

## THE ADULT L2 ACQUISITION OF THE SAXON GENITIVE: ITALIAN AND SPANISH RESULTS

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**ABSTRACT.** *The main goal of this paper is to give evidence for the general hypothesis that adult subjects learning a second language have access to Universal Grammar (UG) at all stages. According to our new findings, L1 transfer is not only what is at hand in the acquisition of the Saxon Genitive by Spanish speaking adults, since Spanish grammar bans the presence of determiners in prenominal possessors (e.g. \*el/un mi amigo), and yet Spanish adults produce the same type of errors found with Italian adults, according to results reported by Bennati and Domenico (2007), whose L1 allows the possibility of having a prenominal possessor following the determiner (il/un mio amico).*

**KEY WORDS.** *Saxon Genitive, English L2 Acquisition, Critical Period, Interlanguage, Universal Grammar, Full Access/ Transfer, Parameters.*

**RESUMEN.** *El objetivo principal de este trabajo es aportar una prueba empírica a favor de la hipótesis de acceso a la Gramática Universal por parte de hablantes adultos que adquieren la lengua inglesa como lengua extranjera. De una forma contrastiva, se comparan los resultados obtenidos por parte de hablantes italianos (Bennati and Domenico 2007) con los obtenidos aquí por parte de hablantes españoles que adquieren las formas de genitivo en inglés en un contexto formal. En concreto se examinan los tipos de errores, muchas veces similares, que se producen en uno y otro grupo de sujetos a pesar de que parten de unas opciones paramétricas distintas (il/un mio amico vs.\*el/un mi amigo).*

**PALABRAS CLAVE.** *Genitivo Saxon, Adquisición del inglés como L2, Período Crítico, Interlengua, Gramática Universal, Acceso Pleno/Transferencia, Parámetros.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the generative tradition, *Universal Grammar (UG)* plays either a direct or an indirect role in the acquisition of second languages. One may find serious

problems with adult L2 acquisition, and yet obtain linguistic development similar to the one attested by children when they undergo L1 acquisition. The still-ongoing debate lies on the exact role that *UG* plays in L2 Acquisition among structure building theories of L2 morphological development within a number of syntactic frameworks including *minimal trees*, *valueless features* and *full access* (Hawkins 2001). There are two clear trends in the last framework which we are interested in discussing here. First, the *Full Access Hypothesis (FAH)* is supported by researchers who argue that *UG* is the initial state of L2 acquisition (see, for example, Epstein, Flynn and Martohardjono 1996). Secondly, the *Full Transfer Full Access hypothesis (FTFA)* (see, for example, Schwartz and Sprouse 1994, 1996; White 1989, 2003; Escobar 1997) states that the learner's L1 grammar constitutes the initial state of L2 acquisition, but the L2 learner has access to *UG* in its entirety and, hence, parameter resetting is possible in L2 acquisition.

The study reported in this paper was aimed to test the predictions made by the FTFA hypotheses by considering the L2 acquisition of one syntactic parameter, the *Saxon Genitive parameter (SGP)* in English by native speakers of Italian and Spanish whose L1 apparently belongs to a different syntactic parameter, the *Prepositional Genitive parameter (PGP)*. We compare the L2 acquisition of the English possessive by native speakers of Italian (according to the data reported by Benatti and Domenico 2007) and by native speakers of Spanish according to the results of our experiment reported below.

The distribution of the paper is as follows. First, we will deal with the syntactic parameters under study examining the properties of English possessives in contrast to Italian and Spanish equivalent examples. Second, we will discuss experimental results found in Bennati and Domenico (2007) under the Full Transfer Full Access hypothesis. Next, we will turn to our study of acquisition of the English possessive by Spanish learners of L2 English. Finally we discuss our results considering the predictions of the FTFA.

## 2. TWO SYNTACTIC PARAMETERS

In this section, we look into the properties of two different parameters corresponding with the structure of possessives of Germanic and Romance languages, with the purpose of testing the FTFA hypothesis for the L2 acquisition of the Saxon Genitive by Spanish adult subjects.

### 2.1. *Strong versus weak D*

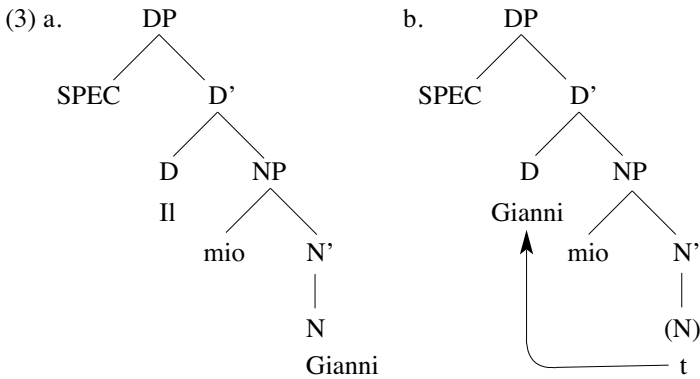
On the DP-hypothesis, the noun phrase is strictly speaking a determiner phrase, and NP designates a constituent of the noun phrase, taken to be the complement of the determiner (Szabolcsi 1983; Abney 1987). Then, the Italian example in (1) is formed by the NP *mio Gianni* (my Gianni), a complement of the Determiner *Il* (The).

(1) [<sub>DP</sub> Il [<sub>NP</sub> mio Gianni ]]

Longobardi (1994) further argues that proper names in Italian and other Romance languages must move from the noun head (N) to the determiner head (D) when a determiner is not present, which explains the following contrast:

- (2) a. \* $[_{DP} \text{ — } [_{NP} \text{ mio Gianni } ]]$   
 b.  $[_{DP} \text{ Gianni} [_{NP} \text{ mio } t_i]]$

The grammatical examples in (1) and (2b) correspond to the trees in (3a) and (3b) respectively:



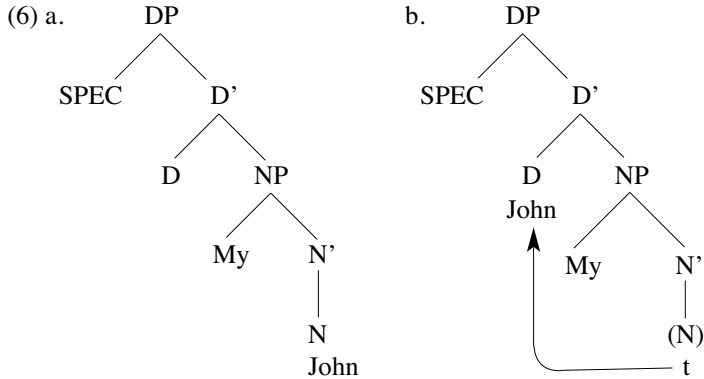
Looking at English, on the other hand, proper names are in complementary distribution with determiners, as illustrated by the ungrammatical example in (4):

- (4) \* $[_{DP} \text{ The } [_{NP} \text{ my John } ]]$

When a determiner is not present the proper name needn't move to fill the empty D head, which explains the following contrast:

- (5) a.  $[_{DP} [_{NP} \text{ my John } ]]$   
 b. \* $[_{DP} \text{ John} [_{NP} \text{ my } t_i]]$ .

In order to explain these linguistic parameters, Longobardi (1994) claims that N-to-D movement is overt in Romance but covert in Germanic. In other words, the D head in Romance is strong and N-to-D is compulsory (cf. 3b), whereas in Germanic D is weak and therefore N-to-D doesn't take place in the overt syntax (cf. 6b).



