The Use of English Tenses by Thai University Students: Relativity, Transfer, and Cognitive Implications

A particular language influences the habitual thoughts of the people who speak it. There is a relationship between its grammatical system and these people and how they understand the world. Different languages, thus, lead to different ways of thoughts (Whorf, 1956). Generally, time concepts exist in any language. They enable the speaker to locate events in terms of time. However, the ways people refer to time, in accordance with Whorf’s linguistic relativity, differ depending upon which language they speak. Such influence might affect the comprehension and the production of L2 learners which leads to conceptual transfer (Odlin, 2005). In English, time is expressed by tense which is presented through verbal inflections, including some auxiliaries. Nonetheless, Thai does not have a tense system to convey the time concepts. In Thai, time is conveyed through time markers, modals and discourse contexts. The research carried out by Tawilapakul (2003, 2007) investigates the use of English tenses by Thai university students. It demonstrates that time references in Thai yield conceptual transfer both in positive and negative ways. The existence of conceptual transfer indicates that there is a connection between linguistic relativity and transfer. Thai learners of English attain time conceptualisation in a way significantly different from that of English speakers. Speakers of Thai do not perceive time in the world with clear progressive and perfect aspects like English native speakers do. Such typological difference between the two languages has cognitive implications. The progressive and perfective aspects in English make the speakers consider the events more analytically while Thai speakers view the events more holistically.

Linguistic Relativity and Language Determinism

Why people in different countries or even people of different ethnic groups use different languages? It has long been believed that people of each group view things around them in the way that differs from that of others. These different worldviews are thus expressed through different languages. Some researchers like Franz Boas and Edward Sapir also had speculation on such belief. It was Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) who was the first to try to verify it. Studying the Hopi language, the language used by American Indians, Whorf compared it with languages in the “Standard Average European” group. He found that the linguistic systems of the two languages differ in terms of plurality and numeration, nouns of physical quantity, phases of cycles, temporal forms of verbs, duration, intensity and tendency. He also tried to find the connection between these linguistic features of Hopi and English with habitual thoughts of the people who speak them. For example, in English, time can be counted. One day, two hours, ten years, these all suggest that English speakers treat time as an object. On the other hand, Hopi is tenseless. Time is referred to by the use of validity-forms, aspects, and clause-linkage forms. It is treated as recurrent events. Linguistic relativity or Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis concerns the relationship between language and thought. Diversity of linguistic systems relates to cognitive difference. According to the strong form, language determines the pattern of thought. This version of the hypothesis, nevertheless, does not gain support from scholars. If the idea is true, learning another language is impossible. In fact, humans have cognitive ability which helps them acquire a new language and in translation.
Conceptual Transfer: Influence of Prior Knowledge at the Conceptual Level

Transfer in second language acquisition (SLA) is the phenomenon where second language (L2) learners transfer forms and meanings from their first language (L1) to the target language (Lado, 1957). Transfer can be positive transfer, where L1 supports the acquisition of L2, or negative transfer, where the influence of L1 imposes difficulty in the acquisition and, even worse, the misuse of L2 (Odlin, 1989). Negative transfer can be caused by underproduction, overproduction, production errors and misinterpretation. Underproduction occurs due to inadequate competence in L2 by learners which results in the avoidance of some grammatical performances. Such avoidance, then, results in overproduction when learners turn to use or perform other forms in L2 at which they are more competent. Similarities and differences between L1 and L2 can sometimes impose production errors, while the influence of linguistic structures in L1 as well as misunderstanding in L2 linguistic structure can lead to misinterpretation.

