Setting the elements of syntactic variation in L2 acquisition: On the English 's morpheme

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If parameters are located in the functional lexicon (Borer 1983, Rizzi 2011 a.o.) and the triggers are vocabulary items with their idiosyncratic properties, then acquiring a second language (L2A) is to be thought of as very similar to first language acquisition (L1A). The L2 learner is faced with new words/morphemes (or with their apparent absence) whose syntactic properties have to be discovered (through UG) and, ideally, there is nothing to be reset and everything to be set. The literature has however brought to light many differences between L1A and L2A, and among them many can be explained assuming parameter resetting. My aim here is not to deny these results, but just to explore the idea that the L2 learner is faced with new vocabulary items whose syntactic properties have to be discovered through a specific instance, the English –s morpheme, which I find particularly interesting because its morpho-phonological opacity makes it a potentially ambiguous trigger.

In this work I analyse data collected through a written task from 50 Italian L2 learners of English (beginners or near beginners) aged 10 to 12. We chose two uses of the –s morpheme which are homophonic and homographic: the case in which 's is a contracted form of BE and the case in which it is a genitive. Subjects were presented a list of sentences (well formed and non – ambiguous) corresponding to 5 different patterns (see Table 1). They had to decide whether the value of 's in each item was BE or genitive and indicate it to the right of the item. Two testing sessions were realized, one soon after students were taught BE simple present and 's –genitive and one five months later. Results indicate: a) a similar percentage of target and non-target decisions across items in the two sessions (Table 2). b) an equal ranking of the various patterns in the two sessions (Table 3 and Figure 1). c) a statistically significant difference between Pattern 2 and Pattern 3 in both sessions (Figure 1).

- a)indicates that it is really a problem to decide what is 's, and the problem persists over time. b) and c) show that this decision is not equally difficult and the difficulty is structure dependent. We interpret the results in the following way. Learners not only find 's ambiguous, but they parse the sentences they are presented with, assuming the hypothesis in (1):
- (1) *Is* and 's are allomorphs of a general agreement morpheme input driven part

 UG driven part

In Pattern 2, but not in Pattern 3, 's is placed at a choice point (Fodor 1998), i.e. a point in which it can be attached within the constituent currently being parsed (the DP) following Late Closure, or projecting the CP node (coherently with Minimal Attachment). Hence the significantly higher number of non –target decisions. (1) is also confirmed by some elicited production errors like (2) and (3):

- (2) Q. What does Jane want?
 - A. Bag is Mary
- (3) O. Where are the belts?

A. The belt is Brom is on the table. The belt is Katrina is on the chair which reveal that the boundaries of what is known as 'BE overgeneration' (Ionin and Wexler 2002), when BE is third person singular, go beyond the clause and include the DP as well. And if 'BE overgeneration' is a hallmark of L2 acquisition (Paradis *et al.* 2008) we can restate our introductory issue. An L2 learner, like an L1 learner, tries to discover the properties of 's, but, differently from the latter, the former starts building hypotheses with an already matured structure (perhaps in the form of 'treelets' as proposed by Fodor 1998).

Table 1

Value of 's	Pattern	Example
1. BE	Common noun + 's + PP	My bike's in the garage
2.BE	Proper name + 's +PP	Jodie's in the garden
3.GV	IS + subj+ Poss simpleNP +'s +N	Is this Jack's tracksuit?
4.GV	IS + subj+ Poss conjoinedNP +'s +N	Is this Tom and Jenny's car?
5.GV	PossNP + 's + NP + BE + AP	Rosie's dog is very friendly

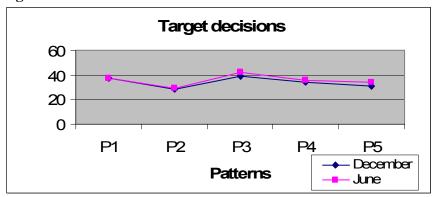
Table 2. Total % of target decisions

Session	Target decisions	
December	67.6%	
June	71.2%	

Table 3 Patterns ranking for target decisions

1 W 10 0 1 W 101 1 W 101 1 W 1 B 1 0 1 W 1 B 1 0 1 B		
Session	Ranking	
December	P3>P1>P4>P5>P2	
June	P3>P1>P4>P5>P2	

Figure 1.



December: There is a statistically significant difference between Pattern 2 and Pattern 3 (χ^2 =5. 4726 p=.05; with Yates correction χ^2 = 4.5228 p=.05).

June: There is a statistically significant difference between Pattern 2 and Pattern 3 ($\chi^2 = 8.2079$ p=.05 (significant also at p=.01 and at p=.001); with Yates correction $\chi^2 = 6.9937$ p=.05 (significant also at p=.01).

Selected References:

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