

Revisiting the Interface Hypothesis: A Theoretical Discussion of its Claims and Predictions for Second Language Acquisition

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The issue: The original formulation of the Interface Hypothesis (IH) argued that phenomena at the interfaces of syntax and other linguistic domains are more difficult to acquire than those that are exclusively syntactic (Sorace, 2005; Sorace & Filiaci, 2006). The IH was later refined to propose developmental differences between grammar-internal (e.g. syntax-phonology, syntax-semantics) and grammar-external (e.g. syntax-discourse) interfaces (Tsimpli & Sorace, 2006; Sorace, 2011). Specifically, the refined IH suggests that phenomena at grammar-external interfaces may not be fully acquirable. Using support from an analysis of the Focus Sensitive Particle (FSP) *only*, I show that the current formulation of the IH is problematic for two reasons: (i) it is based on treating focus exclusively as the formal feature [$\pm F$], an analysis which does not include requisite discourse information, and (ii) evidence from L2 studies (past and current) suggests that phenomena at the grammar-external interface are acquirable. Essentially, I argue that the original formulation of the IH should be revisited in future work. To that end, this study addresses the following research questions: what interfaces are involved in the processing of the FSP *only*? and does the revised version of the IH hold up against empirical findings?

The interfaces: FSPs are operators that take scope over a specific constituent leading that constituent to be interpreted as the focus (König, 1991a,b; Rooth, 1992; Beck, 2016; Grosz, 2016). The most recognizable property of FSPs is their positional variability. Consider (1), where the difference in interpretations depends on where the FSP *only* occurs.

- (1) a. **Only** [Patrick]_{FOCUS} eats sushi. c. Patrick eats **only** [sushi]_{FOCUS}.
b. Patrick **only** [eats sushi]_{FOCUS}. d. Patrick eats [sushi]_{FOCUS} **only**.

In particular, *only* introduces a restrictive reading to propositions. In other words, the presence of *only* signals that a constituent is being contrasted with a set of alternatives. In short, for learners to fully interpret an utterance containing *only*, they must be able to construe a contrast set that is made available by either linguistic or environmental context. Previous analyses of focus in the IH treat focus as the feature [$\pm F$]. Thus, the approach to grammatical interfaces taken by the IH would treat sentences with an FSP like *only* as only involving the syntax-semantics interface in processing.

The L2 acquisition problem: The revised IH claims that phenomena that involve processing at the syntax-discourse interface require "a 'higher' level of language use" (Tsimpli & Sorace, 2006: 653) and are thus predicted to be non-target-like in advanced second language grammars. Crucially, the claims of the IH are contrary to studies which show adult second language learners can fully express discourse constrained information from early on (see Dimroth & Narasimhan, 2012), and even utilize discourse information to linearize their sentences at early stages of acquisition when knowledge of inflectional morphology and grammatical constructions is limited (cf. Klein and Perdue 1992; Klein and Perdue 1993, 1997). Moreover, Park (2013) argues that the L2 acquisition of the English articles *the* and *a* by native speakers of Korean cannot be accounted for by assuming a developmental difference between grammar-internal and grammar-external properties given that learners performed equally as well on definite uses (syntax-discourse interface) and generic uses (syntax-semantics interface). Additionally, Özçelik (2018), suggests that findings related to the Turkish L2 acquisition of quantificational scope by native speakers of English are better accounted for by lack of negative evidence than the refined IH.

The take home point: The acquisition of the FSP *only* cannot simply be treated as a learning problem at the syntax-semantics interface, i.e. discourse information is required. This is problematic for the IH, which bases its claims on studies that assume focus is only at the syntax-semantics interface. Furthermore, various phenomena at the grammar-external interface appear to be fully acquirable, meaning that the refined IH does not provide a meaningful distinction.

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