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Syntax transfer effects: A tool for studying second language learning?

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Michael A. Skeide provides an elegant and incisive commentary on our recent article ‘Anomalous transfer of syntax between languages’, in which we show that abstract syntactic rules transfer spontaneously between bilinguals’ two languages. Our findings cast light on the long-standing and contentious debate on functional representation of syntax in the brain. Skeide proposes that the phenomenon of spontaneous syntactic transfer may also be used to unpick another Goliath of the psycholinguistic debates: that of sensitive periods for language acquisition. Skeide argues convincingly that examining spontaneous syntactic transfer from the second to the first language would provide insight on whether syntax in the second language has become established. However, by asking the question: What is the crucial age at which second language syntax can transfer to the syntax of the first language? Skeide assumes that 1. syntax can transfer from the L2 to the L1, and 2. that age of acquisition is a key factor in L2 syntax establishment/acquisition. Regarding the first assumption, it is not known whether L2 syntax transfers from L2 to L1. Our study provided evidence for L1 syntax to the L2, not the reverse. Regarding the second assumption, to our knowledge there is no consensus in the field that age of acquisition (AOA) determines the extent of syntax or even language proficiency. The extent of immersion in the second language and individual differences in overall language attainment may have a greater impact than AOA.

Therefore, studying the conditions under which spontaneous syntactic transfer occurs may not be the ultimate approach for investigating entrenchment, or fluency in the second language. However, establishing a time window in development when syntactic transfer (from L1 to L2 and vice versa) can occur would provide a breakthrough in the sensitive periods of language acquisition debate.

In sum, Skeide presents a very interesting possible application of the spontaneous transfer of syntax effect. As well as being used to demonstrate abstract representation of rules in the brain, it may be used in a broader context to examine the factors and limitations governing second language learning.