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Imperfect Language: *How come?* and *So what?*

1. Imperfect language

We linguists, both as researchers and language teachers, aim at the ideal of a perfect language, that is, language that is standardized and codified. However, we are constantly exposed to imperfect language, i.e. language that differs from the standard either by a deliberate decision or due to a reduced capacity of the user. The deviations from the ideal are considered linguistic errors.

Errors are an inseparable part of language use. They may also be an interesting source of evidence for linguistics. All language users make mistakes, some of them frequently, others more rarely. Linguistic errors are made by:

- (a) children acquiring their mother tongue;
- (b) students learning a foreign language;
- (c) aphasics and people with other language disorders;
- (d) native speakers.

Children and students of the language can replace correct items with almost anything from the realm of incorrect or non-existent language items. Often there is a tendency to overgeneralize, meaning that nonexisting regular forms are used instead of irregular ones. Aphasics and native speakers, on the other hand, mostly use existing elements, but wrongly; they substitute incorrect forms for correct ones. Their errors are caused by impaired performance (in aphasics) or insufficient knowledge (in children and students), or the errors are made simply by mistake (in all types of language users).

1.1. Errors on the morpho-syntactic level

In order to be able to analyse language errors linguistically we must be able to compare two structures:

(A) correct utterance;

(B) deviant utterance.

B-structures are the actual material collected from language users; A-structures are the target forms. It is taken for granted that (A) is known, but it need not be that simple. In the case of language tests the intended A-structure may be clear, but in spontaneous speech it is not always obvious what the speaker aimed at in terms of the content and form of the utterance.

The question is: what should the erroneous forms be compared to? Should it be the written norm of the standard language, that is, the language form described in grammars and handbooks, which is codified and easily checked? This, however, is seldom the language form used in oral communication.

Should the material then be compared to the spoken norm of the language? That seems more appropriate, but it is not easily done. The spoken norm of a standard language has been much less investigated and described than the written norm. In some languages (for example, in Czech) it was deliberately neglected by linguists, and only recently has it become an object of linguistic interest (e.g. Hoffmannová, Müllerová & Zeman 1999; Hoffmannová & Müllerová 2008). As large corpora of spoken language have been made accessible (see, for example, Prague spoken corpus; Brno spoken corpus; Czech spoken corpus ORAL2006), many linguists have experienced an unpleasant shock. The transcription of a normal conversation appeared to be surprisingly messy and ungrammatical. As a rule, it seems to be abnormal, of the kind produced by aphasics, not by normal language users. However, what used to be considered impossible by armchair-researchers and incorrect by language teachers seems to function quite satisfactorily in oral communication.

How then should one evaluate linguistic errors? Should the results of the written and oral sections of tests (such as aphasia test batteries) be compared to different language norms (i.e. A-structures)? In written tasks, users tend to use standard language, in oral exercises the choice of language code depends on the situation, the relation between the test administrator and the speaker, the individuality of the speaker, and many other factors. The target form may change from one testing to another, and it may change during one test situation, too.

Languages differ considerably as to the richness of the various codes and their grammatical manifestation. In Czech there are several language codes:

- (a) standard literary language;
- (b) common spoken language;
- (c) dialects;

(d) slangs;

(e) argots.

These codes differ from one another not only lexically and stylistically, as is the case in most languages, but also grammatically, especially on the level of morphology. Standard language and common language are so far apart that we can almost speak of two different codes (diglossia).

In analysing linguistic errors, the question that arises is, to which code should the deviant utterances be compared: standard language (1), common language (2), Moravian dialect (3), or any combination of their features (4)?

- (1) *Mám nemocné oči, ale čeští lékaři tvrdí, že jsem zdravý.*
(2) *Mám nemocný voči, ale český doktoři tvrděj, že sem zdravej.*
(3) *Mam nemocné oči, ale český doktoři tvrdijó, že su zdravé.*
(4) *Mám nemocný oči, ale český doktoři tvrdí, že su zdravej.*

‘I have sore eyes, but Czech doctors say that I am healthy.’

