

DOCTORAL THESIS

Tethering Effect as an Explanation for the Bottleneck in Second Language Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

A learner of L2 normally attains a certain level of competence which then stagnates, thereby rarely accomplishes native-like competence of the target-language (TL). This bottleneck effect is accounted for through the E-Tether Theory (ETT), which is the main thesis of this dissertation. The ETT argues that the L2 E-grammar of a learner's community exerts a centrifugal force that draws the I-grammar of the learner towards it. This force, christened as the "E-tether", stems from the learner's identification with his speech community and from the linguistic input provided by the local E-grammar. When the local E-grammar is not identical to the TL grammar, the E-tether is a double-edge sword that encourages the development of the L2 I-grammar in the initial stages, but then prevents the I-grammar from progression towards the TL. By considering how social environment affects the I-grammar of individual learners through E-languages, the ETT provides a more comprehensive account to the bottleneck effect.

The validity of the proposed ETT is examined in this dissertation through two empirical studies: (i) the acquisition of English consonant clusters by the native Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong, and (ii) the acquisition of the same structures by the native Cantonese speakers in Guangzhou. In the two studies, the ETT is tested by seeing whether the individuals in the two cities attitudinally incline towards the phonological patterns of Hong Kong English (HKE) and of Guangzhou English (GZE), which are the E-languages of the two communities. The E-grammar in each city is generalized from the productions of consonant clusters by 10 speakers and is analyzed under the framework of Optimality Theory; the attitudes towards the E-grammar are obtained through a language attitude test implemented to 129 participants in Hong Kong and 66 in Guangzhou. Two findings emerge from the results. First, there is a tendency in HKE and in GZE to produce syllabic obstruents and to devoice word-final obstruents. Both patterns are also attitudinally accepted by the participants in the two cities. Second, when there is more than one strategy in the local E-grammar to avoid consonant clusters, the one that better preserves intelligibility is more likely to be accepted. The observed acceptance of the L2 speakers towards the "non-standard" L2

patterns can hardly be explained if one does not acknowledge the role of the local E-grammar. The findings thus lend support to the ETT.

Besides the Hong Kong study and the Guangzhou study, there is evidence showing that the ETT can work in a range of social contexts, and can apply to domains other than phonological acquisition.

Keywords: *L2 acquisition; I-language; E-language*

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