

Negative evidence in L2 acquisition

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1. Introduction

This article deals with the L2 acquisition of differences between Norwegian and English passives, and presents data to show that the acquisition of these differences by Norwegian L2 acquirers of English cannot be fully explained by positive evidence, cues, conservatism or economy. Rather, it is argued, it is natural to consider whether indirect negative evidence may facilitate acquisition by inferencing.

1.1. Theoretical background

The structures in focus are impersonal passive constructions with postverbal NPs, as illustrated in (1), and passive constructions with intransitive verbs, as in (2). These sentences are ungrammatical in English. Chomsky (1981) proposes that this is a result of passive morphology absorbing objective case in English, so that, for (1), there is no such case to be assigned to the postverbal NP *many bottles of beer*. In (2), the verb *cry* does not assign objective case, being intransitive, so that there is no case for the passive morphology to absorb. Thus, (1) has to be changed into the personal passive in (3), where the NP receives nominative case, and the objective case is free to go to the passive morphology. The verb in sentence (2), however, cannot be used in the passive voice at all.

- (1) *There were drunk many bottles of beer.
- (2) *It was cried a lot in England when Princess Diana died.
- (3) Many bottles of beer were drunk.

Both the structures discussed in this article, i.e. impersonal passive constructions with postverbal NPs and passive constructions with intransitive verbs, are grammatical in Norwegian. However, the options available in English, viz. personal passives and active sentences, are equally possible. Åfarli (1992) therefore proposes that Norwegian has optional case absorption, so that in sentences (4) and (5), passive morphology does not absorb case, while in (6), it does.

- (4) Det ble drukket mange flasker øl.
there were drunk many bottles beer

- (5) Det ble grått mye i England da prinsesse Diana døde.
it was cried much in England when Princess Diana died
- (6) Mange flasker øl ble drukket.
many bottles beer were drunk

On the basis on such observations, we may propose a parameter with the settings [+case absorption] for English, and [-case absorption], signifying optional case absorption, for Norwegian. This means that none of the structures that are grammatical in English can function as positive evidence for the [+case absorption] setting, since they are also grammatical in optional case absorption languages. The question is how this parameter is set.

1.2. Learnability

Parameters like the one outlined above have caused problems for generative theories and are the reason for theories such as that of the Subset Principle¹ in L1 acquisition. Children acquiring English cannot encounter positive evidence, i.e. structures that are not also grammatical in languages with optional case absorption, to help them set their parameters at [+case absorption].

For L2 acquisition, however, the Subset Principle is not likely to apply, since numerous studies show that L2 acquirers may indeed initially adopt the less restricted parameter setting when this is the setting for their L1, regardless of whether or not this is the relevant setting also for the L2. If Norwegian L2 acquirers of English do not start out with the assumption that English has the parameter setting [+case absorption], then the question is whether, and how, this parameter setting may be acquired at a later stage.

For the acquisition of case absorption effects, i.e. the ungrammaticality of impersonal passives with postverbal NPs, as in (1), and with intransitive verbs, as in (2), by Norwegian acquirers of English, several hypotheses are possible. I will focus on three of them:

Hypothesis 1: L2 acquirers, like L1 acquirers, are conservative, and Norwegian L2 acquirers of English start out assuming that impersonal passives with postverbal NPs are ungrammatical, regardless of their L1.

¹ This theory assumes that the L1 acquirer always adopts the more restrictive parameter setting initially, and uses the less restrictive setting only if he encounters positive evidence for it.

Hypothesis 2: L2 acquirers are not conservative, and since they encounter no positive evidence telling them that impersonal passives with postverbal NPs and with intransitive verbs are ungrammatical, Norwegian acquirers of English will assume that these structures are grammatical in English just like in Norwegian.

Hypothesis 3: L2 acquirers are not conservative, and Norwegian L2 acquirers of English initially assume that impersonal passives with postverbal NPs and with intransitive verbs are grammatical also in English. However, L2 acquirers may, especially at more advanced stages, be sensitive to indirect negative evidence, i.e. the absence of certain structures in the input. Advanced Norwegian acquirers of English may therefore have an intuition that impersonal passives with postverbal NPs are ungrammatical in English, without necessarily resetting the case absorption parameter.

