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Linking L2 proficiency to L2 acquisition: Opportunities and challenges of profiling research¹

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At the SLATE meeting of December 2006, Franceschina, Alanen, Huhta and Martin (2006) proposed the so called *DEMfad* agenda, meaning that development of a particular linguistic construction can best be studied by examining the frequency, accuracy and distribution of form-meaning constructions longitudinally, from emergence to mastery in a given domain². However, we would not only like to examine the acquisition of specific elements of L2 grammar in isolation, but also in combination with an understanding of how the lexico-grammatical system at large is developing. Researchers therefore need to ascertain the “linguistic profile” of L2-learners, at any point of L2 development, in terms of the accuracy, under-use and over-use of morpheme sequences. Many of the papers brought together in this volume provide evidence of the feasibility of such a profiling enterprise. This is an exciting, promising and non-trivial feat, first of all for language testing practice and possibly also for syllabus design. As the contributions of Salamoura and Saville and of Alanen, Huhta and Tarnanen show, it is possible to build learner corpora of written productions, have productions rated at a given CEFR level, annotate them, and then conduct lexical and grammatical analyses yielding lexico-grammatical profiles. Comparisons of the profiles appear to show that the profiles of two adjacent developmental levels often differ from each other in the frequency of occurrence of a whole range of (correct or incorrect) morphemes rather than in the total absence versus presence of particular morphemes or in the partial versus fully correct application of particular rules of grammar.

1 I would like to thank the three editors and Gabriele Pallotti for their useful comments on an earlier version of this text.

2 The six underlined letters make up the DEMfad label; see the contribution of Martin, Mustonen, Reiman, and Seilonen in this volume for a full explanation).

Thus the good news is that, although second language acquisition is a matter of gradual progress (not a matter of jumping from one stage to the next), it appears to be possible to assign, with high probability, an L2 writing product to a particular CEFR level. With sufficiently big learner corpora and with increasingly sophisticated software tools, we can now envisage, for the not too distant future, that computers will reliably rate L2 productions. Computer software is presently already capable of automatically rating constrained responses, such as single-utterance responses; it does so by sheer “ignorant brute force”, without parsing responses into traditional linguistic categories. The profiles resulting from the sort of work described in this volume will also allow computer rating of longer or non-constrained productions. Much laborious work has to be conducted, however, until this type of computer rating has materialized because it is unlikely that universal profiles will be found for each CEFR level for each target language and the software has to take learners’ L1 into account. Finally, as Salamoura and Saviile point out, profiling research may help construct detailed scales of the lexical and grammatical mastery required for a given target language. This would produce scales of much more detail than the global, language-neutral scales for lexis and grammar in chapter 5 of the Common European Framework of Reference, CEFR. (Council of Europe, 2001). Once reliably established, profiles can be used in L2 instruction (in addition to the Profile Deutsch, English, Spanish, etc projects of the Council of Europe). A research team at Lund University has already developed a program that is capable of producing grammatical profiles in a corpus of texts written by L2 learners of French (Granfeldt, Nugues, Ågren, Thulin, Persson, & Schlyter, 2006).

The danger of circularity in establishing CEFR-related profiles

It is clear then that language assessment stands to benefit from profiling research. But will SLA research benefit as well? Before answering this question, let me briefly bring to mind what the CEFR is and what it isn’t. The CEFR attempts to describe communicative language proficiency in terms of real-world like language activities (chapter 4) and language competencies (chapter 5). It has no ambition of linking language proficiency to language acquisition in any detail, beyond the general observation (Council of Europe, 2001: 17) that acquisition of an L2 is a matter of development in what learners can do with their L2 and how well they can do this. The CEFR contains well over 50 scales, all using the same six level symbols (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2). Some scales do and others do not refer to linguistic accuracy. For instance, the B1 level of the global scale (p. 24) is defined with minimal reference to linguistic accuracy: “Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters

regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.” Only the word “simple” may be interpreted as referring to linguistic quality. However, the qualitative scale on pages 28–29 specifies accuracy at the B1 level in the following way: “Uses reasonably accurately a repertoire of frequently used ‘routines’ and patterns associated with more predictable situations.”

For profiling research to be successful in the ways to be outlined below it is crucial to avoid the danger of circularity, as several authors in this volume emphasize. If written or oral productions are first rated with the quality scale of chapter 3 (Table 3, pp. 28–29), containing references to linguistic accuracy, and the researcher is then going to analyse and compare productions at different CEFR levels in terms of accuracy, overuse, and underuse of certain grammatical phenomena, the study may fall victim to circularity. Thus, to avoid circularity in profiling research, when written or oral productions are being rated, rating scales should be used with no, or minimal reference to accuracy of linguistic forms.

