

Full Transfer at the L2 initial state: Evidence from Afrikaans learners of German

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This paper presents experimental evidence (production & comprehension) from Afrikaans-speaking learners of German, bearing on three hypotheses of the L2 initial state: ‘Minimal Trees’ (Vainikka & Young-Scholten, 1994), ‘Structural Minimality’ (Bhatt & Hancin-Bhatt, 2002), and ‘Full Transfer’ (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1994). Both German and Afrikaans are V2-languages with head-final VP and IP, resulting in surface SVO order in matrix clauses. Full transfer would provide the Afrikaans learners with target-like phrase structure and word order right away. If only VP or IP are transferred, they are predicted to start out with verb-final structures (SOV). Our results from elicited production provide compelling evidence against this prediction: in 94% of cases, the verb *preceded* the object.

In the comprehension task, learners were presented with wh-questions (1), which are ambiguous between subject (i) and object (ii) question interpretations.

- (1) a. *Was hat die Katze gebissen?* (PERFECT tense condition)
what have-3sg the cat bitten
(i) ‘What has bitten the cat?’ / (ii) ‘What has the cat bitten?’
- b. *Was beisst die Katze?* (PRESENT tense condition)
what bite-3sg the cat
(i) ‘What is biting the cat?’ / (ii) ‘What is the cat biting?’

Native-speaker controls found these questions ambiguous in both tense conditions. Under Full Transfer, the Afrikaans learners are predicted to perform just like the controls, importantly with no differences between the two tense conditions. If learners transfer only a (head-final) VP, (1a) can only be parsed as a subject question (2a). (1b) cannot be accommodated within such a ‘minimal tree’ (2b), predicting random performance for the present tense.

(2a) VP
NP³ NP V
– NP V
was (hat)⁵ –
(die) Katze gebissen

(2b) VP
NP³ NP V ?
– NP V ?
was –⁵
? beisst (die) Katze

Contrary to these latter predictions, Afrikaans learners interpreted (1a) as a subject question in only 20% of cases. Moreover, there was no significant difference between their performance in the two conditions – supporting Full Transfer – nor were there any significant differences between the learners and the controls.