Verb Placement in the Initial Stages of Swedish as a Third Language

Various models of third language (L3) acquisition attempt to explain what the new language’s initial state is. The L2 Status Factor model (L2SF, Bardel & Falk, 2007) claims that the L2 is primary and blocks transfer from the L1. The Typological Primacy Model (TPM, Rothman, 2015) predicts that the parser subconsciously transfers whichever language seems closer to the available L3 input, comparing them using a cue hierarchy with the L3 lexicon at the top, followed by phonology, morphology, and syntax. This study tests both models with L1 English/L2 German participants by varying the L3 lexical input the learners receive, while keeping the syntax the same, as in (1).

Unlike English, Swedish is V2 like German, meaning the inflected verb is the second element, as shown in (2) and (3). When both modal and infinitive are used, German places the infinitive at the end (4), but English and Swedish place it right after the modal (5). Seeing where participants place the L3 Swedish verbs shows if German or English syntax is the initial state.

(1) He reads the book often.
   Er liest das Buch oft.
   Han läser boken ofta.

(2) He often reads the book.
   *Er oft liest das Buch.
   *Han ofta läser boken.

(3) *Often reads he the book.
   Oft liest er das Buch.
   Ofta läser han boken.

(4) *He wants the book to read.
   Er will das Buch lesen.
   *Han vill boken läsa.

(5) He wants to read the book.
   *Er will lesen das Buch.
   Han vill läsa boken.
This study tests both models using the TPM’s cue hierarchy. English, German, and Swedish are all Germanic, so typological closeness is not clear. The L2SF predicts that the L2 will transfer no matter what Swedish input participants receive, meaning both groups should perform similarly, while the TPM predicts an asymmetry if they receive input more like English or German, and argues that the lexicon will determine which transfers.

L1 English/L2 German participants (N=10) were taught Swedish nouns and verbs in one session via PowerPoint, either English-like or German-like cognates, for which the other previous language’s word is not a cognate, like knife/kniv/Messer or read/läsa/lesen, using syntax consistent with all languages. There was no auditory input. Then participants created modal and V2 sentences using the Swedish they had learned, so they were forced to choose where to place the verbs.

Participants given German-like input followed German-like modal placement 92% of the time and German-like V2 80% of the time for a combined total of 86%, while those given English-like input followed English-like modal placement 57% of the time and English-like V2 39.6% of the time for a combined total of 48.5%. This behavior was significantly different (p = 0.0001). When the two types of sentences are run separately, the same two-tailed Fisher’s exact test shows that the modal results have the same result as the total (p = 0.0001), while the V2 results are only just statistically significant (p = 0.0463).

Results support the TPM over the L2SF and the TPM’s claim that the parser uses the lexicon to choose between L1/L2. The stronger German effect might be an L2 factor or could reflect the relative strength of the cognates. Future work with an L1 German/L2 English group will tease this apart, as if they show similar results to the L1 English group, then it is likely the cognate strength, but if they show opposite results, then it is likely an L2 effect.