



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**USING THE FAILED FUNCTIONAL FEATURES HYPOTHESIS TO
ACCOUNT FOR THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH LOCATIONAL AND
DIRECTIONAL PREPOSITIONS BY MALAYSIAN CHINESE SPEAKERS**

SHARON CHONG YEE LING

FBMK 2007 2

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By

SHARON CHONG YEE LING

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

April 2007



DEDICATION

**To Mdm. Lydia Thien Nyuk Kien,
my beloved grandmother who left us to be with the Lord on the 23rd of May 2005.**



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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This study examines the acquisition of English locational and directional prepositions by Malaysian Chinese speakers in relation to the issues concerning the Failed Functional Features Hypothesis in SLA (Second Language Acquisition) within the Minimalist Program framework. In particular, this study tests the hypothesis of the inaccessibility of a parameterized functional feature [Dir] which is not instantiated in adult learners' L1 (first language) inventory due to the critical period effect.

Chinese is argued to be a language that has no [Dir] feature for its directional expression is controlled by a verb. On the other hand, the English language requires a [Dir] feature which is found in English prepositions to express directionality. Therefore, it is postulated that Malaysian Chinese speakers have persistent difficulty in recognizing the directional reading expressed by English directional and ambiguous prepositions. In contrast, these speakers have no difficulty in recognizing the locational reading expressed by English locational and ambiguous prepositions probably due to the presence of a [Loc] feature in the learners' L1 inventory.



It is argued that after the age of seven (the end of the critical period), L1 Chinese L2 English speakers are not able to acquire the [Dir] feature as the feature is not found in the learners' L1 inventory and at the same time, the learners are also unable to reset their L1 parameter settings into L2 parameter settings. Two tasks, a Grammaticality Judgment Task (GJT) and a Directionality Judgment Task (DJT) were administered to 100 adult L1 Chinese speakers of L2 English. The former comprises grammatical and ungrammatical items with locational, directional and ambiguous prepositions. The latter consists of items with locational, directional and ambiguous prepositions which convey locational and directional readings. In addition, an Oral Production Task on describing directions was carried out with 12 of the respondents.

The findings indicate that while the Chinese speakers were able to acquire the surface structure of the English prepositions, they nevertheless had not acquired the underlying associated features. Such findings are consistent with the view that parameterized uninterpretable functional features are subject to a critical period.

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

**PENGUNAAN HIPOTESIS KEGAGALAN FITUR FUNGSI UNTUK
MENERANGKAN PEMEROLEHAN PREPOSISI LOKASI DAN ARAH
BAHASA INGGERIS OLEH PENUTUR BAHASA CINA MALAYSIA**

Oleh

SHARON CHONG YEE LING

April 2007

Pengerusi: Profesor Madya Wong Bee Eng, PhD

Fakulti: Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi

Kajian ini menguji tentang pemerolehan preposisi lokasi dan arah bahasa Inggeris oleh penutur bahasa Cina Malaysia yang berkaitan dengan isu Hipotesis Kegagalan Fitur Fungsi dalam bidang pemerolehan bahasa kedua dengan menggunakan rangka Program Minima. Khasnya, kajian ini menguji hipotesis tentang kegagalan fitur fungsi [Dir] yang berparameter yang tidak terkandung di dalam inventori bahasa pertama pemeroleh dewasa akibat kesan tempoh kritikal.

Bahasa Cina dikatakan merupakan bahasa yang tidak mempunyai fitur [Dir] untuk menyatakan bacaan arah kerana bacaan arah bahasa Cina dikawal oleh kata kerja. Manakala, bahasa Inggeris memerlukan fitur [Dir] yang didapati di dalam preposisi bahasa Inggeris untuk menyatakan bacaan arahnya. Oleh itu, adalah dipostulasikan bahawa penutur bahasa Cina Malaysia menghadapi masalah untuk mengenal bacaan arah yang dinyatakan oleh preposisi arah dan preposisi taksa bahasa Inggeris. Sebaliknya, penutur bahasa Cina Malaysia tidak mempunyai masalah untuk mengenal

bacaan lokasi yang dinyatakan oleh preposisi lokasi dan preposisi taksa bahasa Inggeris. Ini disebabkan oleh kehadiran fitur [Loc] dalam inventori bahasa pertama pemeroleh.

