Overgeneralization Errors In Child Speech: English And Uzbek Examples

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Abstract
This paper examines overgeneralization errors in the speech of young children acquiring English and Uzbek as first languages. Overgeneralization is understood as the extension of a linguistic rule or word meaning beyond its conventional domain of application, as in English *goed* for *went* or *mouses* for *mice*. Such errors are widely regarded as evidence that children do not simply imitate adult speech but actively construct grammatical generalizations. The study compares morphological, lexical and phonological types of overgeneralization in a fusional-analytic language (English) and an agglutinative Turkic language (Uzbek). It is argued that in English overgeneralization chiefly affects irregular inflection, whereas in Uzbek, where suffixation is highly regular, it mostly appears at morpheme boundaries, in stem alternations such as vowel elision and consonant voicing. The paper concludes that the typological profile of a language shapes where overgeneralization occurs, while the underlying cognitive mechanism of rule extension is common to both languages. Pedagogical and speech-therapy implications are briefly discussed.
Keywords: overgeneralization, overregularization, overextension, child language acquisition, morphology, agglutinative languages, English, Uzbek, U-shaped development.

Introduction

Child language has long attracted linguists and psychologists because it reveals how a grammatical system emerges from limited input. One of the most informative phenomena in this process is overgeneralization: the child applies a productive rule to forms that are exceptions in the adult language. The classic English examples *I goed to the park*, *two foots*, *she bringed it* are never heard from adults, so they cannot be explained by imitation. Instead, they show that the child has extracted an abstract pattern (add *-ed* for past tense, add *-s* for plural) and is using it creatively.

Since Berko's (1958) famous "wug test", which demonstrated that children can inflect nonsense words, and Brown's (1973) longitudinal study of morpheme acquisition, overgeneralization has been central to debates about the nature of linguistic knowledge. However, most research has been carried out on English and other Indo-European languages. Turkic languages, including Uzbek, have received far less attention, although their agglutinative structure offers a valuable contrast. The aim of this paper is to describe the main types of overgeneralization in English and Uzbek child speech, to compare them, and to explain the similarities and differences in terms of language typology.

The notion of overgeneralization

In the literature the term covers several related phenomena. *Overregularization* (morphological overgeneralization) is the application of a regular inflectional pattern to an irregular item, e.g. *runned*, *teeths*, *gooder*. *Overextension* (lexical or semantic overgeneralization) is the use of a word for a wider range of referents than adults allow, e.g. calling every four-legged animal *doggie* or every round object *ball* (Clark, 1973). A third type, *syntactic overgeneralization*, involves extending a construction to verbs that do not permit it, as in *Don't giggle me* (causative use of an intransitive verb), described by Bowerman (1982).

A characteristic feature of morphological overregularization is the so-called U-shaped developmental curve. At first the child correctly produces a few high-frequency irregular forms (*went*, *came*) that are stored as whole words. Then, once the regular rule has been discovered,

these correct forms are partly replaced by regularized ones (*goed*, *comed*). Finally, the child learns to block the rule for exceptions and returns to the correct forms. Marcus et al. (1992) showed, however, that overregularization is less frequent than often assumed: in their large corpus analysis English-speaking children overregularized only a small proportion of irregular past-tense verbs, which suggests that errors arise when the stored irregular form is not retrieved quickly enough.

Two main theoretical explanations have been proposed. The dual-route ("words and rules") model holds that regular forms are produced by a symbolic rule, while irregular forms are stored in memory; an overregularization occurs when memory retrieval fails and the default rule applies (Pinker, 1999). Connectionist and usage-based approaches, by contrast, argue that a single associative mechanism, sensitive to type and token frequency, can produce both correct forms and errors (Rumelhart & McClelland, 1986; Tomasello, 2003). Whatever the model, both agree that overgeneralization reflects the child's active search for patterns.

Overgeneralization in English child speech

English provides abundant material for overregularization because it combines a productive regular system with a large closed set of frequent irregular items. The most typical areas are the following.

Past tense of verbs. Children regularize strong verbs by adding *-ed*: *go → goed*, *eat → eated*, *catch → catched*, *break → breaked*. Sometimes a "double marking" appears, where the rule is added to an already irregular form: *wented*, *ated*, *broked*.

Plural of nouns. Irregular plurals are regularized: *mouse → mouses*, *foot → foots*, *child → childs*, *man → mans*; double marking also occurs: *feets*, *mices*, *mens*.

Comparison of adjectives. Suppletive forms are replaced by regular ones: *good → gooder*, *bad → badder*, *more better*.

Lexical overextension. At the early one-word stage a child may use *daddy* for all men, *moon* for lamps and other round shining objects, or *car* for any vehicle. These errors usually disappear as vocabulary grows and new words take over parts of the overextended meaning (Clark, 1973).

Syntactic overgeneralization. Children extend productive argument-structure patterns to verbs that resist them: *I'm going to fall this on you*, *She disappeared the rabbit*, *Don't say me that* (Bowerman, 1982).