It is very difficult to judge what the user aimed at when he made a mistake. The distribution of codes depends on many factors, both linguistic and sociological. The dialect (3) can usually be identified by the family background of the user. On the other hand, both standard language (1) and common language (2) can be used by the same person in a given situation, and not even a mixture of these two codes (4) is impossible. For one B-structure there are several possible A-structures.

1.2. Cross-linguistic studies

It is difficult enough to evaluate test results within one language; it becomes even more complex in cross-linguistic studies. Results obtained from different languages provide interesting material for comparison, but at the same time they represent a methodological challenge.

As the data are often given in statistical form, the question is on what grounds they can be compared. Even the simplest data, such as the number of words, is dependent on the type of language:

- (5) CZ *naš-emu psací - mu stol - u* 3 words
(6) RU *наш-ему письменн-ому стол-у* 3 words
(7) SW *till vårt skriv-bord* 3 words
(8) EN *to our writing table* 4 words
(9) HU *az író - asztal - unk - nak* 2 words
(10) FI *kirjoitus - pöydä - lle - mme* 1 word

1.2.1. “Only that which can go wrong will go wrong”

As the corollary to the famous Murphy’s Law has it (Paradis 2001), the number of errors depends on the possibilities of going wrong. In languages with poor morphology, such as English, users are not likely to encounter many morphological errors, while in morphologically rich languages, such as the Slavonic languages, it is a miracle that users ever get anything right.

For the sake of exemplification let us consider the grammatical category of gender, which is realized very differently in different languages.

In the following example the same three sentences are given in three pairs of typologically different languages: inflecting Czech (11) and Russian (12), isolating Swedish (13) and English (14), agglutinating Hungarian (15) and Finnish (16). In the first line (a) all referents are male; in the second line (b) all referents are female. The underlined word-forms are gender explicit; the others can refer to both men and women.

(11) CZ:

(a) *Mám nového kolegu. Je to Čech. Náš profesor mi ho představil.*

(b) *Mám novou kolegyni. Je to Češka. Naše profesorka mi ji představila.*

(12) RU:

(a) *У меня есть новый коллега. Он чех. Наш профессор мне его представил.*

(b) *У меня есть новая коллега. Она чешка. Наша профессор мне её представила.*

(13) SW:

(a) *Jag har en ny kollega. Han är tjeck. Vår professor presenterade honom till mig.*

(b) *Jag har en ny kollega. Hon är tjeckiska. Vår professor presenterade henne till mig.*

(14) EN:

(a) *I have a new colleague. He is Czech. Our professor introduced him to me.*

(b) *I have a new colleague. She is Czech. Our professor introduced her to me.*

(15) HU:

(a) *Új kollégám van. Ő cseh. Professzorunk nekem bemutatta.*

(b) *Új kollégánóm van. Ő cseh. Professzornőnk nekem bemutatta.*

(16) FI:

(a) *Minulla on uusi kollega. Hän on tšekki. Professorimme esitteli hänet minulle.*

(b) *Minulla on uusi kollega. Hän on tšekki. Professorimme esitteli hänet minulle.*

Table 1. Referring to referents by gender explicit / unexplicit means

REFE- RENT	I		COLLEAGUE		PROFESSOR	
	+EXPL	-EXPL.	+ EXPL.	-EXPL.	+EXPL.	-EXPL.
CZ		mám mi	nového kolegu Čech ho	je to	náš profesor představil	
RU		меня мне	новый он чех его	есть коллега	наш представил	профессор

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SW		jag har mig	han tjeck honom	ny kollega är		vår professor presenterade
EN		I have me	he him	new colleague is Czech		our professor introduced
HU		-m nekem	kolléga	új van ő cseh -a	professzor	-unk bemutatt
FI		minulla minulle		uusi kollega on hän tšekki hänet		professori- mme esitteli

Table 2. Explicit expression of gender in different grammatical categories:

+ explicit reference to either man or woman

- both man and woman referred to by the same form

(+) usually explicit but not always

(-) usually refers to both genders but sometimes female may be expressed explicitly

