Second language learning dynamics – Verb and complement competing for the attention of the learner?

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If we look at the grammar as emergent dynamic system, we can see it evolving according to rules that are difficult to predict. Nevertheless, second language teaching relies on the presumption that learning proceeds in piecemeal fashion: some things are learned before others in order to reach native-like way of expression. The basic assumption of this research goes beyond the accuracy and complexity of three different learner groups in comparison: the scope of this study is to find some prevalent linguistic features and morphosyntactic representations that distinguish L2 variation from target language (Finnish) variation, and variation between the three different age groups.

The data of this study consists of 1180 morphosyntactic units of language learner groups (children, youngsters and adults). Linguistic structures are subdivided into inflectional categories which, together with syntactic arguments, form a meaningful unit. By taking a root morpheme and extracting it from the inflectional morpheme, we explore the degree of elaboration in the expression. Each morpheme is labeled as a native-like morpheme, a zero-morpheme, a form-function error or as reduplication. We will reach another level of analysis by taking each predicate verb and looking for its counterparts in complements. Each predicate-complement combination counts as a marker of a possible fragile zone in the language learner’s emergent grammar.

Preliminary results suggest that the synchronic variation between the conjugation and declension processes is not completely free. Instead it seems that a language learner of Finnish puts the cognitive effort to each of which separately. This is demonstrated with a principal component analysis and Chi-square test. It is noteworthy to pay attention to the clear distinction of processing patterns. The analysis indicates that second language learning is rooted firstly to the automatized verb conjugations and secondly to declensions which cause somewhat more variability in the form.

Keywords: language learner variation, second language group differences, morphosyntactic processing.