Does Basic Variety occur in the (naturally acquired) writing of low-proficiency speakers of English as a second language?
A description and discussion of Basic Variety utterance patterns found in the writing of adult migrants

ANNA PHILLIPS – NCELTR, Macquarie University

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Basic Variety (BV) utterance patterns found in low-proficiency speakers in a longitudinal, cross-linguistic project carried out by the European Science Foundation (ESF) and asks whether BV also applies to the writing of low-proficiency migrant learners who acquire English outside the language classroom. Thirty-six learners with a range of first languages from three regional groups were given a narrative writing task based on a sequence of pictures. Text analysis showed that BV occurred in the texts of learners from all three regions. Though the scope of the study is small, the results indicate that BV occurs not only in spoken form but also in naturally acquired writing.

Introduction

It has generally been assumed that the writing of low-proficiency learners of second languages mirrors the patterns of their first language. In areas of writing research such as contrastive rhetoric, genre and composition studies, researchers argue that there is a relationship between culture and particular organisational patterns in written texts (Kaplan 1966; Hinds 1990; Mauranen 1993; Connor 1996; Valero-Garces 1996). However, longitudinal, cross-linguistic studies on the oral acquisition of a second language by migrants have found that the speakers' first languages (L1) have limited impact on their utterance patterns in the second language (L2). These studies, which were coordinated under the auspices of the ESF, also found that speakers who acquired their second language outside the language classroom developed common, stable interlanguage, called BV. BV occurred across a range of first and second languages (Perdue and Klein 1992; Skiba and Dittmar 1992; Klein and Perdue 1997). This paper examines whether

BV also occurs in the writing of low-proficiency learners operating outside the language classroom.

Grammaticalisation and BV

BV is a part of grammaticalisation within the domain of second language acquisition (SLA). Grammaticalisation 'tries to discover the dynamics of linguistic evolution, change or acquisition by examining the interaction of grammatical processes with semantic and pragmatic factors and to explain this in functional terms' (Dittmar 1992: 251). Sankoff points out that 'grammaticalization processes the transition between what initially appear to be ad hoc speaker strategies and what later can be described as syntactic rules' (1980: 260).

These 'syntactic rules' of BV are described by Klein and Perdue (1997: 303) as being:

- determined by the interaction of a small number of organisational principles (phrasal, semantic and pragmatic);

- largely (though not totally) independent of the specifics of L1 and L2 language organisation, though lexicon and word formation can be influenced by L1 (Broeder et al 1993);

- simple, versatile and highly efficient for most communicative purposes.

However, the implications of this study for written language acquisition remain unexplored.

The study

Thirty-six low-proficiency migrant learners were selected. The subjects were attending language classes for the first time at a TAFE (technical and further education) college in south-western Sydney, which has a high percentage of immigrants and refugees, especially from east and South-East Asia and the Middle East. Learners attending day classes have resided in Australia for various periods of time, ranging from a few months to more than five years. The length of time they have lived in Australia can be misleading, however, as most of these day/part-time learners have had little opportunity to speak or learn English for a variety of reasons. Many women postponed learning English because they remained at home raising families. Also, both men and women have worked in factories with their compatriots and other non-native speakers, so there has been little opportunity to use English. Others have been unemployed for some time, frequently due to industrial accidents. Finally, because many of these learners are refugees, they often have low levels of education in their first language.

In order to compare utterance patterns, subjects were chosen from three regions, which included a number of different languages. All subjects were from Level 1, the lowest proficiency level.

To reduce the number of variables (gender, age, education levels and length of time in Australia), four subjects were selected from each group. In order to provide anonymity, subjects were given numbers and codes to indicate their regions. 'A' was attributed to subjects from South-East Asia, 'M' to subjects from the Middle East and 'S' to subjects from Central and South America. Their profiles are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Learners selected to participate in the study

Code No	Gender	Age	Country	Education	Time in Australia
A4	Female	38–40	Vietnam	Low	5 years
A5	Female	40+	Vietnam	Low	
A9	Female	44	Vietnam	9 years	18 years
A18	Male	40+	Vietnam	Low	16 years
M1	Female	35+	Turkey	Low	< 2 years
M4	Female	30+	Iran	Low	4 years
M5	Female	30+	Syria	Low	6 years
M6	Male	40–49	Iran	12 years	< 1 year
S1	Female	44	San Salvador	6 years	12 years
S2	Female	40	Ecuador	> 12 years	8 years
S3	Male	68	Argentina		5 years
S5	Female		South America		

The subjects were given one writing task based on a simple, sequenced visual narrative to which key words were added. Since the learners had low-proficiency skills, it was important to choose a genre with which they would be familiar. Thus, a narrative genre was chosen because storytelling is common in all cultures and well-known from childhood onwards (Hendriks 2000).