		CZ	RUS	SWE	ENGL	HUN	FIN
nouns	lexical	+	+	+	+	+	+
	word-forming	+	(+)	(-)	(-)	(+)	-
adject.		+	+	-	-	-	-
	possessive adj.	+	-	-	-	-	-
numer.		+	+	-	-	-	-
pron.	attributes	+	+	-	-	-	-
	1 st /2 nd pers. pron.	-	-	-	-	-	-
	3 rd pers. pron.	+	+	+	+	-	-
verbs	pres. ind. act.						
	1 st /2 nd person	-	-	-	-	-	-
	3 rd person	-	-/+	-/+	-/+	-	-
	future act.						
	1 st /2 nd person	-	-	-	-	-	-
	3 rd person	-	-/+	-/+	-/+	-	-
	past						
	1 st /2 nd person	+	+	-	-	-	-
	3 rd person	+	+	-/+	-/+	-	-

conditional 1 st /2 nd person 3 rd person	+	+	-	-	-	-
passive 1 st /2 nd person 3 rd person	+	+	-	-	-	-
gerund (transgressive)	+	-	-	-	-	-

It is obvious that gender-explicitness does depend on the typological character of the language, but within each type the realization of certain features can be implemented with different intensity.

Finnish and Hungarian, in which agglutination predominates, offer very restricted opportunities for expressing gender. The only potential means available in the agglutinating type are gender-specific affixes. However, this possibility is realized in Hungarian much more than in Finnish: Hungarian nouns referring to females are usually marked by a derivational suffix, while Finnish nouns have no gender.

In Swedish and English, where isolation predominates, gender distinction is expressed approximately to the same extent: it is realized in 3rd-person pronouns and a few derivations only.

Czech and Russian, both considered inflecting languages, differ in the degree of gender explicitness not only from other types, but also from each other. While Czech is noticeably consistent in marking the gender of referents, even in redundant positions, Russian can sometimes refer to both genders with the same form (cf. Table 2).

Finnish and Hungarian offer next to no possibilities for errors in the category of grammatical gender, while Russian and especially Czech demand a choice of correct forms in almost every word. Obviously, Slavonic languages are more liable to error in this category than Fenno-Ugric languages.

2. How come?

Having stated the explicitness of grammatical gender we can proceed to analysing errors in this category in a specific language. Not surprisingly, I shall use Czech material here, although a similar treatment could be applied to any other language, and to any other category for that matter.

In Czech, the grammatical category of gender cannot be omitted. It must be used, whether it be correct or incorrect. Incorrect use of gender means replacing the proper gender form by a wrong form. This can be manifested in two ways:

- (a) by declining the noun according to a wrong paradigm;
- (b) by using incorrect forms in agreement.

2.1. Children acquiring Czech as their mother tongue

Gender errors in children's speech are syntagmatic rather than paradigmatic: children do not decline masculines according to feminine paradigms, but they replace masculine forms of attributes and predicates with feminine ones.

- (17) *hodná* *táta*
good-(F instead of M) Daddy-M
'good Daddy'
- (18) *Tom* *je malá*
Tom-M is small-(F instead of M)
'Tom is small'
- (19) *Tom* *udělala*
Tom-M made-(F instead of M)
'Tom made'

The process of language acquisition is characterised by overgeneralizations. In the first stage the category of gender is not acknowledged and feminine forms are generalized. The prevalence of F is usually explained by the fact that children imitate the speech of their mothers and other female caretakers. Children also prefer open syllables of the form "consonant+vowel", which is typical for feminine forms (Pačesová 1979).

When gender starts to be distinguished, its typical endings are overgeneralized:

- (a) all words ending in a consonant are taken for masculines;
- (b) all words ending in *-a* are taken for feminines;
- (c) all words ending in *-o* are taken for neuters.

2.2. Students learning Czech as a foreign language

Finnish students of Czech naturally have many problems with the category of gender. Paradigmatic errors are due to gaps in grammatical knowledge. Replacing a correct gender with a wrong one is usually based on probability (for example, words ending in a consonant are taken for M, words ending in *-a* for F). This is the same strategy as that used by children acquiring the language.

In syntagmatic errors two opposite influences can be observed. On the one hand, the masculine form may be overused because it is given first in dictionaries and textbooks. On the other hand, in courses where the teacher and most of the students are female, feminine forms tend to outweigh masculine forms.

A special gender error made by Finnish students is the wrong reflection of natural gender in personal pronouns and verb forms.

