

The Verb Phrase in English and Marathi: A Study in Markedness Differential Hypothesis

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ABSTRACT

The field of “language transfer” has hitherto been an object of perpetual attraction for many linguists and ESL experts, and has emerged as one of the important subfields of Second Language Acquisition. In alignment with the previous studies, in this research paper, we will attempt to examine the acquisition of the English verb phrase by first year management students whose first language is Marathi. We have used Eckman’s Markedness Differential Hypothesis (MDH) (1977), to compare the features of English with that of Marathi.

The data for the present research has been drawn from a grammaticality judgment test and has been analysed using the SPSS software. The tool of error analysis has been used to analyze the linguistic behaviour of the participants. This tool deals with the description and analysis of the errors actually made by the learners; it compares the learners’ acquired norms with the target language norms and explains the identified errors. We have made an effort to trace the interlingual errors made by second language learners in light of the comparative study of the first language (Marathi) and the second language (English).

Keywords: Markedness differential hypothesis (MDH), F/T approach, error analysis, interlingual errors, intralingual errors, first language, second language, Marathi, English.

INTRODUCTION

The role of the first language (L1) in second language (L2) learning has been a fertile area for research and discussion for both linguists and ELT experts

alike. Linguists across the centuries have been interested in discovering the relationship between L1 and L2, which has resulted in numerous studies that involve comparison between languages. The area of “language transfer” has evolved as an important sub-field in SLL, and has attracted the attention of many researchers. Starting with Contrastive Analysis, to the more recent Principles and Parameters approach and Functional Typological approach, the first language plays a significant role in the acquisition of the second language.

A plethora of books, articles and research papers have been written to discover the role played by the first language in the acquisition of a second language by the learner. In the present research paper, we will examine the role played by Marathi (L1) when native speakers of Marathi attempt to acquire the verb phrase in English (L2). In the process, we will also discover the relationship between L1 and L2. A close analysis of the linguistic similarities and differences in the morphological and semantic properties of the verb phrase in English and Marathi will enable us to understand the process of language transfer among Marathi speakers of English while learning English as a second language.

The present study is divided into two parts. In the first part, we have compared the syntactic and semantic characteristics of the verb phrase in English and Marathi. The primary objective of this comparison is to identify the features of English verb phrase that are more marked, and hence may lead to the transfer of L1 features to L2. In the second part of the research, these identified areas of language transfer have been verified using a questionnaire and a battery of English tests administered to 100 management students belonging to different management institutes in Pune district.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Grammars Used for Comparison

A Grammar of Contemporary English by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik (1972), was used as the standard English grammar for this paper. For Marathi, the book entitled *Marathi* by R. Pandharipande (1997) was used as the standard Marathi grammar. Both these theoretical grammars are descriptive, corpus-based reference grammars in their respective languages. The syntactic and semantic properties of the verb phrase in English and Marathi were also studied in detail in order to understand the errors committed by the learners in the use of the same features.

As mentioned earlier, Eckman’s (1977) Markedness Differential Hypothesis (MDH) has been used for comparing the features of English with that of Marathi

and predicting the potential areas of language transfer. Eckman, though his hypothesis, attempted to understand the reasons why some L2 structures are more, or less difficult for learners to acquire than others in the developmental stages of language acquisition. The proponents of F/T approach believe that the concept of “markedness” can be used to explain why some features from the native language get transferred to the target language while others do not. The linguistic relationship between Marathi (L1) and English (L2) verb phrases has also been explored in this paper in order to trace the interference errors made by the second language learners in light of the comparative study of L1 (Marathi) and L2 (English).

Data Collection Procedure

The quality of any research study depends largely on the quality of the data collected. Hence, it is very essential to use well-thought-out procedures that can elicit high quality data. Such procedures usually lead to valid research findings and conclusions. In the second part of our research, the areas of language transfer deduced from the comparative study of the verb phrases in English and Marathi were verified by administering a questionnaire and a battery of English tests to 100 management students belonging to different management institutes in Pune district. The tests consisted of questions that were meticulously designed to assess the use of the verb phrase in English and were arranged as per their relative order of difficulty. Since we wanted to investigate the cross-linguistic influence of Marathi on English, only students who spoke Marathi as their first language were selected for the study. In all, 100 participants were selected based on the following parameters:

1. Class: First Year MBA students from the management institutes located in Pune
2. First Language: Marathi
3. Medium of instruction in school: Marathi
4. Marks: 50% - 70%
5. Gender: 50 male students and 50 female students

The tests consisted of 8 questions based on the use of the verb phrase in English. The questions were both closed-ended and open-ended and were arranged as per their relative order of difficulty. They ranged from structured to completely unstructured questions.

DATA ANALYSIS

The results of data obtained from the tests were calculated using the SPSS

software. A simple descriptive statistical method was used, where the data was first converted into a percentage. The percentages were then compared and systematically analyzed to identify the extent to which the first language impacts the acquisition of the second language while acquiring the verb phrase in English. Corder's tool of error analysis (1967), was used to analyze the data. The responses given by the participants were divided into the following four categories:

1. Correct Responses
2. Interlingual Errors
3. Intralingual Errors
4. Unattempted Questions

Thus the researchers followed an eclectic approach, where they first compared the verb phrases in English and Marathi theoretically to identify the features less marked in Marathi and more marked in English. They wanted to verify whether these features were transferred to the second language and whether Marathi learners made some errors due to language transfer while using the verb phrase in English. Then they conducted a string of English tests on the participants to verify the areas of language transfer in order to get empirical evidence for the study. Thus, the research consisted of both qualitative and quantitative analysis of the use of the verb phrase by Marathi learners of English.

The conclusions drawn from the qualitative and quantitative study are represented in the graph in figure 1. According to the graph, 36.7 per cent of the students responded correctly to all eight questions; 33.8 per cent of the students had interlingual errors; 26.2 per cent had intralingual errors out of which 3.5 per cent had interference based intralingual errors. Furthermore, 3.3 per cent of the questions were not attempted by the participants.

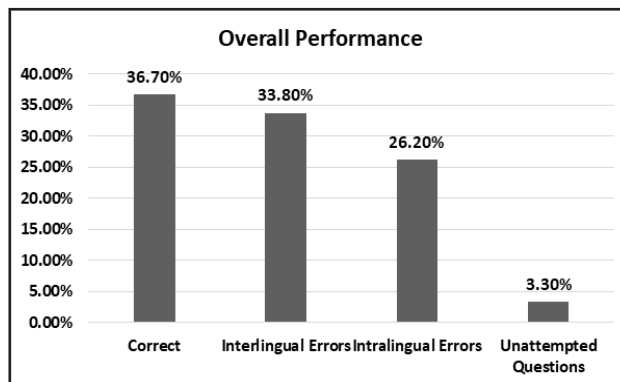


Figure 1

Figure 1 also indicates that 70.5 per cent of the students had learnt the verb forms. However all of them had not internalized the semantic nuances revealed by these verb forms. Furthermore, 26.20 per cent students had developmental errors in which the students used incorrect verb forms, i.e., they had not learnt the verb forms. The first language interference for all eight questions can be summarized in figure 2:

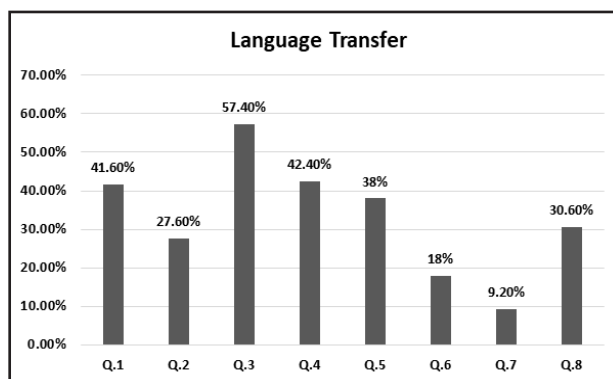


Figure 2

This graph indicates that the participants, i.e. the first year MBA students had not mastered and internalized the syntactic and semantic properties of the verb phrase in English completely.

CONCLUSIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This paper also aims to explore some of the pedagogical implications for teaching English verb phrase to Marathi learners based on the conclusions drawn from the qualitative and quantitative study undertaken. Hence, it would be very fruitful for the teacher to keep the linguistic differences between Marathi and English at the back of his/her mind while teaching English grammar, especially the verb phrase to Marathi students.

