Syntactic representations in the multilingual mind – Evidence from an eye-tracking study on the comprehension of passive sentences

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The aim of our presentation is to show how the combination of an offline and online method allows for a better understanding of monolingual and multilingual syntactic representations. To this end, we investigated monolingual children and adults and early second language learners' interpretation of passive sentences. This structure has been investigated in preschool children (compare Aschermann et al. 2004; Dittmar et al. 2014; Grimm et al. 1975) and has been considered to pose an important difficulty for school-aged children (Ehlich et al. 2008; Gogolin & Lange 2011) even if this has not been tested empirically so far. We present data of two studies in which we compared the comprehension of passive sentences in monolingual (L1) children at age seven and ten (n = 24, 25) with age-matched early second language (L2) learners (AoO = three/four year; n = 17, 24) and L1 adults (n = 27). We monitored their eye movements while they were listening to reversible active and passive sentences and asked them to choose which of two pictures corresponded to the sentences by pressing a button. We discuss the findings suggesting that even if the L2 seven-year-olds' off-line performance was high and not significantly different from that of the L1 age-matched children, their on-line use of the cues was still not native-like, in contrast to the older L2 ten-year-olds compared to their L1 peers. We interpret these results as a consequence of the shorter cumulative exposure time of the L2 seven-year-olds to German, which at age 7 was around 3–4 years. We argue that the L2 seven-year-olds are still learning how to weight cues in a native-like fashion and the time they had at their disposal to extract information from the input was too short to lead to a pattern that would be identical to native speaker children. The fact that we found that the L2 ten-year-olds did not differ from their L1 peers supports the usage-based assumption that the longer the exposure to the L2, the more native-like the children's processing becomes. In sum, our study shows that a comparative analysis of off-line and on-line data is theoretically informative and contributes to a better understanding of multilingual learners' syntactic representations.

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