

Introduction to Learner Language Analysis: Developmental Sequences in German as a Second Language

Christine Czinglar, Friedrich Schiller University Jena

In this lecture, I will introduce the concept of learner language (interlanguage; Selinker 1972) and how it can be analyzed in a systematic way. As an example for an analysis on the level of grammar, I will use verb placement in learners of German as a Second Language (L2). I will present two longitudinal case studies from Czinglar (2014, 2017) of two successful untutored learners documented in the DaZ-AF corpus (e.g. Dimroth 2008, Pagonis 2009). Being half-sisters living with their mother first in St. Petersburg and then in Cologne, the two learners differ mainly in age of exposure: 8;7 years vs. 14;2 years. They were recorded once a week in spontaneous interaction with native speakers and the data were transcribed in CHAT format (MacWhinney 2000). Based on the coding scheme by Haberzettl (2005), the transcripts were coded and analyzed for verb position. The corpus contains more than 10.000 (sub-)clauses containing verbs, about one quarter of which were discarded as prefabricated chunks (Czinglar 2014). The other learner corpus also contains two longitudinal case studies, but it is much smaller: The two adolescent learners in the DaZ-UMF-Corpus are unaccompanied minor refugees from Afghanistan (Czinglar 2018; Heidemann 2021) and there are only 4-6 data points. The data are obtained and analyzed in the same way as the DaZ-AF data.

Three learners pass through the typical developmental sequences for verb placement as described for late L2 learners of German (e.g. Haberzettl 2005; Meisel 2013), but one learner seems to take a slightly different path. And of course, all learners differ with respect to their respective rate of development, due to individual differences such as age, education and literacy. It is important to discuss variation in learner language (Wisniewski, Lüdeling & Czinglar 2022), whether it interindividual, as described above, or intraindividual, which suggests that the learning trajectory of one learner is not always progressive. I will discuss some methodological issues in determining developmental sequences for verb placement in individual case studies based on spontaneous speech data by using the methodology of obligatory contexts, correctness rates and a coherent acquisition criterium. The concept of developmental sequences or stages has been questioned by a high degree of variation found in several studies (e.g. De Bot, Lowie & Vespoor 2006; Schwendemann 2022), which will also be discussed.

As a preparation for the talk please read Czinglar (2017), which is a short, open access article, that introduces one of the case studies and methodology.

References

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