Ultimate Attainment at the Syntax-Discourse Interface: the acquisition of object movement in Dutch

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This paper tests the Interface Hypothesis (Tsimpli & Sorace 2006) through investigating the L2-acquisition of two different domains of object movement in Dutch. The Interface Hypothesis suggests that external interfaces, such as the discourse-syntax interface, are persistently problematic for L2ers because of increased processing difficulties, while other domains, such as the syntax-semantics interface and narrow syntax, are not.

This study compares 3 experiments, focusing on two motivations for object movement: discourse or semantic. Definite objects prefer to move across adverbs when they are discourse anaphoric (Neeleman & vandeKoot 2007), leading to SOAdvV orders, while moved indefinites receive a specific interpretation as opposed to in-situ indefinites, which are interpreted non-specifically (Experiment 1 & 2). In addition, objects can move long-distance to the first position, leading to OSV orders, but only when they are focused (Frey, 2010). Thus, experiment 1 and 3 investigate discourse driven movement of topics and foci respectively. Unlike Dutch and German, English does not follow the same discourse-to-syntax-mapping.

Advanced and near-native L1 English learners of L2 Dutch (n=10), a native control group (n=10) and a control group of L1 German learners of L2 Dutch (n=11) participated in two Felicity Judgment tasks and a Truth Value Judgment Task. The results show that English near-native learners of Dutch correctly accept non-canonical OSV orders in contexts with focussed objects, but they do not show a preference for SOAdvV over SAdvOV orders when the object is discourse-given. Furthermore, several participants in both proficiency groups show problems with restricting scrambled indefinites to a specific interpretation. The L1 German group performs on target in all tests.

This suggests that the external interface is not necessarily problematic in end state grammars and the syntax-semantics interface not necessarily unproblematic, supporting the view that (in the future) interfaces should not be viewed holistically (White 2011).

Keywords: Sentence Processing, L2 Acquisition, Syntax-Discourse Interface.