The acquisition of verb second in Icelandic as a Second Language

This talk presents the results of a pilot study on the acquisition of verb second (V2) in Icelandic as a second language. Forty-five students of Icelandic as a Second Language at the University of Iceland, aged 21-63, were presented with a task, which consisted of ten incomplete sentences, where only the first phrase was given. The students were of many different nationalities. They were asked to arrange words and phrases that were presented in a random order to form a grammatical sentence. In addition, each sentence had one verb in the infinitive, which the participants were asked to inflect.

Results show that the participants’ answers can be classified into four syntactic developmental stages: 1) No V2. This stage is characterized by lack of grammatical morphemes, speakers at this stage either over-generalizing the infinitive or verb roots. The only example of an inflected verb is after hvað (e. what), where it appears second in an embedded question, which is non-targetlike. 2) V2 emerges in matrix wh-questions but it is still over-generalized in embedded questions. Auxiliaries are inflected but only occasionally raised to second position, the copula vera (e. be) being the first one to be raised. Speakers at this stage do not use V2 after topicalised negation. V2 emerges after topicalised NPs, but infrequently after topicalised PPs. 3) V2 in embedded questions is still over-generalized. Auxiliaries are raised to second position and V2 is used after topicalised negation. Speakers seem to have mastered movement to I. 4) V2 in embedded questions is no longer over-generalized. V2 is consistently used after a topicalised PP. Minimum non-target word order within the TP. Most speakers seem to have mastered the movement to C.

The developmental stages outlined above show striking similarities to the stages that children go through in their first language acquisition of V2 in Icelandic, e.g. with respect to the over-generalization of V2 in embedded questions (see Sigurjónsdóttir 2005). However, the speakers produced many non-targetlike sentences with respect to placement of the finite verb, which have not been documented in children acquiring Icelandic, which raises the question of
whether the acquisition of syntactic phenomena in L2 is independent of the acquisition of morphological ones.

The number of participants in this study that had V2 in their native language was not high enough to get reliable results. Nevertheless, twelve speakers had V2 in their native languages and their answers indicate that they generally acquire V2 more easily than speakers of other languages. Most of these speakers had only one or two sentences with non-targetlike word order within the TP, where there was a clear L1 influence with respect to placement of the finite verb. These results support the results of Ute Bohnacker, who found robust evidence in Swedish learners of German for L1-syntax transfer of the V2 property from Swedish to German (Bohnacker, 2006).

References:
