

Evidence Available for the Acquisition of a Subset Grammar

In the second language (L2) acquisition of phonology, it is assumed that subset grammars can only be acquired using direct or indirect negative evidence or, in certain L1-L2 combinations, using direct positive evidence from morphophonemic alternations, loanword adaptations or comparison of cognates. This paper explores another type of evidence that may be available in certain L1-L2 contexts: indirect positive evidence (IPE). IPE is available through errors made by native speakers of the learner's L2 in the learner's L1.

We experimentally examine whether native speakers of English, who are naïve to the structure of Brazilian Portuguese (BP), can learn the phonotactic constraints holding of word-initial position in BP only using IPE. Word-initial clusters in English are sC and CL in shape; BP only permits CL. In native BP words and loanwords, sC is repaired via prothesis (Mateus & d'Andrade 2000). BP-speaking learners of English also use prothesis to repair sC-initial words when speaking English (Cardoso 2007). We predict that English speakers who observe the repair to sC in BP-accented English will infer that in BP: (i) word-initial sC clusters are ill-formed; (ii) sC is repaired using prothesis; (iii) CL clusters are well-formed.

32 anglophone participants listened to a dialogue in English between two BP speakers who used prothesis to repair sC-initial words. Participants were then tested on the well-formedness of BP-like words. Results from approximately half supported predictions (i)-(iii) indicating that these participants were able to use IPE to build a grammar that is a subset of their own English grammar.