Preposition placement in learner English: 
Acceptability depends on input frequency and 
cross-linguistic similarity

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Recently, research on multilingualism has moved towards a more usage-based idea of linguistic knowledge (e.g., Hall 2016). This usage-based reorientation is complemented by recent efforts in Construction Grammar to factor in multilingual knowledge (e.g., Hilpert and Östman 2014). To back up this emerging paradigm empirically, the effect of preposition placement on the acceptability of English oblique relative clauses (RCs) in German and Chinese multilinguals was investigated. While preposition fronting is common to English and German (e.g., *Sarah never achieved [the fame of which she dreamt]*), English also uses preposition stranding (e.g., *[...] [the fame which she dreamt of]*). In contrast, Chinese uses neither but normally omits the preposition in oblique RCs which precede the modified noun (e.g., *I come 的 place*, Engl. *the place where I come from*).

In a magnitude estimation experiment, German and Chinese learners of English and native controls were asked to indicate the acceptability of English oblique RCs which systematically varied preposition placement and the prepositional verb. According to earlier research, learners favor stranding over fronting arguably because of the high frequency of stranding in their input (cf. Hoffmann 2011, pp. 101-104). In addition, I expected preposition fronting to be more acceptable to German than to Chinese learners due to first language transfer. Last, I expected the acceptability of fronting to increase even more when the English prepositional verb had a word-by-word translational equivalent in German. For statistical analysis, a linear mixed effects model was fitted to the data. The results indicate that stranding was more acceptable than fronting across learner groups, whereas the effect was reversed in native controls. As expected, preposition fronting was more acceptable to German than to Chinese learners. Moreover, proficiency level had a significant influence on the interaction such that the acceptability of stranding increased with proficiency in German but dropped in Chinese learners, while fronting remained stable in German but increased in Chinese learners suggesting a complex dynamic interplay between first language transfer and second language input. The predicted effect of the prepositional verb was not significant.

In general, this suggests that multilinguals don’t acquire two separate language systems – their first and some second inter-language – but an integrated one which emerges from the dynamic interaction of first language transfer and second language input. Following Höder (2012), I argue that German learners of English acquire an interlingual diaconstruction which generalizes over German and English exemplars of fronting oblique RCs in their multilingual input. This suggests that learners acquire an all-encompassing dynamic network of usage-based constructions, “a ragbag of resources from several languages that are put to use in the situations that require them” (Hilpert and Östman 2014, p. 139).


