

# **Grammatical Morpheme Acquisition/Accuracy**

## **Order: Universal development or L1 influence?**

Foreign Language Acquisition &  
Communication I

Class 3

## Brown's (1973) L1 morpheme acquisition study: comparing children with different family backgrounds

Grammatical morpheme	Example
progressive <i>-ing</i>	The boy is eat <u>ing</u> .
plural <i>-s</i>	The boy <u>s</u> are hungry.
irregular past tense	The boy <u>sang</u> .
possessive <i>- 's</i>	The boy' <u>s</u> book
articles <i>a/the</i>	He saw <u>the/a</u> book.
regular past tense	The boy shout <u>ed</u> .
3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular present <i>-s</i>	The boy run <u>s</u> .
copular <i>- 's</i>	The boy' <u>s</u> hungry.
auxiliary verb <i>- 's</i>	The boy' <u>s</u> going.

## Dulay & Burt (1974)

- ▶ Expanded Brown's (1973) study
- ▶ Hypothesis: (Dulay & Burt, 1974, p. 38) if it is the L2 system rather than the L1 system that guides the acquisition process, then the general sequence in which certain English syntactic structures are acquired by children of different language backgrounds should be **the same, with only minor individual variation**.
- ▶ The results supported their hypothesis.

# English L1 & L2 Morpheme Acquisition Order

L1	Morpheme	Example	L2
1	Progressive <i>-ing</i>	He is talking.	1
2	Plural <i>-s</i>	There are two cats.	2
3	Past irregular	We ate.	6
4	Possessive <i>-s</i>	The child's toy	9
5	Copula <i>be</i>	He's tall.	3
6	Articles <i>a/the</i>	The cat/A sunny day	5
7	Past regular <i>-ed</i>	They talked.	7
8	Third person <i>-s</i>	He sings.	8
9	Auxiliary <i>be</i>	She's sinking.	4

# **Is the order of morpheme acquisition universal? Or does learner L1 influence the order?**

- ▶ Shirahata (1988) investigated the morpheme acquisition order with Japanese junior high school students.

JLE	Morpheme	Example	EnglishL2
2	Progressive <i>-ing</i>	He is talking.	1
4	Plural <i>-s</i>	There are two cats.	2
1	Copula <i>be</i>	He's tall.	3
5	Auxiliary <i>be</i>	She's sinking.	4
7	Indefinite articles <i>a/an</i>	A sunny day	5
10	Definite articles <i>the</i>	The cat	5
6	Past irregular	We ate.	6
8	Past regular <i>-ed</i>	They talked.	7
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3	Possessive <i>-s</i>	The child's toy	9

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## **Is the order of morpheme acquisition universal? Or does learner L1 influence the order?**

- ▶ Luk, Z. P-S, & Shirai, Y. (2009). Is the acquisition order of grammatical morphemes impervious to L1 knowledge? Evidence from the acquisition of plural –s, articles, and possessive ‘s. *Language Learning*, 59(4), 721-754.



# Why has the universality in acquisition order been accepted?

- ▶ The largest population of L1 Spanish learners across previous studies (N=354 in Goldshneider & DeKeyser's (2001) study)
- ▶ L2 learners from various L1 groups, yet they are combined in the study
  - ⇒ This may cancel out L1 effects of individual learners/a group of learners.
- ▶ Theoretical motivation in the 1970s: universal grammar ⇒ interest in universal aspects of SLA ⇔ against the contrastive analysis (predicting learning difficulty based on L1 transfer)

[Hypothesis (Luk & Shirai, 2009, p. 727)]

- ▶ The ease (or difficulty) in acquiring a certain grammatical morpheme is highly related to whether the morpheme in the target language is semantically and structurally similar to the corresponding morpheme in the learner's L1;
- ▶ The absence of a grammatical morpheme in the learner's L1 will pose great difficulty for the learner in acquiring that morpheme in the target language.

# The study

- ▶ Plural –s, articles, and possessive 's
- ▶ Japanese, Korean, & Chinese
- ▶ Terminology: longitudinal, cross-sectional studies, case studies, correlation

# Linguistic transfer from Japanese

- (a) Articles: no system in Japanese, abstract
- (b) Plural –s: The lack of obligatory plural marking in Japanese + noun countability (difficulty to distinguish b/w mass and count nouns)
- (c) Possessive –s: *Ken-no-pen* = *Ken's pen* → should be easy
  - BUT is the possessive construction really easy for Japanese learners?
  - *The daughter of my friend* vs. *Tomodachi-no-musume*
  - Difficult to learn when the possessive –s is appropriate to be used and when NP-*of*-NP should be used?

# Linguistic cues to process linguistic input

- ▶ We process linguistic input with linguistic cues.
  - ▶ Various cues are available; people have acquired what cues they need to process linguistic input while acquiring their L1.
- (a) A diamond ring Mary John gave.
  - (b) Mary gave a diamond ring John.
  - (c) John received a diamond ring from Mary.
  - (d) ダイヤの指輪をメアリーが/にジョンに/があげた。
  - (e) メアリー    あげた    ダイヤの指輪    ジョン
  - (f) ジョン    ダイヤの指輪    もらった    メアリー

- ▶ Why is it difficult for the Japanese L2 English learners to distinguish between /l/ and /r/?
  - ▶ because of no necessity for their L1 phonological processing.
- ▶ (p. 741) In other words, learning a native language is a process of learning how to ignore unimportant distinctions.
- ▶ (p. 742) Thus, in various linguistic domains, learning a native language involves acquiring the ability to process it efficiently and learning to ignore – or losing the ability to make – the distinctions that are unimportant in the language.

# How does L1 influence L2 learners' cognitive process of morphemes?

- ▶ Overshadowing L1 cues in L2 learning
- ▶ A cue for plurality for English natives: plural marker
- ▶ No plural marker → No concept of plurality?
- ▶ Different cues to interpret and mark plurality
- ▶ Japanese process plurality with the cue from L1 (discourse and context) automatically and unconsciously.  
→ overshadows the marker -s in processing English,  
insensitive to the plural marker -s

## Universality in acquisition order

- ▶ “Natural factors “ (e.g., perceptual salience, semantic complexity, morphophonological regularity, syntactic category, and frequency in input) are universally available to us and we use these cues to process input and acquire grammatical morphemes.

≠ the acquisition order is universal. → Ellis (1985)\*: the term ‘universal’ is misleading since not all learners acquired every item in exactly the same order.

- ▶ Explicit instruction and frequent exposure to the articles in English should make JLEs aware that they must put the article in front of a noun and there is a noun at the initial sentential position. ⇒ distinction between a/an and the, the role of the preverbal noun

\*Ellis, R. (1985). Understanding second language acquisition. Oxford University Press.