Learnability Issues in the L2 Acquisition of Contextually Encoded Grammatical Features in Russian

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Introduction

- What makes it so difficult to achieve native-like proficiency in the L2?

- What are possible barriers to successful L2A? How do we explain learner variability?
Barriers to Successful L2A

- **L1 interference**
  (Bley-Vroman, 1990; Clahsen et al., 1989; Schachter, 1990)
- **Representational Deficits**
  (only interpretable features can be learned, Tsimpili & Dimitrakopoulou 2007, Hawkins & Hattori 2006)
- **Form-meaning mismatches** (syntax-semantics interface)
  (Dekydtspotter et al., 2001; Montrul & Slabakova, 2002, 2003)
- **L2 optionality at the external interface**
  (Belleti, Bennati & Sorace, 2007; Hopp 2004; Ivanov, 2009; Rothman, 2009; Tsimpili & Sorace, 2006)

→ Inconsistent findings suggest that other explanations are needed to account for variability and optionality in L2A
Goals of the present study

- To examine the L2 learnability within the feature re-assembly approach – Feature Re-assembly Hypothesis (FRH, Lardiere, 2007, 2008, 2009)

- To test Slabakova’s (2009) extension of the FRH by examining the degree of difficulty in remapping covert and overt features in L2-Russian by L1 English speakers
The Feature Re-assembly Hypothesis (Lardiere, 2009)

Old-style parameters are dead! Even if a feature is similar in L1 and L2 (e.g., Tense), it may not be encoded on similar morphemes: verbs in English, nouns in Somali, C in Irish.

The biggest L2 learning task is re-assembling features from the way they are represented in the L1 into new configurations in the L2.

Another example is the feature [plural]:

- **English**: 2+, obligatory marking, -(e)s, (in) animate,
- **Arabic**: 3+, optional marking, –aaduu,
- **Chinese**: 2+, optional marking, -men, definite, human
- **Korean**: 2+, optional marking, “-dul”; however, plural NPs with a demonstrative require plural marking, (in)animate
- **Russian**: 2+(semantically), 5+(grammatically), obligatory marking, different morphemes for different genders ( -y for masc, fem; -a for neut.)
Re-assembling features into different combinations in the L2

- UG inventory:
  - L1-English: [+plural] -(e)s
    - [±definite]
    - [±animate]
    - [±human]
  - L2-Chinese: [+plural] -men
    - [+definite]
    - [+human]
The degree of difficulty

Slabakova’s (2008, 2009) prediction

- Re-assembling covert features in the L1 into overt features in the L2 (covert to overt realization) is easier than re-assembling features in the reverse direction (overt to covert realization).
What are Overt and Covert features?

**Overtly realized features**
- I bought the book. [+definite]
- I bought a book. [−definite]

**Covertly realized features**
- Peter intends to marry a merchant banker – even though he doesn’t get on at all with her. [+specific]
- Peter intends to marry a merchant banker – though he hasn’t met one yet. [−specific]

(Lyons, 1999)
Working Definitions: Overt vs. Covert features

- A feature is overt if it is encoded linguistically (lexically or morphosyntactically)
  (e.g., English [definite], [past], [plural])

- A feature is covert if it is encoded extralinguistically, i.e., by context/discourse
  (e.g., English [specific], Chinese [past])
Why different degrees of difficulty?

Slabakova’s (2008, 2009) predictions:

- Re-assembling covert features in the L1 into overt features in the L2 (covert to overt realization) is easier than re-assembling features in the opposite direction (overt to covert realization)….

- because it is easier to map meaning to new form when the form is available (saliency and frequency are also factors).

- On the other hand, going from an overt morpheme to the same meaning being fixed by discourse context or word order is much harder and requires more observation of the extralinguistic reality.
Definiteness in Russian

(1) Malčik spit
    boy     sleep
    ‘The boy is sleeping.’

(2) Spit malčik
    sleep boy
    ‘A boy is sleeping.’

(Under neutral intonation)

Definite NPs – preverbal position
Indefinite NPs – postverbal position
Specificity in Russian

(1)  Ivan xoĉet kupit’ kakoj-to dom
Ivan want buy [+spec]determiner house

(2)  Ivan xoĉet kupit’ kakoj-nibud’ dom
Ivan want buy [−spec]determiner house

Both: ‘Ivan wants to buy a house.’
Research Questions

• Do L1 English speakers exhibit any developmental patterns in acquiring overtly encoded [specific] and covertly encoded [definite] interpretation of nominals in L2 Russian?

• If easier acquisition is indexed by earlier and more accurate acquisition, do learners acquire the overtly marked (non)specific interpretation earlier than covertly marked (in)definite interpretation?)
Methodology

Participants (n=96)

- Native controls (n=54): residents of Moscow, Russia
- L1 English learners (n=42)
  - Advanced-level learners (n=15):
  - Intermediate-level learners (n=27)

Proficiency Test

Adapted version of the standardized Russian language test developed by the Ministry of Education of the Russian federation
Methodology

Task

Contextualized Felicity Judgment Task (AJT) on a 5-point scale (1 = unacceptable, 5 = acceptable), with a separate option for ‘I don’t know.’

