

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

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Keywords: Construction Grammar, L2 Learning, Transfer, Entrenchment, Generalization

The interlanguage of L2 learners is shaped by various factors, perhaps most prominently transfer from L1 to L2 and (over-)generalization from L2. Transfer has traditionally been treated as an all-or-nothing phenomenon by focusing on L2 structures that either have or do not have an equivalent in the L1. Only recently, researchers working in usage-based construction grammar have taken into account frequencies and association strengths of L2 structures (e.g. Cabrera and Zubizarreta 2005, Ellis and Ferreira-Junior 2009, Martinez-Garcia and Wulff 2012, Römer, Brook O'Donnell and Ellis 2014). These studies show that entrenchment plays a similar role in L2 learning as it does in L1 acquisition.

What is missing is a systematic investigation of the role of the entrenchment of L1 structures and its interaction with the L2 entrenchment. We report three studies that investigate these factors using the case of the ditransitive construction in the interlanguage of German learners of English as a Foreign Language. The construction exists both languages but has a broader meaning in German (where it can encode almost any type of three-participant event) than in English (where it is restricted to transfer events). This semantic difference leads to differences in the collostructional preferences (Gries and Stefanowitsch 2003, Stefanowitsch 2006) of the construction in the two languages, allowing us to investigate the extent to which the transfer of L1 usage patterns to the L2 depends on the positive or negative entrenchment of verb-construction associations in the L1, and the extent to which transfer can be inhibited by the entrenchment of verb-construction associations in the L2.

The first two studies are rating tasks in which German learners of English are asked to rate the acceptability of English ditransitive sentences constructed according to either German or English collostructional preferences. In the first study, subjects were confronted with ditransitive constructions exclusively, in the second study, they were first asked to rate the corresponding to-dative (which, due to its broader meaning in English allows all verbs found in the German ditransitive). This was meant to remind them implicitly of the fact that the English ditransitive has a narrower meaning than the German one. The results of both studies show that L1 entrenchment is an important factor prompting learners to transfer L1 structures to the L2 and keeping them from acquiring the appropriate L2 constraints even if the latter are highly entrenched; L2 entrenchment plays a role in shaping learner's linguistic behavior only where there are no L1 associations interfering. In the third study, learners were asked to translate German ditransitives into English. The results show that learners translate these sentences according to German collostructional preferences, confirming the strong influence of L1 entrenchment.

Generally, our results confirm the role of positive and negative entrenchment in shaping the acquisition of lexical restrictions on particular slots in constructions. Specifically, they also show the stability of such entrenchment-based restrictions: once they have been acquired in a first language, they will be transferred to subsequently learned languages.

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