Text analysis

Two tools were employed for the text analysis. The first is the grid system, which has often been used in Systemic Functional Grammar to demonstrate theme and rheme patterns in texts (Halliday 1994; Butt et al 2000). Here it has been used to separate the texts into the basic categories of theme and rheme, with the theme being further divided into textual, interpersonal and marked/unmarked themes. In Table 2 (see 'Results and discussion' section), the first column on the left shows the type of BV pattern being

used. Rows are interposed between utterances to enable simple analysis of the BV patterns.

The second tool is BV analysis using the utterance patterns based on three constraints or organising principles: phrasal, semantic and pragmatic (Klein and Perdue 1997). These are described in more detail below.

Phrasal constraints (PH): According to Klein and Perdue (1997), there are absolute constraints on the form and relative order of the constituents in an utterance. These constituents are composed of noun phrases (NP), which are one or more noun or noun-like words grouped together. There are two types: NP1, which appears as part of the theme of the utterance, and NP2, which occurs in the rheme. BV also contains base or stem forms of verbs (V) that carry no time function (non-finite). Thus, when a verb-like form appears, the phrasal patterns might carry a V-stem (infinitive) form or a V-ing (present participial) form.

As well as NPs and V-stem/-ing, these utterance patterns also carry adverbial (Adv) and/or prepositional phrases (PPs), which add time or spatial information. These may either precede or follow all patterns (Klein and Perdue 1997: 313-14). The three basic patterns and two sub-variants are shown below. However, although the first pattern, PH1, has three sub-patterns, the three patterns only differ in the number of NP arguments, as shown in the following examples taken from my data:

PH1a:	(i) NP1-V	eg It's raiing [raining] (A9)
	(ii) NP1-NP1-V	eg Two people one man and one woman go to shopping (A6)
PH1b	NP1-V-NP2	eg two cars pass the crossing (A9)
PH1c	NP1-V-NP2-NP2	eg there are 6 people and 4 cars (A3)
PH2	NP1-V/Copula-Adj/NP2/PP	eg so his [he is] very angry (M1)
PH3	V/Copula-NP2	eg [zero reference] splash water (A3)

Semantic constraints (SEM): Semantics in this context refers to the interpersonal relationship between the referents of NP1 and NP2. They follow the principle that there is asymmetrical control between the referents. The amount of control exerted can vary from a strong, asymmetrical relationship between referents around verbs such as 'hit' or 'break' to weaker asymmetries, such as 'kiss' or 'meet', where the referents are in a more equal relationship with each other. Thus, there are two patterns, as shown below:

SEM1: The NP-referent with the highest control comes first, for example, *they saw the women* (A4). Since 'they' are doing the looking,

'they' carry more force than the 'women' who are being looked at. The NP with more agentive force comes first. In data from the ESF study, this was always human.

SEM2: The controller of the source state outweighs the controller of the target state. For example, in *they saw the women* (A4), 'they' is the source state as 'they' control the 'looking', while 'the women' are in the target state because they have no control over this situation. However, because this writing task involved a description of a series of events rather than a recount of the relationship between characters, there were few examples of these two rules.

Pragmatic constraints (PR): Pragmatic factors are expressed through textual cohesion, reference maintenance and topic-focus structures (Klein and Perdue 1997: 316). There are two types. The first is the topic-focus structure and the second is the pattern of information status, that is, what is new, and what is maintained or given from previous utterances. While in reality the two go together, for the sake of clarity they need to be dealt with separately. Topic-focus is maintained by word order. The topic is the point of departure for what the speaker/writer is going to say/write, while the focus is the centre of the message (Halliday 1994: 38). Thus, the relevant constraint is PR1: focus expression last (Klein and Perdue 1997: 317). Examples are as follows:

PH1: topical position   eg *He* splash diving (A1)

PH3: focus position   eg make *they* wet (A1)

