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What do prosodic accounts add to the research on L2 articles?

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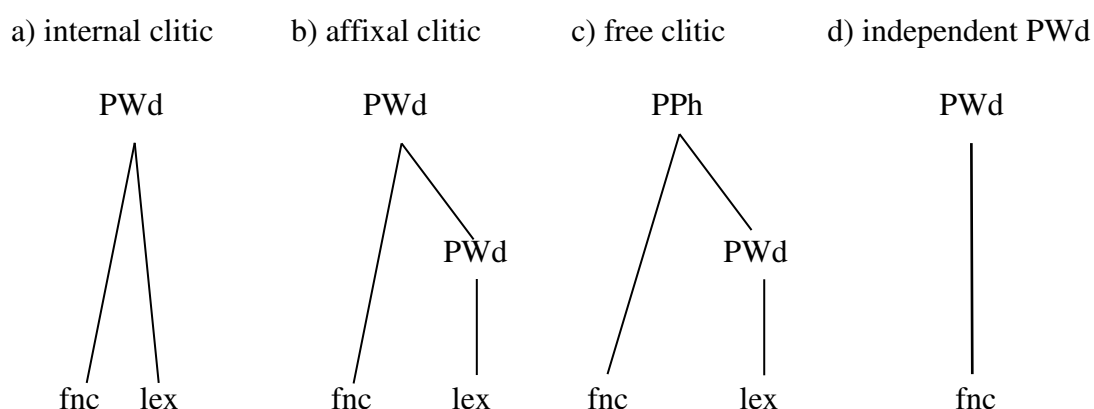
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1. Introduction

Mastering the grammar of another language is a difficult task, especially for late second language (L2) learners. Certain difficulties can persist even after years of learning and of daily use. Understanding the sources of such difficulties and explaining the mechanisms of L2 development are some of the central goals of L2 research.

The Prosodic Transfer Hypothesis (PTH) (Goad & White, 2019) (G&W hereafter) proposes that the prosodic structure of the first language (L1) may interfere with the prosodic representation and production of L2 functional morphology, and that in doing so, it may be the source of some frequently observed non-target patterns in L2 use. The PTH is formulated within the framework of non-linear phonology (Selkirk, 1996) which assumes that phonology imposes a hierarchical structure on language. In this framework, functional material (grammatical words and morphemes) can be prosodically represented in one of four ways, depending on how closely they are bound to the lexical host (an independent prosodic word, or PWd):

- a) internal clitic (part of the internal structure of its lexical host)
- b) affixal clitic (involving adjunction to the lexical host)
- c) free clitic (when it links to the phonological phrase (PPh), rather than directly to the lexical host)
- d) independent PWd in its own right



Starting from there, the PTH predicts that if a particular structure is not represented in one language but is needed to prosodically represent functional material in another language, L2 users will have difficulties with it. One frequently observed difficulty in L2 English which the PTH proposes to explain is article omissions amongst L2 learners from L1 backgrounds

without articles¹. My commentary is focused on evaluating the evidence for the PTH in this domain.

2. Are prosodic properties of the L1 the source of article omissions in L2 English?

In the framework described above, English articles are realised prosodically as free clitics. The following predictions fall out of the PTH in relation to L2 article omissions:

- 1) If the L1 does not have a prosodic representation for free clitics, L2 learners will find it difficult to prosodically represent English articles; according to the PTH, article omissions are expected.
- 2) If the L1 does not have a prosodic representation for free clitics but has a representation for affixal clitics, L2 learners will use the affixal clitic structure to accommodate English articles when possible to do so (i.e., when an article directly precedes the noun); under the PTH, article omissions are expected at a higher rate when there is an intervening element between an article and the head noun (e.g., *the black cat*) than in non-modified noun phrases (NPs, e.g., *the cat*).

The corollary of 1 and 2 are the predictions 3 and 4:

- 3) If the L1 has a prosodic representation for free clitics, L2 learners will **not** find it difficult to prosodically represent English articles; under the PTH, article omissions are **not** expected in this population.
- 4) If the L1 has a prosodic representation for free clitics, L2 learners will **not** have to represent English articles as affixal clitics; under the PTH, an asymmetry in the rate of article omissions between adjectivally modified and non-modified NPs is **not** expected in this population.

What does the evidence say? A large body of literature on L2 article use shows that across a broad range of languages article omissions are far more prevalent and far more persistent in L2 populations from L1s without articles compared to L2 populations from L1s with articles (see reviews in Austin et al., 2015; Luk & Shirai, 2009; Trenkic & Pongpaiboj, 2013; Trenkic, 2009; Trenkic, in press). With specific relevance to this commentary, article omissions are common in L2 populations from L1 backgrounds without articles **even when the L1 has free clitics** (e.g., L1 Serbian in Trenkic, 2007; L1 Thai in Pongpaiboj, 2008). Furthermore, a higher incidence of article omissions in adjectivally modified compared to non-modified NPs is observed not only in L2 populations from L1s without free clitics (G&W), but also in populations whose L1s do have free clitics (Trenkic, 2007; Pongpaiboj, 2008). That the same patterns of article omission errors exist both in populations in which they are expected under the PTH and in populations in which they are not expected, effectively falsifies the hypothesis that L1 prosody is the key driver of these errors. Rather than the absence of the prosodic structure for free clitics in the L1 (i.e., L1-L2 prosodic differences), it is the absence of articles in the L1 (i.e., L1-L2 grammatical differences) that the collective evidence pinpoints as the main source of L2 article omission errors.