2. The study

The study to test these hypotheses was conducted at the universities of York and Tromsø in February and March, 2000.

2.1. The subjects

The Norwegian participants in the study were university students of English. There were 50 Norwegian subjects, 29 of which were basic level students of English. 16 were intermediate level students, and five were graduate students. They ranged in age from 19 to 43, with an average age of about 22. All of them had started to learn English around the age of 10, except from seven subjects who reported to have started to acquire English between the ages of four and eight. Their average performance was not better than that of the rest.

In order to compare the judgments of Norwegian L2 acquirers of English to those of native speakers of English, I also included a group of 63 undergraduate students of English literature at the University of York. The English subjects varied in age from 18 to 38, with an average age of 20.

2.2. The study

The Norwegian version of the study consisted of two parts; a grammaticality judgment section and a translation section. The grammaticality judgment section contained ten pairs of impersonal passives with postverbal NPs, as illustrated in (1), five pairs of impersonal passives with postverbal clauses, as in (3), five pairs of passives with intransitive

verbs, as in (2), and five pairs of active sentences with existential *there*, as exemplified in (7). All sentences were presented in both English and Norwegian, and in random order.

(7) There are McDonald's restaurants in every corner of the world today.

The translation section of the study consisted of 15 Norwegian sentences; five impersonal passives with postverbal NPs, five impersonal passives with postverbal clauses, and five sentences with passivized intransitive verbs. The subjects were asked to translate the sentences into English, and to rephrase them if they felt it was necessary in order to make them grammatical in English.

The English version of the study contained only a grammaticality judgment test with 40 sentences. These were the English sentences from the grammaticality judgment section of the Norwegian version, as well as direct translations of the sentences in the translation section, i.e. five ungrammatical impersonal passives with postverbal NPs, five ungrammatical passives with intransitive verbs, and five grammatical impersonal passives with postverbal clauses.

2.3. The results

2.3.1. Grammaticality judgments

The judgments of Norwegian as well as English subjects were fairly variable on all sentence types. However, the majority of English subjects clearly indicated that impersonal passives with postverbal NPs and passives with intransitive verbs are ungrammatical in English, whereas impersonal passives with postverbal clauses and active sentences with existential *there* are grammatical.

Table 1:

Percentage of correct judgments on all English sentences types by Norwegian and English subjects.

(Correct responses imply rejection of the two first structures, and acceptance of the two last structures.)

	Norwegian subjects	English subjects
Impersonal passives with postverbal NPs	28.4%	76.5%
passivized intransitive verbs	50%	84.8%
Impersonal passives with postverbal clauses	70.4%	88.3%
Impersonal active sentences	67.5%	85.3%

Also the Norwegian subjects clearly preferred impersonal passives with postverbal clauses and impersonal active sentences to impersonal passives with postverbal NPs and passives with intransitive verbs. For most subjects, however, their judgments did not show clear intuitions about the ungrammaticality of the two latter structures. Furthermore, the subjects

generally seemed to be skeptical of such structures in Norwegian as well, albeit not to such an extent as to explain their judgments on the English sentences. However, those few Norwegian subjects who did seem to have clear intuitions about the ungrammaticality of impersonal passives with postverbal NPs and of passives with intransitive verbs generally accepted such sentences in Norwegian. Finally, there did not necessarily seem to be a relationship between the Norwegian subjects' intuitions about impersonal passives with postverbal NPs and about passivized intransitive verbs. The judgments of both English and Norwegian subjects, however, showed that passivized intransitive verbs are probably less acceptable than impersonal passives with postverbal NPs in both languages.

Table 2 shows all the judgments by Norwegian subjects on all English sentence structures. The category "other" includes "not sure" marks, attempted, unsuccessful but yet relevant corrections, as well as judgments followed by a comment indicating that the subject in fact feels that the judgment may be wrong. In short, all the judgments in the "other" group can be said to reflect insecurity about grammaticality on the part of the subject.