However, the pragmatic constraint also covers other aspects of utterance structure including adverbials. Time and space adverbials take topic-position when they are used to frame the utterance, but take the final or focal position when time-span or spatiality is central to the message. PH1 with time adverbials did not occur in this study, probably because the narrative writing task did not require time information, so the example is taken from Klein and Perdue (1997: 318). The patterns for topical and focal positions are outlined as follows:

PH3 (expressed
as Adv-V-NP):   topical (time or space foregrounded)

Temporal: Today is weather raining (M1)

Spatial: and picture 2 There is a car (A3)

PH1:   focus (time or space in rheme position)

Temporal: always [topical] I wake-up at eight o'clock [focus]
                (Klein and Perdue 1997: 318)

Spatial: drive near bicycle (A3)

The new-maintenance or given distinction is the second pragmatic factor. This refers to the way the text is developed, that is, what is carried forward from the previous utterance. This interacts with the topic-focus status and results in two types of noun phrases. The choice of form depends on whether the reference is introduced or maintained from a previous utterance, and whether it is in topic or focus position. According to Klein and Perdue (1997: 318), in BV pronouns only occur in topic position, while the focal position only takes a proper name, a noun, possibly with a determiner, or zero reference. The compositions of NP1 and NP2 are summarised below:

NP1	NP2
proper name	proper name
(determiner) noun	(determiner) noun
pronoun	Ø zero reference

There were exceptions to this rule in the current study and these are described in the following section.

Results and discussion

To demonstrate the evidence in context, a representative text by S3 is presented and analysed in Table 2.

There are various elements that demonstrate S3's use of BV. One is the type of referencing he uses. Broeder et al (1993) noted that learners usually use noun compounds in theme and rheme positions. S3 illustrates this point very clearly, as he does not use pronouns at all. However, this is not true of all texts, as will be seen later. Therefore S3, like other BV users, has to rely on the careful introduction of noun protagonists (almost always used with determiners) in the theme and then maintain the action through to the rheme.

The story is fuelled by verbs, which are generally non-finite, another feature of BV. Verb stems are used and these do not carry tense function. In Line i, which follows the pattern of PH1a, the verb is missing, though the utterance holds a copula-like position. The following verb forms are all non-

Table 2: The text of S3, 68-year-old male from Argentina, with 5 years' residence in Australia

BV	Theme			Rheme
	Textual	Inter personal	Topical	
		marked Theme	unmarked Theme	
i			The rain today,	
PH1a			NP1 (with temporal framing) – copula-like position	
ii	An		the people	taka an umprella,
PH1b	conj		NP1	V-stem – NP2
iii			the car	not reducion the peed,
PH1b			NP1	V-like – NP2
iv			wather	to sprinkle a oll people in crossing.
PH1c			NP1 (indirect reference to rain)	V– stem – PP1 – PP1 (L1 influence)
v			the bus	to sprinkle a drive car on bike a wimen an men,
PH1c			NP1	V-stem – PP1 – PP1 – PP1 – conj – NP2
vi			the man	Angry
PH2			NP1	copula-like
vii		ho, ho, hol!!! Exclamatory/emphatic		

finite and some are in infinitive form: ii, 'taka' [take]; iii, 'not reducion [reducing] the [s]peed'; and 'to sprinkle', in iv and v. The final utterance, vi, is again missing the copula. These features, then, follow the phrasal constraint patterns as described by Klein and Perdue (1997).

The heavy use of PPs is also a BV characteristic. In this case, S3 restricts PPs to the rheme, a clever technique both to help locate the action and to move the narrative forward. As in other texts in this study, PPs play a complex role and are very successful in the hands of a competent writer/communicator. However, this heavy use of PPs is one of the signs that these texts are not following English grammatical patterns.

In terms of semantic constraints, S3's text also follows BV patterns. The NP referent with the highest control comes first, for example, in iv and v, 'wather' and 'bus' respectively (SEM1). It also follows SEM2, because NP1 is the controller in the source state and it is stronger than NP2 in the target state. However, unlike the ESF project, the NP with the most agentive force is apparently not human because it is, on a metaphoric level, the 'wather' and, later, 'the bus' that splash the people. What this shows is that L2 speakers and writers can muster their knowledge of language to lubricate communication.

