

*Variability of BE in English-Chinese Interlanguage Grammar*

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**Abstract**

The variable use of BE has been widely noticed in the acquisition of English as both the first and a second language. This study aims to investigate the variability of BE in Chinese-English interlanguage grammar by exploring a 160,000-token corpus of Hong Kong university students' English writings. Based on a comprehensive distribution analysis of interlanguage BE with different forms and functions, the present study examines a few factors that may influence the production and omission of BE, as characterized by the following linguistic distinctions: copular vs. auxiliary BE forms; finite vs. non-finite BE forms; stage-level vs. individual-level predicate types; as well as the difference between L1 and L2 (i.e. 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 interlanguage BE may result from a few factors working in tandem, such as L1 transfer 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.

**Key words:** BE, interlanguage, variability, corpus-based

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