The Case of the Pseudo-hypercorrection

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a phenomenon I qualify as a pseudo-hypercorrection. A pseudo-hypercorrection has the same basis as a hypercorrection, but the important characteristic of a pseudo-hypercorrection that distinguishes it from a hypercorrection is that the expression is grammatically correct. As a case example I have used a phenomenon in Dutch, given the consideration that it occurs frequently, so that it cannot summarily be dismissed as a chance event.

Keywords: Hypercorrection; Pseudo-hypercorrection; Grammar; Inflection

1. INTRODUCTION

A hypercorrection occurs when what the speaker expresses diverts from what is considered correct language use while the speaker mistakenly thinks that the alternative (s)he uses is correct. There is no consensus with respect to the specific nature of the 'hypercorrection',[1] but given the focus of this paper, that issue does not have to be explored here; I merely add that those who distinguish between *quantitative* and *qualitative* hypercorrections – the former referring to alternative but still grammatical forms, the latter pointing to ungrammatical forms[2] – would specify the sort of hypercorrection inquired here as qualitative. The issue of 'correctness' warrants some attention, though, which it will receive once the main issue will have been investigated.

What I specify as a pseudo-hypercorrection is a linguistic phenomenon that occurs when a speaker accidentally produces a correct result. I introduce the term 'pseudo-hypercorrection' because 'hypercorrection' does not capture what occurs here. After all, in the event of a hypercorrection, an *incorrect* result is (mistakenly) produced, whereas the result that is produced in The Case of the Pseudo-

hypercorrection is *correct*.

As is often the case, presenting a case example is the best way to make clear what is at issue. I use one that properly represents the pseudo-hypercorrection, for it occurs regularly. While this paper does not inquire to what extent differences in language use may be explained by social variables, I use the opportunity to remark that the particular pseudo-hypercorrection I point out is used throughout different social classes, and can even be observed to be used by newsreaders (who – presumably – read out texts that have been checked closely for possible mistakes).

The case example is a Dutch case, but it will be preceded by a case example in English so as to indicate that it is not a *typically* Dutch occurrence; the phenomenon is, in other words, not limited to Dutch.

This is the case example in English:

(1)   The United States (of America) has adopted policies to promote public health.
(2)   The United States (of America) have adopted policies to promote public health.

In sentence (2), either of the following may be intended by the speaker: the federation has adopted

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1   Howard Giles and Angie Williams, "Accommodating Hypercorrection: a Communication Model", p. 343.

2   Ferdy Hubers, Thijs Trompenaars, Sebastian Collin, Kees de Schepper and Helen de Hoop, "Hypercorrection as a By-product of Education", p. 553.

the policies in question or each of the individual states that constitute the federation has adopted those policies; in the latter case, the individual policies may differ, so that, for example, California may have other (specific) goals than Ohio. (Incidentally, the fact that there are *policies* (plural) is not incompatible with the federal level: it is possible, even at that level, that various goals are intended, with different concomitant policies.)

In the first case, sentence (2) is incorrect (as 'has' would be the correct word instead of 'have', so that sentence (1) should be used). Suppose that someone who is unaware of the form of government of the United States (and perhaps mistakenly thinks that it is a unitary state) wants to say that the policies have been adopted at the national level (which is the federal level, but the person in question is unaware that this – separate – level exists) and also suppose that such policies have indeed been adopted at the federal level *and* by all of the individual states. What the speaker expresses when sentence (2) is used is, accordingly, correct. Importantly, though, it just *happens* to be correct: if the individual states (or at least one of them) had not adopted the policies in question, the statement would be incorrect.

The speaker may have considered using 'has', but, mistakenly thinking that 'have' is instead the correct word in this case, have opted for 'have'. The intention of the speaker is not the right basis, then, but it is not the decisive element in assessing the (grammatical) correctness of the sentence. Since the resulting sentence is correct, a pseudo-hypercorrection rather than a hypercorrection is produced. (The intention *is* important in a different respect, though; I will return to this issue briefly below.)

A second, perhaps clearer, illustration may be provided by pointing to a phenomenon in Dutch. In Dutch, the third person plural is 'zij' (or 'ze') if the subject of a sentence is concerned, while 'hen' is used to indicate the direct object and 'hun' is the correct word for the indirect object. (Incidentally, 'aan hen' may be used instead of 'hun', but that given does not affect the point at issue.) 'Hun' is sometimes used (incorrectly) as the subject of a sentence, but this issue is only mentioned for completeness, as it will, not being relevant for the topic under discussion, not be addressed here.[3]

[3] It has, however, drawn the attention of Dutch linguists (e.g., Roeland van Hout, "Hun zijn jongens. Ontstaan en verspreiding van het onderwerp 'hun'", passim, Kamila Tomaka, "Hun hebben de taal verkwanseld en hun hadden gelijk – over het gebruik van hun als onderwerp in het hedendaagse Nederlands", pp. 107-110). Van Bergen, Stoop, Vogels and De Hoop ("Leve hun! Waarom hun nog steeds hun zeggen", pp. 15-27) argue that the prevalence of 'hun' may be explained by the given that it, unlike 'zij' (or 'ze'), can be used to refer to animate entities.