The S3 text also follows the pragmatic constraints as outlined in the ESF study. The pattern followed here is NP1 in the topical position, with the focus coming last (see iii, iv, v). In terms of PPs (or adverbials, as Klein and Perdue refer to them), S3 makes use of spatial focus in the rheme position (see iv, v). There is, therefore, a clear fit between this text and the BV utterance patterns.

As far as the influence of L1 is concerned, S3 makes use of a number of Spanish words; in fact, far more than the other Spanish speakers. This is probably not surprising, since he was in his mid-sixties when he arrived in Australia. S3 uses Spanish verb forms in ii, 'taka' [take] and iii, 'not reducion' [reducing], as well as the Spanish spelling 'oll' for 'all' and 'a' for 'at'. However, as can be seen from the above discussion, this use of L1 has no significant effect on the syntax pattern.

On the issue of framing/rhetorical patterns, it is interesting to note that, while S3 was grammatically influenced by Spanish, his framing of the narrative was shared by five other writers. Two writers from each region chose to give the text a temporal frame (today). Also, eight learners used rain as the main plot element in this study and, again, they were equally spread across the three regions. Perhaps what this tells us is that, at least in this small study, it is not culture that predicates narrative organisation but successful storytelling and writing skills.

Comparisons between this study and the ESF study

The other texts in this study follow S3 quite closely. Overall, they show that BV occurs in naturally acquired L2 writing, with minor differences associated with the nature of the task.

The remainder of this section outlines these differences within the three constraint categories. Finally, another oddity, which I have called 'ESL (English as a Second Language) rhetoric', is also discussed.

PHRASAL CONSTRAINTS

As well as the three basic phrasal patterns, PH1, PH2 and PH3, two

variations appeared occasionally. The first one, which I have called a pre-verb utterance (P/V), is a variation on the use of the PP. Three of the learners used the PP in a verb-like way. The following are examples from the text:

• and the man, he *by bike*, spash next to (A1)

• He angry the bus *in the water* he car (A5)

• He can see some body on the street and *to the crossing* (A18).

The relevant phrases are italicised, and we can see that the P/V functions like an ellipsed clause.

One of the interesting aspects of BV is the way learners in this study use PPs for a number of different purposes. They are most heavily used to locate the action of the characters in the story, as in A18's example, 'on the street'. A1 uses 'he *by bike*' as an ellipsed clause, as well as a form of reference maintenance. A5 uses 'in the water' as a verb. This multifunctional use of PPs seems to be one of the markers of grammaticalisation and shows the transition from ad hoc strategies to syntactic rules (Sankoff 1980: 260).

Another pattern is the pre-existential pattern (P/E), where learner utterances show a structure that, according to English grammatical rules, should carry the existential construction of 'there is' or 'it is':

• [It is] the day at street (M5)

• [It is] the rain today (S3)

• One day [it is] raining (A16)

• and [there is] to much rain and to much water and to much wrnter (A5).

This pre-existential pattern seems to fit with Klein and Perdue's (1997) findings that existential expressions were not used by BV users. However, some learners in the study did make some use of these forms: one used 'there is' and 'there are' (twice) in the text, and four learners used 'it is raining'. However, 'it is' occurred only in the form 'it is raining', so it is very likely that these examples represent rote-learned chunks of language, and this belief is supported by the fact that these learners fit within the parameters of BV in other respects.

Finally, finite verbs were consistently and appropriately used in a few texts, and it is likely that these learners are reaching the end of BV utterance patterns and are getting ready to move on to English grammar.

SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC DIFFERENCES

As already discussed in regard to S3's text, the data in this study followed the SEM1 constraint, but not SEM2. This is probably due to the nature of the narrative task.

Pragmatic patterns tend to be very similar to BV, except in the composition of NP2. Three learners (A1, A2 and M6) introduced pronouns in NP2. An example from A2 follows:

Line v:	because	he	splash diving
PH1:	conj (reason)	NP1	V-finite-V-ing
Line vi:			make *they* wet.
PH3:		Ø ref	V-finite-NP2
			(pronominal reference)

As in the case of finite verbs, these learners are probably moving towards the end of BV.

'ESL RHETORIC'

The only exception to the BV utterance patterns was found in the data from a group of new arrivals, primarily from the Middle East. They had been in Australia a few months before attending class, and had zero proficiency in English. Virtually their first contact with English was in the ESL classroom. As 'true beginners', these nine learners were in a separate class. They were, however, given the opportunity to try the writing task, and this data has been added because it presents an interesting contrast to the BV learners.

