The ‘bleached’ adversity of passives in L2 Chinese

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The persistent difficulty of the L2 acquisition of Chinese passives has received much interest, but has yet to receive satisfactory conclusions or solutions. This experimental study compares the response of English speakers learning Chinese to linguistic stimulus against that of their native counterparts, exploring a semantic constraint of the Chinese passive, namely its adversity, in L2 grammars.

English and Chinese passive constructions have different word orders and formation strategies. In English, they are typically formed with the combination of an auxiliary verb BE and a passive participle with the passive suffix –en/ed. By contrast, Chinese employs an individual passive marker BEI to mark passive sentences. Historically, BEI was used as a lexical verb. It is considered to be in the process of being grammaticalized and thus has become a semi-lexical verb (Liu, 2012). For this reason, BEI often denotes an unfortunate event in modern Chinese. By contrast, the English BE passive is not subject to adversity. However, it has been observed that the number of BEI constructions that do not express adversity is increasing, due to the influence of Indo-European languages, especially English (Li and Thompson, 1989). In other words, the adversity has become somewhat ‘bleached’ rather than absolute, manifested as a strong semantic constraint of BEI.

The result from three proficiency groups of learners (lower intermediate, higher intermediate and advanced) as well as a control group of Chinese native speakers reveals the development of the bleached adversity in the learners’ mental representations. In addition to the traditional off-line Acceptability Judgement Task, a Self-paced Reading Task was developed to scrutinize the product of learning, namely implicit knowledge versus explicit knowledge, using the criteria in Ellis (2005).

Keywords: L2 Chinese, passives, semantic bleaching.