Table 2: Grammaticality judgments by Norwegian subjects on English sentences.

	impersonal passives with postverbal NPs	passivized intransitive verbs	impersonal passives with postverbal clauses	impersonal active sentences
grammatical	53.8%	24.8%	70.4%	67.5%
ungrammatical	28.4%	50%	15.2%	15%
other	17.8%	25.2%	14.4%	17.5%

We see here that the level of insecurity was relatively high both on the grammatical and on the ungrammatical structures. By comparison, the level of uncertainty for the English subjects was only about 5% for all structures, and was reflected almost exclusively in "not sure" marks rather than unsuccessful corrections.

2.3.2. Translation

In the translation task, the Norwegian subjects generally rephrased the ungrammatical sentences consistently. A majority in fact rephrased sentences where a direct translation would have been ungrammatical to such an extent that they matched the English subjects' judgments. This means that when using English these Norwegian subjects probably sound as if they know the ungrammaticality of both impersonal passives with

postverbal NPs and with intransitive verbs, regardless of their judgments of grammaticality.

Table 3: Translations of all sentence types by Norwegian subjects

	impersonal passives with postverbal NPs	passivized intransitive verbs	impersonal passives with postverbal clauses
rephrased	69.6%	75.2%	26%
did not	24.4%	17.6%	67.6%
other	6%	7.2%	6.4%

2.3.3. Stages of acquisition and individual differences

We have seen that the Norwegian subjects generally seemed more skeptical towards the two ungrammatical structures, impersonal passives with postverbal NPs and with intransitive verbs, than toward the grammatical structures in the study. Furthermore, we have seen that although the subjects clearly rephrased the ungrammatical structures to a greater extent than they did the grammatical structures, there was little evidence that they had clear intuitions about the ungrammaticality of these structures.

All these observations are of course consistent with Hypothesis 3 from section 1, stating that Norwegian L2 acquirers of English do start out assuming that English is identical to Norwegian in the use of passives, and that they only later come to realize that this may not be so. However, one thing still needs to be demonstrated; namely that this uncertainty about the grammaticality of the two ungrammatical structures in English is not simply a constant state for Norwegian L2 speakers of English. In other words, it has to be shown that the subjects' skepticism towards these structures increases when their English becomes more advanced.

In table 4, the subjects are categorized according to the level at which they are studying. In table 5 they are categorized by the number of months they have spent in English-speaking countries. Here, we see that for impersonal passives with postverbal NPs, there seems to be a fairly clear difference between those subjects who have had little English input, and those who have had more. With passivized intransitive verbs, however, this tendency is not at all clear.

Table 4: Percentage of accepted structures in the grammaticality judgment task, Norwegian subjects, according to level of education

	impersonal passives with postverbal NPs	Passivized intransitive verbs	impersonal passives with postverbal clauses	impersonal active sentences
basic	59%	23%	68%	71%
intermediate	44%	18%	70%	64%
graduate	40%	32%	76%	80%

Table 5: Percentage of accepted structures in the grammaticality judgment task, Norwegian subjects, according to time spent in an English-speaking country

	impersonal passives with postverbal NPs	passivized intransitive verbs	Impersonal passives with postverbal clauses	impersonal active sentences
-2	60%	26%	62%	72%
2-12	51%	18%	74%	71%
12	42%	20%	70%	65%

Table 6 and 7 show the subjects categorized by the same criteria. Here, we see their performance in the translation section.

Table 6: Percentage of rephrased structures in the translation task, Norwegian subjects, according to level of education

	impersonal passives with postverbal NPs	Passivized intransitive verbs	Impersonal passives with postverbal clauses
basic level	56%	64%	22%
intermediate	89%	92.5%	33%
graduate	88%	84%	52%

Table 7: Percentage of rephrasing in the translation task, Norwegian subjects, according to time spent in an English-speaking country

	impersonal passives with postverbal NPs	Passivized intransitives verbs	Impersonal passives with postverbal clauses
-2 months	62%	63%	23%
2-12 months	70%	82%	38%
12 months +	76%	86%	36%

In translation, the tendency that the more advanced groups perform better seems to hold for impersonal passives with postverbal NPs and with intransitive verbs alike. There is one exception to this tendency, and this is found with passivized intransitive verbs. As we can see from table 6, the graduate students performed surprisingly poorly compared to the intermediate students. This is probably best explained by their low number, since one out of these five subjects performed significantly below the rest, and pulled the percentage of rephrasing down. If we disregard this one subject, the percentage of rephrasing for passivized intransitive verbs in the group of graduate students was in fact 95%. This shows another important tendency of the results, namely individual differences.

