Remapping of progressivity in adult L2 acquisition in L2 German

Vincent DeLuca, David Miller, Denny Berndt, Jason Rothman

University of Reading, United Kingdom

Acquiring new L2 and/or (re)mapping (L1) aspectual features is challenging (e.g. Ayoun and Rothman, 2013; Ellis, 2013). This study examines the acquisition of progressivity in the German simple present tense (GPT), and related constructions, by highly advanced English natives of L2 German.

Unlike English, German does not have an explicit gerundial form (e.g. Duden, 2005), all non-past aspectual readings are expressible through the GPT. The am+INFINITIVE (am) and beim+INFINITIVE (beim) constructions (Am-BeimC) also express progressivity. However, only partially overlapping distributions affect their meaning differentially (see gloss):

(1) Ich bin am Schwimmen
Nom.1sg be.Present.1sg at the.Dat swim.Inf
'I am swimming.'

(2) Ich bin beim Schwimmen
Nom.1sg be.Present.1sg by the.Dat swim.Inf
'I am at/ by the swimming pool/I am swimming.'

Although semantically Am-BeimCs map to the English copula + gerund construction, their unique syntax leads to word-order grammaticality differences. We thus test the extent to which L2 learners (a) remap aspectual meaning onto new L2 constructions; (b) distinguish between am and beim in context; and (c) acquire the syntax of Am-BeimCs.

Experiment one, a truth value judgment task (TVJT), establishes learners’ acquisition of the aspectual properties of the GPT. Experiment two, a TVJT assesses knowledge of the distribution of am and beim. Lastly, a grammaticality judgment task examines knowledge of the syntax of Am-BeimCs, inclusive of word order differences between German and English.

Predictions: L2ers should (1) acquire the aspectual properties of the simple present (2) judge the appropriateness of am and beim in context; (3) acquire the syntactic distinctions that differentiate German Am-BeimCs from English copula+ gerund.

Data from a control group (n = 25) and Advanced L2s (n = 16) confirm all three predictions above, suggesting that adult L2 acquisition is not limited to a superficial re-distribution of properties available from the L1 and that L2 feature reassembly is possible.

Keywords: Feature Reassembly, Aspect, Beim, Am.