BOOK REVIEWS


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Introduction

In 2011 Kristof Baten defended his PhD thesis A Processability Approach to the Acquisition of the German Case System by Dutch-Speaking Foreign Language Learners at the Universiteit Gent in Belgium. Baten was encouraged to pursue publication of his thesis, which has resulted in the book under review. As the publisher advertises, this is ‘the first book on the acquisition of the German case system by foreign language learners’ <http://benjamins.com/#catalog/books/palart.2>. It is published within the PALART series, which stands for Processability Approaches to Language Acquisition Research and Teaching, edited by Manfred Pienemann, Bruno Di Biase and Jörg-U. Keßler. The result is a comprehensive volume explaining the theoretical grounds of both Processability Theory (PT) and the second language acquisition (SLA) of a case system (with a focus on German), reviewing the relevant literature in these fields and presenting an in-depth longitudinal study into the acquisition of the form-function mapping of German case assignment by eleven native speakers of Dutch.

Chapter 1. Introduction

Baten starts his book by situating the work within SLA and PT research. From the beginning he gives the reader plenty of authentic examples from (Dutch) second language (L2) speakers of German who are about to learn the case system in the target language. The second part of this chapter presents the theoretical framework, Processability Theory by giving arguments for the core statement that ‘a second language learner can produce only those L2 forms/structures that he or she can process.’ (Baten, 2013, p.6). The basics of PT are outlined in a nutshell and references to the following chapters advice the reader where to look for more
in-depth discussion of the theoretical underpinnings. Next, Baten briefly introduces the hypothesised developmental stages of acquiring case in German: all nominative > non-nominative for non-subject function based on e.g. word order (position marking) > distinction accusative-dative based on prepositions (lexical case assignment) > functional case assignment also in non-canonical order > conceptual case marking, when the learner has acquired the form-function mapping at the conceptual level (e.g. alternating case-use for two-way prepositions).

As such, the introduction briefly explains the theoretical and technical basics of PT and the German case system and presents the learner's perspective supported by authentic data gathered from learner forums.

Chapter 2. The developmental problem in second language acquisition

The second chapter focuses on Pienemann’s (1998) Processability Theory, which is the theoretical framework Baten situates his work in. PT ‘explains what causes the development of a particular target language to follow the route that it follows’ (Baten 2013, p. 19) by drawing on three structure levels of language, i.e., the argument (a) structure, the functional (f) structure and the constituent (c) structure.

Next, Baten uses Levelt’s (1989) Speech Production Model and its distinction of Conceptualiser and Formulator to exemplify the language generation process: ‘The grammatical encoding of the Formulator is processed through two processing sets. The output of the Conceptualiser is first processed functionally, which involves lexical selection and functional assignment, and is then processed positionally, which, in turn, involves constituent assembly and inflection.’ (Baten, 2013, p. 25). For native (L1) speakers these processes are performed largely automatically but an L2 speaker needs to build up new values for the target language.

The next section provides details of Lexical-Functional Grammar (Kaplan & Bresnan, 1982). This theory distinguishes a language specific constituent structure at the surface from a universal underlying functional structure. Importantly for Baten’s work, case assignment is not inherently linked to a specific grammatical function. Accordingly, the same basic function can be expressed by different forms at the surface (e.g. active vs. passive voice in German).

The two final sections of Chapter 2 take up the L2 learner’s perspective when Baten first explains developmental schedules (2.3) and then applies them to German as an L2 (2.4). From a PT point of view, both the processing procedures (cf. Levelt) and the linguistic knowledge of the L2 (cf. Bresnan’s LFG) become available to the learner only gradually. Accordingly, L2 learners start off with a parallel mapping of the a-, f-, and c-structures. Stage-by-stage they then acquire the non-linear relationships of natural languages. Crucially, learners often base their
production on what they know already, that is, their L1. With growing target language competence they acquire the deviations from the system they know. Baten explains why his work focuses on case assignment in German: Apart from the fact that it has hardly been examined within a PT framework, the group of learners he is studying (Dutch native speakers) share word order but not case assignment in their L1 Dutch and L2 German.

