The Acquisition of Negation by English and Korean Native Speakers of Mandarin

Mandarin Chinese mainly expresses negation by means of two negation markers: *bu* and *mei*. Researchers have argued that these two markers can be distinguished by their semantic denotation and aspectual selections (Lin, 2003, etc.). The Korean language also has negation markers (안/못) whose aspectual selections are similar to *bu* and *mei*. However, both *bu* and *mei* translate into English as “not”, the aspectual selections of which are characterized by insertion of the auxiliary *do*, meaning the aspectual selections of negation marker in English is significantly different from Chinese and Korean. Given these similarities and differences, it is interesting to investigate whether English and Korean speakers can distinguish the semantic denotation and aspectual features of *bu* and *mei*, whether there are differences in acquisition between English and Korean speakers, and the potential difficulties these speakers encounter when learning Chinese.

Several studies have focused on acquisition of *bu* and *mei* and their distinctions in L2 grammars. Yuan (2004), Zheng (2012), and Zhang (2013) concluded that L2 learners can correctly position negation markers before thematic verbs. In addition, Zheng (2012) found that participants could accurately use *bu* and *mei* with aspectual markers. However, Zhang (2013) and Gao (2009) argued that Chinese heritage learners and Korean L1 have trouble in distinguishing *bu* and *mei* from a semantics and morpho-syntax perspective.

This paper targeted 29 native Korean speakers and 30 English speakers with relatively high Chinese proficiency as test subjects. A Chinese cloze test will be conducted during recruiting to identify speakers’ language proficiency. Subjects were given two tests: the production test (15 groups of words) and the acceptability judgement test (94 Chinese sentences). The first test aimed to investigate whether subjects can position *bu* and *mei* correctly. The second examined subjects’ judgment on the position of *bu* and *mei* and the different semantic denotation and aspectual selections of *bu* and *mei*.

This paper used the SPSS’ Non-Parametric Statistics to compile and analyze the results. The results show that 1. Subjects had a relatively good grasp of *bu* and *mei* in normal sentence positioning, yet struggled when asked to position them relative to *de* phrase; 2. There was a relatively large difference in the performance of native English and Korean speakers of intermediate Chinese proficiency and that of native Chinese speakers; 3. Compared to intermediate proficiency speakers, English and Korean native speakers with high proficiency were significantly closer to the performance level of native Chinese speakers, with native English speakers performing slightly better than Korean ones.

At the end, a variable-dependent account is proposed for the results, arguing that success or failure in acquisition of *bu* and *mei* is likely to depend on a number of variables, including cross-linguistic influence, semantics-syntax interface, and the nature of aspectual makers involved in the distribution of *bu* and *mei*. 
References:


