

Traceback as a method for exploring usage-based second language acquisition.

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Usage-based theories of language acquisition have recently been gaining traction, with several studies demonstrating the fruitfulness of this approach. One method that has been used to explore usage-based (first) language acquisition has been labelled traceback. The main principles of traceback are that (1) in order for a usage-based framework to hold, all utterances produced by a developing language user should be traceable to the input they have heard and/or to their own previous utterances and (2) learners will create new utterances by productively generalising from the input (e.g. Lieven et al. 2003). The criteria used to determine whether utterances can be traced back varies from study to study, particularly concerning the types of available slot fillers and the operations used as a basis for forming the learner's utterances from their previous language experience (see Hartmann et al. 2021 for an overview of existing traceback studies).

Koch (2019) presents a version of the traceback method in which five slot types (REFERENT, PROCESS, ATTRIBUTE, LOCATION, and DIRECTION) and three operations (SUPERIMPOSE, SUBSTITUTE, and ADD) are included. As with previous traceback studies, it is designed to analyse first language acquisition data. The present study applies an adapted version of the traceback procedure used by Koch (2019) to second language acquisition data. Specifically, the Welsh language learning programme SaySomethingIn (SSi) is used as a case study. This programme follows a broadly constructionist approach by introducing learners to chunks of speech and encouraging them to produce new utterances by combining and generalising what they have already heard. In this study, transcripts of SSi are used to explore how the traceback method might be adapted to second language acquisition. The findings will be applied to elicited production data from a small group of participants (2-4) who have taken the programme for one month to verify the method and to discover firstly to what extent second language learners' language can be derived from the input they have heard, and secondly whether the participants have created new utterances through generalisation. From the results, the extent to which usage-based theory is applicable to second as well as first language acquisition will be discussed.

References

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