

Acquiring Argument Structure in French L2: the Case of Ditransitive Structures

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Abstract

Numerous studies have been conducted on the acquisition of clitics in French L2 ([16]; [2]; [3]; [6]; [13]; [5]). Findings suggest an order by which clitic formation is acquired, and highlight problems regarding the positioning of clitics in sentences, as well as the difficulties learners encounter in the production of dative clitics.

Our study focuses on the acquisition of French dative clitics in ditransitive structures by adult English-speaking learners. More specifically, we are interested in the impact of cross-linguistic influence on the production of these clitics ([7]; [10]; [11]). According to [15], in ditransitive structures, the lexical entries of the L1 are a superset of the L2, since the L1 has the NP NP structure (the double object structure), in addition to the NP PP structure. As such, dative clitics in ditransitive structures in French L2 offer an interesting point from which to measure the influence of the L1 on the L2.

The dative shift is governed by morphophonological and semantic restrictions, amongst others ([2]; [8]; [9]; [12]; [4]). Besides verbs that accept both structures (to offer, to teach, etc.), there are two other groups that only accept one of the alternation's forms: a group of verbs that only allows the double object structure (to refuse, to cost, etc.) and another group composed of verbs that only accept the NP PP structure (to pull, to donate, to demonstrate, etc.).

We tested two groups of subjects with a test comprised of four exercises in which the three types of verbs appeared. One group was composed of English L1 speakers, while the members of the second group did not have English as their L1. Our results show that, for the English-speaking subjects, the performance varies significantly depending on the type of verb, which is not the case for the other group. The cliticisation of the arguments of the verbs that only have the double object structure in English are the most difficult ones for native English speakers. This influence of the L1 argument structure can be observed in intermediate level learners, as well as advanced ones. However, despite L1 influence, advanced learners still outperform intermediate ones overall due to their mastery of the clitic formation.

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