L2 parameter “shifting” in the DP domain: developmental patterns in the acquisition of German possessive constructions

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The present study aims at contributing to the debate on inconsistency in L2 parameter resetting (White 1990/1991, Hawkins 1993, Herschensohn 1998a, 2000) by adding new evidence on parameter resetting in the nominal domain and by discussing the role that internal factors (properties of the L1, Subset Principle) and external factors (negative evidence) may or may not have in such a process. Specifically, the acquisition of some aspects of the morphosyntax of German possessive constructions is investigated in a population of Italian adult learners (N=32) with different proficiency levels by means of two different elicitation procedures. The main findings sustain the hypothesis that certain parameters cannot be reset in an “all or nothing” manner in L2 acquisition, but are reset gradually (cf. Herschensohn 2000), regardless of their status with respect to the Subset Principle or the presence of negative evidence in the input. This is particularly evident in the intermediate stage of L2 acquisition, during which L2 learners are trying to abandon the L1 value for a given parameter, and, at the same time, they seem to test hypotheses about the L2 grammar.

Thanks to Luigi... for the guidance that led many interesting questions to come to my mind.

1. Introduction
In the spirit of Minimalism (Chomsky 1995), syntactic differences among languages, such as a positive or negative setting for a given parameter, should be confined to two slightly distinct options resulting in a range of clustered characteristics and related differences in linear word order among languages. According to this view, a major word order parameter like the Verb Raising Parameter (Pollock 1989) is due to the strength of the feature T(ense) in IP resulting in overt vs covert verb raising to T, as it is the case, for example, in French and English respectively. Consequently, differences in word order concerning negation and adverb placement emerge in the two languages. Under this view, if speakers have the potential to gain both values of a
given parameter through UG, the shifting to a new value in L2 should not be impossible and the most salient aspects of a given parameter, the ones easily detectable from positive evidence, should be the most easily accessible. However, many studies investigating L2 parameter resetting at the clausal level have shown that this process takes place gradually. As a consequence, a certain degree of variability and lack of clustering effects may emerge in interlanguage grammars. In a pivotal study on Verb Raising Parameter in L2 English, White (1990/91) tested verb placement with respect to negation and to adverbs in French adult L2 learners, and found a discrepancy between the two contexts as far as the position of verb is concerned. Similar findings have also been reported in the literature on this topic (Hawkins et al.1993, Herschensohn 1998a), suggesting that the L2 learner may go through a period of “parametric inconsistency” during which his/her interlanguage grammar may display lack of clustering effects.

In the past, much work has focused on L2 parameter resetting with respect to major word order parameters at the clausal level, such as the Null Subject Parameter, the V2 Parameter, the Verb Raising Parameter. More recently, many studies have also investigated characteristics of the determiner phrase (DP) in terms of word order parameter resetting: noun-adjective linear order (Gess and Herschenson 2001, Bruhn de Garavito and White 2002, Parodi, Schwartz and Clahsen 2004); acquisition of possessive constructions (Van de Craats, Corver and Van Hout 2000, Di Domenico and Bennati 2006). Although these works represent an important term of comparisons for the results of the present research, none of them has specifically compared L2 resetting of multiple word order parameters or addressed the question of the nature of developmental patterns in interlanguage grammars during a phase of so-called “parameter shifting”. The current study is a contribution in this line of research. It aims at investigating two major word-order parameters at the level of nominal syntax which regulate the different placement of nouns and possessor in Germanic (i.e. German) and Romance (i.e. Italian) languages, addressing the questions whether phenomena of parameter inconsistency are found and, if so, whether the lack of clustering effects attested in interlanguage grammars may nevertheless reflects properties of UG.