Chapter 3. The acquisition of the German case system

Baten summarises earlier work on the acquisition of the German case system in his third chapter. First he critically reviews early, generativist and functionalist research into child language acquisition and closes with the words that this work has not created a conclusive picture. This is due to the fact that ‘none of the studies are really embedded in a theory of language development that disassociates itself from language-internal explanations […] the various studies use data sets of different nature […] and […] the different criteria that the various studies adopt for considering something acquired or not’ (Baten, 2013, p. 81). Baten aims to address these problems in his own work.

Baten gives an extensive summary of the few investigations on L2 acquisition of German case assignment by contrasting second language to foreign language contexts and states that much earlier work has taken a pedagogic approach by focusing on when and how to teach the German case system rather than relating it to SLA theory. By acknowledging the value and insights of these earlier investigations he concludes that, together, they have not managed to provide a generalizable picture. Crucially for his own research, none of them adopts a PT perspective — which combines a processing approach with grammatical theory and, therefore may be able to fill the gaps in research regarding the acquisition of German case assignment.

Chapter 4. Feature unification and linking in case marking

In Chapter 4 Baten sets out to give a PT account of the German case system and its acquisition. By applying the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2 he explains how PT predicts that non-linear a-to-f or c-to-f structure mapping results in later acquisition than linear mappings because the former poses higher processing demands than the latter. Giving plenty of examples and going back to the earlier reviewed work in Chapter 3, he reiterates an important theoretical claim: the use of a case marker does not mean that the function is fully acquired. ‘Only
when empirical data include non-canonical sentences can it be demonstrated that learners proceed from marking the position to marking the function’ (Baten, 2013, p. 126) because ‘a case cannot be acquired independently, but only in opposition to another case or cases’ (Baten, 2013, p. 128).

Based on this crucial assumption and the further insight that case acquisition and word-order regularities are closely related, he then proposes the developmental hypotheses that underlie his work — nicely summarized in two tables: ‘Functional case assignment will emerge when the sentence procedure is fully active […] which implies] that learners will use a case opposition within the oblique, i.e. between the accusative and dative cases.’ In brief, the acquisition of the German case system is expected to develop from non-functional to functional marking.

Chapter 5. Methodology

In this chapter, Baten presents the empirical study he performed in order to test his hypotheses. First he outlines the methodological approach he adopted to collect a large data set required for research into the many-to-many form-function mappings of the German case system. He performed a longitudinal study with eleven beginner and advanced Dutch foreign language learners of German and asked them to tell a picture story at six different moments of time spread over a period of two years. All data were transcribed and coded for the emergence of the form-function mapping of German cases in the learner data. Baten clearly justifies why he opted for the emergence criterion rather than the accuracy threshold used in earlier studies.

Chapter 6. Results and discussion

The results of the empirical study are presented and discussed in great detail in Chapter 6, which covers more than 120 pages. First, Baten reviews the development of case in verb arguments, i.e. functional use in canonical and non-canonical sentences, and then shifts to prepositional phrases, i.e. the emergence of lexical case assignment. The data on verb arguments show that Dutch L2 learners of German display (as can be expected on the basis of their L1) a high level of syntactic accuracy, which contrasts with a rather low level of correct morpho-syntactic marking. These findings support Baten’s hypothesised developmental sequence from all-nominative via direct case mapping (no difference between accusative and dative) to direct mapping including the ability to differentiate these cases and the final stage of functional marking of all cases in all positions.
With respect to prepositional phrases Baten’s data show how L2 learners go from a stage of non-emergence to a stage of emergence. In the case of so-called one-way prepositions the difference between accusative and dative seems to emerge earlier than in verb arguments. The acquisition of case assignment following two-way prepositions — a specifically complex feature of German because case is based on a conceptual difference and cannot be derived on lexical grounds only — is in agreement with Baten’s predictions: verb arguments seem to be used accurately at an earlier stage than the emergence of correct marking of two-way prepositions. As such, the study reveals that the accusative-dative opposition is acquired differently in different contexts (verb arguments versus prepositional phrases).