The findings of the study show that the participants had not learnt the use of the perfect progressive construction in English. This is clear from figure 3 which shows that only 19.9 per cent of the students used the perfect progressive construction correctly; 48.6 per cent of the students used the progressive construction instead of the perfect progressive construction. A comparative study of the verb phrases in English and Marathi indicates that in English, the perfect progressive is used for a persistent situation, whereas the progressive aspect is usually used along with an appropriate postpositional phrase to express a persistent situation in Marathi. The progressive construction is typologically less marked as compared to the

perfect progressive construction and hence this first language habit is transferred to English. That is the reason why most of the Marathi speakers of English tend to use an appropriate prepositional phrase along with the present progressive to denote an activity started in the past and continuing up to a later point in time. This point of language transfer was verified in the test given to the students. In fact, it seems to be a pan-Indian feature.

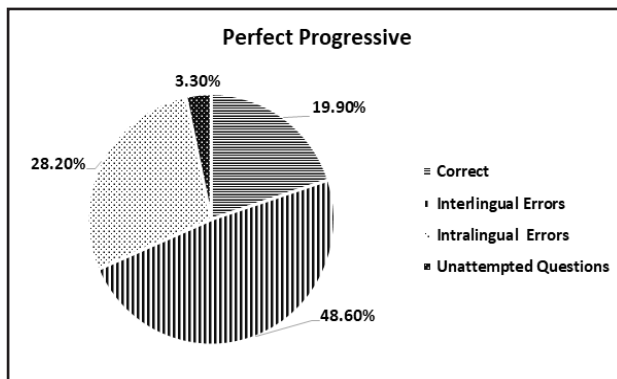


Figure 3

The difference in the use of prepositions “since”, “from” and “for” creates a problem for Marathi learners. The results of the tests indicate that 56.10 per cent of the students gave interference induced responses. The perfect progressive for a persistent situation in English involves the use of the preposition “since” before an adverbial indicating the starting point of time, and the preposition “for” before an adverbial of duration. However, in Marathi, the same postposition “*pāsūn*” (meaning: since/from) is used for both. That is the reason why many Marathi speakers of English cannot distinguish between “since” and “for”, and use the common preposition “since/from” for both as it is a translation of the postposition “*pāsūn*” in Marathi. Furthermore, in English the preposition “since” occurs in perfect aspect, whereas “from”

occurs in other tenses. Marathi speakers of English find it difficult to understand this difference and use “from” instead of “since” in the perfect aspect.

The participants also faced problems in the use of the present perfect construction. As shown in figure 4, only 22.8 per cent of the participants were able to use the present perfect construction successfully; 36.1 per cent of students used the past simple construction instead. The distinction in the usage of the present perfect and the past simple is not clearly defined in Marathi as they can be used interchangeably without hampering the meaning of the original sentence. English

on the contrary has clear semantic differences in the use of these constructions. This could be the reason why many Marathi speakers tend to use simple past and the present perfect constructions synonymously. Moreover, in English the present perfect construction is more marked than the past simple construction. Hence, the first language (Marathi) trait of using the simple past is carried over to the second language (English), and therefore Marathi learners use the simple past construction instead of the present perfect construction.

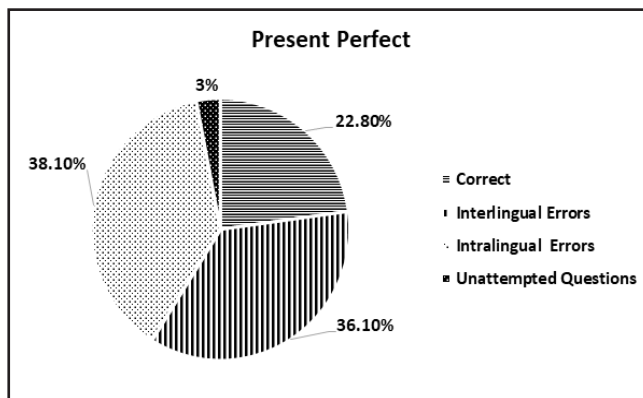


Figure 4

The tests were also used to assess whether the participants understand the semantic differences between the perfect of experience and the perfect of result. Here, 15.25 per cent students used the correct form—"has been"—and 34.25 per cent used the construction "has gone" to express the meaning of the perfect of experience. This could be because in Marathi, the verb "dza" is used for both the perfect of result and the perfect of experience. The English equivalent of this verb is "go". Here, the "has gone" construction is less marked as compared to the "has been" construction. Hence this first language habit is carried forward to the second language and the speakers tend to use "has gone" for both the perfect of experience and the perfect of result.