Overall, the results indicate that subjects are able to change parametric values responsible for word order asymmetries between their L1 and the L2, such as the different position of possessors and nouns in possessive constructions of the –s Genitive type. Interestingly, a discrepancy was found between the early production of adjective-noun linear order and the gradual use of –s Genitives, which suggests that L2 parameter resetting may be more problematic in the latter domain than in the former. Moreover, an interesting cross-linguistic comparison on possessive constructions in Germanic languages reveals that some non-target patterns that emerged in two groups of L2 learners are indeed attested as possible UG options. These findings will be analysed in terms of general issues concerning theories of L2 acquisition (i.e. Full Transfer/Full Access hypothesis – Schwartz and Sprouse 1996) and the role that the Subset Principle (Wexler and Manzini 1997) and formal instruction may or may not have in the L2 acquisition process.

The paper is organized as follows: section 2 offers brief comparative remarks on possessive constructions in German and Italian; section 3 focuses on issues related to L2 acquisition theories and the Subset Principle; section 4 formulates the research questions and the predictions of the present study; sections 5 and 6 are devoted to the
experimental procedure and the data analysis. Section 7 discusses the main findings, while section 8 concludes the paper.

2. On the syntax of German and Italian possessive constructions: some comparative remarks
Concerning the aspects of nominal syntax investigated in this study, we will consider the interaction of two different kinds of parametric variation that differentiate the syntax of Italian and German possessive constructions, namely:
(i) the different position of bare proper name possessors;
(ii) the different position of nouns with respect to adjectives.
The relevant patterns are exemplified in (1) vs (2) for German and Italian, respectively:

(1) a. Ilses rote Tasche
    Ilse-gen red bag
    ‘Ilse’s red bag.’

    b. die/eine rote Tasche von Ilse
    the/a red bag of Ilse
    ‘The/a red bag of Ilse.’

(2) a. la/una borsa rossa di Ilse
    the/a bag red of Ilse
    ‘The/a red bag of Ilse.’

    b. * la/una di Ilse borsa rossa
    the/a of Ilse bag red
    ‘The/a red bag of Ilse.’

    c. ?? la/una rossa borsa di Ilse
    the/a red bag of Ilse
    ‘The/a red bag of Ilse.’

    d. la/una sua rossa borsa
    the/a her red bag
    ‘Her bag/a red bag of her.’

With respect to possessors, it will be assumed, as traditionally proposed by Lyons (1986) and Giorgi and Longobardi (1991), that a Possessor Parameter regulates the different distribution of possessor in Germanic vs Romance languages. According to this hypothesis, a possessor may have either a “determiner status”, as in English or German, or an “adjectival status”, as in Italian. While the former is supposed to occupy the same structural position as the article and does not co-occur with it, the latter behaves like any other attributive adjective and may co-occur with different kinds of determiners. In German, possessors of the type in (1)a force a definite interpretation of the whole nominal phrase. It should be pointed out that possessor constructions of the type in 1(a) may also be realised through an analytic possessive construction, i.e. von-insertion as in 1(b). Nowadays, the use of –s Genitives in

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\[2\] In Modern German the word affix -s has a restricted distribution: it is used with determiner-less bare proper names and kinship terms. It is invariable with respect to gender and number distinction and may be attached both to masculine and feminine nouns.
Modern German is subject to a high degree of sociolinguistic and regional variation. As for Italian, non-pronominal possessors cannot occur in prenominal position (i.e. 2b); they are instead licensed postnominally through an analytic possessive construction realized via di-insertion (i.e. 2a). Only pronominal possessors may be placed in prenominal position in Italian and, similarly to any other nominal modifiers, they have to be introduced by a determiner (i.e. 2d).

As for adjective-noun word order, assuming Cinque’s proposal (1995, 2005) that adjectives are organized in a universal hierarchy based on their semantic properties, the variation in noun placement with respect to adjectives has been traditionally interpreted as the result of a parametrized option of noun movement inside the nominal phrase, due to the strength of a functional category attracting the noun (i.e. NumP according to Bernstein 1993; Ritter 1992; Valois 1991). Such cross-linguistic variation is particularly evident in Germanic vs Romance languages: the noun obligatory targets an intermediate position in Italian but not in German. As a consequence, German displays a strict word order adjective-noun, as exemplified in (1)a-b. Conversely, Italian has noun-adjective or adjective-noun, depending on the class of the modifier. The examples in (2)a vs (2)c show that colour adjectives occur in postnominal position in this language. However, for some other classes of adjectives, both the adjective-noun and the noun-adjective order are possible.

