

Generalization and Transfer in L2 Acquisition: The Role of Entrenchment in L1 and L2

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Keywords: entrenchment – construction learning – collocation analysis – L2 learning

The interlanguage of L2 learners is shaped by a variety of factors, including transfer from the L1 to the L2 and (over-)generalization from the L2 input. Traditionally, these have been treated as all-or-nothing phenomena – transfer and overgeneralization happen, or they don't. From a usage-based perspective, this is too simplistic, as lexical and grammatical units are understood as having different degrees of entrenchment. Thus, a number of studies have taken into account L2 entrenchment when studying transfer and L2 (over-)generalization (e.g. Cabrera & Zubizarreta 2005, Ellis & Ferreira-Junior 2009, Martinez-Garcia & Wulff 2012, Römer, Brook O'Donnell & Ellis 2014). What is missing so far is a systematic investigation of the interaction of entrenchment in the L1 and the L2. In our study, we look at a case of semantically overlapping constructions with different lexical restrictions in the L1 and the L2 – the English and German ditransitive constructions. While the ditransitive generally means 'cause to receive' in both languages, it is associated with a much wider set of verbs in German than in English, which has some specific lexical restrictions (for example, *say* cannot occur while *tell* does, *donate* cannot occur while *give* does, etc.). We investigate the role that the entrenchment of verbs (their collocation strength, Gries & Stefanowitsch 2003) in the ditransitive in the L1 and the L2 plays in the acquisition process. We report the results of three experiments. In the first two experiments, subjects are confronted with English ditransitive sentences that would be grammatical in German, some of which are grammatical and some ungrammatical in English. Crucially, the translation equivalents of the verbs in these sentences are either strongly or weakly attracted to the German ditransitive, and they are either strongly or weakly attracted (for the grammatical stimuli) or repelled (for the ungrammatical stimuli) in English. In the first study, subjects are asked to rate the grammaticality of the stimuli. In the second study, subjects are additionally asked to rate the grammaticality of a paraphrase with the prepositional dative (which is always grammatical), to determine whether the presence of a grammatical alternative helps to preempt the ungrammatical one. In the third study, subjects are given the grammatical German sentence and asked to translate it into English to determine whether their language production reflects their acceptability judgments. All three studies show that German English learners transfer the German pattern to English if the verb in question is strongly entrenched in German. In these cases, it makes little difference whether a verb is strongly or weakly attracted or repelled in English. Where a verb is weakly entrenched in German, subjects are sensitive to the association patterns in the L2: they will rate ungrammatical sentences low in acceptability, especially if the verb in question is strongly repelled in English.

In sum, entrenchment in the L1 is an important factor that keeps learners from acquiring constructional restrictions in the L2 even where they are highly entrenched in the L2. Our results enable us to take a developmental perspective on the role of transfer from the L1 and generalization from the L2 input at a very fine-grained resolution, to assess their relative importance and the precise pattern of their influence, and to take a new perspective on appropriate teaching strategies.

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