

Inter-Learner Variability in the Acquisition of English Articles by Serbian L1 Speakers

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It has long been noticed that the acquisition of functional categories in both L1 and L2 is characterized by substantial variability (e.g. Hudson Kam & Newport, 2005; Roeper, 1999; Yang, 2003). However, research on the acquisition of functional categories in L2 has assumed a uniform role across speakers for the L1 in the acquisition process (e.g. Prosodic Transfer Hypothesis - Goad, White & Steele, 2003; Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis - Prévost & White, 2000). Our contention is that the uniformity assumption should be challenged, particularly when studying the acquisition of a functional category missing in the L1 but present in the L2.

In our study, we investigate the acquisition of English articles by Serbian L1 speakers, since most Serbian L1 speakers seem to display difficulties in article use, even though they have mastered all other aspects of English. As far as articles are concerned, we take it that the difference between English and Serbian is two-fold. First, English has the DP category which hosts articles (and other determiners), while Serbian lacks the DP category, and determiners function as adjectives. Second, English has a complex determiner system, indicating notions such as specificity and definiteness, while Serbian only marginally employs lexical means to instantiate these categories (e.g. Bošković 2006; Trenkic 2004; Zlatić 1997, 1998). As there is no direct L1 transfer of the DP category, it is not clear that the L1 should have a uniform effect in the acquisition of the English DP.

A complicating factor is that the input may not be perfect for adult L2 learners. Following Papp (2000), we characterize the determiner input as non-robust and argue this leads to a non-deterministic UG mapping (see also Sorace, 2005 on the acquisition of interface properties). Our hypothesis states the following:

Free-Mapping Hypothesis (FMH)

With non-robust input, a functional category which is missing in L1 and present in L2, will display variable mapping from UG or the L1 to the L2.

We conducted a study of ten advanced Serbian learners of English who performed a picture description task designed to elicit spontaneous speech. We analyzed each participant individually in order to discover the patterns of determiner use. As far as syntax is concerned, our findings indicate that all participants have acquired DP, showing that they have access to UG. However, the L1 and UG seem to constrain the production of articles in different ways with different speakers, both in the syntactic domain and the domain of the interfaces.

For example, one participant omits definite determiners in ‘topic’ position (87% omission), while providing them in non-topic position (38% omission) ($p < .0001$). We attribute this to the influence of Serbian where topics are obligatorily marked [+def] (e.g. Comrie & Corbett, 2002; Li & Thomson, 1976). A second participant displays a pattern of ‘article drop’ in predicate position, as in Serbian predicate NPs allow only unmarked adjectives (Zlatić 1997). Again, a third participant drops articles in a discourse chain. Thus, on the second and third mention of a DP, the article appears but subsequent mentions are without articles. Another participant shows a pattern where definite articles are supplied while there are no occurrences of indefinite articles. Neither of these patterns is found in English or Serbian but both are found in other languages, i.e., Hausa and Arabic, respectively. We attribute this to a UG option and argue that the learners freely map from UG to English L2 selecting options that may be at odds with the input data.

We conclude that our results are consistent with the FMH, as our participants show a variety of patterns of article use. In addition, as the participants have developed the category D, and are constrained in the article use by the available L1 and UG options, our study supports a Full Transfer/Full Access model of SLA (e.g. Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996).

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