For impersonal passives with postverbal NPs, five subjects rejected them at least 90% of the time. All of these were either at least intermediate students, or had spent more than 12 months in an English-speaking country, or (for most of them), both. Three of them also seemed to know the ungrammaticality of passive intransitive verbs.

Altogether 7 students had judged as ungrammatical and rephrased passivized intransitives at least 90% of the time. This means that four of them seemed to know the ungrammaticality of these structures, but not of impersonal passives with postverbal NPs. Three of these four had spent more than 12 months in an English-speaking country.

It does, then, seem that input plays an important role in the acquisition of the ungrammaticality of the relevant structures. However, it does not seem that there is any kind of automatic relationship between input and acquisition. One subject, for example, who was a graduate student and had spent 36 months in an English-speaking country, only rejected about half of all the ungrammatical structures, although he did rephrase them fairly consistently. Two other graduate students, one of whom had spent 12 months in an English-speaking country and one two months, also performed rather poorly on grammaticality judgment, one of them, as we have seen, also on translation.

We see, then, that the best performers were generally among those who had had more English input, either as students or by living in an English-speaking country. Also, the overall results show a fairly clear tendency for intermediate and graduate students to perform better than basic-level students, and for those who have lived in an English-speaking country for some time seem to perform better than the rest. Both these facts seem to indicate a development in the skepticism toward the ungrammatical English sentences in the Norwegian L2 acquirers, consistent with Hypothesis 3. The question is, of course, how this skepticism develops, and why it does not seem to be represented in all the subjects, i.e. why this seems to be an area where fossilization is common.

3. Discussion

3.1. Evidence in language acquisition

Within a generative framework, the kind of evidence normally seen as relevant for language acquisition is positive evidence. Language acquisition is assumed to take place on the basis of structures and elements encountered in the target language, not by those not encountered. Direct negative evidence in the form of corrections may play a role in L2 acquisition, but in the case of the ungrammaticality of the structures of this study, this is hardly relevant, since it is not normally taught in Norwegian classrooms. Indirect negative evidence, i.e. the very absence of certain structures in the language has traditionally been assumed to be irrelevant. As White (1989:15) points out in the case of L1 acquisition: "We would need a theory which would explain why children notice the non-occurrence of some sentence types but not of others."

It is, however, possible that the role of indirect negative evidence is different in L2 acquisition. Even though indirect negative evidence is not normally assumed to be relevant within the generative approaches, Chomsky himself opens for the possibility of its relevance:

“In the absence of evidence to the contrary, unmarked options are selected. Evidence to the contrary or evidence to fix parameters may in principle be of three types. 1. Positive evidence, 2. Direct negative evidence (...), 3. Indirect negative evidence - a not unreasonable acquisition system can be devised with the operative principle that if certain structures or rules fail to be exemplified in relatively simple expressions, where they would be expected to be found, then a (possibly marked) option is selected excluding them in the grammar so that a kind of “negative evidence” can be available without corrections, adverse reactions etc.” (Chomsky 1981:8-9)

Researchers who do not assume UG to be available for L2 acquirers have also proposed the possibility of indirect negative evidence as a relevant factor in L2 acquisition. Inferencing as a learning strategy has been discussed in L2 acquisition research for decades. Carton (1971) and Bialystok (1978), for instance, emphasize the role of inferencing in the acquisition of new items. Also Rubin (1981) and Naiman (1978) include induction and inferencing as a part of their proposed schemas for acquisition strategies employed by successful L2 acquirers.