Test items (n = 22): 12 for definiteness; 10 for specificity

Filler items (n = 34)

Contexts are in the participants native language (Russian for Russian speakers and English for English speakers) and target sentences are in Russian.
Sample test items
[+definite] Object NP (OVS)

(1) Oleg and his brothers Sergei and Aleksei always help their mom make dinner. Today they made mushroom soup, baked potatoes and beet salad. When their dad came home and tried the soup, he asked: *Kto svaril takoj’ vkusnij’ sup?* (‘Who made such delicious soup?’) OVS should be accepted.

a. *Sup svaril Oleg.*  
   1  2  3  4  5 I don’t know  
   soup cooked Oleg  (‘Oleg made the soup.’)

b. *Ego svaril Oleg.*  
   1  2  3  4  5 I don’t know  
   it cooked Oleg  (‘Oleg made it.’)

(The test sentence with pronoun is a filler.)
Sample test items
[−definite] Object NP OVS

(2) I was watching TV when Aunt Galya called. She wanted to talk to Mom. I told her that Mom is busy cooking. Aunt Galya asked: "Shto gotovit mama?" (‘What is mom cooking’)  

(Soup is not mentioned in the context)  
OVS should be rejected

a. *Sup gotovit mama.*  1  2  3  4  5   I don’t know  
soup cooks mother ‘Mother is cooking soup’

b. *Sup gotovit ona.*  1  2  3  4  5   I don’t know  
soup cooks she   ‘She is cooking soup’
Sample test items
[+specific] Contexts

(1) My brother Leo wants to borrow money from me. He says he saw a nice car at a dealership last week. He already has two cars and I don’t think his wife will be happy if I lend him money.

a. *Moj brat xočet kupit’ kakuju-to mašinu.*

   my   brother wants buy [+spec] marker car

   1  2  3  4  5 I don’t know

b. *Moj brat xočet kupit’ kakuju-nibud’ mašinu.*

   my brother want buy [−spec] marker car

   1  2  3  4  5 I don’t know

Both: ‘My brother wants to buy a car.’
(2) My son Sasha is turning six tomorrow. He asked me if I could get him a pony. He told me that it didn’t have to be an expensive pony and he would not care if the pony is white, black or brown. I don’t know where he is going to keep his pony if I get him one. We have a small apartment.

a. Saša xočet kakogo-to poni. 1 2 3 4 5 I don’t know
   Sasha want [+spec] marker pony

b. Saša xočet kakogo-nibud’ poni. 1 2 3 4 5 I don’t know
   Sasha want [−spec] marker pony

Both: ‘Sasha wants a pony.’
Group Results:
Word order and definiteness

[+def] Object Lexical NP
[-def] Object Lexical NP

Expected
Group Results:
Indefinite Determiner & Specificity

[+spec] contexts
wh-to
[+spec] contexts
wh-nibal'
[−spec] contexts
wh-to
[−spec] contexts
wh-nibal'

Native
Advanced
Interm.

Expected
✓
✗
✗
✓
## Intergroup Comparisons Tukey HSD

$(\alpha = .05)$

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* = significant
Summary of findings

- Do L1 English speakers exhibit developmental patterns in acquiring overtly encoded [specific] and covertly encoded [definite] interpretation of nominals in L2 Russian?
  (i.e., Do learners acquire overtly marked (non)specific interpretation earlier than covertly marked (in)definite interpretation?)

Yes!

The overtly marked [specific] interpretation was acquired earlier (at the intermediate level) than the covertly marked [definite] interpretation (at the advanced level).
Discussion:
[+definite] Object NP (OVS)

Let’s look at the example test item again:

(1) Oleg and his brothers Sergei and Aleksei always help their mom make dinner. Today they made mushroom soup, baked potatoes and beet salad. When their dad came home and tried the soup, he asked: kto svaril takoj’ vkusnij’ sup? (‘Who made such delicious soup?’) OVS should be accepted

a. Sup svaril Oleg. 1  2  3  4  5 I don’t know
soup cooked Oleg (‘Oleg made the soup.’)
Potential confound

- The marking of definiteness in this condition is confounded with the marking of Information Structure (Topic and Focus), which is well established in Russian.
- There is an encoding relationship between English articles and definiteness; however, there is only a significant correlation between Russian word order and definiteness.
- Strictly speaking, word order does NOT encode definiteness. Word order encodes information structure....
Topicality and definiteness

- Topics are not always always definite:
  
  Q: *Can you tell me a joke?*
  
  A: *A joke I can tell you, but not a really good one.*

- Definite NPs are not always topics:
  
  Q: *What are you doing?*
  
  A: *Taking the garbage out.*

- Hence, Topic/Focus and (in)definiteness are in a significant correlation, not in an encoding relationship.
Alternative testing designs

So how can we test knowledge of definiteness in Russian if we want to evade the Topic-Focus confound?

- One possible design is to use a translation task, but this is considered too prone to metalinguistic reasoning on the part of learners.

- Another possible design is a paraphrase task:

  Mal’chik  
  boy      sleeps       ‘The boy is sleeping’

  a) the boy we were talking about (should be chosen)  
  b) some boy not mentioned before (should be rejected)

Again, this design relies on explicit manipulation of grammatical meanings (not a good idea with naïve informants).
Alternative testing designs

- In order to test definiteness through word order, we opted for testing Topicalized objects.
- We believe we are justified in this design because word order in the end does signal definiteness, even if indirectly and for reasons of information structure.
- We are working on alternative test designs.
Conclusion

- The semantic property signalled through word order (definiteness) seems to be more difficult to acquire than the property signalled by a dedicated morpheme (specificity), in the second language acquisition of Russian.
- This confirms Lardiere’s original intuition that even if the same feature is selected by two languages \( L_A \) and \( L_B \), if the form-meaning mapping of that feature is different in \( L_A \) and in \( L_B \), then that feature will present difficulties to L2 learners.
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Selected References


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