

The emergence of the unmarked in L3 phonology

Nabila Louriz

Hassan II University, Casablanca

In the acquisition literature, it has been argued that the learner starts by acquiring the unmarked features of the target language. However, there is a disagreement as to what is marked and what is unmarked. Also it is still not clear if the features that appear first in the acquisition process do so because they are unmarked or they are due to other factors, such as transfer.

The present paper reports on the constraints that appear high in the scale of L3 grammar, which is responsible for L3 production. Adopting the optimality framework, the focus will be on two constraints: FTBIN and ALIGN-L (F_t, PWd). The former necessitates that the foot is binary, and the later requires that the stressed foot is aligned to the left edge to the prosodic word.

Studies on first and second language acquisition show that these constraints are common in the learner's grammar. On the one hand, studies conducted on first language acquisition show that the child produces disyllabic words with binary foot (Vihman, 2002, Archibald, 1993). Also, L2 learners build binary foot as well (Pater, 1997). So, it seems that binary foot appears to be unmarked for first and second language acquirers. On the other hand, as far as Alignment constraint is concerned, most L1 phonology research reveals that children tend to stress the initial syllable of the word (Fikkert, 1994: 292). In other words, the stressed syllable/foot is aligned to the left edge of the prosodic word, which might be an argument in favor of the trochaic bias. Also, studies on L2 acquisition of stress show preference of initial stress regardless of the nature of the mother tongue (Pater, 1997; Baptista, 1989, Archibald, 1998). This means that the initial stress appears to be a normal feature in the acquisition process.

The present study shows that Moroccan learners of English as a third language rank the constraints ALIGN-L (F_t, PWd) and FTBIN high in their grammar. This explains the production of initial stress in the L3 data under consideration. The main question to be addressed is why these constraints appear in the initial state of L3 acquisition process although they are not active in neither of the languages involved in the study (Moroccan Arabic, French and English). I shall not only explain the unmarked nature of the binary foot but will also provide arguments for the unmarked nature of ALIGN-L (F_t, PWd)

I will conclude that initial stress is predominantly unmarked in language acquisition. L1 learners are noticed to stress the first syllable. L2 learners are also said to have the same tendency regardless of the stress pattern of their L1. Also, the case study in question proves that learners have the constraint ALIGN-L (F_t, PWd) highly ranked in their L3 grammar, which generates initial stress.

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