Examples of correct sentences, with an indirect and a direct object, respectively, are, accordingly:

(3)   "Ik heb hun de boeken gegeven." ("I gave them the books.")
(4)   "Ik heb hen gezien." ("I have seen them.")

An example of a sentence with a hypercorrection is:

(5) *"Ik heb hen de boeken gegeven." ("I gave them the books.")

The result of this hypercorrection would be as follows. 'Hun' is sometimes mistakenly used for the direct object. In accordance with the examples presented above, a typical sentence in which this would occur is:

(6) *"Ik heb hun gezien." ("I have seen them.")

A speaker who is aware of the fact that 'hun' is sometimes used where 'hen' would be correct and knows that (6) is incorrect may be inclined to formulate a sentence such as (5), thereby producing a hypercorrection.

It is also possible that a speaker always uses 'hun', so both (correctly) for the indirect object and (incorrectly) for the direct object. Such a speaker would, accordingly, produce sentences like (3) and (6) but not sentences like (4) and (5). A sentence like (3) would be produced, not on the basis of the knowledge that 'hen' would be incorrect, but rather on the basis of the idea that 'hen' must be avoided at all times. Sentence (3), while correct, would in that case be produced luckily. The pseudo-hypercorrection would in this case result from the speaker's thinking that 'hen', if that option is considered, must be 'corrected' to 'hun'. Since the speaker does not know *why* 'hun' is correct, what occurs here has the semblance of a hypercorrection. The (accidental) correctness is what makes it a pseudo-hypercorrection rather than a hypercorrection.

As becomes apparent, the English translation of the Dutch sentences (so (3)-(6)) are all correct, notwithstanding the incorrect formulation of two (namely, (5) and (6)) of their Dutch counterparts. In English, the difference is not noticeable morphologically, if the sentence deep structure is not taken into consideration, since 'them' is used irrespective of whether a direct or an indirect object is concerned. In other words, (morphologically) the same result is rendered in English for sentences (3) and (5) and for sentences (4) and (6), respectively.

The shift in Dutch towards 'hun' may result in the disappearance of 'hen' (so that 'hun' is used for both the direct and indirect object). This would not necessarily be problematic. It *is*, of course, problematic from the consideration that a universal use of 'hun' results in a loss of accuracy. Still, linguistic purists fight an uphill battle even if they are a decreasing minority, being unable to convince the majority that something is expressed which is (grammatically) incorrect (or 'incorrect'). If a sufficient number of people invariably say 'hun' (and so use that word for both the indirect and the direct object), this will in time become the norm, not just for the majority (for whom this is already the case), but for every speaker, with the corollary that sentences (3) *and* (6) will be considered correct.

Linguistic purists' concerns may be assuaged by pointing out that this change does not necessarily have negative consequences insofar as language use is concerned. This is demonstrated by the (translated) sentences in English. As I pointed out above, the equivalent sentences "I gave them the books." and "I have seen them." are correct, which demonstrates that the fact that the indirect object is not expressed morphologically differently in English than the direct object is – apparently – not problematic: there is no reason to think that speakers of English experience any confusion or misunderstanding as a result of this state of affairs.

The change would be consistent with a development of a reduction of inflection in Germanic languages.[4] (Inflection would still exist, but relatively simplified, since the indirect object may not be distinguished morphologically from the direct object, as is already the case in English.) Practically speaking, then, the change need not be problematic. It does not mean, though, that pseudo-hypercorrections themselves are never problematic, for while speaker intentions are not relevant insofar as grammatical correctness is concerned, they *are* relevant semantically (which becomes more apparent on the basis of the first case example (sentences (1) and (2)) than on the basis of the second (sentences (3)-(6)), and misunderstanding a speaker's intentions may lead to miscommunication.

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4   *Although, difficultly, while in the case of pronouns the dative for the third person plural differs from the accusative, the accusative (morphologically) corresponds to the nominative (see, e.g., David Megginson, "He (pl) and Other New Old English Pronouns", p. 6). Still, this observation may be relativized in light of the morphological differences between nouns in Old English (see, e.g., Petra Steiner, "Diversification in the Noun Inflection of Old English", pp. 182, 183) that have in modern English, insofar as the issue of different cases is concerned, disappeared (a possessive form is used, but this must be distinguished from the genitive case).*

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Data availability statement:
Data sharing is not applicable as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.