

**THE NATURE OF *BE* IN THE INTERLANGUAGE REPRESENTATION  
OF L1 CHINESE LEARNERS OF L2 ENGLISH**

**By**

**SOONG LEE CHENG**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,  
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts**

**November 2004**

## **DEDICATION**

To anyone who appreciates this piece of work

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment  
of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

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**Chairman: Associate Professor Wong Bee Eng, Ph.D.**

**Faculty: Modern Languages and Communication**

The interlanguage (IL) representations of *be* in second language acquisition (SLA) research have received different treatments. To some linguists, *be* in morphological tense forms is considered to be the easiest morpheme to acquire because it is in a local head-complement relation, taking it as a local-relation marker. Researchers have also strived to explain why *be* in periphrastic tense constructions is usually used by L2 learners to passivize unaccusative verbs, treating it as a pseudo-passive marker. They assume that it is probably due to incomplete acquisition of lexical properties of unaccusative verbs that makes L2 learners explicitly mark the logical object in the formal subject position with non-native auxiliary *be*.

This study refutes the above claims by adopting Ouhalla's analysis to give an alternative treatment to the nature of IL representations of *be*. Within the Principles and Parameters framework, Ouhalla (1991) postulates that *be* is an expletive in both morphological and periphrastic tense constructions, which has no argument structure and functions to formally hold the place of the empty Inflection node. Therefore, the study proposes that the nature of IL representations of *be* is an I-supporter to help

instantiate I, which is stranded in non-verbal predicates, and in situations where the categorial nature of the verb becomes nominal after being joined with a nominal functional head. Therefore, *be* in a periphrastic tense form, which is the  $[be+V]$  complex, is hypothesized to be used to non-natively mark perfective aspectual contexts.

By refuting that *be* is a local-relation marker, the study assumes that L2 learners could never easily acquire *be*-support of the Modal phrase, which is also in a local head-complement relation as with copula *be* and auxiliary *be*. In order to rebut *be* as a pseudo-passive marker which is mostly associated with unaccusatives, the study assumes that L2 learners will still accept the IL  $[be+V]$  complex even when the formal subject position is occupied by a logical subject, the thematic verb is either transitive or unergative in categorial nature, and the bound morpheme attached to the verb is either one of the bound morphemes *-s*, *-ed*, *-en* or  $\emptyset$ .

A hundred and thirty-four subjects, who are undergraduates of B. A. (Mandarin) at Universiti Putra Malaysia, participated in an Acceptability Judgement Test and fifteen of them in an Elicited Translation Task. The findings show that although the L1 Chinese learners of L2 English have acquired *be* in non-verbal predicates, they have difficulty in acquiring *be*-support of Modal phrases. Furthermore, the subjects accepted and produced the IL  $[be+V]$  complex even when the formal subject of the sentence is a logical subject, the thematic verb is either transitive or unergative in categorial nature, and they attached one of the bound morphemes *-s*, *-ed*, *-en*, or  $\emptyset$  to the verb in the complex. In sum, the findings of the study suggest that the claims

that *be* in morphological tense forms is a local-relation marker, and *be* in periphrastic tense forms is a pseudo-passive marker can be refuted.

It is argued that the subjects are able to reset the [ $\pm$ overt] feature specification of I instantiation from [-overt] in Chinese to [+overt] in English. Furthermore, they have no problem mapping the [+overt] feature to the morphological form of I-supporter *be* in morphological tense constructions. However, when there is an added layer of Aspect categorial feature, the subjects encounter difficulties realizing the [+V] feature specification of perfective aspect element, and mapping it onto the morphological form *have*. Rather, they take the Asp element to be nominal, and unconsciously realizing that I is stranded, they instantiate I with the I-supporter *be*.

In conclusion, the nature of *be* in IL representations of L1 Chinese learners of L2 English is an I-supporter which helps instantiate stranded I in both morphological and periphrastic tense constructions as postulated by Ouhalla (1991).

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sastera

**SIFAT *BE* DALAM PERLAMANGAN ANTARABAHASA  
PELAJAR CINA YANG MEMPELAJARI BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI  
BAHASA KEDUA**

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Perlambangan antarabahasa *be* dikaji daripada beberapa aspek dalam bidang penyelidikan pemerolehan bahasa kedua. Kepada sesetengah ahli linguistik, *be* dalam pembentukan kala selapis dianggap sebagai morfem yang paling mudah dipelajari kerana berada di dalam hubungan kepala-komplemen setempat, dan diperlakukan sebagai penanda hubungan-setempat. Penyelidik-penyelidik juga berusaha menjelaskan kenapa *be* dalam pembentukan kala majmuk sering digunakan oleh para pelajar L2 untuk mempasifkan kata kerja tak-akusatif, dan memperlakukannya sebagai penanda pasif palsu. Dalam hipotesis mereka, fenomena ini mungkin terjadi kerana pelajar L2 tidak memerolehi ciri-ciri leksikal kata kerja tak-akusatif dengan lengkap; oleh itu mereka menandakan kewujudan objek logik dalam tempat subjek formal dengan kata kerja bantu *be* secara terus-terang.

