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A German, an American, and an Englishman walk into a language class ... – Crosslinguistic influence in L2 Danish grammar

Abstract:

How much influence does your mother tongue have on languages you acquire later in life? Is there a shared grammar between L1 and L2s? Within the field of second language acquisition, cognitive linguistics and error analysis studies, the role of crosslinguistic influence is highly debated, especially when it comes to grammar.

Previously, certain areas of language were believed to be impervious to crosslinguistic influence – e.g. morphology and syntax (Jarvis 2017). Several studies of primarily English as a second language have questioned these claims (Jarvis 2017; Thewissen 2015). In L2 Danish, the role of crosslinguistic influence has not been studied extensively. Danish is however an interesting case because of some special grammatical features: for instance V2 word order, adjective inflection for both attributive and predicative adjectives, gender, and instances where two forms sound the same but are written differently – e.g. the homophones and heterographs at motionere ‘to exercise’ and Hun motionerer ‘she exercises’ (Søby & Kristensen: forthcoming).

Some of these grammatical features occur in German, but not in English. Therefore, we examine the error profiles of two groups of L2 Danish learners in a corpus study: 28 L1 English learners (mean age 32.6 years) and 14 L1 German learners (mean age 32 years) at beginners’ level. The corpus consists of written essays from a Danish language school with 8,256 words.

We report the types and frequencies of grammar anomalies in the two groups and discuss examples of differences between them. Besides highlighting the role of crosslinguistic influence, this study has consequences for language teaching practices: We account for aspects of Danish grammar that are difficult for both groups and discuss how grammar teaching can be targeted to students with different L1 backgrounds.

References:
