Pronoun Resolution in L2 English: The Role of Topicality, Verb Semantics, and Coherence Relations in Vietnamese Learners

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Abstract

The resolution of pronouns, which often function as anaphors, is essential to successful communication. Various discourse-pragmatic factors have been suggested to influence native speakers' interpretation of anaphoric ties, based on the correlation between pronoun preference and discourse prominence. In research involving language learners, however, it remains debated whether (a) learners can integrate different cues in their pronoun resolution similarly to native speakers, and (b) cross-linguistic influence plays a role in this process. The present study addressed this ongoing debate with the population of Vietnamese learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). As a pro-drop language, Vietnamese differs from non-pro-drop languages such as English in how pronoun preference relates to discourse prominence. Moreover, while English uses two different forms for subject and object pronouns (e.g., *he* and *him),* Vietnamese lacks case marking and uses the same form for both (e.g., *anh ấy* means both *he* and *him).* This morphosyntactic difference may have potential cross-linguistic influence on Vietnamese-speaking English learners' second language (L2) pronoun resolution.

We crossed three discourse-pragmatic factors (topicality, verb semantics, and coherence relations) in a series of sentence completion tasks in English and Vietnamese. We investigated the effect of various referring expressions with different levels of topicality (i.e., indefinite noun phrases (NPs) and pronouns) on their likelihood of being mentioned again. We also scrutinized the implicit causality effect denoted by two classes of psychological verbs (i.e., experiencer-stimulus and stimulus-experiencer verbs) and two coherence relations (i.e., explanation and narration). The experiments, which followed a within-subject design, featured thirty-one Vietnamese EFL learners of various levels of proficiency and twenty-three L1 speakers of English. Participants completed sentence fragments such as Tom appreciated him because he…., resolving the ambiguous pronouns using the available cues in the preceding discourse.

Results suggested significant interactions between participant groups and the discourse-pragmatic predictors. We found a positive correlation between referring expressions' levels of topicality and their likelihood of being re-mentioned. When the object was a pronoun, a highly topical referring expression, the probability of subject reference was low. Also in these conditions, L1 Vietnamese group showed an almost categorical object preference, which may be attributed to the Vietnamese language's lack of distinction between two forms of pronouns. The effect of the interaction between verb semantics and coherence relations on groups' pronoun resolution also reached significance, with a crossover pattern: while the explanation relation facilitated the implicit causality promoted by verb semantics, the narration relation inhibited this.

Nevertheless, we observed similar performance between L1 English speakers and Vietnamese EFL learners across levels of proficiency, providing no evidence for cross-linguistic influence on the learners' L2 pronoun resolution. Results also suggest learners' ability to implement multiple discourse-pragmatic cues in a native-like manner, providing counter-evidence to the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace, 2011), which predicts that non-native speakers struggle to fully acquire linguistic features involving multiple interfaces.