

論文

Similarities and Dissimilarities
Between Child and Adult L2 Language Acquisition
From a Morphological Perspective.*

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Abstract:

Under the assumption that acquiring a second language (L2) is intrinsically different from acquiring a first language (L1), all L2 learners, both children and adults, are expected to exhibit a similar acquisitional pattern, which differs from children acquiring an L1. This paper discusses the expected similarities and differences between child and adult L2 learners based on the deliberation of a morphological phenomenon.

Keywords:

Morphological Development, First/Second Language Acquisition, Child/Adult Language Acquisition

1. Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) research comparing two different age groups, children and adults, has shed light on the rate of acquisition tested by several kinds of skills tests (in the short term, i.e., three months, adults outperformed children, whereas in the long term, i.e., ten months, children showed the most gain) (Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978), native likeness (e.g., Bongaerts, 1999), and recently, scrambling construction (i.e., moving a direct object leftward) (Unsworth, 2005a). This comparative perspective should be able to open up new angles for the discussion of currently debated issues such as the role of Universal Grammar (UG) in constraining development, developmental sequences, maturational influences on the ‘growth’ of grammar, critical period effects for different linguistic domains, initial state and ultimate attainment in relation to the length of exposure, L1-transfer in relation to the age of onset among many others (Haznedar & Gavruseva, 2008). Schwartz (1992; 2003; 2004) also claims that child L2 acquisition could provide the missing link in answering the question as to whether adult L2 acquisition is driven by the same innate language acquisition device as L1 acquisition, namely UG, or whether it is based on general learning mechanisms, principles of information processing and general problem solving (cited in Unsworth, 2005a, p. 633-634).

Two areas that provide insight into L2 morphology, which is the topic of this essay, are the acquisition of nominal gender and agreement by learners whose native language does not have a gender feature and the acquisition of verb inflection (Herschensohn, 2007, p. 127). For example, a study by Granfeldt (2005) shows that Swedish adult learners of L2 French take longer to learn the gender feature of French than Swedish-French bilingual children. Based on Schwartz’s (2003, p. 47) generalisation that in the domain of inflectional morphology, child L2 acquisition is more like adult L2 acquisition, Blom (2008) states that it implies a two-way dissociation between syntax proper and inflectional morphology: L1 transfer is limited to

syntax and does not influence inflection, and the acquisition of inflectional morphology is affected by the age of onset, whereas the acquisition of syntax is not (p. 272). Hence, various factors of age have been investigated to find which influences morphological development. In spite of that, the purpose of this essay is not to demonstrate what differentiates (i.e., factors) morphology acquisition between child and adult L2 learners, but to describe common and uncommon developmental features of their morphology acquisition affected by those biological and linguistic factors.

The following sections will illustrate similarities and differences of morphology development respectively between child and adult L2 learners.

2. Developmental differences between child and adult L2 learners

This section will have a look at previous studies which empirically indicate differences between the two age groups.

Newport's (1991) hypothesis, 'Less is More,' suggests that children are able to focus on detail (such as inflectional endings), whereas adults' comprehensive view of the 'big picture' may impede them in acquiring morphological detail. Similarly, Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1998) similarly propose that adults use free morphemes as triggers to their acquisition of L2 morphosyntax, whereas children use bound morphemes. They claim that whereas bound morphemes such as inflectional affixes typically function as triggers in L1 acquisition, it is free morphemes that do so in L2 acquisition (cited in Herschensohn, 2007, p. 148).

Sensitivity to morphology has been found to be different between adult and child L2 learners. Perdue (1993) kept track of one child, MAT, and one adult, Lavinia, whose native language was Italian and who stayed in England. When he was studied, MAT was seven years old without any knowledge of English and had been in England for six months. With the same length of stay at the beginning, however, Lavinia was given a formal instruction in English and had opportunities to interact with people at an

English nursery school where her child went. Regardless of the amount of exposure she was given, her first regular past (*explained*) emerged and *-ed* morpheme became productive much later than MAT, whose morphological features appeared at the beginning of his stay, after a six-month stay.

Likewise, Calleri (1992) compares L2 Chinese children with L1 Chinese adults when they were acquiring L2 Italian based on the duration of their stay in Italy as to their morphological productivity. He highlights that the children's tense-aspect system is richer than the adults' with the fact that the *imperfetto*, which constitutes late acquisition, is present in the children's inter-language, but not in the adults'. What is interesting is that the morphological productivity among the children appeared despite the fact that the children had stayed in Italy shorter (only two months) than the adults (four years). Therefore, it seems that these child L2 learners are more sensitive to the L2 temporal morphology than the adult L2 learners from the same L1 (Rocca, 2007, p. 220). An fascinating fact is that the children's tense-aspect morphology is still developing after five years in Italy regardless of virtually any L2 instruction (*ibid.*).

