Abstract

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This paper investigates the influence of the first language (L1), here Swedish, on the acquisition of syntax and discourse pragmatics in a closely related second language (L2), here German, by looking at the information structure of Verb-Second clauses. Even though almost any type of element can occur in the so-called ‘prefield’, i.e. the clause-initial preverbal position of V2 declaratives, we document language-specific patterns for native-speaker corpora. The frequencies of prefield constituent types differ substantially between German and Swedish, and Swedish postpones new (‘rhematic’) information and instead fills the prefield with given (‘thematic’) elements and elements of no or low informational value (e.g. expletives) to a far greater extent than German.

Using oral production data from Bohnacker 2005 and 2006 and new written production data from Rosén 2006, we compare Swedish learners of German at beginner, intermediate and advanced levels to native controls, matched for age and genre. These learners master the syntactic properties of V2 but start their sentences in nonnative ways. They overapply the Swedish principle of “rheme later” in their L2 German, indicating L1 transfer at the interface of syntax and information-structure, especially for structures that are frequent in the L1 (e.g. subject-initial clauses, expletive-initial clauses, fronted thematic objects das ‘it/this’). Implications of these findings for language teaching are discussed.

Keywords: information structure, Swedish, German, transfer, discourse, thematic progression, prefield, second language acquisition, production, coherence, V2 declarative.