Chapter 7. General conclusion

The final chapter concisely summarises the theoretical framework and the assumed developmental sequence that form the basis for the empirical study reviewed in Chapter 6. Briefly, the main findings and its contribution to the field are presented before some suggestions for future work are given. Baten finishes with a quote from an L2 learner faced with the German case system — continuing the learner perspective that he presented throughout the volume.

Critical discussion of contribution to the field

Baten’s (2013) study is rooted in Pienemann’s (1998) *Processability Theory*. It is the first volume that focuses on the acquisition of the German case system by foreign language learners within the PT framework and as such presents theoretically and empirically original work. In addition, Baten substantiates his theoretical approach by drawing on Kaplan and Bresnan’s (1982) Lexical-Functional Grammar (LFG). The in-depth analysis of longitudinal learner data from eleven L2 speakers of German allows him to draw firm conclusions, e.g. that German accusative and dative case are not acquired consecutively but together as an opposition. As a whole, this volume presents a unique and rigorous piece of SLA scholarship.

Baten’s scientific style is straightforward, well-structured and has a clear focus on German L2 by Dutch foreign language learners. Throughout the work he reminds the reader of the learner’s perspective. For example, the theoretical concepts are all clearly explained and exemplified with authentic learner data. In his discussion of the literature, Baten critically reviews the field and identifies flaws in earlier work. Given the fact that his review of the PT literature is extensive and
encompasses work on many different target and source languages, his critique seems to be well-founded. Similarly, Baten displays extensive knowledge of work into the L1 and L2 acquisition of German taking different theoretical frameworks (e.g. generative, functional) into account. The heart of the book — Chapter 6 — which presents and discusses his own data is rigorous and elaborate. In addition, it stands out from much of the earlier work because it approaches the data from different analytical levels. The analyses are nicely accompanied by tables and graphical representations, which support the interpretation of his data in terms of growth over time for groups of learners and individual cases.

As a whole, this volume is a valuable addition to the field of SLA but, especially, worth reading for anyone doing research into PT and the acquisition of German case assignment. Due to its methodological clarity (in terms of empirical set-up and data analysis), it can be used very well as a guide to perform future research into PT and the acquisition of case — be it in German or any other L2. Even though the theoretical chapters and literature review are covering PT as a whole, the volume may be most suitable for others working in a similar context because the elaborateness and detail seem to target this specific audience rather than someone interested in the acquisition of a foreign language or the acquisition of case in general.

A critical note could be added here that given its learner perspective, which is displayed throughout the volume, it is a pity that no pedagogical implications are formulated at the end of the study. In relation to earlier work into the acquisition of the German case system, in particular by Dutch native speakers, that has mainly taken a didactic approach, it would seem appropriate to hear the author’s voice about pedagogical issues.

Furthermore, the work probably could have benefited from an overview of the German case paradigm (as part of the introduction). Currently, the many examples (and Figure 5.3 on p. 150) help the reader understand the general problem L2 learners of the German case assignment are faced with. However, readers not familiar with German may find it difficult at times to follow the author’s line of reasoning. An introduction of the learner-problem, e.g., a table showing the intricate form-function relationships that need to be acquired would have helped the reader a lot.

Conclusion

Baten (2013) presents a theoretically extensive, methodologically rigorous and analytically elaborate and detailed study into the acquisition of the German case system embedded in the PT framework. Due to its specific focus, it may be most
suitable for a specialist audience adopting the same theoretical approach and/or focusing on the L2 development of case systems. For that particular purpose, this book is a valuable contribution to the field of SLA.

References


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