

Mistakes of Interference in German Declarative Sentences Made by Thai Learners of German

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1. PATTERN GERMAN

In the final examination of the course "German Intermediate 2" (BA-Programme) at Ramkhamhaeng University Bangkok/Thailand students were asked to arrange given parts of sentences into syntactically correct orders. The title of the exercise was "A Sad Story". The story is about a successful piano player whose neighbours were angry because they felt disturbed by him practising on the instrument. So the piano player decided to visit friends or his mother when he wanted to practise. One day when he was away from his home because he wanted to play the piano he fell and injured his fingers which he could not move any more. As a result he was not able to play the piano any longer.

Some of the given parts of sentences were¹:

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|---------|----------|
| (1) | zu seiner Mutter | er | manchmal | aufs Land | fuhr | |
| | (to his mother) | (he) | (sometimes) | (upcountry) | (went) | |
| (2) | gehen | deshalb | er | zu Freunden | oft | mußte |
| | (go) | (therefore) | (he) | (to friends) | (often) | (had to) |

¹ The whole exercise is Appendix 1. (1) and (2) in this paper are 5. and 4. in the exercise. The English translations in brackets are only for the sake of this paper; of course they were not included in the examination.

PATTERN GERMAN contains possible solutions for (1) and (2). The pattern was designed to help students produce correct declarative sentences. This pattern is used in many textbooks of German, e.g. in "Themen neu" (Aufderstraße, 1995: 141).

PATTERN GERMAN:

	...	Subject 1	Verb 1	Subject 2	xxx	Verb 2
(1a1)		Er (he)	fuhr (went)		manchmal zu seiner Mutter aufs Land (sometimes)(to his mother) (upcountry)	
(1a2)	Manchmal (sometimes)		fuhr (went)	er (he)	zu seiner Mutter aufs Land (to his mother)(upcountry)	
(2a1)		Er (he)	mußte (had to)		deshalb oft zu Freunden (therefore) (often) (to friends)	gehen (go)
(2a2)	Deshalb (therefore)		mußte (had to)	er (he)	oft zu Freunden (often) (to friends)	gehen (go)

PATTERN GERMAN is restricted to main clauses, in which Verb 1 and Verb 2 are separated. Verb 1 is on the left in the clause and Verb 2 in final position on the right. The pattern does not include subordinate clauses, which join together Verb 2 and Verb 1 on the right with Verb 1 being the last element of the clause, e.g.

(3) ... weil er gehen mußte. (because he had to go.)

The full verb "gehen" is Verb 2, the modal "mußte" Verb 1. The first position of subordinate clauses is occupied by relative pronouns, question words or subjunctions. In (3) "weil" ("because") is a subjunction.

In (1a1) and (1a2) "er" is the subject. There are two subject positions, Subject 1 and Subject 2. If position ... in front of Subject 1 is empty like in (1a1) Subject 2 is filled - in (1a2) by "Er", the first letter of which is capitalised because it is the first word of the sentence. If position ... is filled like in (1a2) by "manchmal" "er" moves to Subject 2 behind Verb 1.

"er" is the subject in (2a1) and (2a2), too. In (2a1) ... is empty and "er" fills the Subject 1 position. If "deshalb" moves to the beginning of the sentence and occupies ... "er" goes to Subject 2. In (2a1) and (2a2) both possible verb positions are used. Verb 1 is the modal "mußte", verb 2 the full verb "gehen".

In (1a2) "manchmal" indicates frequency. "zu seiner Mutter", which gives the direction of the verb "fuhr", may move to ..., too:

(1a3)	Zu seiner Mutter	fuhr	er	manchmal aufs Land.
	(to his mother)	(went)	(he)	(sometimes)(upcountry)

is also possible.

*(1a4)	Manchmal	zu seiner Mutter	fuhr	er	aufs Land.
	(sometimes)	(to his mother)	(went)	(he)	(upcountry)

*(1a5)	Zu seiner Mutter	manchmal	fuhr	er	aufs Land.
	(to his mother)	(sometimes)	(went)	(he)	(upcountry)

are not possible. If ... contains only one type of information - in (2) either frequency or direction, but not both of them at the same time - the sentences produced are always correct.

Quite a few students of "German Intermediate 2" at Ramkhamhaeng University produced wrong sentences, such as:

- * (1b) Manchmal er fuhr zu seiner Mutter aufs Land.
 (sometimes) (he) (went) (to his mother) (upcountry)
- * (2b) Deshalb er mußte oft zu Freunden gehen
 (therefore) (he) (had to) (often) (to friends) (go)

Why are these sentences wrong? According to PATTERN GERMAN the students who wrote *(1b) and *(2b) put "er" in a wrong position. As position ... is filled - in *(1b) by "manchmal" and in *(2b) by "deshalb" - the subject "er" must move to Subject 2 behind Verb 1.

