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Grammar anomalies and grammatical awareness in native speakers and L2 learners

Abstract:

Grammar anomalies occur in all kinds of written texts – whether the author is a second language learner or a native speaker. In second language research, errors are commonly defined in contrast to an L1 standard, e.g. as “a linguistic form or combination of forms which in the same context and under similar conditions of production, would, in all likelihood, not be produced by the speakers’ native speaker counterparts” (Lennon 1991: 182). However, this comparison is problematic as native speakers also produce grammar anomalies (cf. Søby & Kristensen, forthcoming).

In a corpus study of grammar anomalies, we compared the grammar in essays written by L2 learners of Danish to that of essays by Danish high school students. The L2 essays were written by 28 L1 English speakers who study Danish at beginners’ level. The L1 essays were written by 36 high school students for their final exam. We annotated all anomalies in the corpus and distinguished between grammar anomalies (pertaining to morphology, syntax, use of grammatical words and use of word category) and anomalies related to orthography or lexicon.

Overall, the frequency of morphological and syntactical anomalies is higher in L2 essays (80 anomalies/1000 words) than in L1 essays (18 anomalies/1000 words). We describe the primary challenges for the L2 group, which include V2 word order, adverb placement, inflections of verbs and adjectives and issues with gender and number. Some aspects of Danish grammar, however, seem more challenging to native speakers of Danish than to second language learners, e.g. the inflection of modal verbs and adjectival adverbs and the use of reflexive pronouns. We discuss how these differences may be related to cognitive processes and to individual differences in acquisition of grammatical categories.

The results give insights to the formation of grammatical categories and are relevant to teachers of Danish grammar in language schools and high schools.

References:
