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Orders and Sequences in the Acquisition of L2 Morphosyntax, 40 Years On: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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This Special Issue of *Language Learning* provides a state-of-the-art overview of current perspectives on acquisition orders and sequences in second language acquisition. It contains examples of empirical studies, theoretical reflections of, and a dialogue between proponents of Dynamic Systems Theory, Learner Varieties, Processability Theory, Processing Determinism, Sociocultural Theory, and Usage-Based Linguistics. This introduction presents the context and rationale for the collection of contributions.

Keywords orders and sequences; second language acquisition; interlanguage development

Introduction

One of the central issues in understanding phenomena of second language acquisition (SLA) concerns the question of whether, and to what extent, universal stages can be identified in the route along which the morphosyntactic structures of second languages (L2s) are acquired, regardless of learners' first language (L1), the learning setting (e.g., tutored vs. untutored acquisition), or learner characteristics such as age, literacy, or motivation. In the literature, a distinction is often made between orders and sequences of acquisition. While the term *order of acquisition* generally refers to the order in which different structures of the target language are mastered to criterion level (e.g., in English, present progressive, past tense, and plural *-s* on nouns), the term *acquisition sequences* is generally used to refer to developmental stages in the acquisition

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in a single grammatical domain (e.g., negation, past tense). Furthermore, while acquisition order generally refers to targetlike control of the structures, acquisition sequence refers to intermediate, nontargetlike stages of acquisition. Thus, while *order* may invoke the criticism of what Bley-Vroman (1983) called the comparative fallacy, *sequence* does not, as it draws on frequency analysis of interlanguage data to plot the dynamic development of specific grammatical structures.

According to most SLA textbooks, one of the established findings in the field concerns the more or less fixed order in which learners acquire the morphosyntactic structures of their L2. VanPatten and Williams (2007) formulate this observation as follows: “Learners’ output (speech) often follows predictable paths with predictable stages in the acquisition of a given structure” (p. 10). According to Ortega (2009), there is “robust evidence that L1 transfer cannot radically alter the route of L2 acquisition,” meaning that “all L1 groups will traverse the same series of approximations to the target L2 systems” (p. 34).

The existence of L2 acquisition orders was originally proposed by Dulay and Burt (1973, 1974) and Bailey, Madden, and Krashen (1974). Both teams of researchers claimed that there exists a single order in which the morphosyntactic structures of English are acquired by L2 learners of that language, irrespective of age, setting, or L1. This claim was at variance with what researchers working in the behaviorist-structural traditions had been claiming (e.g., Lado, 1957). The question central in this *Language Learning* Special Issue is to what extent the claim can be upheld almost forty years later and what theoretical accounts can be provided for it.

Goldschneider and DeKeyser (2001) reviewed twelve empirical studies (published between 1973 and 1996) of the order in which six morphosyntactic functors of English (i.e., present progressive *-ing*; plural *-s*; possessive *-s*; articles *a, an, the*; 3rd person singular present tense *-s*; regular past tense *-ed*) are acquired by L2 learners of that language. They found that, across these 12 studies, 71% of the variance in acquisition orders could be accounted for by five input factors: perceptual salience, semantic complexity, morphophonological regularity, syntactic category, and frequency.

It appears that not very many empirical studies on acquisition orders in SLA have been published since 1996, with the exception of: (1) the research conducted by Pienemann and his associates in the framework of Processability Theory (e.g., Pienemann, 2005; see also Dyson, 2009; Kawaguchi, 2010); (2) the research conducted in the framework of the European Science Foundation project on untutored L2 acquisition, conducted by Klein and Perdue

and their many associates in various countries, proposing the so-called Basic Variety of SLA (e.g., Klein & Perdue, 1992, 1997); and (3) papers by Jia and Fuse (2007) and Luk and Shirai (2009). Most of the acquisition-order and acquisition-sequence debate in the SLA literature concerns the question of which factors can be seen as causally involved in observed orders or sequences (Ellis, 2008, ch. 3; Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001; Ortega, 2009, ch. 6; Pienemann, 2005). The question remains, however, how reliable (replicable) and general (i.e., across L2s, learner characteristics, settings, and L1s) the acquisition orders and sequences are that have been established in the empirical literature.

This Special Issue aims at providing an update of recent empirical findings and of theoretical accounts of orders and sequences for the acquisition of L2 morphosyntax in SLA. The authors represent the following theories: Emergentism and usage-based language learning (O'Grady and Eskildsen), Dynamic Systems Theory (Lowie & Verspoor), Processability Theory (Lenzing and Pienemann), and Sociocultural Theory (Zhang & Lantolf). In addition, there are two closing articles: Ellis stakes the philosophical and practical case for maintaining sequence of acquisition as an important construct in SLA, while Hulstijn provides some closing remarks reflecting back on the Special Issue as a whole. A paper representing Basic Variety was also planned to be written by Christine Dimroth (who was one of the invited discussants in the 2013 *Language Learning* Roundtable in Amsterdam), but more urgent business prohibited her to contribute. In the final article of this Special Issue, Hulstijn includes a commentary reflecting on Dimroth's presentation.

The Special Issue has been guest co-edited by Hulstijn, Ellis, and Eskildsen at the invitation by the *Language Learning* editors, and all articles underwent one-way blind peer review. The author lineup emerged naturally from the following two events: (i) a *Language Learning* Roundtable session organized by Jan Hulstijn and held in August 2013 prior to the 2013 annual conference of the European Second Language Association in Amsterdam and (ii) a colloquium organized by Rod Ellis and Søren Eskildsen and held at the 2014 annual conference of the American Association of Applied Linguistics in Portland. The 2013 Roundtable consisted of two keynote presentations, given by William O'Grady and by Marjolijn Verspoor and Wander Lowie, followed by two discussant presentations, given by Christine Dimroth and Manfred Pienemann. The 2014 colloquium comprised presentations by Rod Ellis, Søren Eskildsen, Wander Lowie and Marjolijn Verspoor, Anke Lenzing, and Xian Zhang and Jim Lantolf, with Jan Hulstijn adopting the role of discussant. The spirit of dialogue was clearly present at the 2013 and 2014 colloquia. In an attempt

to maintain this spirit, we distributed the draft versions of the articles in this Special Issue to all authors, inviting them to make comments on each other's contributions to the extent they wished to do so. Regrettably, this process of cross-commenting took so much time that insufficient time remained for the inclusion of the response from Zhang and Lantolf to comments by Pienemann; these comments will appear in a later issue of *Language Learning*. One thing is clear to the guest editors: The SLA community will surely continue this dialogue at future fora.

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