

The acquisition of English dative alternation: Proficiency effects in French L2 learners

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Sentence processing; Second language acquisition; Dative alternation; Visual world paradigm; Expectation-based language processing; French L2 learners of English

This presentation concerns a Visual World eye-tracking experiment, which investigated the processing of English dative constructions (see 1a,b) by French learners of English. In English, there are two major ways of ordering the constituents in semantically dative sentences (shown below): Either with two bare noun phrases (1a) or with the use of a prepositional phrase for the recipient (1b). As reported by Bresnan et al. (2007) the choice between these two possible patterns is influenced by a wide variety of factors, crucially by idiosyncratic properties of the verb (verb bias). These properties of lexical items were found to have an effect on the native speakers' comprehension and production of syntactic alternations (Tily et al., 2008).

In (psycho-)linguistics, dative alternation has received particular attention. When comparing the verbs *serve* and *offer*, which have similar meanings in contexts like ones below, it has shown that the former has a stronger bias towards usage in a prepositional dative construction (1b), whereas the latter exhibits a bias for double-object dative constructions (1a) (Bresnan et al., 2007).

- (1a) The maid will offer/serve the prince the wine. (double-object construction, DO)
- (1b) The maid will offer/serve the wine to the prince. (prepositional object construction, PO)

In second-language research, the acquisition of these constraints has received little attention. The influence of probabilistic characteristics of the target language – English – on German L2 learners was investigated by Wolk et al. in 2011. They reported that less proficient learners had only little verb bias effects in the construction that was dominant in their L1 (DO). In most contexts, German does not have a prepositional dative object, and the ordering of objects in the double-object construction is preferred to be recipient before theme, thus matching the order of the English double-object dative. However, in French the prepositional object construction is the only possible pattern, i.e. double-object constructions do not exist in sentences in which only bare nouns are used.

This experiment investigated data from 28 French learners of English in varied degrees of proficiency. The Visual World study is a replication of the experiments conducted by Tily et al. (2008) and Wolk et al. (2011). Participants were presented with illustrations of subject, recipient and theme while listening to a recording of dative sentences. We compared anticipatory eye-movements across dative realizations (PO/DO construction), verb biases (towards PO/DO) and proficiency groups (low/high proficiency; level assessed with a subtest of the Cambridge Test) and found that speakers indeed acquire the norms of the target language. Additionally, it was discovered that sensitivity for verb bias is stronger for advanced speakers in both constructions.

Potential discrepancies between German and French L2 learners of English could be discussed further, especially the fact that German L2 learners showed different and more complex effects than French L2 learners: German learners of English featured a consistent effect of verb bias in PO constructions, whereas French speakers did not. All participants appeared to be strongly influenced by the animacy of the visual stimuli and seemed to avail themselves of bias when their expectation was violated.

References

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