The tests also examined the ability of the students to use stative verbs appropriately. Stative verbs usually do not occur with the progressive aspect in English. However, the Marathi counterparts of these verbs can be used dynamically in Marathi. The present progressive construction is typologically more marked in Marathi as compared to the present simple construction in English, and will not be transferred to the target language (English) according to the markedness principle. The responses were indicative of mixed results; 36.50 per cent of the students used the correct tense—the present simple. However, 31 per cent of the

responses given by the students had interlingual errors as they used the present progressive tense.

The use of the present perfect for a persistent situation in case of stative verbs is difficult for Marathi speakers of English. In Marathi, present simple along with an appropriate prepositional phrase is used to express the meaning of a persistent situation for verbs. The present perfect construction is more marked as compared to the present simple construction. The tests also examined the ability of the participants to use the present perfect for a persistent situation in the case of stative verbs. The test results show that only 9.5 per cent students used the present perfect correctly, whereas interference induced response of the present simple was exhibited by 47.4 per cent of the participants.

Both English and Marathi use the present tense to denote the meaning of habitual actions in the present time. However, Marathi also has a morphologically marked “habitual aspect”, which is used to denote the meaning of habitual activities. This use of the habitual aspect is quite similar to the progressive construction in English. However, according to the principle of markedness, the present progressive construction in Marathi is more marked as compared to the present simple construction and hence will not get transferred. The tests administered to the students examined whether the students have learnt the use of the simple present tense for habitual actions. The test results (figure 5) indicate that 47 per cent of the participants were able to use the present tense correctly whereas, only 17.70 per cent of the population used the present progressive instead of the present simple for habitual actions.

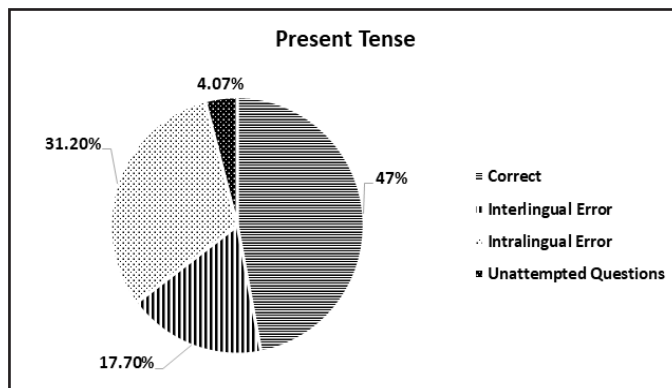


Figure 5

A linguistic analysis of the verb phrase in English and Marathi indicates that Marathi speakers of English use past perfect in Marathi in some situations where

native speakers of English prefer to use the simple past. The substitution of the past perfect for the simple past has been considered a pan-Indian feature by many linguists. However, the past perfect construction used in Marathi is more marked as compared to the past simple construction and according to MDH, this feature should therefore not get transferred to English. These two contradictory views were cross-examined in the tests given to the participants. It is interesting to note that only 11.7 per cent participants used the past perfect construction instead of the past simple construction, whereas 51.4 per cent participants used the past tense construction successfully (figure 6).

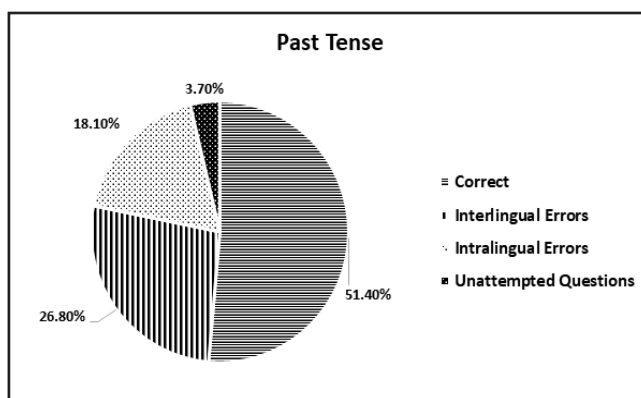


Figure 6

The distinction in the meanings of the present perfect, the past simple and the past perfect is not clear cut in Marathi as they can be used interchangeably without changing the meaning of the original sentence. English, on the contrary, has clearly defined semantic differences in the use of these constructions. This could be the reason why the difference between the past simple, the present perfect and the past perfect is neutralized among Marathi speakers of English. The semantic difference between these forms is not clear to them. They tend to use these three constructions synonymously. Moreover, the participants under consideration have shown a tendency of using the past simple more as compared to the present perfect or the past perfect.