The responses of the new arrivals showed that, as their lack of proficiency did not allow them to write a narrative, they moved to a 'default' setting, that is, making use of the English forms they were familiar with. As the examples show, the texts are based on the two basic English grammar patterns: declarative or subject-verb-object pattern and the interrogative or Wh- and How- forms followed by verb-subject.

M1	Interrogative	How do you cou come to school
	Declarative	I come to school by car
A12	Declarative	I go to work

When an 'ESL rhetoric' text is compared to a BV text, the difference is quite marked and it highlights the potential communicative ability of BV, despite the difference from English grammatical patterns.

BV PATTERNS IN SUBJECTS FROM SOUTH-EAST ASIA

The ESF project studied subjects whose first languages were Arabic, Finnish, Italian, Punjabi, Spanish and Turkish (Perdue 1993: 3). In contrast, this study included students from South-East Asia, whose languages included Chinese, Cambodian, Vietnamese and Thai. Thus, we can see that BV also applies to people who speak a range of Asian languages.

Ideally, future studies would have even numbers of subjects across the regions and would include larger numbers of subjects, enabling analysis of a wider range of variables, including the impact of education, length of time in Australia, gender and age. It would also be valuable to add a number of different tasks that would explore a broader range of learner capabilities.

Conclusion

This study shows that BV also occurs in naturally acquired writing in low-proficiency second language learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds. This finding, however, seems to contradict writing research at high-proficiency levels. Perhaps, therefore, the most pressing question is whether these two domains function on different axes or, if given the opportunity, do they actually cross over? To give an example, if a migrant begins with naturally acquired L2 (making use of BV), then goes into the language classroom and, finally, to university, will she follow the rhetorical patterns of her L1 or L2? Another question that might be asked is whether there exists a quantifiable difference between such a student and an international student who has studied English as a Foreign Language before studying among native speakers of that language?

It would be instructive for future research to address this apparent dichotomy between the low- and high-proficiency levels of L2 writing.

REFERENCES

Broeder, P., Extra, G., van Hout, R., & Voionmaa, K. (1993). Word formation processes in talking about entities. In Perdue, C. (Ed.), *Adult language acquisition: Cross-cultural perspectives* (Vol. II: The results, pp. 41–72) European Science Foundation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Butt, D., Fahey, R., Feez, S., Spinks, S., & Yallop, C. (2000). *Using functional grammar: An explorer's guide* (2nd ed.) Sydney: NCELTR.

Connor, U. (1996). *Contrastive rhetoric: Cross-cultural aspects of second-language writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dittmar, N. (1992). Grammaticalization in second language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 14, 249–257.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar* (2nd ed.). London: Edward Arnold.

Hendriks, H. (2000). The acquisition of topic marking in L1 Chinese and L1and L2 French. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 22, 369–397.

Hinds, J. (1990). Inductive, deductive, quasi-inductive: Expository writing in Japanese, Korean and Chinese, and Thai. In Connor, U. & Johns, A.M. (Eds), *Coherence in writing: Research and pedagogical perspectives* (pp. 87–110). Alexandria, VA: TESOL.

Kaplan, R. B. (1966). Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education. *Language Learning*, 16, 1–20.

Klein, W., & Perdue, C. (1997). The basic variety (or: couldn't natural languages be much simpler?). *Second Language Research*, 13(4), 301–347.

Mauranen, A. (1993). Contrastive ESP rhetoric: Metatext in Finnish–English economics tests. *English for Specific Purposes*, 12, 3–22.

Perdue, C. (Ed.), (1993). *Adult language acquisition: Cross linguistic perspectives* (Vol. I: Field methods). European Science Foundation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Perdue, C., & Klein, W. (1992). Why does the production of some learners not grammaticalize? *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 14, 259–272.

Sankoff, G. (1980). *The social life of language*. Philadelphia: University Press of Pennsylvannia.

Skiba, R., & Dittmar, N. (1992). Pragmatic, semantic, and syntactic constraints and grammaticalization: A longitudinal perspective. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 14, 323–349.

Valero-Garces (1996). Contrastive ESP rhetoric: Metatext in Spanish–English Economics Texts. *English for Specific Purposes,* 15:4, 279–294.