

Cross-Linguistic Influence in Initial L2 Syntax Acquisition

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Introduction. The shared syntax account (Hartsuiker et al., 2004) and the transfer accounts (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996; MacWhinney, 1997) assume that first language (L1) syntax facilitates the acquisition and processing of sufficiently similar second language (L2) structures. The separate syntax accounts (de Bot, 1992; Clahsen & Felser, 2006) assume that there is not such cross-linguistic influence. Previous studies have explored how an L2 structure is processed at different stages of L2 development. To my knowledge, the influence that L1 syntax has on initial L2 syntax acquisition has been overlooked.

Research question. Is a structure that is similar in the L1 and the L2 learnt more easily than a structure that is not?

Methods. This question will be addressed using a semi-artificial mini-language with a Spanish-Galician cognate vocabulary. Its syntax will be based on two structures of Galician used to express desires, one similar to a Spanish structure and the other unparalleled in that language. Forty Spanish natives with no knowledge of Galician will be incidentally exposed to the language. Then, their learning will be tested with a grammaticality judgement task. Accuracy and reaction times will be measured. Whether unconscious rule knowledge is achieved will be assessed with a verbal report.

Expected Results. If L1 syntax facilitates L2 syntax acquisition, participants will accept grammatical similar sentences and reject their ungrammatical counterparts to a greater extent than they will accept grammatical dissimilar sentences and reject ungrammatical ones. They will do so faster for the similar structure. If there is no cross-linguistic influence, participants will accept grammatical sentences and reject ungrammatical ones to the same extent for both structures. They will do so equally fast. If rule knowledge is conscious, participants will be able to verbalize it; if knowledge is unconscious, they will not.

Keywords: cross-linguistic influence, syntax acquisition, implicit learning

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