As far as the use of modal auxiliaries is concerned, Marathi speakers tend to use the auxiliary "can" where the use of "may" would be more appropriate to seek permission. In the responses given by the students, 66.5 per cent of the students responded with "may", whereas 31 per cent of the students responded with "can". They also tend to use the construction "can able to" where the modal auxiliary "can" and semi auxiliary "be able to" are used together. This could be an attempt

to translate the Marathi structure “*karū śakate*” to describe ability into English. In response to the corresponding question, 57 per cent students gave the correct answer “can” to show ability whereas 27 per cent students responded with the interference induced answer “can able to”.

Some Marathi students showed a tendency to use two part verbs such as “do study”, “do work”, “do practice”, etc., due to first language interference. Out of the total responses given by the students, 60.50 per cent students were able to use the verb forms correctly, whereas 32.50 per cent responses consisted of the two part verbs.

The study also aimed to prove that the features of Marathi verb phrase are transferred to English verb phrase, depending on the typological relationship between the two languages and the principles of markedness. The Markedness Differential Hypothesis (MDH) assumes that if the structures used in the first language are typologically less marked as compared to the structures used in the second language, they will be transferred to the second language. The findings of the present research based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the performance of the participants collaborate this. The participants showed comparatively better performance while answering questions on the present tense (47 per cent correct responses) and past tense (51.4 per cent correct responses). The features that were less marked in Marathi and more marked in English were transferred to English, resulting in erroneous linguistic behaviour on the part of the students.

As far as the pedagogical implications for teaching the English verb phrase to Marathi learners are concerned, the grammar components can be graded according to the level of difficulty for the learners. Some grammatical constructions are difficult for Marathi speakers of English due to transfer from L1. The teacher should be more careful while dealing with such structures. Furthermore, the unmarked constructions should be taught before the marked functions in English.

It is a good idea to explain the semantic difference among tenses in combination. This helps the students to understand the differences in the meanings expressed by different tenses so that they avoid using tenses inappropriately. The use of time diagrams is also very effective in making the learners understand the difference between tenses. It is advisable to use inductive approach while teaching grammatical constructions so that the students can internalize their forms and functions. It is also advisable that the teacher uses a cyclical approach while teaching grammatical constructions and not the linear approach.

Along with teaching grammatical constructions, it is important to give appropriate

exercises to the students in order to check whether they have internalized the forms and functions of the grammatical constructions under consideration. These exercises must be graded from simple to difficult levels.

Both formal and informal exposure contribute to the learning of English. If teachers expect students to master the forms and functions of the English language, they have to make sure that they themselves use these grammatical structures carefully and correctly while conversing with the students. Students unconsciously grasp the usage demonstrated by the teacher in the class far more as compared to the formal rules taught.

Teachers are advised to adopt a student-centred, communicative approach while teaching and not the traditional teacher-centred approach. The teacher should motivate the students to use different verb forms in context. In fact, they should create communicative situations in which students have the opportunity to use different tenses. Above all, it is necessary that teachers provide the learners with comprehensive inputs in an anxiety-free learning environment. It is equally important that the learners find themselves relaxed and confident before learning any linguistic structure. This is a prerequisite of a learning situation.

In the present scenario, compound bilingualism prevails in Maharashtra, that is, the speakers operate English through a process of translation from Marathi. This leads to negative transfer in the form of interference. The teachers should ensure that they help their learners to move from the stage of compound bilingualism to the stage of coordinate bilingualism. The best way to enable the students to think in English before speaking is to give them enough exposure to the target language for it to become a habit for them.

Berk (1999), rightly opines that “the verb phrase is the heart of a sentence” (p. 97). It is one of the most important aspects of language learning. It is evident from the results of the test that the first year MBA students have not been able to master and internalize the syntactic and semantic properties of the verb phrase in English completely. Such low scores for the correct use of the verb phrase after almost ten years of language learning is very alarming and calls for drastic pedagogical changes and the need for intensive remedial teaching.

Marathi is an Indo-Aryan language. It is interesting to note that most of the features of the use of the English verb phrase exhibited by Marathi speakers are pan-Indian features. This could be because Marathi as the first language shares many features with other Indo-Aryan languages such as Hindi, Gujarati, etc. In this study, I have tried to emphasize the importance of the learners’ knowledge of the syntactic structures of the first language that hinder the acquisition of the

second language. I am hopeful that the study will assist teachers and ESL experts in identifying the interference errors in the performance of Maharashtrian students when they attempt to learn the features of the verb phrase in English and help them to deal with these errors in an efficient manner.

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