2.2. *One vs. two possessive configurations: Romance vs. English*

Italian like most Romance languages (including Spanish) exhibits one periphrastic (or analytic) structure of possessives that includes preposition *of* for both definite and indefinite readings, provided the examples in (7) and (8) respectively:

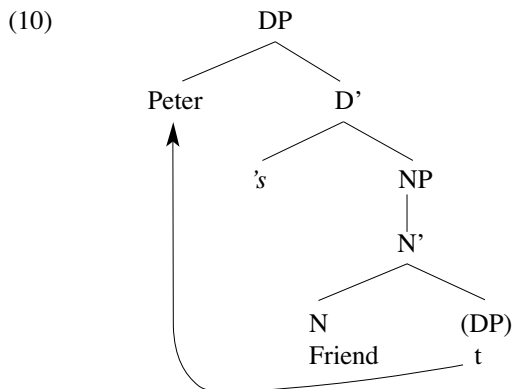
- (7) a. El amico de Gianni (Italian)  
 b. El amigo de Gianni (Spanish)

- (8) a. Un amico de Gianni (Italian)  
 b. Un amigo de Gianni (Spanish)

English, however, also exhibits two different configurations for the definite and indefinite possessives: the Saxon Genitive in (9a) versus the analytic construction in (9b), respectively:

- (9) a. John's friend  
 b. A friend of John's

We adopt Delsing's (1998) analysis and assume that the 's possessive marker is generated in the D head whereas the DP *Peter* has to move out of its canonical position within the lower NP into Spec D in order to trigger the definite reading.



Second, indefinite possessives consist of the periphrastic construction with preposition *of* as in the examples in (11):

- (11) a. A friend of Peter's  
 b. A friend of mine

Unlike definite possessives, indefinite genitives do not undergo any movement at all since they are instances of prepositional phrases, which correspond to the ordinary configuration of both definite and indefinites possessives in languages like Italian or Spanish:

- (12) a. El amigo de Peter  
 <Peter's friend>  
 b. Un amigo de Pedro  
 <A friend of Peter's>

However these two languages differ with respect to the possibility of having prenominal possessors following the Determiner. Unlike Italian, the Spanish pronominal possessor cannot precede the noun and if present it has to follow it, cf. (13) vs. (14):

- (13) a. \*El mio Juan (Spanish)  
 b. \*El mío amigo  
 c. El amigo mío  
 [The friend mine]

- (14) a. Il mio Gianni (Italian)  
 [The mine Gianni]  
 b. Il mio amico  
 [The mine friend]

Turning back to the problem of second language acquisition, if the FTFA hypothesis is correct speakers of Romance languages will start from their L1 grammar and therefore will first allow the analytic possessive construction for both definite and indefinite possessives in the target language. Secondly, Italian but not Spanish subjects will allow pronominal possessors co-occurring with the Determiner. In the following section such predictions are tested in our new experiment replicating the Italian findings found in Benatti and Domenico (2007).

### 3. THE EXPERIMENT

In order to test the acquisition of Saxon Genitive including both proper nouns and pronominal possessors, an experiment was conducted with a group of 70 Spanish speakers aged 22-45 studying English only in a formal environment, at *Centro Universitario de Idiomas a Distancia* (CUID, Madrid). Subjects belonged to three levels: elementary (10), intermediate (42) and upper-intermediate (18) according to their results in a previous placement test taken from the same school. All of them were university students who have studied English as a foreign language at school for at least 7 years.

Adopting Benatti and Domenico's (2007) experiment, subjects had to accomplish two written tasks: an Error Detection Task and a Translation Task. In the Error Detection Task (henceforth EDT), subjects were asked to detect items containing error of various kinds and eventually provide their correct counterpart. The EDT was preceded by a pre-test consisting of three sentences: two wrong (one corrected for exemplification) and one right. We also included items as functional distracters, some of which were part of the placement test mentioned above. We also had a group of 5 native speakers with whom we compared our results.

In the Translation Task (henceforth TT) subjects had to translate sentences from English into Spanish. The reasons for administering two different types of tasks is to ensure (i) that results are not task-dependent; (ii) that more transfer errors are expected to find in the TT task since they have to translate from their subjects' L1.

Both tasks (EDT and TT) were accomplished by the three groups. EDT consisted of 16 sentences: 8 experimental sentences and 8 fillers. The experimental sentences consisted of two correct 's genitive constructions and six 's genitive constructions containing errors of various types: lack of possessor movement with or without 's genitive marker (*House Peter is near the railway station; Car Mary's is red*), presence of a definite determiner preceding the possessee in various environments (*I read Linda's the book; The book Steven's has a blue cover*). The fillers consisted of 4 right sentences (e.g. *My name's Linda, Peter lives in Madrid, What's your name?, Where are Nokia phones from?*) and 4 wrong sentences containing various kinds or errors: preposition of vs. *from*, double suffix *s* (*My letter's is very nice*).

The TT also included 16 items: 8 experimental sentences containing possessive constructions and 8 fillers of various types. All experimental sentences contained

analytic possessive constructions, since like Italian, Spanish doesn't exhibit any other possible genitive equivalents.

### 3.1. Overall Results

First of all, in order to check the three different levels (Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced), we looked at our subject response with respect to a placement test included as part of the test:

<i>Placement test</i>	<i>Native-like</i>
Elementary	27/40 (67%)
Intermediate	56/72 (78%)
Advanced	18/20 (90%)

Table 1. *Placement Test Results.*

As shown by Table 2, the three groups seem to be slightly better in the EDT test than in the TT test, considering the number of correct sentences out of the total of the test-sentence judgements or translated sentences in each group.

<i>Adult groups</i>	<i>Error Detection Task</i>	<i>Translation Task</i>
Elementary (10)	34/60 (57%)	15/36 (42%)
Intermediate (42)	65/108 (60%)	42/72 (58%)
Advanced (18)	17/ 24 (70%)	11/16 (69%)

Table 2. *EDT and TT correct answers.*

According to the data above, there is development in both tasks, i.e. from 57% to 70% in the Error Detection Task (EDT), and from 42% to 69% in the Translation Task (TT).

### 3.2. *The Alison's cat error in EDT*

In order to see whether our subjects were native-like in their error detection, we looked at all their patterns in their interlanguage and, over all, we found a large number of what Benati and Domenico (2007) refer as *the Alison's cat error*. We found that our subjects incorrectly added the definite article to prenominal possessors nouns marked with 's. The patterns of this type of errors in contrast with other errors out of the total of test-sentence judgments are given in Table 3:

Adult groups	<i>The Alison's cat error</i>	<i>Other Errors</i>
Elementary	11/60 (18%)	20/60 (33%)
Intermediate	29/108 (27%)	28/108 (26%)
Advanced	3/24 (12%)	4/24 (17%)

Table 3. *The Alison's cat error vs. other type of errors in EDT.*

Interestingly, although there is a clear tendency to avoid *other errors*, we didn't observe any improvement with respect to *the Alison's cat error*. In fact we found a general acceptance of a determiner with a pre-nominal possessor in all groups which was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 4.8000$   $p = 0.02$  in elementary group,  $\chi^2 = 26.6571$   $p = 0.00$  in intermediate group and  $\chi^2 = 41.8605$   $p = 0.00$  in the advanced group).

The *Alison's cat error* was considered evidence for L1-Transfer in Benatti & Domenico's (2007) paper, since in Italian the Determiner can occur with a prenominal pronominal possessor as in the structure (3a) above for the genitive *Il mio Gianni* in (1). This genitive structure is however impossible in Spanish, cf. (13a) above. Hence, the only potential case of Transfer error for Spanish speakers is the use of the periphrastic construction instead of the Saxon Genitive.

### 3.3. *The analytic possessive construction error in EDT*

The percentage of the periphrastic possessive construction error versus other type of errors out of the total test-sentence judgments is given in Table 4.

Adult groups	<i>Analytic possessive construction error</i>	<i>Other errors</i>
Elementary	7/60 (12%)	9/60 (15%)
Intermediate	10/108 (1%)	18/108 (17%)
Advanced	0/24 (0%)	4/24 (17%)

Table 4. *The analytic possessive construction error vs. other type of errors in EDT.*

Significantly, subjects in the Intermediate and Advanced groups made less use of the periphrastic possessive construction to target the English Saxon Genitive than subjects of the Elementary group. This contrast clearly points to improvement with this respect to this type of error.

Above all, we observed that all subjects had difficulty with indefinite possessives. In particular, they incorrectly reject the grammaticality of the elliptical construction (*A friend of Peter's*).



### 3.4. Errors in TT

In the following task, reported below, we counted the errors out of the total of translated sentences produced by each group.

As we said, the TT was administered to the three groups. Overall results in section 3.1 above showed that subjects were less accurate in this second task. However, Table 5 shows progression from one group to another in the accomplishment of this task.

Adult groups	<i>Native-like</i>	<i>Errors</i>
Elementary (10)	15/36 (42%)	20/36 (55%)
Intermediate (18)	43/72 (60%)	29/72 (40%)
Advanced (4)	11/16 (69%)	5/16 (31%)

Table 5. *Native-like and errors in the Translation Task (TT).*

The patterns of errors we found in this task are summarised in Table 6 as: (1) *the Alison's cat*; (2) Saxon Genitive for inanimates; (3) the analytic possessive construction and (4) others, including lack of determiners or incorrect morphological agreement.

Adult groups	<i>Error (1)</i>	<i>Error (2)</i>	<i>Error (3)</i>	<i>Error (4)</i>
Elementary	6/20 (30%)	4/20 (20%)	3/20 (15%)	7/20 (35%)
Intermediate	7/29 (24%)	6/29 (21%)	5/29 (17%)	5/29 (17%)
Advanced	2/5 (40%)	2/5 (40%)	0/50%	1/5 (20%)

Table 6. *Type of Errors in TT.*

As in the ED, we didn't find any significant development with respect to *the Alison's cat* error in the TT. We only found significant development with respect to the potential Transfer error of the periphrastic possessive construction,  $\chi^2 = 11.5123$ ;  $p = 0.00$ .

Interestingly, a new type of error which is rather pervasive in the three groups is the incorrect use of the Saxon Genitive for inanimates. As shown before, English allows the periphrastic possessive construction for inanimates. If our subjects started from their L1-grammar, they would accept it, contrary to the evidence provided.

## 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Kim, *et al.*'s (1997) neurolinguistic study identified distinct cortical areas associated with native and second languages. The results showed important distances between young

and late learners with respect to brain activity. For many linguists these findings support a *critical period* hypothesis for language acquisition, and, hence, support early foreign language instruction. However, other more recent studies put forward the idea that though early acquisition of a L2 appears to require less cellular area than in late acquisition, the study simply cannot suggest anything more without further study. Moreover, the evidence from new studies suggests that the plasticity of the brain, that is its ability to adapt and change according to new demands, shows the sensitive period can be overcome (Kohnert *et al.* 1999; Hernández *et al.* 2000; Hernández and Kohnert 1999). In fact, these other studies show evidence of better proficiency in L2 over L1 (in this case, Spanish), suggesting that English becomes the dominant language over time when this is the language of the learner's academics.

The subjects that participated in our experiment also use English for academic purposes. Importantly they were not exposed to any negative evidence before being tested on the English possessive.

Given our results, we claim that there is full access to UG, since our subjects showed L2 development and all economy principles are available in their interlanguage (cf. White 2003). First, our subjects avoid the costly operation of moving the Possessor to the Determiner slot, and prefer to merge the possessive marker to the head noun. Crucially, this more economic strategy is fully productive in natural languages like Hungarian, whose possessives are realized by a morpheme attached to the possessed noun as a possessive marker (Szabolcsi 1994), without triggering any further movement.

According to Benatti and Domenico's (2007) data, their subjects only produce *The Alison's cat* pattern but we have found that Spanish speakers produce both definite and indefinite determiners using the same pattern (*The Alison's cat* and *An Alison's cat*). This is in fact expected from the view that their interlanguage is affected by UG. If *The Alison's cat* pattern had to be interpreted as Transfer, we would expect Italian subjects to be able to produce *The/A my cat*, but these authors didn't find this pattern in any of their results. On our alternative hypothesis this result is however expected since L2 learners seem to follow a strategy licensed by UG.

In order for second language learners to succeed, they have to be exposed to a larger number of both definite and indefinite genitives in order to be aware of each different configuration. In future research we aim to test whether this contrastive-pattern learning strategy provides better results in the acquisition of the English genitive.

## NOTE

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