

A sensitive period for morphology? Morphosyntactic feature retrieval in bilinguals

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The relation between age and language acquisition has been subject to controversial debates in the language sciences. In particular, the question whether there is an ideal time window for the acquisition of grammatical knowledge has received much attention. The present study investigated effects of age of acquisition (AoA) of an L2 on the processing of fine-grained grammatical operations. In a cross-modal priming lexical decision study including 106 Russian learners of German with a wide range of AoAs between 0 and 22 years (mean CEFR level of German: C1), we examined differences of processing cost from inflected German strong verb forms with marked (wirft-werfen) versus unmarked stems (werfen-wirft) relative to repetition priming (wirft-wirft, werfen-werfen). Previous research with monolingual German speakers yielded higher processing cost for marked stem primes compared to unmarked ones relative to identical controls (Krause et al., 2015). Higher processing cost reflected extra processing effort for marked stem primes due to unprimed morphosyntactic target features and served as crucial measure of morphosyntactic sensitivity. The current pattern of results yielded a significant three-way interaction of AoA on the processing cost for marked versus unmarked stem allomorphs ($p=.01$), indicating greater processing cost for marked stem primes (wirft-werfen) with increasing AoA ($p=.012$). In addition, non-linear breakpoint regressions revealed a reliable discontinuity of this AoA effect ($p=.034$) with a gradual increase in processing cost for marked stem primes until the age of 10 ($p=.002$), which levels off thereafter ($p=.332$). In contrast, unmarked stem primes did not elicit such a discontinuity ($p=1.0$). We conclude that morphosyntactic feature retrieval is only operative during online language comprehension if exposure occurred early enough. More generally, the results suggest that the acquisition of grammatical information is selectively constrained by a sensitive period.

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