

Semantic principles are more important than syntactic ones for low proficient second language learners: Evidence from sentence processing

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Abstract: Beginning second language (L2) learners of Germanic languages often place verbs behind negation and certain adverbs, thereby violating the target-like word order (Vainikka & Young-Scholten, 1996). Syntactic accounts of L2 acquisition explain this by assuming that full syntactic structures cannot be projected in early L2 grammars. Semantic accounts explain the pattern by a principle of scope marking: verbs follow scope-bearing elements, such as negation and adverbs, since they fall in their semantic scope domain. Two auditory sentence processing experiments are presented to distinguish between these accounts. Subjects are beginning Moroccan and Turkish learners of Dutch. In experiment 1, items contain lexical verbs or auxiliary verbs that precede or follow negation. In experiment 2, negation is replaced by temporal adverbs. The results show that processing preferences are dependent on differences in scope properties between negation and (different types of) adverbs, suggesting that semantic rather than syntactic principles guide early L2 processing.

Vainikka, A., & Young Scholten, M. (1996). Gradual development of L2 phrase structure. *Second Language Research*, 12, 1, 7-39.