Let us now consider how complex possessive constructions of the type in (1)a and (2)a can be derived. Following recent influential analyses, we will assume the existence of a multi-layered articulated nominal phrase structure, along the lines proposed by Haegeman (2004), Giusti (2005, 2006) Cinque (2005) among many others. These hypotheses all share the basic assumption that nominal phrases consist of three layers (DP, IP, NP) and a certain number of functional projections: the lexical layer (the NP projection) is the projection where the noun and its arguments (i.e. the possessor) are merged. The inflection layer (the IP projection) can be split into several functional projections (FP) that serve as landing site for noun movement and whose specifier positions host different kinds of modifiers. The highest layer (DP) is the projection where definiteness is checked. For example, according to Giusti (2002), the highest functional projection (FPmax in Giusti’s terms) is the locus where the “referential value” of the noun phrase is interpreted. Modifiers of the noun that contribute to determining the referential value of the noun phrase include possessive modifiers, referential adjectives, and proper names appearing as possessors. These elements contribute to the semantic content of the noun phrase.

Keeping in mind this brief overview on the characteristics of the internal nominal structure, let us turn to the items under investigation. It will be assumed that the possessive constructions in (1)a and (2)b are derived as follows:

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3 Refining the traditional analysis of the 90s, Cinque (2005a) proposes that the opposite linear order of noun and adjectives in German and Italian is a consequence of different constraints imposed on the noun raising through the extended nominal projection, as well as of two possible sources of noun modifications. In indirect modification, adjectives may enter the derivation as a prenominal reduced relative clause and are not rigidly ordered, whereas in direct modification, adjectives are merged closer to the noun in dedicated functional positions and are rigidly ordered. According to this analysis, the German adjective ordering in (1)a reflects the merge order of direct nominal modifiers without further noun raising; conversely, the Italian adjective ordering in 2(a) reflects the merge order of direct nominal modifiers with noun raising. An interesting question that arises is whether rossa in 2(d) ¿la rossa borsa, which sounds very odd even though acceptable in certain kinds of contexts (i.e. poetry), is an example of indirect modification. This question remains open for further research.

4 Crucially, according to Cinque (1995, 2005) the prenominal or postnominal position of the same adjective with respect to the noun (un grande uomo vs un uomo grande – a big man) is responsible for a different interpretation of the nominal modifier. This issue will be not addressed in this paper.
Internet celebration for Luigi Rizzi’s 60th birthday  
CISCL, Siena

(3) a. \[
\text{SpecDFinP \text{Ilse}_s [DFin [SpecIP t_i [t \text{SpecFP rote} [F \text{SpecFP Tasche}] F [SpecNP t_i [NP t_i]]]]]]}
\]
‘Ilse’s red bag.’

b. \[
\text{DFin la [IP ..[SpecFP borsa] [F [SpecFP rossa] [F [SpecNP di Ilse [NP t_i]]]]]]}
\]
‘The red bag of Ilse.’

The scheme in (3)a illustrates the fact that the bare proper name possessor with an –s affix undergoes a two-step movement in German: from its merge position (SpecNP) it raises to SpecIP in order to check the genitive case feature; further movement to SpecDFinP is triggered by the requirement to check a [def] feature. Finally, the noun targets a SpecFP position just above the lexical layer. Contrary to German, the bare proper name possessor is licensed in situ in Italian through the insertion of the preposition \textit{di}. In this language, the noun raises to an intermediate SpecFP position, as exemplified in the derivation in (3)b. Besides the difference between the two languages under investigation here, such an articulated nominal phrase structure is desirable in order to account for several cross-linguistic variation phenomena that emerged in the domain of adjectival modification and possessive constructions, as will be discussed in detail in section 6. The interesting picture that emerges is that the proposal in (3) allows an interpretation of some L2 patterns which emerged in the present study in terms of possible options made available by UG.

