The Poverty of the Stimulus: Evidence from word order in second language acquisition of German

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Following Rankin & Unsworth's (2016) suggestion to include more empirical evidence in generative first and second language acquisition, this paper supports the Argument of the Poverty of the Stimulus by examining word order in second language acquisition of German of three different groups of L2ers, particularly, with respect to OV utterances.

The three groups in this study can be described as follows. One group consists of eight children (ages 3 to 5) in a German preschool, another group consists of ten adults (ages 18 to 30) at a German university, and the third group consists of twelve adults (ages 18 to 24) at a US American university. The participants' first languages differ and include Turkish, Russian, Arabic, and English.

AG 4

(1)   *Mein Tier   kann schwimmen und *quak quak*   sagt
       my animal   can   swim   and *quack quack* says
       'my animal can swim and says *quack yack*'

(2)   …, dass   ich Milch trinke oder Käse   und Rindfleisch esse
            that   I   milk drink or   cheese and beef   eat
       'that I drink milk or eat beef'

(3)   …, hatte   ich Milch getrunken
            had   I   milk   drunk
       'I had drunk milk'

Examples (1) through (3) are data from the preschoolers, the Germany based adults, and the US based adults respectively.

The collected data show that all L2 learners produce OV utterances despite the fact that they are not necessarily available in their L1s, and/or that they have only been received as input to a limited extent. The findings can be taken as arguments against the idea that L1 plays a prominent role in L2 acquisition (Hartsuiker & Bernolet 2017; MacWhinney 2012) as well as evidence for the poverty of the stimulus argument (in line with Tubau 2012).

References: Hartsuiker, R. J. & S. Bernolet (2017). The development of shared syntax in second language learning. Bilingualism: Language and Cognition 20(2), 219–234. MacWhinney, B. (2012). The logic of the unified model. The Routledge handbook of second language acquisition, 211–227. Pierantozzi, C. (2009). The acquisition of word order in different learner types. Proceedings of the 10th Generative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition conference (GASLA 2009), 264–271. Rankin, T. & Unsworth, S. (2016). Beyond poverty: Engaging with input in generative SLA. Second Language Research 32(4), 563–572. Tubau, S. (2004). Early catalan OV sequences: Empirical evidence for the poverty of stimulus argument. UCL Working Papers in Linguistics 16, 149–163.