An inventory of constructions or interactional competence? Evidence for L2 learning from a usage-based perspective

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In this talk I address the relationship between locally contextualized moments of language use in interaction and long-term language learning. To this end, I draw on usage-based linguistics (UBL) and ethnomethodological conversation analysis (EMCA). The two-pronged approach allows me to capture development over time along two dimensions of language learning, namely development of L2 constructional inventories as seen through the lens of UBL and development of interactional competence as evidenced through moment-to-moment microanalyses of interactions (EMCA) over time.

While the usage-based enterprise in L2 research is growing, the social-interactional situatedness of construction learning is still much overlooked. Given the usage-based assumption that our biographies of L2 use inform and determine our L2 competences, with constructions emerging from specific occasions of use, it is a paradox that the relationship between such biographical history and emergent L2 repertoires remains largely unexplored (Eskildsen & Cadierno, 2015). In addition to addressing this gap in the research, I also refine the usage-based understanding of language in an embrace of interactional competence (Pekarek Doehler & Pochon-Berger, 2015) by reconceptualizing the linguistic inventory as an array of semiotic resources for carrying out social action.

I do this by tracing changes in how L2 speakers put such semiotic resources to use over time. This can be done in two ways: by tracing changes in the interactional uses of particular linguistic constructions over time (Markee, 2008; Ishida, 2009; Kim, 2009; Eskildsen, 2011, in press; Masuda, 2011; Hauser, 2013; Eskildsen & Wagner, 2015, in press; Theodórsdóttir & Eskildsen, forthc.), or by tracing change across time in people’s linguistic methods for carrying out particular social actions in talk-in-interaction (Hellermann, 2008, 2011; Markee, 2008; Pekarek Doehler, 2010; Kasper & Wagner, 2011; Pekarek Doehler & Pochon-Berger, 2015).

I review the empirical evidence gathered so far and, bringing L2 construction learning and interactional competence development to the fore of the discussion as the stuff of L2 learning, I hope to advance our understanding of what constitutes evidence for L2 learning in a usage-based perspective. I conclude by proposing that the combination of UBL and EMCA is a powerful tool for researching how “grammar and social interaction organize one another” (Schegloff, Ochs & Thompson, 1996: 33); i.e., how moment-to-moment L2 interaction and the emergent L2 inventory of constructions are mutually constitutive.

Keywords: