

# A Corpus-Based Study of the Variability of BE in Second Language Acquisition

---

Zhang Yanyan<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The aim of this study is to adopt a corpus-based approach to investigating the variable use of BE in the acquisition of English as a second language. By examining the data from a learner corpus consisting of English writings by Hong Kong university students, the author presents a comprehensive distributional analysis of the forms and functions of BE in the Chinese-English interlanguage grammar. Based on the distribution of interlanguage BE, this paper further explores a few factors that may influence the production and omission of BE, such as the function of BE (copular vs. auxiliary BE), finiteness of BE forms (finite vs. non-finite); predicate types (stage-level vs. individual-level) (Calson, 1977); different post-BE constituents (e.g. ergative vs. unergative verbs), as well as L1 transfer (Chinese “shi” vs. English “be”). It is found that there exist grammatical contingences with regard to the use of BE in the interlanguage grammar of Chinese learners of English, suggesting that the interlanguage BE is largely rule-based and is subject to grammatical constraints. It is proposed that the variability of BE in second language acquisition may result from a few factors working in tandem, such as L1 influence and the “mis-mapping” between morphology and abstract categories or features (e.g. tense/agreement). The results of this study seem to show more support for the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (e.g. Prévost and White, 2000) than the Linguistic Representation Impairment Hypothesis (e.g. Meisel, 1997; Hawkins, 2000), in accounting for the optional realization of verbal inflection in second language acquisition. The present exploration into the persistent factors influencing the variable use of BE have both theoretical and pedagogic implications.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hong Kong Baptist University  
*e-mail*: lucyzhangyy@163.com