“To err is human…”: An investigation of grammatical errors in Swedish 16-year-old learners’ written production in English by Pia Köhlmyr is the book version of her 2001 doctoral dissertation from Gothenburg University, Sweden. It is a broad investigation of grammatical errors in free compositions written by 16-year-old learners of English in Sweden. The compositions were written as a test and formed part of the Swedish National Assessment Programmes in 1992 and 1995. The total database for the study consists of 383 randomly selected compositions from these assessments. In both assessment exercises the topic involved writing a letter to an imaginary youth organisation, in order to win a trip or gain admission to a youth convention, respectively. The task required learners to describe themselves and explain why they should be selected. Not only is the topic fairly uniform across the sample, but the students also share many characteristics. They have all studied English for six years and are in their final year of compulsory schooling (grade 9). One difference, however, is that some learners follow a general course whereas others take an advanced stream. As can be gleaned from the title of Köhlmyr’s study, the subject matter is grammatical errors in these compositions. More specifically, Köhlmyr wants to describe the type of errors found in free production, account for their frequency, and finally, explain why these errors occur. Thus the study is empirical and descriptive. The method applied is that of traditional Error Analysis, and the author gives a detailed description of all errors found in the data, relating them to traditional ‘school grammar’ categories, predominantly based on the parts of speech.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I (Chapters 1–2) provides a brief overview of Error Analysis and gives an account of some previous studies in the field. Part II (Chapters 3–12) is a detailed description of all errors found and, finally, Part III (Chapters 13–21) provides an analysis and discussion of the errors. In Part II the errors are classified according to word class membership, e.g. nouns and articles; verbs; adjectives and adverbs,
etc. In addition, two categories which cut across word classes are introduced, namely concord and word order. Furthermore, the errors are divided into category errors and realisation errors. The former concerns failure to select the correct grammatical category (e.g. choice of the present tense where the future tense is called for) whereas the latter involves choosing the wrong form of an otherwise correct category (e.g. conjugating an irregular verb regularly). All errors are also classified according to whether they involve substitution, addition or omission.

The result of the analysis demonstrates that these Swedish high-school students make a considerable number of errors in their free composition task. Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of errors relate to verbs (25%), nouns and articles (22%), concord (18%) and prepositions (12%). An overwhelming majority of errors are category errors (93%), which is an indication that the students have great difficulties in selecting the correct grammatical category. Köhlyr believes that this can, at least partly, be attributed to limited knowledge of the L1 grammatical system. For example, the tense systems of English and Swedish are largely the same, and should not present the learner with any great problems (applying Köhlyr’s line of reasoning, one might expect correct structures here as a result of positive transfer). However, the results demonstrate that 59% of all verb errors involve time and tense and a significant majority concern the simple present, which is completely parallel in Swedish.

Part II of the book certainly gives a thorough overview of all errors in the data, and could as such be useful for reference, but overall the reader will most likely get more out of Part III where Köhlyr attempts to explain why the errors occur. Here all errors are divided into interlingual and intralingual errors, where the former group consists of errors relating to (negative) transfer and the latter to the structural properties of English. The intralingual errors are divided into overgeneralisation, simplification and blends. Köhlyr is aware of, and discusses, the difficulties in determining for certain whether an error is the result of transfer or a case of overgeneralising a rule within the L2 system. The solution offered is that when in doubt, transfer takes precedence over overgeneralisation. Bearing this in mind, 40% of all errors are attributed to transfer, while 50% of all errors are explained as a result of overgeneralisation of rules in the L2. For example, an interesting result of the analysis of concord is that the Swedish learners overgeneralise third person singular – giving rise to constructions like *I thinks, *They gets etc. Swedish does not differentiate between person and number in the verb paradigm and for teachers of English in Sweden ‘third person –s’ is a well-known problem area. However, one might expect students to transfer the less marked Swedish structure, resulting in a lack of diacritic marking, e.g. *She think. According to Köhlyr however, what seems to happen
is that students overgeneralise a structure that is perceived as ‘typically English’ (p.276). This is an interesting explanation, which Köhlmyr also uses to account for the tendency to overuse the progressive form in the compositions. Swedish does not have a separate form marking the progressive form, and again, it might be viewed as typically English.

The book offers a detailed description of all error types in the data, but as a reader it is also easy to feel lost in detail. Part II – taking up almost 200 pages – is a catalogue of errors, where all errors are treated in the same way, without taking into account their communicative impact. For example, the choice of the wrong word order (*today want I), a instead of an (*a apple) or the wrong tense (*I come tomorrow) are treated exactly in the same way, although it is more than likely that, communicatively speaking, the choice of a or an does not impede communication in the same way as the wrong tense would. Another problem relates to the fact that error frequencies are only presented as absolute numbers, with no consideration of the overall frequency of a particular structure or the number of correct instances of a particular structure. As a reader I also become curious about the language learners behind the errors. All we are told is that there are students from both the general and advanced streams and that high, average and low marks are represented in the sample. Would it not have been possible to include at least a few compositions in full to illustrate these different groupings?

Despite the shortcomings outlined above the book offers interesting insights into the state of English as a foreign/second language in the Swedish school system. In general, English plays a very important role in Swedish society today, and young people in particular seem to value knowledge of English highly. It has even been suggested that good proficiency in English forms part of the national identity of young Swedes (Oakes 2001). It is against such a backdrop that Köhlmyr’s study becomes particularly interesting since her results indicate that there is a huge discrepancy between actual and perceived proficiency. It would certainly be worthwhile to undertake further study in this area, and for anyone so inclined Köhlmyr’s book will offer a wealth of descriptive information into the most prevalent error types.

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**REFERENCES**