Turning to the asymmetries between German and Italian, the interaction of both parameters causes the two languages to have the opposite word order in this particular domain of nominal syntax. One of the problems in acquiring these constructions by Italian learners of German may lie in the “determiner” status of bare proper name possessors with –s affix. They are non-pronominal elements encoding definiteness, hence they are licensed in the outer specifier of the DP projection. Furthermore, Italian learners of German also have to face the different noun placement in the L2 with respect to their L1. Acquiring the morphosyntactic properties of –s Genitive constructions may therefore represent a complex process, due to the interaction of multiple parametric variations at work in this syntactic domain.

3. The Subset Principle and L2 acquisition

The Subset Principle is an economic maximally explanatory model of grammatical development proposed by Berwick (1982), Manzini and Wexler (1987), Wexler and Manzini (1987) for L1 acquisition. It claims that children start with the “subset” – the most restricted – grammar and expand it only when facing linguistic input (positive evidence) that their grammar cannot parse. This is the condition \textit{sine qua non} the grammar is forced to expand within, of course, the possibilities made available by UG.

The role that the Subset Principle may play in L2 acquisition has been advocated for the first time by White (1989), who claimed that three forms of subset-superset relations between the L1 and the L2 may be identified:

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5 Following Cinque (2005a), it will be assumed that the noun moves as a maximal projection (NP) rather than as a bare head (N).

6 For the sake of clarity it will be assumed throughout the paper that \textit{di} complements are licensed in the lexical layer, along the lines of Longobardi (2000). However, many proposals have been formulated on the possibility that PPs of this kind target a functional projection in the low DP inflectional layer (see for example Lindauer 1999 for German)
(a) a situation in which the L1 is a subset of the L2 with respect to a particular property, such as \([L2 \supseteq (L1 \subseteq)]\); 
(b) a reverse situation in which the L2 is a subset of the L1 with respect to a particular property, such as \([L1 \supseteq (L2 \subseteq)]\); 
(c) a situation in which the L1 and the L2 are not in any subset-superset relation, such as \((L1) (L2)\).

White (1989) argues that situations like (b) \([L1 \supseteq (L2 \subseteq)]\) will be the most problematic for L2 acquisition, because, if reconstruction of the L2 grammar is driven by positive evidence, all the positive evidence the L2 learner receives will also be consistent with the L1 grammar. As a consequence, the L2 learner is not forced to reanalyze the L1-based system and interlanguage grammars will not expand. Hence, according to White (1989), in situations like (b) positive evidence will not ensure the restriction of the initially adopted L1 grammar to a more restrictive L2 grammar. Conversely, in a situation where the L1 is in a subset relation with the L2 as in (a) \([L2 \supseteq (L1 \subseteq)]\), going from a restrictive to a more inclusive grammar should, in principle, be possible through positive evidence only. In fact, learners may notice in the input L2 properties which are not available in the L1, and are thus forced to reconstruct their interlanguage grammars accordingly.

As a general observation, the conclusion put forth by White (1989) is that “expanding” the grammatical options of an interlanguage is less problematic than “reducing” them. However, considering the role of L1 grammar in the first stages of L2 acquisition (i.e. Full Transfer/Full Access - Schwartz and Sprouse 1996), it is plausible to assume that learners, differently from children acquiring their L1, do not start out with the most restrictive option, but rather with the L1 grammar, regardless of its status with respect to the L2. Successively, as Full Transfer/Full Access crucially assumes, if the L1-based analysis fails to accommodate the new data, the L2 input will then trigger parameter resetting.

Recently, many studies focusing on L2 acquisition have also addressed the role of the Subset Principle, particularly in non-initial state and ultimate L2 attainment. The major parameter under investigation has been the Null Subject Parameter in both directions: adult speakers of non-null subject languages acquiring a null subject L2 (Lozano 2002, Gürel 2002, 2003a,b, 2006, Rothman and Inversion 2007a, b a.o., Belletti, Bennati and Sorace 2007); adult speakers of non subject languages acquiring a non-null subject L2 (White 1986, Phinney 1987, Ruiz de Zarobe 1998a, b a.o.). Overall, the picture that emerges suggests that parameter resetting is less problematic in situations like (a) \([L2 \supseteq (L1 \subseteq)]\) than in situations like (b) \([L1 \supseteq (L2 \subseteq)]\). Hence, the resetting of the Null Subject Parameter seems to cause major problems when speakers have to “reduce” the possible options available in their grammar instead of “expanding” them, as argued by White (1989).

