Conceptualization of event roles in a second language: Effects of L1, L2 word frequencies, and L2 proficiency

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In linguistic descriptions of events, event roles provide information about "who did what to whom." Previous research has shown that when event roles are encoded linguistically, entities that have higher conceptually accessibility are more likely to be the subjects of the sentences (Rissman et al., 2019). Two major factors that influence conceptual accessibility are animacy (the extent to which something is considered alive or not) and agency (whether something is the initiator of an action). Animacy and agency can affect the likelihood that an entity is selected as the subject of a sentence in different ways across languages. For example, compared to English, Japanese is a language that gives priority to animacy over agency when considering which entity to choose as the subject of a sentence (Ito, 2018). To be specific, humans are more likely to be the subjects when they are patients (receiver of an action) in Japanese than in English.

To the best of our knowledge, no previous studies ever investigated whether and, if so, how L1-entrenched conceptualization of event roles affect L2 learners' conceptualization of event roles. To this end, we prepared 200 images as the materials, with 50 images in each of four different types of action chains involving agents and patients: (1) animals chasing humans (2) humans chasing animals, (3) humans throwing objects, and (4) disasters threatening humans. The participants were 44 native Japanese speakers and 44 native English speakers. They were asked to describe the images in a single sentence and write it down. The native Japanese speakers were asked to complete this task in both L1 Japanese and L2 English on different days.

We were interested in whether agents were chosen as the subjects in the sentences. Using the generalized linear mixed-effects model with a logit link function, we observed a stronger tendency of choosing humans as the subjects across four categories of images in the Japanese participants than in the English participants. However, when the Japanese participants used L2 English to describe the images, this crosslinguistic difference was reduced. Interestingly, we also found a significant effect of word frequencies in L2 English. The higher the frequencies of the English agent words relative to those of the English patient words, the more likely the agents were selected as the subjects of the sentences by the Japanese learners of English. This effect was not observed in L1 Japanese or in L1 English. Moreover, this frequency effect was found to be mediated by learners' L2 proficiency. The higher the learners' L2 proficiency is, the smaller the observed frequency effect becomes.

In conclusion, L1 motivates speakers to conceptualize event roles in a certain way. However, L2 also motivates speakers to reconceptualize event roles differently, which is further modulated by L2 word frequencies and L2 proficiency.

References

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