The Influence of L1, Semantic Complexity, and Proficiency on Phrasal Verb Avoidance and Particle Placement Preferences

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Phrasal verbs pose a significant challenge to non-native English speakers due to their semantic complexity and structural differences from learners' first languages (L1) (e.g. Dagut and Laufer, 1985; Hulstijn and Marchena, 1989; Laufer and Eliasson, 1993; Liao and Fukuya, 2004; Siyanova and Schmitt, 2007). While phrasal verbs are well-researched in an L1 context, studies contrasting L1 and L2 usage are scarce. This research investigates the avoidance of English phrasal verbs and particle placement preferences among English, German, and French native speakers, focusing on the role of L1 influence, semantic complexity, and proficiency.

This study investigates two key aspects: (1) the avoidance of phrasal verbs among native German and French speakers compared to native English speakers, and (2) their preferences regarding particle placement. Specifically, it explores how semantic complexity, structural similarities, and differences between English and the respective L1, as well as proficiency levels influence avoidance behaviors and particle placement preferences. To investigate these questions, the study employs a survey-based experimental design, where participants (three groups – native English, German, and French speakers) complete multiple-choice tasks and sentence production exercises related to phrasal verbs. The stimuli include verbs with varying levels of idiomaticity and separability, and participants' English proficiency is assessed through a background questionnaire. Multivariate statistical analyses will be employed to examine how L1, semantic complexity, and proficiency impact avoidance behavior and structural preferences.

Preliminary findings from a pilot study investigating German and English native speakers indicate that while German native speakers use phrasal verbs less frequently than English natives, they do not categorically avoid them, with idiomatic phrasal verbs being avoided more often than literal ones. Both groups favor the V-Prt-O construction, with German speakers demonstrate a slightly stronger preference, likely due to processing costs. Factors such as object weight, idiomaticity, and definiteness influence particle placement, with heavier objects, more literal meanings, and concrete nouns favoring the V-Prt-O structure. Interestingly, proficiency level did not significantly affect usage or placement preferences, suggesting that L1 influences and structural similarities between German and English are more significant than proficiency in shaping behavior.

This study anticipates that German speakers will avoid phrasal verbs less frequently than French speakers, likely due to the structural similarities between German and English. Additionally, highly idiomatic phrasal verbs will be avoided more regularly than transparent ones, regardless of L1. Concerning particle placement, it is expected that the L1 will influence preferences, with German speakers favoring particle movement more than French speakers. Higher proficiency and increased exposure to English are expected to enhance the acceptance of separable phrasal verbs.

By examining the role of L1 structures, semantic complexity, and proficiency in the acquisition of phrasal verbs, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of second language acquisition. Its findings offer valuable insights into how cross-linguistic factors shape learners' behavior and inform language teaching approaches. These insights are particularly relevant for addressing language-specific challenges in the acquisition of complex lexical structures such as phrasal verbs.

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