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Nicholas Wood and Nicolai Struc (both Reitaku University, Japan)
Investigating Syntactic Complexity in L2 Narrative and Argumentative Writing

Syntactic (or grammatical) complexity refers to the range and degree of sophistication of forms that surface in language production (Ortega, 2003), with the emergence of more elaborate syntactic patterning as learners develop and access more complex subsystems of language (Foster & Skehan, 1996).

This presentation will report on a corpus-based investigation of syntactic complexity in texts written in two genres - narrative and argumentative - produced by 25 L2 learners at the start of a university writing program and at the starts of their second and third years. The study can be considered a quantitative exploration of Rescher's (1998) three dimensions of ontological complexity: the compositional in terms of the relative frequency of syntactic constituents of text (words and clauses), the structural in terms of the occurrence of constructed units (clause types, sentence types and T-units), and function as evidenced by the use of specific constituents and structures in the production of genre.

Syntactic complexity genre differences in L1 writing have been noted by Crowhurst and Piche (1979), who found that T-unit length was significantly greater in argument than in narration, and by Crowhurst (1980), who argued that argumentative writing necessitates the logical structuring of propositions, and this is expressed syntactically in the more frequent use of subordination, and hence longer T-units, than narratives. Beers and Nagy (2009), in a more recent study of L1 texts, found that clause length positively correlated with quality for persuasive essays, while clauses per T-unit positively correlated with quality for narratives but negatively with quality for persuasive essays.

In a study concluded in 2010 (to be published) of narrative and argumentative texts produced by 170 L2 learners at the starts of their first and second years at university, we found statistically significant differences on nine measures of fluency and complexity between texts produced in the two genres. The present research tracks the development 25 of those 170 students into their third year.

The presentation will provide a brief background to methodological issues and then report on the findings of this longitudinal study. The investigation aimed not only to compare the syntactic complexity evidenced in the two genres, but also to develop and utilize an analytical approach that could examine complexity on the basis of a learner's own orthographic production, examine objective syntactic relations (e.g., between a simple sentence and following subordinated clause fragment) by the use of sentence reconstruction, and examine the range of clause types used by individual learners and by the population as a whole. The researchers also developed a statistically-based sentence variety index by which to evaluate the range of sentence types used in text, a tool that may have wider application.

References

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