Word order in L3 French: Transfers it from the L1 or the L2?

A large number of studies over the decades have shown that L1 word order is transferred in L2 acquisition. With L3 acquisition, an important question is whether there would be transfer of word order from the L1 or the L2. Under Rothman's (2015) Typological Primacy Model (TPM), at the initial stages of L3 acquisition the linguistic parser unconsciously determines which of the two previously acquired languages is the most structurally similar to the L3. Once the determination is made, the grammar of that language becomes the basis of the L3 grammar. I will test the predictions of the TPM, looking at word order in L1 Arabic, L2 English and L3 French. L1 Arabic and L3 French share rich verbal morphology triggering movement of the verb out of Verb Phrase up to Tense, while L2 English and L3 French share a large number of cognates. Rothman (2015) proposed an implicational hierarchy in which the lexicon is a more important factor determining transfer than functional morphology.

Participants wrote up to three sentences describing nine labelled images using all of the words on the image. The task was administered to the same learners in the three languages. Results showed that participants used fixed SV word order in both L2 English and L3 French, although they produced VS sentences in Arabic, ranging from 15.6% to 23.7% with affirmative sentences, and 12.5% to 18.75% with negative sentences. Assuming that participants noticed similarities in lexical items in the L2 and the L3, the results support the TPM, but would also support other hypotheses in L3 acquisition research, including the "L2 status factor" (Falk & Bardel, 2011) and psychotypology (Kellerman, 1983).

References

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