Is there a causal link between L2 vocabulary and syntax?

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What causes learners to acquire new syntactic features? In L1 acquisition, the development of syntactic features appears to rely on vocabulary size (Bates & Goodman 1997). Previous research by David et al (2009) suggests that there is a link between the acquisition of L2 vocabulary diversity and MLU. Author (2014, in press) found significant correlations between receptive vocabulary size and uninterpretable Tense features. This study will address some of the shortcomings in Author (2014, in press) by investigating a range of vocabulary measures and a range of syntactic features (DP: gender, TP: verb movement, CP: embedded clauses) to establish not only if there is a relationship between vocabulary and syntax but if it is a causal relationship.

This pilot study seeks to provide initial proof of concept and so a fine-grained analysis of 10 English speaking learners of French will be carried out. The participants are all French undergraduate students and previously studied French at secondary school. They took part in a battery of tasks including a cloze test as a measure of general proficiency, a receptive vocabulary test (X-lex), a written story re-telling task (the Finite Story by Dimroth et al (2010)) and a written composition task.

Initial results show a link between MLU and vocabulary diversity (similar to David et al 2009). Students with a smaller vocabulary size and diversity measures (D) rely on longer, simpler phrases with extended use of conjunctions. Further, more detailed analysis, will look at the acquisition of uninterpretable features, measures of complexity, L1 transfer and characteristics of their vocabulary (e.g. size, diversity). We suggest that in order to acquire new features, the mental lexicon needs to meet certain thresholds, i.e. in order to acquire Tense features the learner needs a minimum number or certain types of verbs.

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