

CAUSED MOTION IN FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION:
EVIDENCE FOR TYPOLOGICAL CONSTRAINTS IN FRENCH AND IN ENGLISH

Research on linguistic diversity has revived a number of debates concerning universal and language-specific determinants in language acquisition (Allen et al., 2007; Bowerman & Choi, 2003; Slobin, 2003). In the context of these debates, we compare how learners express caused motion during first and second language acquisition, with particular attention to the implications of language-specific properties on acquisition. Thus, spatial systems present striking typological differences (Talmy, 2000): Germanic (1) typically encode Manner/Cause in verbal roots and Path in satellites, while Romance (2) express Path in main verbs and rely on less compact structures.

(1) *to walk, hop, skip... to roll the ball... across, up, down...*

(2) *traverser en courant* 'to run across', *monter en faisant-rouler* 'to ascend by making-roll'

Several groups of speakers (N=12 per group) described animated cartoons in which an agent acted upon an object in a certain Manner causing its displacement according to a certain Manner and Path (e.g., push a ball so that it rolls down a hill):

- Controls: English and French adults (AD-E1 and AD-F1),
- L1 learners: English and French children (CH-E1 and CH-F1, ages 5, 6, 10),
- L2 learners: English-speaking adults learning French (AD-E1F2, proficiency levels I to III).

The descriptions of English and French native speakers (E1/F1) displayed the expected typological contrast. Irrespective of age, English responses were denser and more compact than in French. English adults and children rather systematically expressed Manner/Cause in the verb root and Path in satellites. In contrast, French speakers tended to use main Path verbs and/or to scatter Cause, Manner, and Path among various devices within and across utterances. In addition, a striking developmental progression occurred in French from 5 years to adult age (less in English), showing an increasing utterance density stemming from the use of more complex structures (e.g. subordinate clauses).

As for adult learners, responses varied with proficiency level and showed the impact of both E1 and F2 languages. These learners frequently encoded Cause/Manner in the main verb, showing the influence of E1 (*?marcher/pousser dans* 'to walk/push in[to]', *?marcher à travers* 'to walk across'). However, the impact of F2 is also shown by the fact that they attempted to express Path in verbs or verb-like elements. As a result, they produced: 1) coordinated low density utterances at lower proficiency levels (*pousser et descendre* 'pushing and descending'); 2) more complex denser structures with subordinated path verbs at higher levels (*?pousser en montant* 'push going up') and 3) either idio-syncretic ungrammatical uses (*?pousser entre la cave* 'push into/enter the cave') or utterances that are grammatically correct, but not organized in a native-like way (e.g., sentences marked "?" above).

The findings show that typological factors partially determine how children learn their native language and how adult L2 learners construct their interlanguage. The discussion highlights the implications of typological constraints for the relation between language and cognition in models of first and second language acquisition.

References

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