Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Department of Foreign Literatures & Linguistics
Colloquium in Linguistics
On Tuesday, January 24, 2017, 12:00-13:30

Noa Brandel
Tel-Aviv University
will speak about:
Hebrew Speakers Unlearning Null Subjects in L2 English

The talk will take place in Bldg. 74, room 516

Abstract

In this talk I will present two longitudinal studies (one of which is still in progress) investigating the phenomenon of null subjects, alongside the cluster of properties associated with them, among Hebrew speakers acquiring English as a second language (L2). Each of the studies concerns a different age group: 12-year-olds and 18-year-olds, and thus some cross-sectional conclusions will also be drawn.

Both studies aim to shed light on the following questions: (i) Are syntactic properties transferred from the first language (L1) into the L2 grammar? (ii) Are properties transferred from the L1 resettable in L2 acquisition? (iii) Are L2 grammars sensitive to explicit positive evidence (based on Schwartz and Gubala-Ryzak’s 1992 definition)? To that end, syntactic phenomena in which Hebrew (L1) differs from English (L2) were
examined: the (un)availability of phonetically null referential and expletive subjects, the (un)availability of post-verbal subjects, and the (non)occurrence of that-trace effects (in accordance with the feature cluster associated with the Null Subject Parameter in Rizzi 1982). Hebrew, being a (partially/mixed) null-subject language, allows phonetically null subjects and the related structures, while English, a non-null-subject language, disallows them.

In each of the studies, participants were divided into two groups. During teaching, both groups were exposed to texts abundant with expletive subjects, but only in one group were expletives emphasized via explicit positive evidence. A Hebrew-to-English translation-choice task tested the above properties pre-teaching, immediately post-teaching, and four months post-teaching among the 12-year-olds, and only pre- and post-teaching among the 18-year-olds (the third test is yet to be conducted).

Results are examined vis-à-vis two L2 acquisition accounts: Schwartz and Sprouse’s (1994, 1996) Full Transfer/Full Access Model, anchored within Chomsky’s (1981) theory of Principles and Parameters, and Tsimpli and Mastropavlou’s (2007) Interpretability Hypothesis, inspired by Chomsky’s (1995) Minimalist Program. The former predicts resettability of transferred properties, and clustering of properties regulated by a (macro-) parameter. The latter distinguishes interpretable features, which contribute to the semantic interpretation of the sentence, from uninterpretable features, whose role is purely syntactic. It is proposed that only interpretable features are accessible to the L2 learner, and as such, they may also serve to mediate the acquisition of uninterpretable features (otherwise inaccessible during L2 acquisition). So far, the results seem more compatible with the theory of (macro-)parameters, reinforcing their status in linguistic theory in general, and suggesting they might play a role in L2 acquisition in particular.