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Syntactic modification at early stages of L2 German writing development: A longitudinal learner corpus study

Nina Vyatkina[a,*], Hagen Hirschmann[b], Felix Golcher[b]

[a] Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures, University of Kansas, 1445 Jayhawk Blvd., Room 2080, Lawrence, KS 66045, USA
[b] Institut für deutsche Sprache und Linguistik, Philosophische Fakultät II, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Unter den Linden 6, Berlin D-10099, Germany

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ABSTRACT

This study explores *ab initio* development of syntactic complexity in a longitudinal corpus of learner German writing from a Dynamic Usage-Based perspective. It contributes to the research on L2 writing complexity by focusing on beginning learners of an L2 other than English (German) and on fine-grained measures of syntactic complexity, operationally defined here as syntactic modification.

The results show that not only ubiquitous global measures of syntactic complexity but also more specific measures, namely frequencies of syntactic modifiers, can serve as developmental indices at beginning L2 proficiency levels. The learners in this study modified their writing from the very onset of language study and the overall size and range of the modification system did not significantly change over four semesters. However, its composition changed continuously and reflected non-linear waxing and waning of different modifier categories. The study confirmed some results from previous cross-sectional research showing that interlanguage development is characterized by a decrease in cognitively easier (*e.g.*, uninflected) categories and an increase in cognitively more difficult (*e.g.*, inflected and clausal) categories. The high variability that was found along with uniform group trends demonstrates the necessity of simultaneous investigations of linguistic development in groups and individuals.

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1. Introduction

Second language (L2) complexity measures have been used in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research to investigate learner production with three main purposes: "(a) to gauge proficiency, (b) to describe performance, and (c) to benchmark development" (Ortega, 2012a, p. 128). However, as Ortega points out, in comparison with the first two, the third purpose has rarely been addressed and there is considerably less systematic knowledge of it. Manchón (2012) expresses a similar concern related to the field of L2 writing, calling the development of L2 writing competencies "an issue of the utmost theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical relevance [. . .] that, surprisingly, has not been systematically approached in the otherwise abundant research in the field" (p. 3). This study and this Special Issue in general aim to address these research gaps by focusing on the development of linguistic complexity in L2 writing. This focus expands and supplements the research line taken up by two other recent JSLW Special Issues: bringing together SLA research (and, in particular, L2 developmental research) and L2 writing

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: vyatkina@ku.edu (N. Vyatkina), hirschhx@hu-berlin.de (H. Hirschmann), felix.golcher@hu-berlin.de (F. Golcher).

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research (Connor-Linton & Polio, 2014; Ortega, 2012b; Williams, 2012). Furthermore, this study focuses on L2 beginning German learners and uses finer-grained syntactic complexity measures, thus expanding the empirical knowledge base which has mostly encompassed English as an L2, relatively advanced proficiency levels, and global complexity measures.

This study explores the syntactic modification aspect of linguistic complexity, where modifiers are defined as optional elements describing the property of the head of a phrase (Graesser, McNamara, Louwerse, & Cai, 2004). Modifiers can be considered *par excellence* indicators of structural complexity at the sentence level because they expand the simplest possible agent-action-(object) pattern (Graesser et al., 2004; McNamara, Crossley, & McCarthy, 2010). Thus, expansion of modification in learner language would fall squarely under Foster and Skehan's (1996) definition of development in syntactic complexity as "progressively more elaborate language" and "a greater variety of syntactic patterning" (p. 303). Although many studies have used the frequency of selected modifiers as L2 complexity measures (see the overview below), investigations of the modifier system in its entirety are virtually non-existent (see, however, Hirschmann, Lüdeling, Rehbein, Reznicek, & Zeldes, 2013; Hirschmann, in press). This study addresses this gap and explores a variety of modifiers in L2 writing data using Learner Corpus Research (LCR) methods for data extraction and coding.

The study is grounded in the Dynamic Usage-Based approach (DUB, Langacker, 2008; Verspoor et al., 2012) that is informed by the Dynamic Systems Theory (DST, van Geert, 2008). In this approach, L2 development is seen as a dynamic process, in which regular growth stages are modulated by a complex variation within and among individuals and by the continuous waxing and waning (Larsen-Freeman, 2006) of different interrelated aspects of the interlanguage system. The DST and DUB approach has been applied in a number of recent L2 writing investigations (*e.g.*,Verspoor, Lowie, & van Dijk, 2008; Verspoor et al., 2012) and allowed researchers to show that variability drives development and thus merits a more prominent place in L2 research. The present study aims to contribute to this small but growing body of research by zooming in on the dynamics within the syntactic modification system in the interlanguage of beginning L2 German writers and by exploring both group trends and individual developmental trajectories. To account for this complex developmental picture, we use mixed effects modeling methods, which have just begun to gain popularity in SLA research (Barkaoui, 2014; Cunnings, 2012). These methods are uniquely suited for longitudinal studies because they allow the estimation of the mean developmental trajectory as well as variation and covariation among individual trajectories.

2. Study background

2.1. Defining L2 complexity

The concept of "complexity" is itself "complex" due to its polysemous and multidimensional nature, which has led to the absence of its consistent definition in SLA research. Bulté and Housen (2012) conducted a thorough analysis of this notion's use and found that, despite popularity, there has been widespread confusion between complexity and the related notion of difficulty, as well as between the formal and functional aspects of complexity. Bulté and Housen (see also Ortega, 2012a; Pallotti, 2015 for a similar argument) argue that this confusion often leads to interchangeable use of terms representing different underlying constructs (*e.g.*, linguistic complexity and cognitive difficulty) as well as to circular argumentation (*e.g.*, linguistic structures are considered complex if they are used by more proficient learners, and learners are considered more proficient if they use such structures).

Responding to recent calls for clear definitions of complexity in research, we adopt Bulté and Housen's (2012) carefully structured taxonomy of complexity. First, as most of the contributions to this Special Issue, this study is concerned with linguistic complexity of learner writing, or "language complexity in objective, quantitative terms as the *number* of discrete components that a language feature or a language system consists of, and as the *number* of connections between the different components" (Bulté & Housen, 2012, p. 24, emphasis in the original).[1] More specifically, this study focuses on the grammatical component (as opposed to the lexical component) of linguistic complexity. Second, in line with Bulté and Housen, we distinguish three levels for the investigation of complexity development in L2 writing. At the theoretical level (that is, at the level of cognitive constructs), we are primarily interested in the systemic aspects of grammatical complexity, defined by Bulté and Housen as "elaboration, size, range, variation, 'breadth' of L2 grammar" (p. 27). At the observational level (that is, at the level of surface manifestations of complexity in learner writing), we focus on how this systemic complexity is realized in grammatical diversity and sophistication of sentences, clauses, and phrases. At the operational level (that is, at the level of measures), we employ frequency measures, namely ratios of syntactic modifiers as a function of total word counts or counts of the modified elements. By selecting these measures, we aim to fill a considerable gap in L2 writing complexity research that has not focused on the syntactic modification system, as evidenced in the literature review below.

2.2. L2 complexity as a developmental dimension

L2 complexity research originates from Skehan's (1989) three-part model of L2 proficiency encompassing complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF). Many studies have aimed to find general proficiency indicators in learner-produced oral and written texts using these three dimensions (for reviews, see Housen & Kuiken, 2009; Housen et al., 2012). Early studies

[1] This definition is also in line with Pallotti's (2015, p. 117) "simple view of linguistic complexity" as structural complexity.

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