BACKGROUND

The emerging pattern in recent L2 research is that advanced learners can achieve convergent knowledge with respect to natives when formal syntactic properties are involved, yet they often achieve divergent knowledge when properties at the syntax-discourse interface are involved. This pattern has been observed in the acquisition of one of the pro-drop parameter: the distribution of overt and null subjects in L2 Spanish, which is constrained both syntactically and discursively. It is also observed in L1 acquisition, bilinguals’ L1 attrition and SLI.

AIM

If this pattern is correct, it should be observed in the acquisition of the second property of the pro-drop parameter: word order with intransitives, which is constrained both syntactically (Unaccusative Hypothesis) and at the syntax-discourse interface.

PREDICTION

Advanced learners of Spanish will show:
• Convergent knowledge when syntax constrains word order alternations, BUT…
• Divergent knowledge when syntax-discourse constrains such word order alternations (optionality is a subtype here). In short: at advanced levels, syntax could be in place before discourse.

THEORY

Problem for learners of Spanish: does Subject-Verb / Verb-Subject word order alternate freely?

- Maria gritó
- ¿Quién gritó?
- María gritó (VS)
- ‘Shouted Maria’

- ¿Qué pasó?

These word orders do not alternate freely, but are constrained syntactically (Unaccusative Hypothesis) and at the syntax-discourse interface (Focus Phrase).

SYNTAX: UNACCUSATIVE HYPOTHESIS

Two types of intransitives: unaccusatives (VS order) vs. unergatives (SV order). Such word order is elicited by out-of-the-blue questions like ‘What happened?’, which require an unfocused answer where no particular constituent is focused.

SYNTAX-DISCOURSE: FOCUS PHRASE (FocP)

If subject is new information/focus, it appears in a designated Focus Phrase (FocP).

Attainment patterns in advanced SLA

Pronouns at syntax-discourse

Word order at syntax-discourse

Examples:

- A: ¿Quién gritó?
  B: Gritó María
- A: ¿Qué pasó?
  B: Llegó María
- ¿Quién gritó?
  ¿Qué pasó?

SYNTAX-DISCOURSE: FOCUS PHRASE (FocP)

PREDICTION

Advanced learners of Spanish will show:
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METHOD

Subjects: L1 Greek L2 Spa (n=18); L1 Eng L2 Spa (n=17); Spanish controls (n=14). Proficiency level: advanced (80% - 100% score on Spanish placement test).

You are at a party and Maria arrives. Your friend Lola doesn’t know Maria, so she asks: ‘¿Quién llegó?’ [Who arrived?]. You reply:

(a) Maria llegó. –2 –1 0 +1 +2
(b) Llegó María. –2 –1 0 +1 +2

RESULTS

The interlanguage grammars of both Greek and English learners of L2 Spanish at advanced levels show:
• convergence with the grammars of Spanish natives when syntax (Unaccusative Hypothesis) constrains word order ➔ native-like, convergent knowledge
• divergence when word order is constrained at the syntax-discourse interface by focus ➔ optional knowledge.

CONCLUSION

Advanced learners of Spanish have acquired the syntactic constraints regulating word order (Unaccusative Hypothesis) but not the constraints at the syntax-discourse interface.

CONTRIBUTION TO SLA

At advanced levels, syntax is in place before discourse.

FURTHER WORK

Why is syntax in place before discourse in advanced SLA?
Why would prosodic focus cause divergence/optionality?

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