, the learners should be made to memorize maximum new combinations. By oral drills, this target can be achieved in lesser time. The problem of *confused time scale* can be handled by teaching tenses on time line. The problem of *overlooking* will automatically be handled if the fossils of mental association are eradicated.

Understanding obtained from the above data may help to answer some questions of ELT. We come to know why the learners insert *be* in front of the main verb, and why they violate subject-verb agreement rule in the tense under discussion.

In addition to exploring the pedagogic issues, the current study also carries some information that is relevant to SLA research. It exposes the incapability of the available terms to explain the reasons of errors collected in Pakistani educational background. The inter-lingual correlation errors are neither *interference* nor *intra-lingual* errors (Richards, 1971). In the same way, *mental association* errors cannot be explained by *overgeneralization*. Moreover, the present study does not restrict the term overgeneralization to the description of *intra-lingual* errors only. The researchers have observed overgeneralization of many *inter-lingual correlations* too. In short, the terms used in the present study are more compatible with the analysis of errors induced by GTM.

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