Crosslinguistic influence and the second language learning of tense-aspect systems

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A defining feature of SLA research is that we seek to understand how speakers build knowledge of an additional language. Indeed, theoretical and empirical work has been dedicated to understanding this question for decades now, leading to multiple proposals about the emergence, organization, and nature of the multilingual mind (e.g., Ellis, 2006; MacWhinney, 2008; O’Grady, 2013). L2 tense-aspect research has been critical to this endeavor given that almost all adults who learn an additional language have already mastered many complex ideas about the world, including the concepts of time and aspect. The L2 learning challenge, therefore, involves working out how to express these already mastered concepts in potentially new and different ways. In this talk, I take stock of current theoretical and empirical work in this area, paying particular attention to usage-based accounts of how learners develop and manage multiple languages. In doing so, I revisit core assumptions about how we conceptualize and study cross linguistic influence and/or transfer (McManus, 2022). This discussion is motivated by repeated observations that while instances of transfer appear identifiable, very little is known about what transfer is, how it is triggered, and how it impacts broader systems of language knowledge (see also Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008; Sharwood Smith & Truscott, 2019). I will argue that clarity on these topics is of critical importance to the growth and credibility of the discipline. This reconsideration of the place and role of transfer in SLA will be used to motivate new directions in study design and theory-building in tense-aspect research.

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