Speakers are inclined to repeat themselves or their interlocutors in native language (L1) and second language (L2) conversations (Pickering & Ferreira, 2008: 427). This phenomenon was largely attributed to priming, where exposure to a given language form, i.e. prime, results in speakers tending to repeat the same or a related form in a subsequent language production, i.e. target (Branigan, 1995: 940). Early investigations made use of experimental tasks in a lab context and found evidence for syntactic priming by use of picture description and sentence completion tasks.

The present study uses an innovative combination of corpus-linguistic methods and manual analyses to identify syntactic priming of verb-particle constructions (e.g., taking out a paper vs. taking a paper out) in task-based conversations by native and German L2 speakers of English. A mixed effect regression model was employed to disentangle the priming effect from all other factors which might be predictors of the target, i.e. syllable length of the direct object. The results show little evidence for priming as an independent predictor of verb-particle reproduction in L1 and L2 conversations. However, there is evidence for priming in both language conditions when there is lexical overlap. More importantly, in both samples, the reuse of verb-particle constructions can largely be explained by the same set of factors, i.e. syllable length of the direct object, its structural complexity, and whether it is definite and new to the discourse. The results suggest that the mental processing of the verb-particle construction is very similar for L1 and L2 users. Findings will be discussed within frameworks of priming in L2 production.


Keywords: reproduction, factors, priming, lexical overlap, corpus.