

Ruth A. Berman(1978)

'Syntactic Components of the SL Reading Process'

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Berman investigates what she considers to be syntactically-based problems encountered by native speakers of Hebrew who are advanced-level SL¹ students reading English texts. In this review, I will speak from the point of view of Korean learners of English.

In Section I, Berman makes claims and outlines some potential sources and types of syntactic problems which affect SL readers. Then, in Section II, she reviews some experiments of her own and those of others (Cohen *et al.*, 1978; Cohen & Fine, 1978; Olshtain & Bojarano, 1979), in order to substantiate her claims made in Section I. Finally, in Section III, she concludes that the evidence emerging from the experiments and investigations in general substantiates her claims. She further makes some suggestions with respect to research procedures; isolation of variables relating to type of text, type of learner, type of question, and type of elicitation technique.

Berman's central claim is: "efficient SL readers must rely in part on syntactic devices to get at text meaning." There is a basic group of three syntactic structures which she claims comprise the main source of difficulty. Two additional factors, 'opacity', and 'heaviness' are assumed to further affect the SL learner's ability to comprehend a text.

The specific syntactic areas which seem to be potential areas of difficulty are constituent structure, cohesive elements, and dependencies(correlative structures). With regard to constituent structure, she assumes that the reader will have difficulty understanding the sentence where the normal word order is shifted, as in passives, or where material is preposed before the surface subject, or where adverbial clauses precede the main clause. She further suggests SL readers may have difficulty in dealing with cohesive elements, such as conjunctions, adverbs which perform rhetorical functions to relate sentences, e.g. *however, furthermore, since, while, then*. By dependencies, she refers to such correlative structures as *so—that, no more—than, neither—nor*.

Berman defines 'heaviness' as constructions which extend the basic NV(N) structure so that one or more of the sentence constituent is 'heavy'. She hypothesizes that if the structure contains many embedded parts or modifications, it can be a potential difficulty to the SL learner. She considers that heaviness concerns more the amount and the depth of information rather than a function of linear length as Schlesinger(1968) noted. Her general statement is that the SL reader will have difficulty processing more complex

¹ Berman uses SL to refer to second language; in this paper, I will do the same.

structure than the basic structure.

Berman says that certain kinds of cohesive devices may render a text opaque to the SL reader. She assumes that the SL reader needs maximal 'transparency' in the handling of relations between one part of text and another. She considers 'opacity' as a source of potential difficulty, e.g. deletion of relative pronoun, substitution of pronoun *it* or *one*, or verbal *do* for repeated lexical items.

These potential areas of difficulty drawn by Berman seem to be problems not only for the SL learners, but also for the FL² learners like Korean students learning English as a foreign language. Through my teaching experience at college level, I have also observed that many Korean students have difficulties getting at the correct meaning of an English text, because of their lack of grammatical knowledge. Typically, the perception of heavy sentence structure, word order, and rhetorical interrelations present problems for KLF². For example, the shifting word order in the following examples makes it difficult for the learner to grasp the meaning e.g. "Young though she is she is wise," is harder than "She is wise though she is young," as well as "Ten thousand saw I at a glance," is harder than "I saw ten thousand at a glance." Therefore, it is certain that the English sentence is more comprehensible when the order is either SVO in the statement, or the main clause precedes the subordinate clause. However, such constructions are only a small part of English sentences. In addition, I have observed that Korean students have difficulty perceiving where there are some partial shifts which do not affect the basic order. When the adverbial slot, for example, is filled with 'seldom', 'never', 'scarcely', or the like, the slot can be moved from the position between subject and verb to the head of the sentence. Though this movement does not lead to a deviation from the normal order formula, it seems to be difficult for KLF learners. For example, "He never worked for me" is easier than "Never did he work for me," and "He hardly ever smiles" is easier than "Hardly ever does he smile." These shifts should be also added as one of the potential difficulties for SL and FL learners of English.

As Berman noted, conjunctions and connective words are also problem points for FL students in general, in my experience, KLF students in particular. Conjunctions such as 'though', 'since', 'while', 'then', and connective adverbs such as 'however', 'nevertheless', and 'thus' play important roles as cohesion elements in English rhetorical structure. However, FL learners tend to deal with these grammatical formatives very lightly and dismiss them frequently. The English 'since', 'while', and 'then' are often perceived as only markers of time, whereas they are in fact, also markers of reason, concession, and result, respectively. Korean learners of English do not always recognize the possible significance of these cohesion elements.

