Acquisition of probes for short-distance Wh-questions by Japanese learners of English

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This paper reports on how adult Japanese Learners of English acquire the Probes which drive Wh-Movement in Short-Distance Questions/ SDQs in English. We begin by looking at the range of wh-probes found in English and Japanese on the basis of a minimalist-cartographic approach (Chomsky 1995, 2001, 2002, 2005, 2006; Rizzi 1997, 2001, 2004, 2006), arguing that English has a dual-probe system involving the use of C/Complementiser and F/Focus heads as wh-probes (Branigan 2005), whereas Japanese has a single wh-probe system in which T/Tense is used as the sole wh-probe in SDQs (Miyagawa 2006). We report L1A research by Stromswold (1990) and Guasti (2000, 2002) showing that children acquiring L1 English master the adult dual-probe system in English from as young as two years of age, and L2A by Wakabayashi and Okawara (2003), Miyamoto & Okada (2004) and Hawkins & Hattori (2006). We then present results from an Elicited Production Task/EPT experiment showing that JLEs produced that+WH structures such as 'He said that what he should have finished,' which suggest that most Japanese learners initially use T as a wh-probe in SDQs: since T is used as a wh-probe in Japanese but not in Adult or Child English, we conclude that this is likely to be the result of Transfer. We go on to argue that positive evidence in their L2 input from questions like 'What did he say? 'Where can she have gone?' leads most JLEs to realise that English also has F-probe structures, although many struggle to master the conditions on the use of F as a wh-probe. We conclude that use of T as a wh-probe is transfer-driven and use of F as a wh-probe is input-driven. We also report on results from a Grammaticality Judgment Task experiment, which largely bear out the conclusions from the EPT study.

Keywords: Generative Grammar, Probe System, Wh-questions.