Not every German declarative sentence (main clause) follows PATTERN GERMAN. There is a group of words which - when in position ... - require a different pattern. One of these words is "aber" ("but"). For example in (4) Aber er mußte gehen. (But he had to go.) ... is filled by "aber". Nevertheless "er" remains in Subject 1.

2. PATTERN THAI

Although PATTERN GERMAN is taught in the beginners' courses of German at Ramkhamhaeng University it still seems to be a problem in "German Intermediate 2". Even MA students at Ramkhamhaeng sometimes find it hard to speak and write correct German declaratives (main clauses). It is easy to find many mistakes related to PATTERN GERMAN in both BA and MA papers submitted by students. Why is this?

In order to find an answer to this question a comparison between PATTERN THAI, PATTERN ENGLISH and PATTERN GERMAN might be helpful.

We asked a Thai teacher of German to translate (1) and (2) into Thai. Our additional device was: "Please translate in such a way that the Thai sentence elements are as close as possible to the German elements!" The translations we received were:

- (1c) หามแม่ เขา บางครั้ง ที่ต่างจังหวัด ไป
 (to his mother) (he) (sometimes) (upcountry) (went)
- (2c) ไป ดังนั้น เขา หาเพื่อน บ่อย ต้อง
 (go) (therefore) (he) (to friends) (often) (had to)

In a questionnaire Thai teachers of English, French, Spanish, Russian and German at Ramkhamhaeng University were told the story of the piano player and were asked to make correct Thai sentences by using the Thai parts of (1c) and (2c).² PATTERN THAI displays the solutions suggested by the teachers.

PATTERN THAI:

	...	Subject	Verb 1	Verb 2	xxx
(1c1)	บางครั้ง	เขา	ไป		หาแม่เขา ที่ต่างจังหวัด
= *(1b)	(sometimes)	(he)	(went)		(to his mother)(upcountry)
	Manchmal	er	fuhr		zu seiner Mutter aufs Land
	(sometimes)	(he)	(went)		(to his mother) (upcountry)
(2c1)	ดังนั้น	เขา	ต้อง	ไป	หาเพื่อน บ่อย
	(therefore)	(he)	(had to)	(go)	(to friends) (often)

Seventeen teachers returned their questionnaires. There was a strong preference for (1c1) and (2c1): Every single one of these seventeen questionnaires contained these two solutions.

In contrast to PATTERN GERMAN, which has two subject positions - Subject 1 in front of and Subject 2 behind Verb 1 -, PATTERN THAI has only one subject position: the subject is always in front of Verb 1.

Native speakers of Thai with high level education who are sensitive to linguistic problems because they teach languages at a university express that (1c1) and (2c1) are correct Thai sentences. At the same time the wrong German sentence *(1b) follows PATTERN THAI; it has the same structure as (1c1). This suggests that the student who wrote *(1b) applied a Thai structure to German and made a mistake of interference.

² The questionnaire is Appendix 2. (1c) and (2c) in this paper are (2) and (1) in the questionnaire.

The wrong German sentence *(2b) is a combination between PATTERN GERMAN and PATTERN THAI.

PATTERN GERMAN - THAI:

	...	Subject	Verb 1	xxx	Verb 2
*(2b)	Deshalb (therefore)	er (he)	mußte (had to)	oft zu Freunden (often) (to friends)	gehen (go)

In *(2b) Verb 1 "mußte" and Verb 2 "gehen" are separated, which is in agreement with PATTERN GERMAN and in disagreement with PATTERN THAI. On the other hand position ... is filled by "deshalb" and the subject "er" is in front of Verb 1. This does not fit in PATTERN GERMAN, according to which "er" would have to go to Subject 2 behind Verb 1. Here the sentence follows PATTERN THAI. These observations suggest that the student who wrote *(2b) acted between the languages: S/he applied PATTERN GERMAN as far as Verb1/Verb 2 is concerned although this part of PATTERN THAI is different. At the same time s/he failed to use the Subject part of PATTERN GERMAN and made a mistake of interference by implanting the subject part of PATTERN THAI into German.

3. PATTERN ENGLISH

Thai students make mistakes of interference because they apply Thai structures to German declarative sentences. So Thai may be regarded as the first source of mistakes of interference.

Is there a second source of mistakes of this particular type? It might be expected that Thai students implant English structures into German declarative sentences because English is the dominating Western language in Thailand.