The importance of corollaries for drawing valid conclusions cannot be overstated. A hallmark of good science is to look not just for confirmatory contexts, but to actively test its hypotheses in contexts in which they may be disconfirmed – and if disconfirmed, reject them

¹ “L1s without articles” is a shorthand here for “L1s without **grammatically obligatory** definiteness marking”.

or revise them. The evidence from L1 Serbian and L1 Thai learners of English refutes the strongest version of the PTH in relation to L2 articles (that L1 prosody is the source of all L2 article omissions). In the next section I consider a weaker hypothesis that L1 prosody is one of the factors contributing to L2 article omissions.

3. Do prosodic properties of the L1 *contribute* to article omissions in L2 English?

If not the main factor in L2 article omissions, could L1 prosody be an additional factor that aggravates the situation for L2 learners from L1s that lack both articles and a prosodic representation for free clitics? Could it have an additive / cumulative effect? This theoretical possibility can only be confirmed or disconfirmed through a direct comparison of L2 populations from L1s that do and L1s that do not have free clitics, while both missing articles – something that has not been done to date. If L1 prosody plays a role, we would expect to see a) a higher incidence of overall article omissions, and b) a larger asymmetry in article suppliance in adjectivally modified vs non-modified NPs in L2 populations from L1s without both articles and free clitics compared to L2 populations from L1s that do not have articles but do have free clitics. If such findings were to be attested, this would suggest that L1 prosodic constraints explain additional variance in L2 article omissions over and above that explained by the common factor (absence of articles from L1). If, on the other hand, the rates of omissions were similar, this would constitute evidence against even the weaker (additive/cumulative) predictions of the PTH.

4. Do prosodic properties of the L1 contribute to article mispronunciation?

G&W also postulate that L1 prosody may lead to the mispronunciation of functional L2 material. For L2 articles, the following predictions can be made:

- 5) If the L1 does not have a prosodic representation for free clitics but represents some functional material as independent prosodic words, L2 learners will use the independent PWd structure to accommodate English articles, especially when other options such as affixal clitic are not possible (e.g., in adjectivally modified NPs); under the PTH, articles are expected to appear in production as stressed.

The corollary of 5 is prediction 6:

- 6) If the L1 has a prosodic representation for free clitics, L2 learners will **not** have to resort to prosodifying L2 articles as independent prosodic words; under the PTH, articles are not expected to appear as stressed in production of this population.

G&W report that L2 English articles do sometimes appear stressed in the speech of Turkish learners whose L1 is said to lack free clitics. Before this could be attributed to the influence of L1 prosody, though, stressing of articles as a more general approach to L2 article production needs to be ruled out. Just as in the case of article omissions, it is what happens in the populations whose L1s have free clitics that is critical for determining whether the behaviour observed in the population whose L1s doesn't have free clitics could be attributed to L1 prosody or not. Thus, although this prediction is plausible, the critical evidence for it is missing.

5. Conclusion

In summary, there is at present no evidence that L2 article production is influenced by L1 prosody. What is clear is that L1 prosody is not the key source of L2 article omissions; whether it plays some part in it remains uncertain. My personal hunch is that it does, but that still awaits to be shown.

Future research aiming to confirm or disconfirm the PTH would need to test its predictions and their corollaries by including a control group or conditions in the design. For example, to judge whether L1 prosody (the lack of free clitics) has an effect over and above the effect of L1 grammar (the lack of articles), the behaviour of an L2 population from an L1 without articles and without free clitics needs to be compared to that of an L2 population from an L1 without articles but with free clitics; if working only with an L2 population without both articles and free clitics, then it would be critical to include their written production: if the behaviour predicted by the PTH were found to be stronger in spoken than written production, this would provide support for some influence of L1 prosody on L2 grammar production; if, on the other hand, the behaviour predicted only for spoken production is found in both speech and writing, this would rule out the influence of prosody.

Finally, the PTH research would also need to engage with other accounts that explain the same patterns of behaviour. G&W rightly point out that prosodic accounts are meant to complement, rather than replace non-prosodic accounts. Somewhat paradoxically, however, the only non-prosodic accounts they acknowledge are those that make predictions on issues on which the PTH does not (e.g., article substitution errors), but do not engage with any that actually predict the patterns they discuss (e.g., article omissions, higher incidence of omissions in adjectivally modified vs non-modified NPs). The real test for the PTH will be to show, when pitched against other accounts that can explain the same patterns, whether and to what extent L1 prosody adds to the explanation of the observed behaviours.

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