These examples show that in English the main locus of overgeneralization is the boundary between regular and irregular morphology: the rule is simple, but the exceptions are numerous and must be learned item by item.

Overgeneralization in Uzbek child speech

Uzbek is an agglutinative Turkic language in which grammatical meanings are expressed by chains of suffixes attached to a stem: *kitob-lar-im-dan* 'from my books'. Inflection is highly regular: there are almost no irregular plural or past-tense forms comparable to *mice* or *went*. One might therefore expect few overgeneralization errors. Studies of related Turkic languages, particularly Turkish, have indeed shown that children master the regular suffix system remarkably early and with few errors (Aksu-Koç & Slobin, 1985). Nevertheless, Uzbek has its own "exceptions", located mostly at the junction between stem and suffix (Kononov, 1960; Sjöberg, 1963). The examples below are illustrative of the error types that occur in the speech of Uzbek-speaking children of preschool age.

Vowel elision in stems. A group of two-syllable nouns lose the vowel of the second syllable before a suffix beginning with a vowel: *og'iz* 'mouth' → *og'zim* 'my mouth', *burun* 'nose' → *burnim*, *o'g'il* 'son' → *o'g'lim*, *singil* 'younger sister' → *singlim*. Children often ignore this alternation and attach the suffix to the full stem, producing:

og'izim (instead of *og'zim*), *burunim* (instead of *burnim*),
o'g'ilim (instead of *o'g'lim*), *singilim* (instead of *singlim*).

This is a clear case of overgeneralization: the child applies the dominant pattern "stem + suffix without change" to words that require modification.

Consonant voicing at the morpheme boundary. Stems ending in *k* or *q* change them to *g* or *g‘* before vowel-initial suffixes: *yurak* 'heart' → *yuragim*, *qishloq* 'village' → *qishlog‘imiz*, *tilak* 'wish' → *tilagi*. A child may produce *yurakim*, *qishloqimiz* or *tilaki*, keeping the stem invariant.

Irregular verb stems. A few verbs such as *de-* 'say' and *ye-* 'eat' form the present-future tense irregularly: *deydi*, *yeydi*. Children may regularize them according to the general pattern of consonant-final stems (*-adi*), yielding *deadi* or *yeadi* – a direct parallel to English *goed*.

Overuse of a productive suffix. The plural suffix *-lar* may be added to nouns that are normally used without it in a given context, or a diminutive or possessive suffix may be extended beyond its usual range. Children sometimes combine suffixes in an unusual order or repeat them, which resembles English double marking.

Lexical overextension. As in English, Uzbek children at the early stage widely overextend words: *mashina* 'car' for any vehicle, *kuchuk* 'puppy' or onomatopoeic *vov-vov* for any animal, *dada* 'father' for any adult man, *non* 'bread' for food in general.

Comparative analysis

The comparison reveals both universal and language-specific features. Common to both languages is the mechanism itself: the child identifies the most frequent and productive pattern and extends it to less frequent items. In both languages lexical overextension follows the same principles of perceptual similarity (shape, movement, sound) and is gradually reduced as the vocabulary expands. Both languages also show transitional "double marking" forms, which indicate that the rule and the memorized form temporarily compete.

The differences are determined by morphological typology. In English, the regular rule is simple, but irregular forms are many and highly frequent, so overgeneralization concentrates on whole-word exceptions (*went*, *mice*, *better*). In Uzbek, suffixes are regular and transparent, so the child quickly learns *what* to add; errors arise instead in *how* the stem is adjusted – vowel elision, consonant voicing and a few irregular verb stems. Following Slobin's (1985) operating principles, children prefer invariant forms and clear morpheme boundaries; Uzbek stem alternations violate this preference, and children therefore "repair" them by keeping the stem unchanged. Thus, English errors are mainly *paradigmatic* (choice of form), while Uzbek errors are mainly *morphophonological* (form of the stem at the boundary).

A further difference concerns frequency and timing. Because Uzbek inflection is regular, errors are probably fewer and limited to a smaller set of stems, and children may produce long, correctly formed suffix chains at an age when English-speaking children still struggle with irregular past tense. Systematic corpus studies of Uzbek child speech are needed to confirm the relative frequency and the age range of these errors.

Conclusion and implications

Overgeneralization errors are not signs of deficient learning but natural evidence of a child's developing grammar. English and Uzbek data show the same underlying strategy – extending a productive pattern – but the typology of each language determines where this strategy produces errors: irregular words in English, stem alternations at morpheme boundaries in Uzbek. For parents and preschool teachers, this means that such forms should be met with natural recasting ("Yes, you *went* to the park"; "Ha, *og‘zing* og‘riyaptimi?") rather than correction or concern. For speech therapists, knowing the normal, age-typical error patterns of Uzbek helps to distinguish ordinary development from genuine language disorders. Finally, the comparison underlines the need for a systematic, recorded corpus of Uzbek child speech, which would make it possible to test current theories of acquisition on agglutinative data.

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