Selepas umur tujuh tahun (tamatnya tempoh kritikal), penutur B1 (bahasa pertama) Cina B2 (bahasa kedua) Inggeris dikatakan tidak dapat memperoleh fitur [Dir] kerana fitur tersebut tidak terdapat dalam inventori bahasa pertama penutur, dan pada masa yang sama, penutur juga tidak dapat mengubah semula parameter bahasa pertama kepada parameter bahasa kedua. Dua tugas iaitu satu Tugas Penilaian Tatabahasa (GJT) dan satu Tugas Penilaian Berkenaan Arah (DJT) telah dijalankan ke atas 100 orang dewasa penutur B1 Cina B2 Inggeris. Yang pertama mengandungi butiran yang mengikut nahu bahasa dan butiran yang tidak mengikut nahu bahasa dengan menggunakan preposisi lokasi, arah dan taksa. Yang kemudian mengandungi butiran yang menggunakan preposisi lokasi, arah dan taksa dalam menyatakan bacaan lokasi dan arah. Di samping itu, satu Tugas Penghasilan Lisan (OPT) yang menggambarkan bacaan arah telah dijalankan ke atas 12 orang responden dari antara 100 orang responden tersebut.

Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa walaupun penutur bahasa Cina dapat memperoleh struktur luaran preposisi Inggeris, mereka bagaimanapun belum dapat memperoleh fitur dalamannya. Hasil kajian yang sedemikian adalah konsisten dengan pandangan bahawa fitur fungsi yang tidak membawa makna yang berparameter adalah tertakluk kepada kesan tempoh kritikal.

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I certify that an Examination Committee has met on 05th April 2007 to conduct the final examination of Sharon Chong Yee Ling on her degree of Master of Arts thesis entitled "Using the Failed Functional Features Hypothesis to Account for the Acquisition of English Locational and Directional Prepositions by Malaysian Chinese Speakers" in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 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 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.

SHARON CHONG YEE LING

Date: 10th July 2006

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

UG	Universal Grammar
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
ECP	Empty Category Principle
FFFH	Failed Functional Features Hypothesis
MP	Minimalist Program
CS	Computational System
ILGs	Interlanguage Grammars
SD	Structural Description
PF	Articulatory-perceptual System
LF	Conceptual-perceptual System
PF	Phonetic Form
LF	Logical Form
PIF	Principle of Full Interpretation
CP	Critical Period Hypothesis
FD	Fundamental Difference Hypothesis
RRC	Restrictive Relative Clauses
PP	Lexical Prepositional Phrase
pP	Functional Prepositional Phrase
Dir	Directional
Loc	Locational

IV	Independent Variable
DV	Dependent Variable
GJT	Grammaticality Judgment Task
DJT	Directionality Judgment Task
OPT	Oral Production Task
SVO	Subject Verb Object

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

“Language acquisition is a *species-specific* ability, possessed only by human beings” (Radford, 1997: 8). This is due to the presence of a biological innate language faculty in the human brain in which knowledge of language is stored, that is, the tacit knowledge of the grammar of language or the language competence (Radford, 1997: 2). The language faculty helps humans to acquire language as well as to produce language. This language faculty is located in the left hemisphere of the brain in a modular form that consists of interacting modules (Hawkins and Chan, 1997: 188).

However, by knowing only the physical form of the language faculty gives no further information about the language itself and neither does it tell us about the language acquisition and production processes that occur in it. Therefore, beginning from the 1950s, a theory known as Universal Grammar (UG) was postulated by Chomsky to describe the constitution of language knowledge, and to explain the language acquisition and production interactions that take place in the language faculty. However, this theory was specifically proposed to describe and to explain the acquisition of the first language (L1) by young children of one to six years of age. It was not used to describe and to explain the acquisition of a second language by children



after the age of seven (post-childhood) and adults. Such a task was taken up by the second language acquisition (SLA) researchers.

The distinction made between the first language acquisition and second language acquisition processes is due to the fact that acquiring a second language seems to be different from the acquisition of a first language or one's mother tongue especially after the age of seven (Towell and Hawkins, 1994: 2). This is because while L1 acquisition is an effortless, rapid and uniform process, "L2 learners typically acquire second language slowly, with some effort and incompletely" (Towell and Hawkins, 1994: 4). Furthermore, five phenomena are observed among L2 learners. They are subconscious transfer, staged development, systematicity, variability and incompleteness (Towell and Hawkins, 1994: 5)¹.

