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

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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. The parser compares them using a cue hierarchy with the L3 lexicon at the top, followed by phonology, morphology, and syntax. The TPM is supported by an increasing amount of empirical evidence; however, much of it involves languages in which typological closeness is obvious, like English/Spanish/L3 Portuguese (for example, Rothman & Cabrelli Amaro, 2010).

This pilot study tests both models using the TPM’s cue hierarchy with a language triad of L1 English/L2 German/L3 Swedish. Since all three are Germanic languages, typological closeness is not clear. The L2SF predicts that the L2 German will transfer no matter what Swedish input participants receive, meaning both groups should perform similarly, while the TPM predicts that a group receiving more English-like lexical items should transfer English as the basis for L3 Swedish, while a group receiving more German-like lexical items should transfer German. Therefore, the TPM predicts that the two groups will behave differently.

Swedish is V2 like German, meaning the inflected verb is the second element, while English does not fix the verb’s position. When a modal and infinitive are used in German, the infinitive is at the end of the sentence, but both English and Swedish place it right after the
modal. Swedish aligns with German in one way and English in the other. Seeing where participants place the L3 Swedish verbs suggests whether German or English is the initial state.

L1 English/L2 German participants (N=10) were taught some basic Swedish vocabulary in one session via PowerPoint. Half received English-like cognates like *knife/kniv* (German *Messer*), and the other half received German-like cognates such as *läsa/lesen* (English *read*), using syntax consistent with all languages. There was no auditory input. Then participants created modal, V2, and distractor sentences in Swedish on a worksheet. They were given four constituents per sentence, usually consisting of a subject, verb, object, and adverb, or a subject, modal verb, thematic verb and object. The first constituent was already chosen for them, and they needed to put the others in whatever order seemed right. Thus, verb placement was the dependent variable.

Participants given German-like input were significantly more likely to follow German-like verb placement (86% of target items) than participants who were given English-like input, (51.5% of target items). A two-tailed Fisher’s exact test shows that this difference is statistically significant (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).

Because the two groups performed differently based on the lexicon they received, results tend to support the TPM over the L2SF. The stronger German effect might be an L2 factor, a task effect, or might reflect the slightly weaker English-like input. This pilot study is currently being expanded into a dissertation study which will balance the input, have additional tasks, and include an L1 German/L2 English group to tease this apart.