Mapping concepts to syntax in the production of English genitives by native and non-native speakers

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L1 and L2 production is affected by Conceptual Accessibility (Bock & Warren 1985 for L1; Hawkins, Althobaiti, & MA 2012 for L2). For instance, English speakers’ choice of active/passive syntactic frames depends on animacy, whereby animate referents are preferred in first position: the active sentence the medicine cured the patient is recalled as the passive the patient was cured by the medicine more so than the converse. This animacy-first phenomenon, however, is contentious because earlier serialization is typically ascribed to prominent grammatical functions or syntactic positions. Recently, priming methods have been claimed to complement recall experiments, reflecting two-step concept-to-function-to-syntax, one-step from concept-to-syntax, or both.

We tested native and advanced Chinese speakers of English on spoken recall of English genitives, hypothesizing natives would be likely to show less inversion for the student’s room vs. the room of the student and the cleaner of the hotel vs. the hotel’s cleaner. Recall was predicted to be sensitive to grammatical functions, syntactic position, or both. A portion of the stimuli primed the structures to be recalled with reverse structures (i.e. the student’s room priming the cleaner of the hotel and vice-versa) for which we expected spillover on a view that constructions less affected point to the correct two-step or one-step mapping.

Results supported neither position but were suggestive of concept-to-syntax mapping. Native and L2 speakers alike display a weak animacy effect, with greater inversion of animacy-first genitives. Moreover, priming by an opposite structure did not have a significant effect on either group. Instead there was a peculiar tendency by both to invert animate-first stimuli like the soldier’s portrait in favor of the portrait of the soldier which is lexically ambiguous. Finally, despite Chinese marking possession only via an English ‘s equivalent, the de marker, L2 speakers showed no preference for either marker.

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