During the process of SLA, many phenomena occur as learners are trying to find their way to understand the language. Unlike children acquiring their L1, L2 learners have prior linguistic knowledge from their mother tongue. They do not start from point zero and have their language to return to (Roth, 1998). As certain empirical studies have shown, L2 learners trace back to their L1 knowledge: sentence structures, meanings, or whatsoever. This is in order to create their own hypotheses about the target language. In this sense, SLA is thus a process of rule formation rather than a process of habit formation (Corder, 1967). During the process of SLA, learners examine linguistic components of the two languages in terms of similarity and dissimilarity. Then, they select the ones that share the same properties and pick them up as their learning tools to achieve communicative and acceptable production in the target language. It is from this point that language transfer takes place. Learners, moreover, consider as well the ‘transferability’ which varies and is dependent upon the distance between L1 and L2. The more linguistically distant between L1 and L2, the greater degree L1 can facilitate the acquisition of L2 (Gass & Selinker, 1992). Dissimilar elements in L2, however, are not taken for granted as they become ‘new lessons’ to which learners pay much attention. They will set up their hypothesis on them and form new rules in order to acquire them. Such phenomenon of selection, as called by Weinreich (1953), occurs not only in the syntactic level but also in the conceptual level where correct use of the target language in a particular situation is concerned. Correct concepts come before correct syntactic selections. Before they consider whether to put –s at the end of the main verb, learners of English need first to consider the context and choose the correct tense for that situation in order to successfully convey correct temporal reference. During such passage of selection, ‘conceptual transfer’ also plays a vital role. Prior knowledge or, considered at the conceptual level, concepts behind linguistic reflection in the mother tongue influences the selection of linguistic elements in L2.
As mentioned earlier that L2 learners have their L1 to turn to, they rely on tense meaning in their L1 when trying to comprehend the meaning of L2 tense. In the study conducted by Coppetiers (1987), it was found that perceptions of tense meanings are strongly affected by tense meanings in L1. Therefore, the speakers of Romance languages interpret the meanings of French tenses differently from the speakers of Germanic and other tenseless languages. Guiora (1983) points out that to the speakers of Hebrew, it is difficult for them to understand the meanings of English past tenses and to use them masterfully because these tenses seem redundant and their functions are not easy to perceive. This finding is similar to that of Sharwood Smith (1988) whose study indicates that Polish students encounter difficulty mastering the English past progressive. Hinkel (1992) also concludes in the same way that non-native speakers independently perceive the meanings of the time spans and morphological references to time resulting with constraints on their performance in L2 tense.

The Conceptualisation of Time

It is definitely true that time is a part of human’s live as it is an element of human’s experience of reality. Scovel (1970) states that all languages have the semantic notion of time. Actually, time has been characterised in terms of a simple diagram in which it is represented by a horizontal line stretching from the infinite past into the infinite future. The line is intersected by a vertical line at right angles. This represents instantaneous present of a speech event. Clifford (1975) also states that the relationship of time and events refers directly to the order of events. In other words, when a sentenced is uttered, the events referred to in that sentence are said to be before, after, or simultaneous with the event of uttering the sentence. If more than one sentence is referred to in the sentence, these events are said to be ordered with respect to one another. Though the notion of time has been recognised by linguists as a universal concept, Comrie (1985) argues that various cultural groups conceptualise time in different ways and only some measure time and occurring events with exactitude. Concerning time and language, Kripke (1991) views notions of meanings as determined by the conventions of the language which can be treated only in conjunction with the related linguistic phenomena of the language. In order to be understood, the speaker and the interlocutor must have mutual contextual beliefs and the expressions of such beliefs as well as perceptions may not be shared by members of other speech communities (Searle, 1979). If the reference does not match the subjects’ perceptions of the attribute, they may be unable to create a correspondence between them. One needs to know the relationship between concepts of time and how language deals with them.

Time Reference in English

English is a time-oriented language which requires the overt marking of time in its sentences. This time orientation is generally shown in the use of tense or the set of verbs which are inflected in different forms, thus indicating when an event occurs,
occurred, or will occur. Tense is the term used to indicate the time-reference signaled by a verb form or that form of a verb which signals a particular time reference. According to Comrie (1976), tense is a deictic category that describes the location of an event on the time line. Wekker (1976) also suggests that tense expresses the temporal relationship between the event or action described by the verb and the actual utterance. In addition to time reference, the action is viewed with different aspects, in progress, habitual, repeated, momentary, etc. Aspect differs from tense in that it does not indicate the location on the time line but describes the internal constituency of the event (Comrie, 1976). It represents how the speaker views the event. Through the use of auxiliaries, aspect enables the speaker to interpret the temporal nature of the action – whether it is incomplete or incomplete, the time-orientation of an action, or the fact that the action concerned a finite period of time.