With this very brief overview of issues related to L2 acquisition and the Subset Principle in mind, let us turn to the present study and try to accommodate the core morphosyntactic phenomena investigated here in a Subset Principle perspective, in order to test whether this approach is able to further corroborate previous findings on this topic.

As already pointed out in section 1, cross-linguistic differences between German and Italian bare proper name possessive constructions could be ascribed to a different setting of two word-order parameters: (a) the Noun Parameter responsible for a different noun placement with respect to adjectives in Germanic vs Romance languages; (b) the Possessor Parameter responsible for a different distribution of possessors in Germanic vs Romance languages.

Interestingly, adopting a “Subset Principle” perspective, it turns out that German and Italian are in an opposite subset-superset relation with respect to the different settings of the two parameters under consideration:

(a) Noun parameter: Italian Adj-N/N-Adj; German Adj-N >> \([L1 \supseteq (L2 \subseteq)]\)
As far as the Noun parameter is concerned, the L2 is a subset of the L1, in that German only allows the linear word order Adj-N, whereas Italian has a more inclusive grammar admitting both pre- and postnominal adjectives.

(b) Possessor parameter: Italian N-Possessor; German Possessor-N/N-Possessor

Concerning the Possessor parameter, the reverse situation holds: The L1 is a subset of the L2, in that Italian only allows a non-pronominal possessor in postnominal position, whereas German has a more inclusive grammar which admits a possessor to occur in prenominal position (-s Genitives) or in post-nominal position (analytic constructions).

According to White (1989)’s proposal, L2 resetting of the Noun Parameter should be problematic, due to the subset-superset relation of the target language (German) with respect to the L1 (Italian). Conversely, L2 resetting of the Possessor Parameter should be less problematic because, in this case, the L1 (Italian) is in a subset-superset relation with the target language (German).

Assuming that both L1 grammar and UG are involved in the L2 acquisition process, as traditionally proposed in the Full Transfer/Full Access hypothesis, it is plausible to claim that L2 learners start with the L1 setting of the two parameters regardless of their conservative or inclusive status with respect to the Subset Principle. As for the Noun Parameter, Italian speakers of German will start with an inclusive grammar; concerning the Possessor Parameter, they will adopt a conservative grammar. Resetting of the former will be problematic for lack of positive evidence, in particular for the initial stage of L2 acquisition, whereas resetting of the latter will be unproblematic, even though the need for sufficient positive evidence in the input may determine a developmental path.

Note also that studies addressing the issue of the Subset Principle in L2 acquisition have rarely raised the important question of the impact, if any, of negative evidence (i.e. formal instruction, correction) on parameter resetting. Recently, in investigating the effects of formal instruction in Null Subject Parameter resetting by English adult intermediate L2 speakers of Spanish, Rothman and Iverson (2007) found that exposure to quality target L2 input in the classroom is sufficient to set the target language syntax, at least for some parameters. Hence, naturalistic input seems not to be the only privileged trigger of parameter resetting. This aspect is particularly relevant for the L2 population investigated in this study, because L2 acquisition is primarily mediated through negative evidence: all the L2 adult speakers receive formal instruction in the target language and their exposure to the L2 input mainly coincide with classroom activities. In light of this fact, it is plausible to suppose that negative evidence may interact with parameter resetting in two ways: contributing to accelerate such a process or ignoring it.

