A Cross-Linguistic Look at VP-Ellipsis and Verbal Speech Errors

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Abstract

This paper argues that consideration of spontaneous speech errors provides insight into cross-linguistic analyses of syntactic phenomena. In particular, I claim that differences in the distribution of non-parallel VP-Ellipsis constructions in English and German, as well as variation in the spontaneously-occurring verbal speech errors, is explained by a parametric analysis of variation in the inflectional systems of the two languages.

1. A Hybrid Theory of Inflection

Lasnik (1995) argues for a parametric analysis of verbal inflection according to which a language may exhibit (i) a unitary system, where main and auxiliary verbs come either pre-inflected in the lexicon, or are derivationally constructed out of syntactically separate stem and affix, or (ii) a hybrid system, where main and auxiliary verbs are derived differently.

2. VP Ellipsis

2.1. VP Ellipsis in English

Evidence for this parametric analysis comes from VP-Ellipsis constructions. English permits parallel VP-Ellipsis, as in (1a), as well as non-parallel Ellipsis, as in (1b). It is not clear how ellipsis is resolved in (1b), since resolution requires identical forms. Assuming that English main verbs are constructed out of syntactically separate stem and affix, (1b) is possible because there is a point in the derivation of the clause where the stem and inflection are separate units, and therefore *sleep* is available as the ellipsis antecedent, as shown in (1c).

(1) a. Mary won a prize, and John did too.
    b. John slept, and Mary will too.
    c. John [past] sleep, and Mary Mary will ~~sleep~~ too

Warner (1986) notes that non-parallel VP ellipsis is not licensed with auxiliary verbs, as shown by (2a). This is due to the fact that there is no point in the derivation of an auxiliary verb where the verb is separate from inflection; there is no form *have* which can resolve the ellipsis site.

(2) a. *John has left, but Mary shouldn't
       Impossible reading: 'John has left, but Mary shouldn't have left'
    b. *John [has] left, but Mary shouldn't ~~has left~~

2.2. VP Ellipsis in German

Following the analysis of Winkler (1997), German allows VP-Ellipsis, as shown in (3). In addition, I show that German permits both non-parallel VP-Ellipsis with main verbs, as well as non-parallel VP-Ellipsis with auxiliary verbs. Following the analysis of Lasnik, this indicates that German inflection is unitary; both main and auxiliary verbs are formed by adding inflection onto the stem.

(3) …weil   Leon die Aufgabe lösen kann, und auch PETER
    …because Leon the task   solve can   and also Peter
    '…because Leon can solve the task and so can Peter'

3. Verbal Speech Errors

3.1. Spontaneous Speech Errors in English

I assume, following Fromkin 1971, 1973, 1980, 1988, Cutler 1982, that occurring spontaneous speech errors are constrained to those errors which are statable in terms of the linguistic system. As Fromkin (1988:121) notes, "…spontaneously produced speech errors reveal deviations in the units and rules" of language.

The analysis outlined above of English non-parallel VP Ellipsis constructions predicts the different behavior of main and auxiliary verbs in spontaneous speech errors. For example, an irregular main verb may appear in speech errors as a regular form, as in (4a)-(b) (the intended utterance appears to the left and the spoken utterance to the right of the arrow; all English errors are from the UCLA Speech Error Corpus; see http://www.mpi.nl/world/corpus/sedb/). However, we do not observe similar errors with irregular auxiliary verbs.

(4) a. the last I knew about that ->
       the last I knowed about that
    b. … and the objects that would be locally bound   ->
       … and the objects that would be locally binded

In addition, as is seen in the examples in (5a-b), main verbs may switch position, in which case inflectional material may be stranded and each verb surface with the inflection of the other verb. It is also possible for the inflectional material itself to switch position between two verbs, as in (5c). Errors with auxiliary verbs appearing in these error patterns are not attested in the data.

(5) a. We've learned to love mountains ->
       We've loved to learn mountains
    b. It goes to show -> It shows to go
    c. I saw him digging up those bulbs->
       I see him dugging up ...

Observe that in movement errors the inflectional item itself may move from the verb to another item of the utterance, as in (6a-b). However, these movement errors seem to be restricted to main verbs.

(6) a. He kind a tends ta ... ->   He kinds a tend ta ...
    b. If she wants to come here ... ->
       If she want to comes here

It is possible to find errors with the main verb deleted, and the inflection of the verb stranding, as in (7a). In contrast, when an auxiliary verb is targeted for deletion, the whole unit

Ellen Thompson

is affected, as shown in (7b). In sum, the UCLA Speech Error Corpus contains thirteen examples of main verb separated from inflection, and zero of auxiliary verb separated.

(7) a. As I keep suggesting   ->   As I keeping
     b. He doesn't seem happy now -> He not seem happy
         now

We can account for these errors by claiming that they result when the derivation is accessed before the verb and inflection have become a unit. We therefore predict that auxiliary verbs do not appear in these error patterns, since there is no point in the derivation of an auxiliary verb at which the verb and inflection are separate units.

3.2. Spontaneous Speech Errors in German

In German, we observe that, like in English, we find examples of main verbs switching position, with inflectional material of the verbs stranded, as in (8) (example from Bierwisch 1982:32). We also find examples of inflectional material of main verbs switching position, as in (9) (examples hereafter from Wiedenmann 1992).

(8) Ich kann nur über die Teile sprechen, die ich kenne->

     I   can only about those parts speak   that I know

     Ich kann nur über die Teile kenn-en, die ich sprech-e

     I can only about those parts know-INF that I speak-1.sg

     'I can only speak about those parts that I know.'

(9) … daβ dein Zimmer komm-st,   und du räum-t ->

     … that your room   come-2.sg.pre and you clean-3.sg.pre

     … daβ dein Zimmer kommt, und du räumst

     '… that you come and clean your room'

However, unlike the pattern in English, we also observe reversal errors where the inflection of a main and an auxiliary verb switch position, as in (10).

(10) die ich endlich mal weg-räum-te   woll-en ->

     the I   finally   away-clear-past will-infin

     die ich endlich mal weg-räum-en   woll-te

     the I   finally   away-clear-infin will-past

In addition, we find movement errors where the auxiliary verb inflection separates from the stem and appears attached to another auxiliary verb, as in (11). (This example plausibly involves movement of inflection from *werden* to *muβ*, followed by reversal of the auxiliary stem and *schen*.)

(11) man schen werden muβ   ->   man wird schen mussen

     one see   will must-3.sg.pre -> one will-3sg.pre see must

     'One must see.'

4. Conclusion

The different behavior of German and English auxiliary verbs is predicted if we assume that German main and auxiliary verbs are not distinct – both are constructed out of syntactically separate stem and affix. Therefore, German

auxiliary verbs, as well as main verbs, allow separation and manipulation of inflection and verbal stem in errors, as well as in non-parallel VP Ellipsis constructions.

This work thus supports the claim that spontaneous speech errors pattern differently depending on the structural properties of the language, and it provides evidence for Lasnik's (1995) division of languages into inflectionally unitary and inflectionally hybrid systems. Although research in speech errors has investigated language variation in the phonological domain (Berg 1987, Wells-Jensen 1999), variation in syntactic structures remains little-explored.

5. Acknowledgements

6. References

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