Phonetic-phonological development in early L2-learners of French: A multiple case study

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This presentation focuses on phonetic-phonological development of L2 French in early Swedish-speaking learners. More specifically it describes the development of Voice Onset Time (VOT) and liaison in early L2 learners as compared to simultaneous Swedish-French bilinguals and monolingual French children.

Differences between L1 and L2 phonology have traditionally been attributed to a sensitive period for language learning or to L1 influence. According to recent extensive studies in morpho-syntax, L2 acquisition with an age of onset of 4-8 years constitutes a separate mode of acquisition: child second language (cL2) acquisition, where some aspects pattern with bilingual L1 acquisition and others with adult L2 development. These results have been attributed to a combination of a sensitive period and the level of L1 development at onset of acquisition. In comparison, phonological development in early L2 acquisition is fairly under-researched and there is therefore little evidence for a cL2 mode of phonological acquisition.

Longitudinal data were collected in ten recording sessions over 2.5 years. Eight age-matched children participated from age 3 to 6: three Swedish-speaking learners of L2 French (age of onset 3;0-3;5), three simultaneous Swedish-French bilinguals and two French-speaking monolinguals. The eight children attended the same French kindergarten in Stockholm, Sweden. VOT and liaison were targeted using specific picture-naming tasks. VOT was studied in both Swedish and French but liaison only in French since there is no standard Swedish equivalent. The children’s level of L1 phonological development was assessed through standardised speech-language pathology tests.

Data from bilinguals and monolinguals only differ marginally. These minor differences are attributed to the presence of another L1. The L2-learners initially present similarities with adult L2-learners but at more advanced stages the productions resemble those of simultaneous bilinguals. The data thus appears to support the existence of a cL2 mode of acquisition also in the domain of phonology.

Keywords: phonology, liaison, cL2 acquisition, VOT, French.