A usage-based approach to the initial selection of task-relevant tokens and the development of a construction.

Andy Harris

Usage-based accounts of language acquisition hold that the typical route of second language development can be described by a trajectory from 'formula through low-scope pattern to construction' (Ellis, 2002, p143; see also Bybee 2010, Langacker 1987, Tomasello 2003). Empirical support for such a trajectory in SLA, while not exclusively drawing on usage-based theories, comes from fairly course-grained longitudinal studies that suggest that an initial repertoire of fixed formulaic chunks may be broken down by the exigencies of communicative demands, leading to productivity beyond the scope of the original formulas (e.g. Eskildsen, 2009, 2012; Myles 1998, 1999). Drawing on this longitudinal evidence, this current study offers a more fine-grained view than is currently available of the extent to which the intersection of task demands and the initial selection and repurposed use of task relevant tokens may lead to the retention of tokens or the development of more productive patterns. Pre-sessional university students in intact classes (n=92) completed three written tasks under one of three conditions: one group was exposed to instances of past counterfactuals which were identical to the forms needed for task completion (The Literal Group, n=31). A second group was exposed to instances of past counterfactuals which required the breakdown of selected instances to fit the task demands (The Analogy Group, n=33). A third group received no input (The Control Group, n=28). The findings suggest that the selection and subsequent use of tokens can be described by models of analogical processing (e.g. Gentner, 1983, Gentner and Markman, 1997), and albeit with considerable individual variation, that this type of processing leads to positive gains in the knowledge of past counterfactual constructions.

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