Sensitivity to verb bias and semantic persistence in the L2: An eye-tracking study with German and Turkish learners of English

Duygu Şafak & Holger Hopp
University of Braunschweig

L2 readers have difficulty with reanalysis, leading to semantic persistence of garden paths [1, 2]. This study investigates whether L2 learners can use verb bias, i.e. frequency information about the type of verb complements, to ease reanalysis. Some findings suggest that even L2 learners with a verb-final L1 show sensitivity to verb bias [3], while others underscore the effect of L1 word order on sensitivity to verb bias in L2 processing [4].

We focus on L1 German and L1 Turkish. German has a predominantly subject-verb-object word order in main clauses, i.e. the verb can be used to generate predictions about upcoming structure. By contrast, Turkish is a verb-final language; the verb cannot give rise to expectations for incremental parsing.

64 L1 German and L1 Turkish intermediate to advanced L2 learners of English were tested in an eye-tracking reading experiment, in which we manipulated the main-clause verb to have either a direct-object (DO) or a sentential-complement (SC) bias as well as the plausibility of the final segment to be either semantically matched or mismatched with the initial garden path, i.e. the direct-object interpretation (1). L1 German learners, unlike Turkish learners, showed effects of verb bias at the syntactic disambiguation segment and at the final segment, with longer reading times in (1a, b) than in (1c, d). For the final segment, both learner groups showed longer reading times in (1b, d) than in (1a, c), yet no interaction of verb bias and plausibility. Together, these findings provided evidence for L1 word order influence on L2 sensitivity to verb bias but general L2 semantic persistence effects, indicating that L2 learners failed to complete the reanalysis process irrespective of their sensitivity to verb bias. This offers support for the view that L2 learners may not integrate multiple information cues efficiently during real-time sentence comprehension.
Materials

(1) a. **DO-bias semantic match:**
   
   They *observed* the insects *were really* and truly *brilliantly coloured*.

b. **DO-bias semantic mismatch:**
   
   They *observed* the insects *were really* and truly *impossible to notice*.

c. **SC-bias semantic match:**
   
   They *realized* the insects *were really* and truly *brilliantly coloured*.

d. **SC-bias semantic mismatch:**
   
   They *realized* the insects *were really* and truly *impossible to notice*.

References


