

Acquiring English dative verbs: Proficiency effects in French L2 learners

Mirjana Wurm¹, Barbara Hemforth³ and Lars Konieczny^{1,2}
¹University of Freiburg, ²FRIAS, ³Universite Paris Descartes
contact: lars.konieczny@cognition.uni-freiburg.de

We present a Visual World eye-tracking experiment investigating the comprehension of English dative constructions by French L2 learners.

Native speakers' comprehension and production of syntactic alternations is influenced - among other factors - by idiosyncratic distributional properties of the lexical items involved. One alternation that has received particular attention is the dative alternation (1). Comparing the verbs *serve* and *offer*, which have similar meaning in contexts like (1), one finds that the former shows a stronger bias towards being used in the prepositional dative construction (1a) whereas the other has a bias towards double object constructions (1b) (Bresnan et al. 2007).

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

The acquisition of these constraints in a second-language context, however, has received less attention. Wolk et al. (2011) investigated whether probabilistic characteristics of the target language – English- influence German learners, and if so, by what time-course. They showed that less proficient learners showed 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, although free in principle, is preferred to be recipient before theme, thus matching the order of the English double object dative. In French, on the other hand, the prepositional object construction is the predominant pattern.

We present data from French learners of English varying in proficiency. The visual world study is a replication of the experiment in Tily et al. (2008) and Wolk et al. (2011). Participants are presented with depictions of subject, recipient and theme while listening to a recording of dative sentences. We then compare anticipatory eye-movements across dative realizations, verb biases and proficiency groups, finding that speakers indeed acquire the norms of the target language; however, we found the sensitivity for verb bias to be stronger for advanced speakers in both constructions.

The data suggest that subtle probabilistic distributions in the target language have been acquired only by advanced learners. Potential differences between German and French L2 learners of English will be discussed.

References:

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