What counts for SLA learners? A frequency-based approach to the acquisition of German "es" constructions by Spanish-speaking learners

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Annette Fahrner
Karlsruher Institut für Technologie (Studienkolleg, Department „Deutsch als Fremdsprache")
annette.fahrner@kit.edu

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A key assumption in usage-based linguistic research is that input plays a crucial role; and, to be more specific, that frequency distributions in the input matter (cf. Blumenthal-Dramé 2012). In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), which my contribution will deal with, it is commonly acknowledged that high-frequency elements of a foreign language are more readily acquired than low-frequency ones. In fact, this claim starts from the idea that some elements are more and others are less frequent in *the learners' input*. How, then, can a project in SLA research take a certain input – and frequency distributions within – as given? It is clear that the exact input learners have cannot be *known*. Thus, the relevant input has to be modeled.

When it comes to modeling learners' input, the use of corpora is a tried and tested method. Nonetheless, this method does pose several problems: First, the language and the frequency distri-butions in the corpora may not reflect the learners' actual input. Second, even if the corpora and the frequency distributions appropriately represent the input, it is not trivial to reflect about what this means. Usage-based theories would not claim that "language learning is [...] a mere tabulation of frequency of patterns" (Divjak 2012: 3). However, the crucial question is: How do frequency distribu-tions shape the learners' mental representations, that is: How does the learners' brain deal with the frequency patterns it is confronted with?

Both issues raised can be addressed by combining quantitative and qualitative analyses. In my study, I focus on the acquisition of the German pronoun "es" (Engl. "it") by Spanish-speaking learners of German as a foreign language. These learners have difficulty using the German pronoun "es" correctly, due to differences in both language systems. My study suggests that regarding the acquisition, frequency distributions in the learners' input play a role. I would like to argue that high-frequency constructions with the German pronoun "es" (e.g. "es ist schön, dass du kommst", Engl.: "it is lovely that you are coming") are more readily acquired than low-frequency ones. First, I identified German "es"-constructions (according to Goldberg 2006) and their frequencies in natural German, using corpora of spoken and written German. As a second step, I did a corpus study and a psycholinguistic experiment with advanced Spanish-speaking learners of German and analyzed their use of German "es"-constructions.

In my talk, I will present the learner data in detail, focusing on a qualitative analysis. I will show usage patterns which suggest that learners are sensitive to frequency distributions in the input. By doing so, I will treat the issue of corpus-derived frequencies, arguing that a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses can make them more meaningful and valuable.

References: Blumenthal-Dramé, A. (2012). Entrenchment in Usage-Based Theories. What Corpus Data Do and Do not Reveal about the Mind. Divjak, D. (2012). Introduction. In Divjak, D. & S. Gries (eds.) Frequency Effects in Language Representation, 1–10. Goldberg, A. (2006). Constructions at work. The nature of generalization in language.