Plough (1992) proposes that the use of indirect negative evidence is in fact a form of inductive learning. Whereas deductive learning makes conclusions based on evidence where the conclusion contains nothing more than the evidence, and where the conclusion is therefore definitely true, inductive inferencing, Plough argues, results in conclusions that contain more than the evidence, and which are therefore only *probably* true (Plough 1992:91). Plough proposes that the induction process takes place in the following stages:

Stage 1: Scanning what is known (L1, L2 and/or other knowledge).

Stage 2: Linking new material with what is known (it is at this stage where the absence of a structure may be noticed).

Stage 3: Establishing probably true conclusions or generalizations based on the (mis)match between new material and what is already known.

(Plough 1992:90)

This process, according to Plough, is dependent on a wide range of variables like individual learner differences, input etc.

Stage two in Plough's proposed model is the stage where the Norwegian L2 acquirers of English may notice the absence of impersonal passives with postverbal NPs and with intransitive verbs. The question is only exactly what in the linking between known and new material makes the language acquirer aware of the absence of these structures. Impersonal passives are relatively rare in Norwegian, and it would therefore probably take quite a bit of input to realize that most of them are not present in English. It is thus likely that other factors, such as the overrepresentation of other structures, are more noticeable. These problems will be discussed later.

What is important here is that there is a fundamental difference between L1 and L2 acquirers which makes Plough's proposal probable for L2 acquisition but not for L1 acquisition. Whereas the L1 acquirer has no previous linguistic knowledge, the L2 acquirer comes to the language acquisition task with knowledge of his native language, and thus, possibly with expectations as to what structures will be used in various situations. The next section will be used to take a closer look at the expectations that a Norwegian acquirer of English may have regarding impersonal passives with postverbal NPs and with intransitive verbs, respectively.

3.2. The use of passives in Norwegian and English

Impersonal and personal passives are not used haphazardly in Norwegian. Impersonal passives are very common and are used when the subject is long and heavy, since Norwegian, like English, is subject to the Principle of End Weight². Even with shorter subjects, impersonal passives are often used in order not to specify an agent, as well as in formal language. Impersonal passives are also used when there is a desire not to topicalize the patient, which is consistent with the fact that only indefinite nouns can be left in postverbal position in Norwegian due to the Definiteness Effect. This means that although all personal passives are grammatical in Norwegian, they are less acceptable than impersonal passives in many contexts.

Hestvik (1986) proposes that impersonal passives are in fact the unmarked structures. His argument in proposing this is that while there is an impersonal passive for any personal passive (aside from the Definiteness Effect), there are impersonal passives that do not have a corresponding personal passive, such as passivized intransitives and many impersonal passives with postverbal clauses.

² This principle can be stated as follows: "There is a tendency to place relatively long and heavy elements towards the end of the sentence." (Johansson & Lysvåg 1987:301).

Given Åfarli's (1992) assumption that case absorption is not a universal phenomenon and that it is a result of language specific intervening factors, Hestvik's proposal is not unlikely. It can also be argued that impersonal passives with postverbal NPs are unmarked in the sense of more economical, if it is true that the NP appears in postverbal position in D-structure, and that movement is necessary to create a personal passive.

If impersonal passives are in some contexts more acceptable than personal passives in Norwegian, this means that although Norwegian L2 acquirers of English will never encounter instances of personal passives in English in contexts where they would be ungrammatical in Norwegian, they will certainly meet them in contexts where an impersonal passive would be preferred in Norwegian. Such evidence, which is at best circumstantial, is not likely to lead to a realization of the differences as rapid and complete as when positive evidence of L2 structures that are ungrammatical in the L1 is met. It might, however, be enough to create a doubt in the mind of the L2 acquirer as to whether the two languages are indeed identical in the relevant respect.

The argument that Norwegian acquirers of English come to realize the ungrammaticality of English impersonal passives with postverbal NPs because of the relative frequency of personal passives where the NP appears in subject position is also supported by the corrections made by the Norwegian subjects in the study. Whereas the English participants in the study mostly moved the postverbal NP to pre-verbal position, as in (8)³, the overwhelming majority of relevant corrections on these structures by the Norwegian subjects in the study was, in fact, to move the NP to subject position.

