

Age Effects on the Acquisition of Uninterpretable Features by Proficient Arabic Speakers of English

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A recent account of fossilization in adult L2 grammars - the 'Interpretability hypothesis' (Hawkins & Hattori, 2006; Tsimpli & Dimitrakopoulou, to appear) - maintains that uninterpretable syntactic features are subject to maturation. Properties associated with uninterpretable features not already activated in the L1 grammar will pose a learnability problem for older L2 speakers because they are inaccessible beyond a critical period. The present study tests this hypothesis by examining the effects of age on the knowledge shown by proficient Saudi Arabic speakers of L2 English of two subtle linguistic properties associated with uninterpretable features: (i) the Gap Strategy in *wh*-interrogatives, and (ii) Reflexive Binding. While the former is differently instantiated in Arabic and English, the latter is similarly present in both languages. Subjects were 25 proficient Saudi Arabic speakers of English (8 high advanced child starters, 6 advanced child starters and 11 advanced adult starters), together with 6 British English native controls. Using an acceptability preference task, results show that fossilization is selective, and is a reflex of L1-L2 grammatical differences. As predicted, the advanced adult starters showed a persistent L1 effect (de-learning problem) in the acquisition of the gap strategy in *wh*-interrogatives, but hardly had any problems with reflexive binding. The results further suggest that convincing evidence to refute a maturational account should be drawn from testing contrasting structures rather than similar ones (Long, 2005). As for the child starters, while the high advanced group showed native-like competence in all the tested constructions, the advanced group did not. Divergence in the child starters' L2 grammar might be the effect of proficiency.

References

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