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Cross-linguistic influence on the accuracy order of English grammatical morphemes: Insights from a learner corpus

Ever since the study of Dulay and Burt (1973, 1974), it has been accepted in the SLA literature that the L2 acquisition of English grammatical morphemes follows the so-called "natural order" and that L1 has little influence on the order of acquisition. Recently, however, Luk and Shirai (2009) challenged the view by surveying the studies examining the order of acquisition of English grammatical morphemes, and demonstrated that the order, in fact, may differ depending on L1s.

The purpose of the present study is to directly compare the L2 accuracy orders of English grammatical morphemes across different L1 groups and provide the first-hand evidence of L1 (non-)influence on this theme of SLA. The study exploited the Cambridge Learner Corpus and targeted over 10,000 learners of seven typologically diverse L1s (Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Russian, Turkish, German, and French) across five proficiency levels (roughly corresponding to A2 through C2 in the Common European Framework of Reference). Six target morphemes were chosen from an influential study by Goldschneider and DeKeyser (2001); progressive *-ing*, past tense *-ed*, articles, third person *-s*, plural *-s*, and possessive *'s*.

In order to identify meaningful differences between the target-like use (TLU) scores, morphemes within each L1 and each proficiency level were clustered based on the 95% confidence intervals of the TLU scores obtained through bootstrapping. The clustered orders within each proficiency level were compared across L1 groups. Besides the TLU-based clustering above, the Spearman's rank-order correlations of the order of suppliance in obligatory contexts (SOC) scores were calculated for each pair of observed orders, and the correlations of within-L1 pairs were compared against those of between-L1 pairs. If the former is stronger, L1 influence is likely to be operative.

The two analyses above demonstrated clear influences of L1 on the accuracy order of English grammatical morphemes. Some prominent effects include (i) the accuracy order of articles by Japanese, Korean, Russian, and Turkish learners of English is consistently lower than that by other L1 learners of English, (ii) German learners tend to mark a lower accuracy rank of progressive *-ing* than other L1 learners, and (iii) the accuracy order of Spanish learners of English does not deviate from the natural order, which confirms to a Luk and Shirai's (2009) hypothesis that the natural order is a mere reflection of the acquisition order by Spanish learners of English. All in all, despite the commonly held assumption that L2 learners of English acquire grammatical morphemes in a fixed order, the evidence provided in this study is more than sufficient to cast a strong doubt on the universality of accuracy order.

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