Frequency and Semantic Prototypicality in an L2 Spanish Dative Construction: A Corpus Study

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Usage-based models of language acquisition and use posit that linguistic knowledge comprises a network of thousands of form-meaning pairings called constructions, which may involve fixed, semi-fixed, or completely abstract elements that carry certain conventionalized meanings (Bybee, 2010; Goldberg, 1995; Trousdale & Hoffmann, 2013). Under this approach, the acquisition of such constructions is highly sensitive to usage frequency and prototypicality, such that the first exemplars of a given construction that are acquired typically occur in the linguistic input with high frequency and involve the meanings that are most semantically prototypical for that construction (e.g., give for the English VERB- NOUN- NOUN ditransitive construction). Only later does the learner move away from over-relying on these entrenched exemplars and towards acquiring more abstract schemas that encompass a wider variety of types with less prototypical meanings (e.g., write somebody a letter, bake somebody a cake, etc.) (Ellis, 2002).

Previous research has supported this model both through online psycholinguistic experiments (e.g., Ellis, 2016) as well as corpus-based analyses (e.g., Ellis & Ferreira-Junior, 2009). However, to date such research has primarily focused on the acquisition of English constructions. This study seeks to extend this line of inquiry to the acquisition of L2 Spanish. Our analysis focuses in particular on the dative construction involving indirect object pronoun clitics followed by a verb (e.g., les digo ‘I say to them,’ te dan ‘they give you,’ etc.). Our research questions are as follows:

1) When compared to native speakers, do Spanish-L2 writers rely to a larger extent on the highest-frequency exemplars of the dative construction?

2) When compared to native speakers, do Spanish-L2 writers rely to a larger extent on the most semantically-prototypical meanings of the dative construction?

Using automatic concordance software (AntConc, Anthony, 2018), all instances of indirect object pronoun clitic use were extracted from a corpus of written essays in Spanish (CEDEL2; Lozano, 2009), yielding 3,231 tokens from 796 Spanish native speakers and 6,079 tokens from 1,605 English-L1 Spanish-L2 learners. Although the project is ongoing, preliminary results suggest that second language learners of Spanish show a higher reliance on more semantically-prototypical, high-frequency exemplars of the construction (e.g., darle ‘to give,’ decirle ‘to say,’ gustarle ‘to please’), whereas native speakers use a wider variety of types, oftentimes with less-prototypical meanings (e.g., apostarle ‘to bet,’ informarle ‘to inform,’ apetecerle ‘to appeal’) as well as several highly idiomatic uses involving indirect object clitic pronouns (e.g., darse cuenta ‘realize,’ hacérselo ADJECTIVE ‘to seem ADJECTIVE to someone’).

In addition to providing evidence for linguistic theories that emphasize frequency and semantic prototypicality as primary drivers in the acquisition of constructions, such findings also have implications for second language pedagogy, e.g., in suggesting ways that educators can strategically shape language learners’ input and opportunities for output so as to best facilitate language acquisition (e.g., Madlener, 2015).
References