(8) Because of the cold weather there were many warm clothes bought in Tromsø this winter.

The length of the postverbal NP in impersonal passives is also relevant in this respect. It is possible that longer NPs may be accepted more often in postverbal position since we are assuming that the subjects know the principle of end weight, which holds for Norwegian as well as for English.

Each English impersonal passive with postverbal NP was accepted by somewhere between 34% and 64% of the Norwegian subjects in the study. The sentence in (9), which was accepted only by 34%, or 17 subjects, was the only sentence actually rejected more often than accepted. The sentence

³ Note that this structure is still not a candidate for the structure that tells Norwegians that impersonal passives with postverbal NPs are ungrammatical in English, since there are languages (e.g. Western Norwegian, Swedish) which allow both structures.

in (10) was accepted by 64%, or 32 of the 50 subjects, and only rejected by 22%, or 11 subjects. Looking at these sentences, it seems that the length of the postverbal NP may play a role.

(9) Because of the cold weather there were bought *many warm clothes* in Tromsø this winter.

(10) The ideal for young girls is to be thin, and there are made *lots of clothes that can only be worn by girls who are underweight and on a constant diet*.

The postverbal NP in (9) (in italics) is quite short and simple, consisting of a noun preceded by a quantifier and an adjective. The postverbal NP in (10) (in italics), on the other hand, is a noun preceded by a quantifier, modified by a relative clause, which contains yet another relative clause. It thus seems possible that impersonal passives with postverbal NPs may often be accepted due to considerations of end weight.

Passivized intransitive verbs are harder to account for. We could of course take the same approach as we did with impersonal passives with postverbal NPs, and assume that it is the relative overrepresentation of other structures that makes the subjects doubt the grammaticality of these sentences. This approach is, however, problematic. There are no obvious alternatives to passivized intransitives of the kind found with the personal passive that can replace the impersonal passive with a postverbal NP. This means that there is no structure used in English which would obviously be replaced by passivized intransitives in Norwegian.

3.3. Acceptability hierarchies

Sorace (1996) argues that grammaticality judgment tests in language acquisition research have a weakness in normally allowing only for the categories grammatical/ungrammatical, and sometimes also “not sure”. This was indeed the case of the study reported here. Sorace argues that rather than two categories of structures, either grammatical or ungrammatical, there are hierarchies of acceptability in the mental grammar of a speaker of any language, L1 or L2. In such a hierarchy, one grammatical structure may be far more acceptable than another structure, though it may be equally grammatical. Conversely, one ungrammatical structure may, albeit ungrammatical, be more acceptable than another.

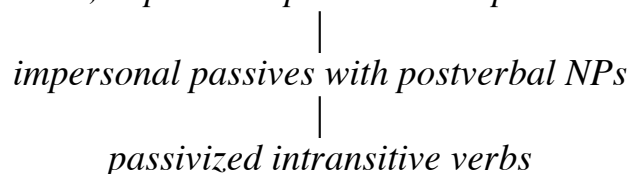
Davies & Kaplan (1998) list several strategies that subjects generally use in grammaticality judgments. One of these strategies is *repair*, i.e. that the subject tries mentally to fix an ungrammatical sentence. This strategy

might possibly actually lead to some impersonal passives with postverbal NPs being accepted rather than rejected. It is possible that the subjects sometimes when encountering an impersonal passive with a postverbal NP, feeling that the structure is unfamiliar, try to repair it by turning it into a personal passive. Finding that the sentence is easily changed into a structure which is familiar, they may then also accept the original sentence. In this connection, another strategy proposed by Davies & Kaplan (1998), that of *analogy*, may also be relevant; since all personal passives have impersonal counterparts in Norwegian (aside from the Definiteness Effect), these two structures may to some extent be seen as analogous, so that if one is grammatical, the other is grammatical as well, though possibly less acceptable.