4. Predictions

The aim of this study is to investigate L2 resetting of the two word-order parameters discussed above: (a) the Noun Parameter; (b) the Possessor Parameter. In light of the diverging properties of the target language (German) and the L1 (Italian) with respect to (a) and (b), and assuming that L2 parameter resetting is guided by both L1 grammar and access to UG (Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis), the following predictions arise:

(1) In the initial state of acquisition, the L2 interlanguage grammar will coincide with the L1 grammar, regardless of its conservative or inclusive status with respect to the L2.

(2) Parameter resetting will take place gradually, based on exposure to sufficient L2 input. However, according to the Subset Principle, resetting of the Possessor Parameter in the L2 will be less problematic, due to its superset-subset relation with respect to the L1. Conversely, resetting of the Noun
parameter in L2 will be more problematic, due to its subset-superset relation with respect to the L1.

(3) Finally, a further prediction concerns negative evidence (i.e. formal instruction, correction): it may affect positively the process of L2 acquisition, especially in the initial state, thus resulting in a sort of “acceleration” of parameter resetting; alternatively, it may have “zero” impact on such a process. A cue in this direction could be the emergence of a developmental path irrespective of the presence/formulation of negative evidence in the L2 input.

5. The study

5.1 Participants

A total of 32 experimental subjects participated in the research project. They formed two different groups of L2 learners:
- Group A performed a written sentence completion task (SCT), and consisted of n. 14 Italian informants. All of them were adult learners of German who had received formal instruction (range 2-7 years) in the L2 and were attending German classes at the University of Siena during the 2002-2003 academic year; their level of proficiency was determined by a standardized proficiency test based on the European Framework for Languages that was administered at the beginning of their courses.
- Group B performed an oral picture description task (PDT) and consisted of n. 18 Italian learners of L2 German (range 2-9 years of formal instruction) attending German classes at the University of Siena during the 2003-2004 academic year. As for the previous group, L2 level of proficiency was determined by proficiency tests administered at the beginning of their courses.

The experimental subjects were trained before the tasks were administered to each of them individually. As for the PDT, each individual oral production was first recorded and then transcribed. Furthermore, two groups of adult native speakers of German participated in the research project as controls.

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics on the subjects’ age for the whole population taking part in the research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Mean Age</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Completion Task</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginner L2 learners (n.5)</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>5.899</td>
<td>20-35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate L2 learners (n.9)</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>24-27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls (n.10)</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>1.991</td>
<td>27-34</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Picture Description Task</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beginner L2 learners (n.4)</td>
<td>19.75</td>
<td>0.500</td>
<td>19-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate L2 learners (n.10)</td>
<td>22.40</td>
<td>4.274</td>
<td>19-34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced L2 learners (n.4)</td>
<td>22.25</td>
<td>1.893</td>
<td>21-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls (n.8)</td>
<td>28.87</td>
<td>9.078</td>
<td>21-45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2 Experimental procedure

Two different tasks were administered to the two groups of L2 learners:
(A) An Oral Picture Description Task (henceforth PDT) consisting of items (n.25) and fillers (n.40) was administered to group B and to a control group (n.8) of German native speakers. The subjects were asked to look at a drawing while listening to some information about the content of the picture and then to answer a very simple question posed by the investigator. In order to elicit possessive constructions containing bare proper name possessor with –s affix, all the question items were formulated through the wh-element Wessen (whose) and the possessors were proper names specified as [+human], as in (4)a:

(4) a. Item: Wessen Buch ist das?
   ‘Whose book is this?’
   (4) b. Expected target answer: Das ist Peters Buch
   ‘This is Peter’s book.’

As for fillers, several kinds of questions were asked of the subjects. Some of them were predominantly concerned with a picture naming task. Other questions implied the description of an action illustrated in the picture or the formulation of a new sentence that had to include attributive adjectives (see Appendix A).

(B) A Written Sentence Completion Task (henceforth SCT) consisting of items (n.15) and fillers (n.36) was administered to group A and to a control group (n.10) of German native speakers. The subjects were asked to complete sentences using lexical/functional elements given in brackets and discarding only one of them in order to construct a well-formed sentence. The ‘intruder’ contained in all of the items was a definite article.

