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Inflection Of Prepositions In Italian Language And Its Effects Iranian Language Learners

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Abstract

This paper investigates inflection and inflectional features in the category of preposition in Italian and how Iranian language learners, learning Italian as a foreign language, deal with it. The analysis of different forms of inflected prepositions, the types of errors and their classification leads to the findings that: the prepositions in Italian language agree with their noun complement in number, person and gender, a feature not available in Persian, which causes some difficulties for Iranian language learners. The analysis of students' errors indicates two types of errors occurred mostly: addition and deletion. The research emphasizes the pedagogical implications for teaching prepositions in Italian language to help teachers and motivate them to take into consideration this typological difference between Persian and Italian in the use of prepositions.

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1. Contrastive analysis and error analysis literature

In 1960s when structural linguistics and behavioral psychology were dominant, contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH) model was developed. Keshavarz (2011:5) defined contrastive analysis (CA) as "the systematic study of a pair of languages in order to identify their structural differences and similarities, usually for translation and teaching purposes".

Brown (2000) states "CAH claimed that the principal barrier to second language acquisition is the interference of first language system with the second language system, that a scientific, structural analysis of the two languages in question would yield a taxonomy of linguistic contrasts between them, which in turn would enable the linguist to

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predict the difficulties a learner would encounter" (as cited in Bilal et al., 2013, P.208). According to this hypothesis, the interference of first language with the second language takes place especially in the use of prepositions.

Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis have been commonly recognized as branches of Applied Linguistics Science. "Applied Linguistics is using what we know about (a) language, (b) how it is learned, and (c) how it is used, in order to achieve some purpose or solve some problems in the real world" (Schmitt and Celce-Murcia 2002, p.1).

Lado (1957) claimed that for the students whose target language is second or foreign language, those elements of the target language that are similar to his/her native language will be simple for him/her and those elements that are different will be difficult. Bose (2005) mentioned that one of the reasons for learner errors is the interference of his mother tongue, which is described as the negative and positive transfer between the mother tongue and the target language. The negative transfer happens when the forms of the target language and those of the learner's mother tongue are different from each other. As Erdogan (2005: 263) discusses, "error analysis deals with the learners' performance in terms of the cognitive processes they make use of in recognizing or coding the input they receive from the target language. Therefore, a primary focus of error analysis is on the evidence that learners' errors provide an understanding of the underlying process of second language acquisition".

Moreover, contrastive linguistics plays an important role in the creation of language awareness (cf. Kortmann 1996, James 2005, Mair 2005). In particular, advanced learners can profit from a direct comparison of their native language with the language to be learned, thus making their implicit knowledge of the differences explicit. Contrastive linguistics has therefore been integrated into teacher training programmes at many universities, and course materials have been designed specifically for university level teaching (cf. König & Gast 2009).

Thus this investigation is expected to bring deeper understanding of the "learning burden" (Larsen-Freeman, 2003: 8) related to the language elements mentioned above, in order to contribute findings to "linguistic theory" (Kallkvist & Petersson, 2005: 113), but also to provide valuable knowledge about the acquisition process of adult Iranian who learn Italian as a foreign language.

2. Error made in the field of Prepositions

Wren and Martin (2006:106) defined preposition as "A word placed before a noun or a pronoun to show in what relation the thing denoted by it stands in regard to something else". Some grammarians provide a list of properties by which they distinguish the class of prepositions from other word classes, here we just mention a few related ones according to Huddleston (1988), (as cited in Mackova, 2012):

- Inflection: they do not enter into inflectional contrasts
- Complementation: they can take as complement an NP or a tensed declarative clause (however, other kinds of complements are allowed as well, e.g. an interrogative clause)
- Modification: they allow only a modest amount of modification
- Function: they function as head in PP2 structure

Although the structures and functions of prepositions are not the same in different languages, some reports of the errors made by different language learners illustrates that the field is not easy to master. Prepositions constitute 14% of all tokens produced in most languages (Fort & Guillaume 2007). They are reported as yielding among the highest error class rates across various languages (Izumi, 2004, for Japanese, Granger et al., 2001, for French). In their analysis of a small corpus of advanced-intermediate French as a Second Language (FSL) learners, Hermet et al. (2008) found that preposition choice accounted for 17.2 % of all errors.

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999:401) contend that prepositions are generally difficult for language learners who learn English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL). Likewise, Boers and Demecheleer (1998:197) argue that prepositions are difficult to master for ESL/EFL learners because they have literal as well as figurative meanings. Catalan (1996:174) claims that Spanish students have difficulty with mastering English prepositions. Habash (1982) discovered that common errors in the use of English prepositions in the written work were attributed to the interference of Arabic than to other learning problems.

A great many errors involve the inappropriate use of prepositions. This is hardly surprising, because prepositions are common and have many uses. Mahmoodzadeh (2012), too, has conducted a research to investigate the errors made by Iranian EFL learners due to the cross-linguistic influence between their L1/SL and L2/TL language (i.e. Persian & English respectively) to find the areas of difficulties concerning the acquisition of second language

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