Impersonal passives with intransitive verbs, however, cannot be repaired in any easy way. I argued earlier that Norwegian L2 acquirers of English may after a while become skeptical to impersonal passives on the whole, but that in some instances they may accept impersonal passives with postverbal NPs to some extent because, analyzing them, they find that the difference between these structures and the familiar personal passives is basically a matter of word order and the use of an expletive. They will of course find that the picture is much more complicated with the passivized intransitives. These verbs cannot be used passively at all, except in a very few instances for verbs that can also be used transitively or with clausal objects, and then new information in the form of an NP or a clause has to be added, slightly changing the meaning of the verb.

On the basis of these considerations, we may thus assume that the subjects have the following acceptability hierarchy for English passives:

(10) *personal passives, impersonal passives with postverbal clauses, etc.*



In this hierarchy, the top level includes those passives actually encountered in the input, i.e. those for which there is positive evidence⁴. The second level includes structures never encountered, thus unfamiliar, but which can easily be changed into familiar structures. The lowest level of acceptability

⁴ This top level may in fact really consist of two levels; some of the subjects seemed more skeptical towards impersonal passives with postverbal clauses than to active sentences, arguably due to overgeneralization of their skepticism towards other impersonal passives.

includes sentences which are never encountered, and which cannot be changed into a familiar structure without a change in voice (e.g. to active) or including new information (NP or clause which would slightly change the meaning of the verb.)

3.5. Avoidance

Avoidance behavior in L2 acquisition is well documented. Numerous studies, e.g. Schachter (1974), Kleinmann (1977), Kellermann (1979), Dagut & Laufer (1985), and Hulstijn & Marchena (1989) all show avoidance of structures that are present in the L2 but not in the L1, i.e. the reverse situation from what I am studying.

Kellerman (1979) argues that the extent to which transfer takes place has do to with the L2 learner's beliefs about the distance between the L1 and the L2. The language acquirer, he argues, holds certain assumptions as to which kinds of structures are likely to be universal for all languages, and which are likely to be specific to his own language. These beliefs are not necessarily true, but the language acquirer will typically avoid those structures that he is not sure are grammatical in the L2 even when the L1 and the L2 are actually similar. The proposal that certain structures are avoided is not the same as saying these structures are not part of the interlanguage. The avoidance may very well be a somewhat conscious strategy which takes place more in planned than in unplanned output.

If we assume that indirect negative evidence does play a part, and that it makes the L2 acquirers uncertain about the grammaticality of certain structures, then it would be reasonable to assume that they might avoid these structures. This would correspond to Kellermann's (1979) beliefs about distance, and would account for the high percentage of rephrased sentences compared to rejected sentences by the Norwegian L2 acquirers in the present study (69.6% vs. 28.4% for impersonal passives with postverbal NPs and 75.2% vs. 50% for passivized intransitives, see tables 2 and 3).

3.6. The Interlanguage

Although for most of the subjects in this study it seems that their fairly good performance in the translation section is a result of avoidance behavior, since their grammaticality judgments do not match the translation, it does seem that a few subject have acquired the ungrammaticality of one or both of the structures in question (see section 2.3.3.). The question is how this could have happened.

Many L2 acquisition researchers make the distinction between learned linguistic knowledge and acquired or automatized knowledge. Krashen (1985) distinguishes between the explicit rules that the L2 acquirer has

learned about the target language and the actual linguistic competence that he has acquired. Bialystok (1978) in her cognitive model of L2 acquisition distinguishes between an analyzed and an automatized factor. The analyzed factor is the language knowledge that the language acquirer is aware of (although this awareness might not be conscious) whereas the automatic factor leaves the acquirer unaware of the organization of his language knowledge. However, automatic knowledge is what leads to fluency, and can also lead to analyzed knowledge. Automatic knowledge is achieved through practice, i.e. through input and production (Bialystok 1978).

This approach may also explain how the interlanguage can be restructured for the structures in question: As the Norwegian L2 acquirer of English uses inferencing and begins to believe that impersonal passives with postverbal NPs and with intransitive verbs may be ungrammatical in English, he starts to avoid using such structures. Thus he is neither receiving these structures in the input, nor producing them to any great extent. This means that the chances of automatization of the structure are very slight. Other structures that can be used to replace such sentences in Norwegian, such as personal passives and active sentences with intransitive verbs and a non-specific subject such as *people*, *somebody*, will be relatively more frequently heard and practiced, and thus become the ones that are automatized.

