

Syntactic movement in the production of French Wh-questions: The role of computational complexity versus L1 transfer in adult L2 acquisition

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Research in L2 acquisition has long debated the role of L1 transfer in L2 grammars (White, 2003). Moreover, research on typical and atypical acquisition converges on the role of syntactic complexity in developing grammars (Guasti, 2002; Hamann, 2006). Given that adult L2 acquisition is an example of atypical language acquisition with the added variable of an L1, this paper aims to examine whether the role of syntactic complexity or L1 transfer is more prevalent in L2 adult grammars.

We examined the elicited production of French matrix questions (Jakubowicz, 2005) by 18 adult L1 English – L2 French learners (10 advanced learners and 8 intermediate). French allows three interrogative structures (in situ, fronted Wh without inversion, and fronted Wh with inversion), each differing in complexity (defined here in terms of movement). English, however, only allows fronted Wh with inversion. The L2 responses were compared to 22 L1 French children with a Specific Language Impairment (SLI) and to 28 typical L1 French adults, thus allowing us to see if the L2 group avoids movement like the SLI group (complexity constraint) or performs two movement operations (as in their L1).

The results suggest that the role of complexity is more predominant compared to L1 transfer in the L2 group. Both L2 and SLI groups produced significantly more in situ and fronted Wh questions without inversion compared to the controls. They also produced the same percentage of unexpected responses (non target structures or Wh words), which was significantly higher than the controls.

We discuss these results with respect to the role of complexity in the responses of both populations. We will argue that the apparent avoidance of movement in the L2 group, despite the L1 influence, supports the hypothesis that syntactic complexity is a predominant factor in atypical acquisition, including L2 adult acquisition.

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