Studies which dealt with the acquisition of tense morphosyntax comparing adult and child non-finite forms have shown that the children's use of non-finite forms in L1 acquisition is systematic (raised verbs are always finite, unraised ones are non-finite in verb raising languages), whereas L2 adults raise both finite and non-finite verbs, treating the latter as default forms (Prévost, 2003; 2004).

Hawkins and Franceschina (2004) mention, as to functional feature of gender (language such as French), that anglophone adult learners do not show behavioural responses similar to native and early bilingual speakers of the Romance languages, and never gain one hundred percent productive abilities either. They state that only child L2 learners over nine years of age can acquire uninterpretable functional feature values available in their own language. They have found that only children of gendered language at that

age are using syntactic cues of concord to determine the gender of new words.

The next section will deal with morphological developments among child and adult L2 learners which seem to be similar.

3. Developmental similarities between child and adult L2 learners

Contrary to the differences found between child and adult L2 learners and shown above, this section will present more recent studies which investigate similarities in their morphological acquisition.

Similarities in the acquisition process between L2 child and adult learners of French learned in an academic immersion programme were observed by Harley (1986, p. 97) based on their language production. The evidence suggests that for children and older learners, the development of the syntax and morphology of the L2 proceeds in fundamentally similar ways, depending on a complex interplay of factors including common language acquisition processes, the nature of the target L2 that serves as input and the learners' L1 background.

Contrary to the findings that children go through a different path from adults in terms of acquiring finite and non-finite forms, Ionin and Wexler (2002) state that children's L2 acquisition looks similar to that of adults. Their subjects (L1 Russian learners of L2 English) do not experience the systematic stage of optional non-finites. They show another difference between their subjects in that the children appear to gain the verbal morphology through irregular verbs more than through affixes, and that they overuse *be* in figuring out the new values for tense in English as opposed to Russian.

Belletti and Hamann (2004, p. 148) also demonstrate that L2 learners of French with a range from 3.5 to 5.5 years old show similar behaviours in their speech to adults' in that they do not have root infinitives nor child null subjects in their French, when compared to L1 children.

In her doctoral dissertation, Unsworth (2005) analyses adult/child and L1/L2 differences between three groups: L1 Dutch by children and L2 Dutch by child and adult anglophones. The focus of her study is scrambling, the movement of a direct object leftwards. Examples are shown below (Herschensohn, 2007, p. 148):

Example: a. Willemijn heeft vandaag [de tuin] omgespit

Willemijn has today the garden up-dug

b. Willemijn heeft [de tuin] vandaag omgespit

Willemijn has the garden today up-dug

The scrambling construction is of interest, firstly because it is found in languages as diverse as German and Japanese, secondly because it is a stylistically charged order that is linked to discourse and pragmatic factors, and lastly because it is acquired late in the L1. Unsworth uses a range of production and comprehension experiments to illustrate comparisons between the groups with respect to their acquisition path and their final interpretive abilities. One of her findings which is of particular relevance to this essay is that “in production, L2 children and L2 adults were found to pass through the same developmental sequence” (Unsworth, 2005, p. 378). Her implications as to L2 acquisition are that her study has shown a more complete picture of how this particular property (clause scrambling) of Dutch develops in L2 acquisition, provides valuable data on the development of the syntax-semantics interface in child L2 acquisition and has demonstrated that L2 children and L2 adults are able to overcome the poverty-of-the-stimulus (p. 382).

4. Conclusion

The longitudinal-bidirectional design of the study serves the purpose of showing the working of language transfer in child L2 acquisition, which

partakes of both L1 acquisition and adult L2 acquisition (Rocca, 2007, p. 97). Child SLA overlaps with L1 acquisition and adult L2 acquisition. With L1 acquisition, it shares morphological sensitivity, whereas with adult L2 acquisition, it shares language transfer. Rohde (1996) also finds that child L2 learners show a faster morphological development compared to adult L2 counterparts. Rocca (2007, p. 85) states that this relationship between child SLA and morphological productivity is worth investigating further because it could pinpoint a crucial difference between child and adult SLA.

Rocca (2007) further argues that understanding child SLA is fundamental for the creation of language curricula that enable the child to use learning strategies, and enhancing morphological sensitivity while controlling language transfer. What child L2 acquisition could offer is a new (and promising) perspective on second language education (p. 223).

What differentiates L2 acquisition from the native L1 acquisition pattern are mastery of L1 phonology, clustering in L1 parameter setting, and automatic acquisition of L1 morphological features like gender. By and large, it is true that learners who are fluent in their L2 have knowledge which is quite similar to that of native speakers, whether they learn the L2 as adults or as children (Herschensohn, 2007, p. 133). This might suggest that what eliminates differences between child and adult L2 learners is their level of proficiency in the L2. It might be interesting to investigate whether the morphological development is similar or different among L2 learners with the same language proficiency (e.g., beginner, intermediate, advanced), if there were a proficiency test which could assess the L2 competence of both children and adults.

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