It is likely that for most Norwegian L2 acquirers of English, the ungrammatical impersonal passives with postverbal NPs and with intransitive verbs will be a part of the interlanguage, though they may be rarely or even never used. This assumption is, of course, supported by the fact that very few of the subjects rejected these structures consistently in the grammaticality judgment task. It is still conceivable that some of the subjects, especially those who have had a lot of English input and who are also paying conscious attention to the differences between the L1 and the L2, will eventually feel that impersonal passives with postverbal NPs and with intransitive verbs sound so unfamiliar that they judge them as ungrammatical.

This indeed seems to be what the data from my study indicates. However, only three subjects consistently judged both sentence types as ungrammatical, and also for the others, their judgments on the two sentence types were often different. This indicates that the rule incorporated in the interlanguage is probably not the rule of case absorption, since this rule should affect both sentence types to the same extent.

The exact point of acquisition of the ungrammaticality of these structures is of course hard to determine. The English subjects were not at all as stable in their judgments as one might expect. The explanations for

the unstable judgments by native speakers is probably best explained by a lack of understanding of the term “grammaticality,” and for the sake of simplicity, I will assume the average percentages of rejection of the two structures by the English subjects to be roughly the point where a Norwegian subject can safely be assumed to have acquired these structures (which, in effect, is the same as if we determined the point of acquisition to be 90%, since no subjects had scores between these points). We thus end up with five subjects who know the ungrammaticality of either impersonal passives with postverbal NPs or with intransitive verbs, and, in addition, three who seemed to know both. It follows from my argument that this is probably the lowest number that we can assume.

This means that it is probably possible to restructure the interlanguage. Earlier in this section, it was argued that this restructuring depends on automatization. It is likely that the amount of input received is important to the automatization process, thus the level of studies and the amount of time that the individual subjects have spent in English-speaking countries should be of importance. This is indeed what we find with both structures.

4. Conclusion

We have seen that the results of the Norwegian subjects’ judgments and translations of impersonal passives with postverbal NPs and with intransitive verbs show that Hypotheses 1 and 2 from section 1 do not hold. The majority of subjects do not seem to have clear intuitions about the ungrammaticality of these structures when making grammaticality judgments. They do, however, generally show signs of being skeptical to such sentences. This is consistent with Plough’s (1992) proposal that indirect negative evidence may lead to a *probably true* conclusion about the target language. The fact that the subjects with very few exceptions changed the impersonal passives with postverbal NPs into personal passives when trying to repair them lends support to the assumption that it is the relative frequency of personal passives which makes the subjects skeptical toward the impersonal passives. This proposal is also supported by the fact that exposure to English seemed to be of importance to this process, which means that input is crucial before this inferencing can take place.

Furthermore, we saw that the majority of the subjects consistently rephrased impersonal passives with postverbal NPs into personal passives when translating them into Norwegian. This supports Kellermann’s (1979) proposal that L2 acquirers tend to avoid not only structures that are present in the target language but not in the native language, but also structures

which are grammatical in the native language, but which the language acquirer thinks may be ungrammatical in the target language.

We have also seen that passivized intransitive verbs are rejected and rephrased more consistently than impersonal passives with postverbal NPs, and argued that this may be due to the former structures being less analogous to any grammatical structure than the case is with the latter structure.

Finally, we saw that a few subjects did seem to know the ungrammaticality of impersonal passives with postverbal NPs in English, and of passivized intransitive verbs. However, none of them described an explicit rule when trying to explain this ungrammaticality, which lends support to theories assuming that the interlanguage is built by automatized knowledge, such as Bialystok (1978) and Krashen (1985).

Furthermore, since very few subjects rejected impersonal passives with postverbal NPs and with intransitive verbs to the same extent, it seems fair to assume that the variable results on the two ungrammatical English structures in the study are acquired more or less independently. It therefore seems natural to conclude that it is probably not the rule of case absorption which is eventually incorporated into the interlanguage, but rather two separate rules excluding impersonal passives with postverbal NPs and with passivized intransitive verbs respectively.

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