The potential of profiling research for understanding second language acquisition

What might profiling research mean for our understanding of second language acquisition? I can think of two benefits, which I present below. First, however, I should say that I doubt whether profiling research will breathe new life into theories and research on so called developmental sequences and natural orders in SLA (see Ellis, 2008, Ch. 3, for a recent overview of the literature on developmental sequences). There are several obstacles for such research. First, most research on developmental sequences pertains to the initial stages of L2 acquisition, i.e., resulting in lower levels of language proficiency. To be able to see what happens during the initial stages of SLA, two snapshots at levels A1 and A2 of the CEFR are unlikely to yield the required detail. Furthermore, for a proper study of development, cross-sectional data need to be supplemented by longitudinal data and I wonder whether funding can be obtained for longitudinal studies involving sufficiently large numbers of L2 learners to produce learner corpora large enough for reliable profiling analyses. Finally, most research on developmental sequences or natural acquisition orders is based on data collected from L2 learners not receiving L2 instruction, whereas most of the data collected in CEFR-linked profiling research have been collected from “instructed”

L2 learners. Frankly speaking, I should perhaps add that I belong to the few skeptics with respect to theories and research on developmental sequences. I do not see which non-trivial developmental phenomena of L2 acquisition there presently are to explain, beyond the A1 level in instructed L2 learners. In 2001, Goldschneider and DeKeyser published an influential re-analysis of oral production data from twelve studies conducted between 1973 and 1996, together involving 924 subjects. Multiple regression analysis showed that 71% of the total variance in acquisition order of six functional morphemes of English is explained by the combination of five determinants: perceptual salience, semantic complexity, morphological regularity, syntactic category, and frequency of these morphemes in the input. When we add L1 transfer as an explanatory factor for acquisition order of some L2 structures, I wonder what else is there to explain?

I see two benefits of profiling research for theories of SLA. First, analyses of large learner corpora consisting of L2 productions rated at different CEFR levels may throw new light on the study of L1 transfer in SLA, because it allows looking at multi-word strings (integrating lexical and grammatical phenomena) in large corpora collected from L2 learners with a large variety of linguistic backgrounds. It would, for instance, be interesting to examine whether profiles of learners with different first languages differ mainly in terms of underlying morphosyntax, as a result of L1 transfer, while hardly differing in terms of morpho-phonological surface forms, as implied by the conservation hypothesis of Van de Craats, Van Hout, and Corver (2002; see also Van de Craats, 2009). If there is one thing that more than 40 years of SLA literature has shown, then it is evidence of massive L1 transfer in SLA and L1 transfer is therefore likely to affect the profiles too, especially at the lower CEFR proficiency levels. Furthermore, by analysing strings of any length and composition, profiling research may provide an integrated lexico-grammatical picture of SLA. In most of the SLA literature, spanning some 40 years, the study of grammatical development is separated from the study of lexical development and the study of phonological development is separated from the study of morpho-syntactic development. Integrative, cross-domain analyses are likely to widen the scope of SLA theories.

Second, a promising line of research emerges when we focus on explaining the levels of L2 proficiency attained in terms of (a) input and (b) learner attributes such as age and level of education. Profiling research ought to look at native speakers as well. It would be good to administer the writing and speaking tasks, presented in the papers of this volume, also to L1 speakers of different ages and at different levels of education or profession. Since Chomsky (1965), many linguists have lost interest in investigating variability in oral and written L1 profi-

ciency, assuming that all adult native speakers share a common core grammar. One may wonder, however, to what extent adult native speakers do share a common lexicon and grammar (Hulstijn, 2007, 2010). In a recent study, Mulder and Hulstijn (2010) observed large variability in the accuracy and speed with which adult native speakers of Dutch, differing in age and the level of their education or profession, performed a variety of language tests. In speaking, a considerable number of participants produced utterances violating some very basic rules of Dutch grammar, such as subject-verb agreement. Thus, when L2 profiling research of the types represented in this volume aims to establish accuracy, under-use, and over-use of lexical and grammatical features in L2 learners, researchers need to have at their disposal corpora of oral and written language produced by L1 speakers of different ages and at different levels of education, for comparison. As the authors of the CEFR pointed out, the CEFR levels do not constitute steps towards native-speaker proficiency (Council of Europe, 2001: 36). The C2 level is attained by only a minority of native speakers. In other words, the CEFR levels implicitly incorporate learners' intellectual functioning into the proficiency scales, reflecting the vertical socio-economic structure in European societies. It would be fascinating to examine at which CEFR level the language proficiencies of adult native speakers begin to differ. Is A2 the highest level shared by adult native speakers or do they share as much as B1? Our view of L2 proficiency at different CEFR levels might undergo some fundamental changes when we take differences in native speakers' language proficiency into account.

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