

Individual Paper Session 3

Syntax

Tuesday, July 4

9:00-9:30am

Null Object Unlearning and Topic-Drop Parameter

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Subjects and objects in finite clauses are allowed to be phonetically null more readily and frequently in 'Korean-type languages' than in 'English-type languages'. The previous studies have shown that, when learning English as a foreign language, the native speakers of Korean-type languages are far better able to detect the ungrammaticality of null subjects than null objects (Zobl, 1994), and high English proficiency does not necessarily help unlearn null objects (Yuan, 1997).

This paper investigates the unlearning of null arguments of 60 Korean EFL learners. In a grammaticality judgment task of 64 sentences, the Korean learners of English had more difficulties rejecting null objects than null subjects, but their rejection of null objects became more consistent as their English proficiency improved. This indicates that, contrary to Yuan (1997), the unlearning of null objects is not at all impossible.

The latter part of the paper focuses on the parameter concerning null objects and topic-drop. It reports that the learners' rejection of null objects and that of non-gap topics increased in a parallel fashion as their English proficiency improved. This, we believe, shows that the availability of null objects is closely related to that of non-gap topics. This finding supports the long-held but never-proved proposition that the (un)availability of null objects is closely related to the topic-drop parameter (Huang, 1984).

Finally, this paper explores the linguistic mechanism responsible for the asymmetry between null subject/null object unlearning. It proposes that the inflectional features of the target language help the learners to unlearn null subjects, but the unlearning of null objects is not guided by the morpho-syntactic inflectional features. Thus, while null subjects can be unlearned by positive evidence only, the unlearning of null objects needs additional negative evidence. This accounts for the difference in the unlearning rate of null subjects and objects.