Making do: Form-meaning mappings in L2 production

Hana Smiskova-Gustafsson
University of Groningen

Usage-based approaches see language as an inventory of conventionalized form-meaning mappings (or, constructions) of differing degrees of specification (Langacker 2008). L1 is constructed together with new meanings by mapping conventionalized forms onto meaning, with frequency of forms in input playing a crucial role in the process (Tomasello 2003). Fully productive abstract constructions - such as the verb-argument construction - develop by generalizing over lexically specific chunks. Consequently, L1 production can be described as the recycling of linguistic material; and L1 productivity as the cutting and pasting of previously encountered lexical material into slots in more or less abstract constructions (Dabrowska & Lieven 2005).

Although many of the same usage-based principles also apply to L2 learning, constructing an L2 is different from constructing an L1 (Ellis & Cadierno 2009). Since L2 learners already have in place their L1 meanings and the corresponding L1 constructions (Tyler 2012), their L2 is mostly constructed on top of their L1. Frequency of L2 forms in input is crucial but the amount and character of input may differ for each learner. Unlike L1 users, L2 learners do not always have sufficient exposure to conventionalized forms. So while the basic mechanisms of the recycling process and the productive cut-and-paste process in L2 may be very similar to those in L1, what is pasted and where will be heavily influenced by entrenched L1 constructions and by the available L2 resources. To express a certain meaning in their L2, learners may come up with linguistic "make-do solutions" (Larsen-Freeman 2013:104) rather than using the conventionalized form mapping onto the meaning.

Taking a usage-based perspective, this study investigates form-meaning mappings in L2 production by closely examining Dutch L2 learners' of English (N=167) linguistic make-do solutions for two beyond-word-level notions: *put money in the bank* (V Obj $Obl_{path/loc}$) and *give money to charity* (V Obj Obj2). The findings show common patterns in how the learners express each notion. Firstly, the learners seem to break down the beyond-word-level notion into separate semantic units. Next, they find a suitable form for these units - often heavily influenced by their L1 – thus creating constituent form-meaning mappings. Finally, the learners use their L1 Dutch verb-argument constructions and fill the appropriate slots with the constituent form-meaning mappings. There are common patterns at different levels of the learner expressions as the learners draw on L1 Dutch constructions of various specifications, including abstract schemata. The interplay of L1 constructions and L2 frequency differs in the two notions. There are indications that this could be explained by constructional similarities between L1 Dutch and L2 English, together with different type and token frequencies of the conventionalized expressions for the two notions in English.

We conclude that L2 learners may not treat beyond-word-level notions holistically as complete semantic units for which there are conventionalized expressions; rather, they see the constituent words and phrases as the basic form-meaning mappings. This is then reflected in the way they produce utterances to express beyond-word-level notions.

Examples

Notion A: *put money in the bank* (V Obj $Obl_{path/loc}$)

a) learner expression	*the rest of the money I would bring to the bank*
b) L1 Dutch constr.	*de rest van het geld zou ik naar de bank brengen*
	(the rest of the money / would I / to the bank / bring)

Notion B: *give money to charity* (V Obj Obj2)

a) learner expression	*give some money to a good purpose*
b) L1 Dutch constr.	*geef wat geld aan een goed doel*
	(give / some money / on a good purpose)