The effect of L1 word order on the sensitivity to verb bias in English L2 processing
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Most verbs can appear in multiple sentence structures, but for many of them some structures are more likely than others. In English, verbs appear early enough in sentences to allow verb-based predictions about likely upcoming structure. However, in verb-final languages like Korean, verbs come too late to allow such predictions. This study examines whether English-L2 speakers with a verb-final L1 learn to use verb bias predictively when understanding English sentences like those in (1) below. The question is whether L2 learners are flexible enough to learn to attend to cues that are not useful in their L1.

The post-verbal nouns in (1) are temporarily ambiguous because the optional complementizer that is missing. Before the disambiguating verb (would in 1a) appears, the noun could be a direct object (DO) or the subject of a sentential complement (SC). The verb understood in (1a) takes DOs more often (DO-bias verb) while the verb admitted in (1b) has the opposite pattern (SC-bias verb). Several studies (e.g., Garnsey et al., 1997) have found that words disambiguating toward the sentential complement are read more slowly following DO-bias verbs than following SC-bias verbs.

In the present study, verb bias and ambiguity (i.e., presence or absence of that) were manipulated in sentences containing sentential complements. (Distractors had DO structures.) The temporarily ambiguous noun was always plausible as both a DO and the subject of an SC. Sentences were presented in a self-paced moving window reading paradigm, followed by comprehension questions. Three groups of participants included 32 native English speakers, 22 advanced Korean learners of L2-English, and 29 proficiency-matched Mandarin learners of L2-English. Mandarin-L1 speakers were included because Mandarin has the same SVO order as English and verb bias has been found to influence reading times in Mandarin sentences (Lu & Garnsey, 2008; see also Dussias & Crammer Scaltz, 2008 for verb bias use in English by Spanish-L1 adult learners). On another dimension, though, Mandarin differs from Korean and English, which both have complementizers: The optional clause-initial that in English and the obligatory nominalization particle (e.g., nun kes) attached to the embedded verb in Korean. Mandarin, in contrast, has no complementizer. Thus, compared to native English speakers, Korean-L1 learners of English may be less sensitive to verb bias and Mandarin-L1 learners less sensitive to complementizer presence. Again, the general question is whether adult L2 learners are more sensitive to cues in the L2 that are also useful in their L1.

Native English speakers showed the usual reliable interaction between verb bias and ambiguity while neither group of L2 learners did. As predicted from the properties of their L1, Mandarin-L1 speakers’ reading times were reliably influenced by verb bias regardless of whether the sentence included the complementizer, while Korean-L1 speakers were reliably influenced by complementizer presence regardless of verb bias.

Taken together, the results suggest that the properties of the L1 shape adult learners’ strategies in parsing L2 English sentences.
(1)  
   a. *The club members understood (that) the bylaws would be applied to everyone.*
   b. *The ticket agent admitted (that) the mistake might be hard to correct.*

References: