

Island sensitivity in development: A perspective from L2 adults, L2 children and L1 youths

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The traditional approach to extraction islands in research on nonnative language (L2) has focused on differences between the native language (L1) and the Target Language (TL), typically asking whether adult L2ers (come to) have the same sensitivity as mature natives (e.g. Bley-Vroman, Felix & Ioup 1988; Hawkins & Chan 1997; Johnson & Newport 1991; Martohardjono 1993; Schachter 1989; White 1992). These studies, where the TL is the more restrictive, point to three findings: (1) (in)sensitivity to extraction islands in the L1 exerts effects, from early adult L2 development onward; (2) as L2 proficiency increases, adult L2ers exhibit patterns of sensitivity similar to those of mature natives (e.g. differentiating 'weak' from 'strong' islands--Martohardjono 1993); and (3) nevertheless, even 'advanced' adult L2ers do not display the exact sensitivity of mature natives. In their study on (ostensible) L2-endstates, Johnson & Newport (J&N 1991) sought to determine whether there are L2 critical period effects in this domain by testing the L2 English of L1-Chinese speakers whose English-onset age ranged from 4 to 38 (all adults at time of testing). J&N found that oral acceptability judgments of adult L2 starters (\geq age 18), but *not* (early) child L2 starters (between age 4 and 7), fell (far) below native levels across 3 types of island violations: extraction from Relative Clauses (RCs), *wh*-islands and Complex NPs (CNPs). These findings suggest to J&N that "adult learners of a language will sometimes form hypotheses or rules ... unnatural to human languages" (p. 245).

Our study revisits (in)sensitivity to extraction islands but from a non-endstate perspective. Following Schwartz (e.g. 2003, 2004), we make a three-way comparison of L2 adults, L2 children (holding L1 constant) and L1 youths. Assuming that (early) child L2ers--in the course of development--create natural language grammars, we hypothesize that if adult L2ers and child L2ers--as well as L1 youths--exhibit similar features (specifically, divergence from mature natives' sensitivity to extraction islands), this would argue, *contra* J&N, that L2 adult Interlanguage is similarly constituted, and evinces non-targetlike insensitivity to islands for whatever reasons L2 child Interlanguage does.

A 72-item, contextualized oral acceptability-judgment task combined with an elicited-production task was administered in English to **L1-Korean adult L2ers** ($n=7$, English-onset age \geq 20, mean age at testing=29;4), **L1-Korean child L2ers** ($n=9$, English-onset age=4;0-7;9, mean age at testing=9;4), **L1-English youths** ($n=8$, mean age at testing=10;1) and **L1-English adults** ($n=9$). Each item comprises a series of pictures which the researcher narrates (in Korean to L2ers); after this, an English-learning puppet 'says' 3 things (each recorded twice) in English--sometimes questions, sometimes statements, sometimes well-formed, sometimes ill-formed--and the participant tells the puppet whether each sounds 'ok' or 'strange' (acceptability judgment), and if 'strange', how to say it 'better' (elicited production). General (prerequisite) grammar relevant to extraction from islands was also tested (RCs, *do*-support, simple questions, subject-auxiliary inversion ($k=3$ each)), but critical items target 3 island violation types ($k=4$ each):

- (1) *Who did Daddy send the card to the policeman that found? (RC)
- (2) *What did Pooh ask Piglet where Daddy put? (*wh*-island)
- (3) *What did Pooh remember the fact that Mickey liked? (CNP)

Results: (a) all 4 groups show sufficient knowledge of general (prerequisite) English grammar; (b) L1-English adults are at ceiling on all 3 types of island violations (e.g. mean accuracy=98%); (c) adult L2ers exhibited (some) sensitivity to island violations (e.g. mean accuracy=80%), as did child L2ers (e.g. mean accuracy=71%) and L1-English youths (e.g. mean accuracy=83%); and (d) whereas our adult L2ers differed little across the 3 island violation types, our child L2ers evinced a pattern similar to that of our L1-English youths: most targetlike in rejecting extraction from RCs and least targetlike in rejecting extraction from CNPs--paralleling, moreover, J&N's adult 'endstate' L2ers.

These findings pose a challenge to J&N's conclusion about adult Interlanguage grammars. Yet, they also seem to pose a question to processing-based accounts of island violations: If strains on processing give rise to the unacceptability of sentences like (1)-(3), why then do populations with reduced sentence-processing resources allow what is unacceptable to mature natives, i.e. *over-accept rather than over-reject*?

References

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