

Abstract

This study investigates determiner usage by Chinese learners of English by comparing corpus data to forced choice elicitation test data, relating to the Fluctuation Hypothesis by Ionin et al. (2004), which states that learners' article choice fluctuates for mixed settings of the semantic parameters definiteness and specificity. The forced choice elicitation test data was obtained using an online survey with 39 participants, most of whom are students at Sun Yat-sen University. The corpus data, from which three 100 sentence random samples were analyzed, was taken from the Sun Yat-sen Corpus (SYSU-C), compiled by Küchler (2015).

Results do not indicate fluctuation in the learners' article choice as predicted by the Fluctuation Hypothesis, with low overall error frequencies. In more detail, the data shows that the biggest significant influence on article choice is exerted by an interaction group of *specificity*, *scope* and *speaker knowledge*. Moreover, noticeable usage differences are found between participants from the fields humanities and engineering. The results furthermore indicate increased article substitution error rates with partitive indefinites and simple (in)definites, which is unexpected. Reasons explaining these result could either be found in the ongoing grammaticalization process of articles in Mandarin Chinese or the proficiency level of the participants, since the Fluctuation Hypothesis is an explicit learner phenomenon. Similar to previous studies on determiner usage, omission errors are generally low in the data.

Tentatively interpreting the results, this study finds that *specificity*, in combination with *scope* and *speaker knowledge*, has an influence on learners' article choice, even though article choice in English is solely governed by definiteness. Additionally, different proficiency levels seem to favor different error patterns. However, these findings should not be overgeneralized, as they apply only to the relatively small datasets that control for numerous sociolinguistic variables, such as age and education.