Indeed, the wrong German sentences *(1b) and *(2b) are not only linked to PATTERN THAI, but also to PATTERN ENGLISH. Therefore English may be considered second source of mistakes of interference.³

PATTERN ENGLISH:

	...	Subject	Verb 1	Verb 2	xxx
(1d)	Sometimes	he	went		to see his mother upcountry
= *(1b)	Manchmal (sometimes)	er (he)	fuhr (went)		zu seiner Mutter aufs Land (to his mother) (upcountry)
(2d)	Therefore	he	had to	go	to friends often

PATTERN GERMAN - ENGLISH:

	...	Subject	Verb 1	xxx	Verb 2
*(2b)	Deshalb (therefore)	er (he)	mußte (had to)	oft zu Freunden (often) (to friends)	gehen (go)

As (1c1) and (1d) on the one hand and (2c1) and (2d) on the other hand have the same structure, PATTERN ENGLISH and PATTERN THAI are the same. This being so the same relationship between PATTERN THAI and PATTERN GERMAN holds between PATTERN ENGLISH and PATTERN GERMAN.

³ This idea is supported by Hufeisen, who shows that a considerable number of mistakes of interference made by Thai students of German are not due to the impact of Thai, but to the influence of English. For example one student wrote "Herr Müller's stick". In this structure the word "Herr" ("Mr") is correct, although the ending "-n" would have to be added because a genitive expressing the idea of possession is needed. "Müller's" and "stick" are English elements in a German environment, however. As German has the s-genitive, but does not use the apostrophe, the correct version would be "Herrn Müllers + noun" ("Mr Müller's + noun"). "stick" is an English word used instead of the German word "Stock" which has to be capitalised because it is a noun (Hufeisen, 1991: 135).

PATTERN ENGLISH shows that the use of the English structure "... filled and Subject in front of Verb 1 filled" results in *(1b), which is wrong in German. Like PATTERN THAI PATTERN ENGLISH has only one Subject in front of Verb 1.

According to PATTERN GERMAN - ENGLISH the wrong German sentence *(2b) features the separation of Verb 1 and Verb 2. In this respect the sentence follows PATTERN GERMAN, but not PATTERN ENGLISH. That Subject is in front of Verb 1 with ... being filled is a violation of PATTERN GERMAN and a mistake of interference because the student applied PATTERN ENGLISH.

4. CONCLUSION

PATTERN GERMAN, which describes German declarative sentences (main clauses), has two verb positions and two subject positions. Verb 1, which may be filled by a modal, is on the left of the clause and Verb 2, the full verb, on the right. Subject 1 and Subject 2 are in front of and behind Verb 1. If the position in front of Subject 1 is filled PATTERN GERMAN requires that the subject must go to Subject 2.

Thai students of German have a tendency to fill the position in front of Subject 1, but not to shift the subject to Subject 2.

The hypothesis is that this is a mistake of interference because the students apply PATTERN THAI/PATTERN ENGLISH which do not have Subject 2. Both Thai and English are sources of this type of mistakes.

Appendices:

Appendix 1: Exercise in the final examination of "German Intermediate 2"

"Eine traurige Geschichte": Bringen Sie bitte die Satzglieder in eine richtige Reihenfolge!
("A Sad Story": Please put the elements given into correct orders)

Beispiel:

Michael / ein erfolgreicher Klavierspieler / war / vor vielen Jahren

> Michael war vor vielen Jahren ein erfolgreicher Klavierspieler.

1. mußte / aber / stundenlang / üben / er / auf dem Klavier

>

2. sehr schwierig / das / war / er / unfreundliche Nachbarn / hatte / weil

>

3. für seine Musik / kein Verständnis / sie / hatten

>

4. gehen / deshalb / er / zu Freunden / oft / mußte

>

5. zu seiner Mutter / er / manchmal / aufs Land / fuhr

>

6. ungestört / dort / spielen / seine Lieblingsstücke / er / konnte

>

7. geschah / dann / ein Unglück / aber

>

8. sich verletzte / er / stürzte / und / schwer

>

9. erst / aber / heraus / stellte / später / sich / die schreckliche Wahrheit

>

10. nicht mehr / er / bewegen / seine Finger / konnte

>

11. er / deshalb / verzichten / auf seinen geliebten Beruf / mußte

Appendix 2: Questionnaire for Thai teachers of English, French, Spanish, Russian, and German.

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Dear Colleague!

We would like to find out some information on Thai syntax as compared to German syntax and would highly appreciate your help.

Text A and Text B are about a piano player. Could you please read Text A and then complete Text B by writing one declarative sentence in Thai in (1) and another in (2)?

Please use the elements given!

Thank you very much!

Text A:

A Sad Story

Michael was a successful piano player. As his neighbours felt disturbed by him playing the instrument he decided to visit friends or his mother to practise. One day when he was away from his home because he wanted to play the piano he fell and injured his fingers which he could not move any more. As a result he was not able to play any longer.

Text B:

Michael could not practise at home.

(1) ไป ดั้งนั้น เขา หาเพื่อน บ่อย ต้อง

(2) หาแม่ เขา บางครั้ง ที่ต่างจังหวัด ไป

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