- (20) *Eva je Češka. On bydlí v Praze.*
 Eva is Czech-F. He-(M instead of F) lives in Prague.
 ‘Eva is Czech. She lives in Prague.’
- (21) *Maminka vařil a já jsem mu pomáhal.*
 Mother cooked-(M instead of F) and I AUX. VERB
 him-(M instead of F) helped- M.
 ‘Mother cooked and I helped her.’
- (22) *Dělala jsem zkoušku.*
 (I) did-(F instead of M) exam.
 ‘I (a man speaking about himself) did an exam.’

Such mistakes were not found in aphasic material and they are not made by students of Czech whose mother tongue realises the category of gender (such as RU, partly also SW, EN). On the other hand, mistakes like (22) are encountered in Czech children learning their mother tongue: feminine verb forms are often used by small boys when referring to themselves.

2.3. Aphasic patients

I have been studying agrammatism in different types of aphasia (e.g. Lehečková 1986; 1988; 2001; 2002; 2008). Paradigmatic errors in gender are rare. This can be attributed to the fact that aphasics tend to use words in their basic form (NOM. SG.). Syntagmatic errors, on the other hand, are very frequent. They appear mostly in attributes, much less in predicates, because aphasic speech contains a prevalence of NPs and very few VPs.

- (23) *ten babička*
 that-(M instead of F) grandmother-F
 ‘that grandmother’
- (24) *hodný holka*
 nice-(M instead of F) girl-F
 ‘a nice girl’
- (25) *hloupej zvíře*
 stupid-(M instead of N) animal-N
 ‘a stupid animal’
- (26) *dobrá zdravý jídlo*
 good-(F instead of N) healthy-N food-N
 ‘good healthy food’

In incorrect usage M usually replaces both F and N; exceptionally, F replaces N (Lehečková 1988, 279). This suggests that masculine forms are the most resistant or are the first at hand for patients with language disorders.

2.4. Native speakers

Native speakers do not generally make mistakes in gender, for the gender of Czech nouns is quite unambiguous. The only marginal exception is represented by some new borrowings or words of foreign origin. Other errors are slips of the tongue.

3. So what?

Corpora of spoken language have shown that unprepared language production is always imperfect, one way or other. Perfect language following all the rules and laws, which we linguists have been formulating and teaching, is rather an abstraction and idealisation. For example, in the category of grammatical gender, paradigmatic errors occur among language learners and in rare cases among people with language disorders; syntagmatic errors occur in all types of language users.

However, even imperfect language can function as a means of communication. Actually, we understand utterances that are full of errors and inaccuracies surprisingly well. I have been able to decode most of my students' statements, however erroneous they might be. On the other hand, I have challenged students with my mistakes in the language which happens to be their mother tongue, but which is a foreign language for me. We have often had a good laugh but seldom a complete misunderstanding.

Understanding imperfect language is important in the communicative approach to language teaching, and even more so in communication with aphasic patients. One has to reduce both production and perception to the most essential core.

I remember having worked with a patient who was once a language professional, a writer and a journalist. Owing to a brain haemorrhage in the left hemisphere he had suddenly lost most of his linguistic performance. His language production was limited to one phrase that he used as a substitute for all predicates: *prosimtě* ("please"). His language perception seemed to be impaired much less.

When I met this patient for the first time, I introduced myself and explained my position and task. Then I tried to start some kind of small talk in order to evaluate the severity of his deficit. For a long time he reacted only by shaking his head. When I was on the verge of giving up, he finally spoke:

- (27) *Já ... prosimtě ... holka, vona ... prosimtě ... docent. No ... prosimtě!*
I ... please ... girl, she ... please ... docent. Well ...please!
'I thought she was just a girl but she is a docent. Well, would you believe it!'

His utterance was deviant and imperfect in many ways. Not only the category of grammatical gender, but also everything else went wrong. Nevertheless, nobody had the slightest problem in understanding it. This phrase became the point of departure for his rehabilitation.

Even a most imperfect language is better than no language at all. This is well acknowledged by those working with aphasic patients or with people isolated in a foreign language environment. It is also something that linguists and language teachers should bear in mind. The search for understanding is more important than the perfect use of language.

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