**Time Reference in Thai**

Time concepts, however, are not always necessarily expressed through a tense system. Many other languages use other devices to present the time concept without any verb form changes or any verb form markers (auxiliaries). Thai as well as some other languages such as Chinese, Vietnamese, Indonesian, have neither verb inflections nor auxiliaries to convey time concepts. It is time markers and contexts that serve as clues to signal either present, past, or future time. Time in Thai morphologically marked only optionally. Generally speaking, a sentence in Thai, without any specific time markers, is capable of being understood in any tense (Chaiyaratana, 1961). According to its time reference, it can be ambiguous when translated into a tensed language like English.

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khaw24  pay33  roo33rian33
he       go      school
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The above sentence can be reconstructed into:

“He went to school.”
“He is going to school.”
“He will go to school.”

Though the reconstruction might suggest that Thai is a timeless language, Scovel (1970, p.2) argues that no language is timeless, either linguistically or eschatologically. The temporal differences exhibited imply that “there exists certain underlying time/aspect category in Thai, categories by which the time of an action is covertly marked in Thai sentences”. This is in agreement with Noochoochai’s (1978) belief that in Thai there are many contexts that do not require any expression of temporal aspect. This differs from English where most of the time temporal aspect is marked overtly. This characteristic of Thai implies that the use of temporal expression is necessary for time reference in Thai because the verb itself does not convey any notion of time.
Kanchanawan (1978) suggests that since there is no verb inflection in Thai, time maybe expressed through the combination of time phrases, time markers, and certain types of verbs. Time markers have syntactic functions as pre-serial verbs, auxiliaries, post-serial verbs, or particles. They also have semantic function as time implication which has its meaning in relation to time presented in the time phrase.

\[
\text{tham33 kaan33baan42 leew45}
\]

she do homework particle denoting past time

“She did her homework.”

Research conducted by Tawilapakul (2003, 2007) examines the acquisition of English tenses which are found in a large amount of research on English language acquisition in Thailand as the most problematic element for Thai students to master. In this study, the use of time markers in Thai is to be tested in order to answer the following research questions:

1) How do time references in Thai affect Thai university students on their use of English tenses?
2) Is there any connection between linguistic relativity and transfer? If yes, does it lead to any cognitive implications?

75 Thai university students of the Southeast Asian Studies program of Thammasat University, Thailand. They were asked to read 8 sentences and a short passage in Thai and rewrite them in English. Time references were represented through time markers, auxiliaries and discourse contexts.

**How does time reference in Thai affect Thai university students on their use of English tenses?**

Time markers and auxiliaries in Thai as well as discourse contexts influence the English production in terms of time reference in different degrees. The students’ use of English tenses, whether correct or incorrect, suffices to claim that L1 transfer, both positive and negative, exists.

**Positive Transfer**

Linguistic elements in Thai and English that share the same properties in terms of form, meaning and function induce positive transfer. The auxiliaries *ca22* and “will” share the same syntactic pattern, that is, they both are followed by an infinitive. Also, they indicate the futurity of the event. The students, as Andersen (1984) proposed, may apply the “one-to-one principle”. *ca22* is thus usually substituted by “will”. This may be the reason why students found this future form the easiest to understand and produce. The one-to-one principle still facilitates the perception of temporalities conveyed with the use of the time marker *mua42 waan33 nii45* and the adverbial phrase *mua42 reaw33 reaw33 nii45*. *mua42 waan33 nii45* indicates the event that already happened in the past in the same way as “yesterday”, its English equivalent, does. More than half of the students automatically perceived the present perfect concept when they noticed the adverbial phrase *mua42 reaw33 reaw33 nii45* which is
equivalent to the English adverb “recently”. It is worth noting that *mua42 rew33 rew33 nii45* also imposes negative transfer and this will be discussed later.

The results also show that students perceive temporality using other clues which do not contain any temporal property. Although the adjectival phrase *khray45 too22 pay33* or “the next” is in fact not a real time marker, the students could perceive the concept of future temporality. In addition, even in the sentence or the slots where time markers and auxiliaries were not provided, students could perceive correct temporality by drawing their own time line in their imagination and using the contexts. It cannot be concluded from the results, however, that discourse contexts in Thai give positive impact only on the conceptualization of past temporality in English.

### Negative Transfer

Prior linguistic knowledge in L1 also impedes the acquisition of L2. As mentioned, *mua42 rew33 rew33 nii45* also leads to negative transfer. The one-to-one principle, once more, is the crucial factor. With “recently” in their minds, students only perceive the past temporality and did not use present perfect tense to indicate the action that has finished not long time ago. Instead, they used past simple tense. It is possible that 1) they did not perceive this time concept, or 2) the non-inflectional pattern of time reference in Thai was transferred.

With the help of *koon22* or “before”, students rearranged the two events in chronological order. They could infer that the event “she came home” came after the other event “he had gone to bed”. It may be claimed that, according to the percentage points shown, most students did not sense the concept of one event already finished before the others despite the fact that the adverbial clause, which signals the sequence, makes it simple for them to understand the situation. However, like what occurs with *mua42 rew33 rew33 nii45*, negative transfer from Thai just blocked the production of past perfect tense for the preceding event.

Negative transfer is quite salient in sentences where *ruay42 maa33* and *mua42 khin33 too33 sii22 thum42* were given. *Ruay42 maa33* actually indicates the duration of an activity that began in the past and continues to the present. The plausible reason why the students were unable to produce present perfect progressive is that they could not think of this tense and may not have any idea about the form. Many of them used past simple instead. The majority did not produce present perfect tense in the slot where *ta22 loot22 ra45 ya45 wee33 laa33 mng22 phan33 pii33* was used to suggest the temporality. To them, the occurrence of the earthquake already finished, even though the lexical clue indicates the continuity and possible repetition both at the present time and probably in the future. The worst case is the sentence with *mua42 khin33 too33 sii22 thum42* or “at 10 p.m. last night”. Students could not perceive the concept that the action was going on around a particular past time and thus only produced past simple tense instead of past progressive tense. When time attributes and their linguistic references of L1 and L2 are different, learners may
find themselves in a situation where they cannot select or recognise the temporal attribute to which tense is a grammatical reference (Donellan, 1991).

**Is there any connection between linguistic relativity and transfer? If yes, does it lead to any cognitive implications?**

Language is an essential tool humans use to express their ideas. Thai and English have different linguistic systems for time reference. Therefore, speakers of Thai and English are assumed to think about time differently. This simple assumption, however, seems to have no grounds. But if one explores the use of English tenses by Thai university students, he can see that the hypothesis “language shapes thoughts” proposed by Whorf (1956) has some grounds and that there is a connection between linguistic relativity and L1 transfer. This time, learners’ L1 “shapes thoughts” in their L2. If learners rely on their L1 when acquiring L2, their thoughts are presumably shaped by linguistic knowledge in their L1.

As positive transfer is quite pervasive with past simple and future simple tense with the auxiliary “will”, it can be assumed that speakers of Thai conceptualise the past and future times in the same way as the speakers of English do. What about negative transfer?

The misuse of some tenses that carry progressive and perfect aspects is empirical evidence to suggest that learners’ L1 shape their thoughts in L2. They could not produce present perfect, past perfect, and past progressive tenses. In this case that Thai syntactic pattern of time reference is distinct from that of English, the occurrence of linguistic determinism is probably due to the fact that:

1) the non-inflectional pattern of time reference in Thai prevents Thai learners of English from perceiving and producing some English tenses in which more complicated syntactic patterns are required and

2) speakers of Thai conceptualise only present, past and future times and consider actions that finished before the others, actions that happened in a particular time in the past and actions that happened in the past and carry on to the present merely as simple past actions.

The connection between linguistic relativity and language transfer is also salient when students misconceptualised time references conveyed by maa33 leew45 and daay42. The concept of past time that the two Thai lexical clues usually denote shapes their thoughts in L2. As a result, the number of students who produced present perfect tense is below the half of the total percentage points.

Concerning temporal cognition, it is too early to conclude that speakers of Thai and English view time differently. So far nothing can be generalise about how speakers of Thai view and conceptualise time. It is still possible that they, like their English counterparts, can correctly locate actions on the time line and perceive the temporal
nature of the actions. Moreover, the fact that they could not produce correct tenses is probably because these tenses (not time) do not exist in Thai. It is the tenseless characteristic of the Thai language that prevents Thai learners of English from producing some tenses, especially those containing complex syntactic patterns. Though further experiment is needed for tracing the complete route of temporal conceptualisation of speakers of Thai, it can be concluded at this point that they view the events more holistically while speakers of English consider the events more analytically.

References


