The role of salience in the second language acquisition of Focus Structure

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The present research investigates the second language acquisition of Focus Structure in "Hungarian-prime" (Hungarian′) by native speakers of English. The study was designed to answer the research question: Which is a more salient cue for English speakers to Focus Structure in Hungarian′: position or prosody? In particular, the study was concerned with investigating the ability of learners to perceive and process cues in the speech signal and their ability to map those cues onto Focus, a component of Information Structure.

Information Structure (Erteschik-Shir 1997, 2007; Kiss 1995; Prince 1981) is a universal property of language that reflects the organization of discourse functions such as Topic and Focus, and can be instantiated in very different ways cross-linguistically (Carroll 2006). This makes Information Structure an interesting phenomenon to explore from the perspective of second language acquisition, and, indeed, the literature shows that from very early on learners exploit Information Structure to linearize their sentences even when their knowledge of inflectional morphology and grammatical constructions is severely limited (cf. various papers in Klein and Perdue 1992; Klein and Perdue 1993, 1997). In particular, research shows learners of certain European languages (e.g. the languages studied in the European Science Foundation (ESF) projects (Perdue 1993)) follow the principles in (1).

(1) a. Topic first: What did Mary do? [She]$_{TOPIC}$ walked the dog.
   b. Focus last: What did Mary do? She [WALKED THE DOG]$_{FOCUS}$

Following Brown (1973:409), perceptual salience correlates with such aspects of the input as amount of phonetic substance, lexical stress level, and the serial position of a word in a sentence. Moreover, in DeKeyser & Goldschneider's (2005) meta-analysis of determinants in morpheme acquisition, they state that much of the literature on salience in language acquisition argues the more perceptually salient a grammatical functor is, the earlier it will be acquired. The decision to invent a simpler target language, i.e. Hungarian′, was made because stress placement and word order are intertwined in natural Hungarian where focal accent and preverbal position both mark Focus. Thus, Hungarian′ allowed for a clearer contrast between word order and prosody, the salient factors under investigation.

A between-subjects design was chosen in order to minimize participant fatigue, practice, and carryover effects. Two groups were tested: group 1 completed the *Position Experiment* and group 2 completed the *Prosody Experiment*. Participants in both groups were asked to complete a forced-choice picture-based task. The target and foil items for group 1 differed in word order but were prosodically equivalent. For group 2, the target and foil items differed in prosodic prominence but exhibited the same word order. Results show no significant differences between group 1 and group 2 on overall accuracy scores and reaction times. However, an analysis of the combined data from group 1 and group 2 showed that sentence-initial Focus position had overall higher scores. Although the difference in scores was not significant, items with *Focus first* had higher scores than items with *Focus last*. This finding conflicts with the claims of Klein and Perdue, a fact that merits further investigation. If the linearizations seen in (1) are universal and available in the L1, it is unclear why learners should not be able to instantly map the salient cues to Focus. It is possible that there could be transfer of L1 word order preferences, but if so it is not allowing participants to perform above chance on these tasks. On the assumption that there were no task effects, the claim can be made that learners must first acquire the particular patterns of the target language before they acquire properties of Information Structure.

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