Briefly, subconscious transfer refers to the transfer of L1 mental grammar properties into the construction of L2 grammar by the L2 learners (see for example, Odlin, 1989; Selinker, Swain and Dumas, 1975; Dulay and Burt, 1983; Selinker, 1983; Riley, 1981; Zobl, 1984; White, 1986a in Towell and Hawkins, 1994: 7-10). L2 learners also go through a series of transitional stages before they can acquire the properties of the target L2 grammar (see for example, Clahsen and Musyken, 1986; Clahsen, 1984 in Towell and Hawkins 1994: 10-11). This phenomenon is known as staged development. In line with this, it is said that there is systematicity in the growth of L2 competence or grammar knowledge across L2 learners (Meisel, Clahsen and Pienemann, 1981; Ellis

¹ For a detailed explanation, please refer to the book *Approaches to Second Language Acquisition* by Towell and Hawkins, 1994, Chapter One: 7-16.

1989; Dulay and Burt, 1973; Dulay and Burt, 1974; Bailey, Madden and Krashen, 1974; Makino, 1980 are mentioned in Towell and Hawkins, 1994: 11-12).

L2 learners are also said to have intuitions about aspects of the L2 grammar which cause variation in the production of those aspects of the L2 grammar at certain stages of development. This is due to the fact that L2 learners give the impression that “L2 learners at certain stages of development appear to allow more than one structural variant for a given construction where the target L2 has only one form” (Towell and Hawkins, 1994: 13).

L2 learners also seem to stop short of native-like success which leads to incompleteness in certain areas of the L2 grammar in the acquisition of the target L2 (Johnson and Newport, 1989: 60-99).

Being aware of the above phenomena, SLA researchers have been trying to formulate hypotheses and theories in order to explain the five observable phenomena of SLA. One of the earliest linguistic approaches is the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis. This hypothesis claims that if formation of a set of habits is involved in the acquisition of an L1, then the same habits should be involved in SLA too. The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis also claims that some of the habits which are appropriate to the L2 that have been acquired in the learners’ L1 will be acquired easily; others need some modification

or eradication in the context of the L2, while certain habits need to be acquired or learned from scratch for the L2 (Towell and Hawkins, 1994: 17)².

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis appears to have shortcomings. Firstly, this hypothesis could only explain one phenomenon, which is the subconscious transfer out of the five observable phenomena of SLA. In addition, the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis “under predicts” (Towell and Hawkins, 1994: 22) that all similarities lead to positive transfer when, in fact, some similarities do lead to negative transfer. It also “over predicts” (Towell and Hawkins, 1994: 22) that all similarities pose no learning problems to L2 learners but certain studies showed that some similarities between languages do pose learning problems for L2 learners. For example, “Odlin (1989) reports that although Spanish has a copula verb similar to English ‘be’ in sentences such as ‘That’s very simple’, ‘The picture’s very dark’, L1 Spanish learners of L2 English characteristically omit the copula in early stages of acquisition, saying: ‘That very simple’, ‘The picture very dark’” (Towell and Hawkins, 1994: 19).

As a result of the shortcomings of earlier approaches in SLA research, there has been a change of direction of interest among SLA researchers since the 1980s. These researchers began studying the extent of the availability of the role of Universal Grammar (UG), specifically principles and parameters in SLA (Cook and Newson, 1996: 124). Since then three hypotheses have been formulated in order to describe the role of UG in SLA especially among adult L2 learners.

² For a more detailed explanation, please refer to the book *Approaches to Second Language Acquisition* by Towell and Hawkins, 1994, Chapter Two: 17-32.



The formulation of these hypotheses about the role of UG in SLA is said to be due to some of the differences in the developmental aspect as well as the production aspect between L1 and L2 acquisition. According to Mitchell and Myles (2004: 84-89), there are three main factors that cause such differences: L2 learners are cognitively matured, they already know at least one other language and they have different motivations for learning an L2. As a result, three logical possibilities concerning the role of UG in SLA have been proposed: the Full Access Hypothesis, No Access Hypothesis and Partial Access Hypothesis (Mitchell and Myles, 2004: 84-89).

The Partial Access Hypothesis is considered to be the more recent approach compared to the other two hypotheses. This hypothesis appears to be able to explain the SLA phenomena in a more complete manner especially in terms of subconscious transfer, systematicity, variability and incompleteness. The Partial Access Hypothesis claims that some aspects or certain subparts of UG are fully available while others are not (Mitchell and Myles, 2004: 84-89).

According to Hawkins and Chan (1997: 187-189), the partial availability of UG are principles like the Empty Category Principle (ECP), Subjacency and the Binding Principles. The Empty Category Principle is a principle that constrains the empty categories or traces that are left after movement in a sentence such that they are properly governed either by a lexical head (object position) or by an antecedent (subject position) (Cook and Newson, 1996: 263). The Subjacency Principle, on the other hand, constrains the movement that takes place in a sentence. It states that an element may not be moved