Cross-Linguistic Influence in Second Language Acquisition: A Study on Event Conceptualization Patterns

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Learning to speak in a foreign language involves more than learning to apply correct vocabulary and to build syntactic structures compliant with the language-specific requirements. Language-specificity seems to come into play at an even higher state of cognitive functioning - that of building mental representations of the content to be expressed, attention allocation as well as memory organization.

For example, speakers of different languages have been shown to differ systematically in their way of event conceptualization – that is, whether the *ongoing* phase of an event is focused or whether the event is conceptualized as a *whole*. The extent to which the progressive aspect is grammaticalized in the respective language has been identified as the crucial factor here (Stutterheim & Nüse 2003). These language-specific preferences in selecting information to be expressed verbally can be interpreted in the relativist framework of *Thinking for Speaking* (cf. Slobin 1996, 2003).

When acquiring a foreign language, uncovering the target language-like principles of information organization seems to be one of the most complex tasks to accomplish. It has been argued that grammaticalized forms (such as the progressive aspect) in the first language are associated with underlying cognitive concepts and thus exert a strong cross-linguistic influence in L2 acquisition (cf. Schmiédtova 2011). With respect to second language acquisition, the question arises as to whether conceptualization patterns can be restructured in accordance with the target language in order to gain native-like proficiency.

Although a variety of studies have demonstrated a strong L1 influence with respect to the acquisition of target language-like perspectivation strategies, restructuring seems possible in the specific case of decontextualized motion events with advanced German learners of English (see Stutterheim 2003; Stutterheim & Carroll 2006).

This paper investigates in how far these processes of conceptualization may be altered under the influence of a second language and whether they can be adapted to the target language-like principles of perspectivation. We aim to answer this question with respect to formal foreign language instruction where input is more restricted than in natural settings of acquiring a second language. Results from a pilot study that we conducted point at a process of beginning restructuring of conceptualization patterns in this context.

Taking these results as our starting point, we will report data from a subsequent study using standardized stimuli (a set of animated motion events) with both verbal and non-verbal tasks. Our research question centers around possible effects in the domain of *Thinking for Speaking* (verbalization task) as well as in the domain of non-linguistic memorization processes. While we expect systematic cross-linguistic differences between English and German monolinguals and a gradual adaptation to the target language on part of the English learners with respect to *Thinking for Speaking* effects, we hypothesize no relativist effects in non-linguistic cognitive processing. We discuss possible implications for modeling the conceptual system in the process of second language acquisition.

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