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TWO CAUSES FOR MISAPPLICATION OF LANGUAGE RULES

By David C. Butler

Incorrect application of rules in a foreign language may stem from at least two basic causes: (1) failure to master the operational or transformational component of a rule, and (2) failure to learn a rule's true domain of applicability (see Landa, 1974).

An example of the first problem is a student of English as a second language who

does not know how to form the present perfect tense or how to nominatize and embed one sentence in another. The second problem is illustrated by a student who does not know in what semantic contexts—what communication situations—present perfect tense is required or who can not identify the features of sentences which make application of a given sentence—combining rule either appropriate or inappropriate. This second problem is the more perplexing one for the student.

A math example may help illustrate the importance of coming to grips with teaching a rule's true domain of applicability (see Scandura, 1973, p. 173). Suppose I give a student a neat rule for summing a long arithmetic number series such as $4+7+10+13+\dots+n$ or $1+6+11+16+\dots+n$. The rule is add the

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first term in the series to the last term, divide by 2, and multiply the result by the number of terms in the series: $([(F+L) / 2]N)$. We might assume the student has mastered all he needs to know when he has demonstrated

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Missapplication of Language Rules

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the ability to sum any arithmetic number series we give him. But notice the artificial nature of this task. In the real world, no one is going to be around to tell our student which number series are arithmetic, and which are not. The rule given above will not work at all for series like the following: $2+4+8+16+32+\dots+n$ or $3+7+15+31+\dots+n$. It is obvious that the student must learn some kind of procedure for identifying the indicative features of situations where the rule given above is appropriate. If those features are not present, then he must search for some other summing rule. In the case of the rule given above, the indicative feature is whether or not there is a constant numerical difference between terms in the series.

In an actual lesson for teaching present perfect tense to intermediate students of English as a second language, the teacher might begin by pointing out the need for instruction.

Teacher:

In this lesson, you're going to solve the following kind of communication problem. This is the situation. You go to a club meeting and meet one of the members. Is it appropriate to ask him the following question: "How long have you been a member of the club?"

Student:

It's appropriate.

Teacher:

You're right. Listen to another example.

You are talking to the president of a large company and he tells you that he used to be the janitor. Is the following question appropriate: "How long have you been janitor?"

Student:

I'm not sure.

Teacher:

This question is *not* appropriate. You are telling the company president that you think he is still the janitor.

At this point, the teacher might want to review or introduce the operational component of the rule.

Teacher:

In this lesson, you're going to learn about forms such as *have been*, *have worked*, *has studied*, and so forth. Then you will learn when to use these forms. Notice the chart on the board labeled *Present Perfect*. When we ask, "How long have you been a member of the club?" or say, "She has studied piano for five years." we are using present perfect. Notice that we use *has* with subjects like *he*, *she*, *it*, *Mr. Davis*, *the student*. But with subjects like *I*, *you*, *they*, *we*, *Mr. and Mrs. Davis*, *the students* we use *have*.

Now you should be ready to teach the decision-making capability (Scandura, 1973, p.173) which is necessary for correct use of the present perfect. You need to teach the two indicative features for this rule—Previous Action AND Current Relevance.

Teacher:

When do we use the present perfect?

We use it when a previous action (point to time line chart on the board) is directly related to the present. Notice there are two necessary things: Previous Action AND Related to the Present.

Listen to this situation. John began playing ping pong three years ago. He is still an active player. Listen to John: "I've played ping pong for about three years." Is his statement appropriate?

Student:

Yes.

Teacher:

That's right. It's a previous action and it's also related to the present. Listen to another situation. Mark was a member of the Blue Key club for one year. He didn't like the club so he joined the Red Key club about six years ago. Listen to Mark: "I was a Blue Key for just one year, then I have joined the Red Key club." Is Mark's last statement all right?

Student:

It sounds funny.

Teacher:

Which of these is missing? (Points to the indicative features: Previous Action AND Related to the Present)

Student:

It's a previous action but it's not related to the present.

Teacher:

Very good.

After students have demonstrated listening mastery for present perfect, the teacher may then proceed to design speaking activities where the communication setting makes it either appropriate or inappropriate to use the present perfect forms.

Instead of teaching the present perfect, suppose you want to teach students how to add more information to their sentences through nominalization and embedding. Again it seems important to teach not only the structural manipulation and word order changes but also an explicit procedure for determining the set of situations to which the sentence-combining rules may be applied.

In an exercise in Crymes, James, Smith, and Taylor (1974, p. 89), one finds the following sentence pair to be combined using *that* or *to*:

He supposed SOMETHING. The similarity between proverbs is significant. (He supposed that the similarity between proverbs is significant) OR (He supposed the similarity between proverbs to be significant).

Then on page 100, one finds the following sentence pair to be combined using an *ing* nominalization:

Some folk remedies may keep you from SOMETHING. You would get sick. (Some folk remedies may keep you from getting sick).

Suppose the student is in a situation where the appropriate rule to be used is not indicated by the instructions for the exercise. Unless we teach the student to identify the features of sentences which make application of a given rule either appropriate or in appropriate, there is nothing to prevent him from generating the following ungrammatical sentences:

*He supposed the similarity between proverbs being significant.

*Some folk remedies may keep you from that you would get sick.

While it is probably easier to teach the operational component of language rules, the more challenging task of teaching a rule's true domain of applicability must not be slighted.

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