Berman suggests that the opacity is one of the major difficulties for SL learners in

² In this paper I will use FL to mean foreign language, and KLF to mean Korean learners of a foreign language.

reading the text. I have found that especially at the intermediate level, deletion of 'wh-+be', 'that', or 'which' in the relative clause, substitution of *it* as a personal anaphoric pronoun and empty-prosubject in a cleft sentence is a source of difficulty to KLF students. In my opinion, the advanced reader, however, should be trained to recognize the relations of the parts, even though the structure is on the surface opaque, because he will find opaque structures not only in advanced texts, but in written English in general. In the same sense of Berman's 'heaviness', I assume that nesting reduces the contiguity of related constituents. Because of the structure of Korean, nesting in English is hard for KLF students. For example, the nominalization which begins with 'that' or 'to' often seems hard as well as an interpolation which immediately follows the object. For example, "That I would run for mayor was announced by my secretary," is harder than "My secretary announced that I would run for mayor," and "I'll tell the man who comes here to drink the story," is harder than "I'll tell the man the story when he comes here to drink."

Berman used three different procedures of investigation; comparison studies, classroom observation, and elicitation. She cites two other procedures which I found less convincing.

In her pilot study, Berman compared two different groups of subjects, giving the experimental group a syntactically adapted version of the same text given to the control group. In her results, she found that the group who had the adapted version of the text did better on all types of questions than the other group who had the original text. In a contrasting experiment, the text was simplified in vocabulary items while the syntax was maintained as much as possible. She found the mistakes made by the students were grammatical ones rather than lexical, though the vocabulary was quite advanced. She also noted that in these experiments, students made more mistakes on specific information rather than on general content. This implies that grammatical signals are necessary in order to grasp specific information rather than overall ideas.

Berman further reports some of her own observations in the classroom of Israeli students working both on technical and non-technical texts. Here she found that most of the students had difficulty with heavy structures in complex strings, when the heads of related constituents are separated by a modifying phrase. In addition, she found some other grammatical problems affected by the structure of the reader's native language. For example, negative expressions such as 'be unaware of', 'no faster than', 'not unpleasant', or the dismissal of the role of subordinate words 'though' or 'although'. Berman used an elicitation techniques which relied on the students' report on a specific text, or translation of the text into their native language. From this experiment, she also found that heavily embedded sentences, discontinuous structures, with correlative words, shifting of the word order and negative expressions were the major source of difficulty.

With the evidence from these different types of investigations, Berman's central claim and assumptions seem in general confirmed and substantiated. This implies that SL and FL teachers should pay more attention to these areas of difficulty. Furthermore, Berman's

research shows the necessity of more carefully designed experiments to try to recognize other specific syntactic problems which are problems for the learners because of structural differences in their native language.

Berman introduces the interview technique of elicitation used by Cohen *et al*(1978) and Cohen & Fine(1978). In these experiments, the investigators used informants as a means of investigating students' understanding of ESL texts. Berman believes that they were able to reach pertinent conclusions about the nature of difficulties students encountered with the text, and how the SL readers from the native-speaking subjects in their responses.

But, the use of native speakers by Cohen *et al* precludes the repetition of the experiment in foreign countries where there are few native-speakers of the target language available to participate in the experiment. Korea is such a country.

Berman finally cites the research of Olshtain & Bejarano (1979). In their study, students were required to keep diaries and make self-reports on their reading difficulties and reading strategies. It is not clear whether the diary is kept in the target language or the native language. A questionnaire, however, was given in the mother tongue of the students afterwards. Berman believes that the use of diaries or of self-reports by the student while and after his reading of a text should be enlightening, particularly when backed up by more structured questionnaires concerning specific points in the text.

In Korea, specifically, I do not believe that diary keeping or self-reporting is a viable method because, the students would have to be taught how to recognize their reading problems, how to record their own learning process in a diary, and how to record their own learning process in a diary, and their English writing skill is not likely to be sophisticated enough for diary writing. Furthermore, the concept of self-teaching courses is alien to Korean students.

Berman's elicitation techniques and the comparison methods used in her pilot study seem most relevant for the investigation of learners' problems. An elicitation technique which relies on students' responses, reports, or translations into their native language would be more reliable for discovering the syntactic problems which impede the understanding of the semantic meaning of the text. To my knowledge, the elicitation can be done both in written form and in oral report. If we take the method used in Berman's pilot study, different variables can be isolated by having different groups of subjects. As Berman suggests, variables could be isolated by adapting the same text for different group of subjects, either simplifying syntactic structure, vocabulary, or overall rhetorical structure.

In this way, the researcher should be able to obtain more accurate data and should be able to pinpoint specific problems that learners encounter in the reading process. The evidence could be used as feedback in order to develop the students' ability to understand the functions of grammatical elements, and sentences in association with each other as elements in a discourse, so that the students hopefully develop the ability to process a reading text efficiently.

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