

The Effect of L1 on the Acquisition of English Alternating Unaccusative Structures by Moroccan Learners of English

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The influence of L1 structure across the languages of a bilingual has been the target of research by linguists who seek to understand how language and cognition affect each other, including the linguistic relativity hypothesis. The present study investigates the effect of L1 on the acquisition of English alternating unaccusative structures by Moroccan EFL learners. These structures consist of verbs that can yield transitive and intransitive sentences (e.g., the child broke the window; the window broke).

A contrastive analysis of English and Moroccan Arabic (MA) reveals that English and MA differ in the types of verb which admit the transitivity alternation and the way the alternation is morphologically marked. More specifically, unlike English, some of the alternating unaccusatives in MA are morphologically realized (e.g., l-bab t-sed; literally: the door was closed). On the other hand, there are unaccusative structures in which, like English, the morphemes marking the causative alternation are not realized overtly (e.g., s-sbaġa neshfat; literally: painting dried). Therefore, it is hypothesized that Moroccan learners of English may not face acquisitional problems with respect to English unaccusative structures which are similar to their mother tongue, but they may fail to recognize the grammaticality of English transitive sentences with non-overt morphology and prefer *get* passives in order to compensate for the reflexive morpheme [*t*].

To verify this hypothesis, two instruments are used in the experiment: a forced-choice sentence selection task and a translation task. The participants taking part in this study consist of two groups: an experimental group of Moroccan learners of English and a control group of native speakers of English. Both tasks include items covering alternating unaccusative constructions that can either be morphologically realized or morphologically null in MA.

The results showed that most of the learners had learning problems associated with English sentences containing alternating ergative verbs that are morphologically realized in their L1. Nevertheless, the learners' responses fairly indicated no learning problems related to transitive sentences which lack causative morphology in both varieties. Hence, the role of L1 (MA) was detected in the acquisition of ergatives as a result of negative transfer from L1. Based on these results, a number of pedagogical implications are suggested to help learners acquire relevant English ergative constructions.

Key words: alternating unaccusative structures, influence, morphology

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