Kajian ini menyangkal kenyataan-kenyataan di atas dengan analisis Ouhalla dan memberikan satu pengolahan alternatif kepada sifat perlambangan antarabahasa *be*. Dalam rangka teori *Principles and Parameters*, Ouhalla (1991) mempostulat bahawa

*be* dalam kedua-dua pembentukan kala selapis dan majmuk merupakan kata dami yang tidak mengandungi struktur argumen dan berfungsi menampung tempat kosong nod *Inflection* (I). Oleh itu, kajian ini menyarankan bahawa *be* dalam perlambangan antarabahasa merupakan penyokong-I. Ia membantu mengaktifkan I, apabila I tergendala dalam kes-kes predikat bukan verbal, dan dalam keadaan di mana sifat kategori kata kerja bertukar kepada nominal selepas bergabung dengan satu kepala fungsi bersifat nominal. Jadi, *be* dalam pembentukan kala majmuk, iaitu kompleks [*be+V*], dihipotesiskan sebagai penanda konteks kala sempurna yang tidak asli.

Dengan menyangkal perlambangan *be* sebagai penanda hubungan-setempat, kajian ini bercadang bahawa pelajar-pelajar L2 tidak dapat mempelajari penyokong-*be* frasa Modal dengan mudah sekali, di mana penyokong-*be* juga berada di dalam hubungan kepala-komplemen setempat seperti kopula *be* dan kata kerja bantu *be*. Manakala, untuk menyangkal *be* sebagai penanda pasif palsu yang sering dikaitkan dengan kata kerja tak-akusatif, kajian ini menyarankan bahawa pelajar-pelajar L2 tetap menerima kompleks [*be+V*] biarpun tempat subjek formal diambil oleh subjek logik, kata kerja bersifat transitif atau tak-ergatif, dan kata kerja digabung dengan satu di antara morfem-morfem terikat *-s*, *-ed*, *-en* atau  $\emptyset$ .

Seratus tiga puluh empat orang siswa-siswi Sarjana Muda Sastera (Mandarin), Universiti Putra Malaysia mengambil bahagian dalam *Acceptability Judgement Test* dan 15 daripada mereka menyertai *Elicited Translation Task*. Dapatan kedua-dua instrumen ini menunjukkan bahawa walaupun pelajar-pelajar Cina yang mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris sebagai L2 dapat memerolehi *be* dalam konteks predikat bukan verbal, pemerolehan penyokong-*be* di dalam frasa Modal mereka adalah kurang

memuaskan. Lebih-lebih lagi, subjek-subjek menerima serta menghasilkan kompleks [*be+V*] walaupun tempat formal subjek diambil oleh subjek logik yang biasa, kata kerja itu bersifat transitif atau tak-ergatif. Mereka juga mengaitkan satu antara morfem-morfem terikat *-s*, *-ed*, *-en* atau  $\emptyset$  ini kepada kata kerja dalam kompleks itu. Pendek kata, kajian ini berjaya menyangkalkan kenyataan-kenyataan yang menganggap *be* dalam pembentukan kala selapis sebagai penanda hubungan-setempat, dan *be* dalam pembentukan kala majmuk sebagai penanda pasif palsu.

Kajian ini mencadangkan bahawa subjek-subjek mampu mengeset semula spesifikasi ciri [ $\pm$  terang] penandaan *Inflection* daripada [-terang] dalam Bahasa Mandarin kepada [+terang] dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Tambahan lagi, subjek-subjek tidak mengalami kesusahan dalam memetakan ciri [+terang] kepada bentuk penyokong-I *be* di dalam pembentukan kala selapis. Akan tetapi, apabila adanya satu lapisan tambahan ciri *Aspect*, subjek-subjek menghadapi masalah merealisasikan spesifikasi ciri [+V] elemen kala sempurna *Aspect*, serta memetakan ciri ini ke atas bentuk *have*. Sebaliknya, mereka menganggap elemen kala sempurna *Aspect* bersifat nominal, dan secara tak sedar mendapati bahawa *Inflection* tergendala, mereka mengaktifkan *Inflection* dengan penyokong-I *be*.

Sebagai kesimpulan, sifat *be* dalam perlambangan antarabahasa pelajar Cina yang mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris sebagai L2 merupakan penyokong-I yang merealisasikan I yang tergendala dalam kedua-dua pembentukan kala selapis dan majmuk seperti dipostulatkan oleh Ouhalla (1991).



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I certify that an Examination Committee met on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2004 to conduct the final examination of Soong Lee Cheng on her Master of Arts thesis entitled “The Nature of *Be* in the Interlanguage Representation of L1 Chinese Learners of L2 English” in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulation 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for the quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.

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**SOONG LEE CHENG**

Date:

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