(ii) Sentence Completion Task

(5) a. Item: Der Polizist [Tasche; Ilses; sucht; rote; die]

(5) b. Expected target answer: Der Polizist sucht Ilses rote Tasche
   ‘The policeman looks for Ilse’s red bag.’

With regard to fillers, the task included sentences where L2 learners had to discard lexical as well as functional items.

(ii) Sentence Completion Task

(6) a. Input: Die Frau [Kaffee; einen; trinkt; Zug]

(6) b. Expected target answer: Die Frau trinkt einen Kaffee

As noted by Lindauer (1999), inanimate bare proper names with –s suffix are more likely to be placed in postnominal position in German:

(i) die Entdeckung Amerikas (Lindauer 1999: 110)
   ‘the discovery of America’

In this case Amerikas cannot be interpreted as the possessor of the event nominal Entdeckung, but rather as its object.
‘The woman is drinking a coffee’

It should be stressed that, differently from the PDT, the SCT looks more in detail at a particular property of –s Genitives, namely the fact that the bare proper name possessors with an –s affix does not co-occur with determiners. Finally, it is worth considering that, in both tests, –s Genitive constructions have been tested in two structural conditions: (1) in simple DPs such as possessor-noun; (2) in complex DPs containing an attributive adjective such as possessor-adjective-noun. The PDT contains n. 15 items under condition (1) and n. 10 items under condition (2). The SCT contains n. 11 items under condition (1) and n. 4 items under condition (2).

6. The data
This section is divided into two parts. In the first part, a data analysis of the results on the acquisition of the –s Genitives in the SCT and in the PDT will be given. The second part is focused on the tendency that emerged in both tests concerning noun placement with respect to adjectives.

6.1 Possessive Constructions

Data has been analysed through a two related samples non-parametric test:
– the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test, which has compared the mean scores on –s Genitives production of experimental subjects in the two structural conditions under investigation;
– Mann-Whitney tests were successively run as post-hoc for the Wilcoxon Test. R-family effect size were also calculated.

Graphs 1 and 2 indicate a clear developmental path among the L2 subjects with respect to Controls in both tasks as far as the production of –s Genitive constructions is concerned. Interestingly, an asymmetry emerges between Beginners’ L2 learners of SCT and those of PDT. Specifically, while the production of target –s Genitives in the SCT Beginner group ranges from 20% to 60% on the basis of the different contexts, the PDT Beginner group never resorts to such an option and prefers to express the possessor relation through a periphrastic construction (i.e. von construction), the only strategy available in their L1:

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8 Parametric tests have been excluded because Levene’s test for homogeneity of variance was not significant even on transformed data for at least one level of the independent variable in both SCT and PDT.
9 Differently from the PDT, no alternative option other than –s Genitive constructions was available in SCT, because all the possessor given in the input were bare proper names with –s affix.
Let us examine L2 performance on the basis of the type of test administered to the experimental subjects.

**6.2 Possessive constructions in the Sentence Completion Task**

Concerning data coding, L2 productions have been classified on the basis of possessor placement with respect to the noun and to the adjective. Moreover, the co-occurrence between possessors and determiners was also checked. As exemplified in Graph 1, Beginners and Intermediate L2 learners show a different performance when
compared to Controls. Furthermore, the structural configuration seems to affect the production of target –s Genitives; specifically, when the DP contains and adjective, accuracy on –s Genitive production decreases in L2 learners. Such tendencies are confirmed by the statistical analyses. The Wilcoxon test found a highly statistical result on the different production of –s Genitives in possessor-noun and possessor-adjective-noun contexts (Z=3.595; p<.0001; effect size r = 0.87), whereas Mann-Whitney tests reveal that both Beginner and Intermediate groups differ robustly from Controls. However, no statistical differences emerge between Beginner and Intermediate L2 learners, as also confirmed by the small effect size found for such a contrast in possessor-noun and possessor-adjective-noun contexts. Statistics for Mann-Whitney tests are reported in Table (2) below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Production of -s Genitives</th>
<th>Possessor-N</th>
<th>Effect size</th>
<th>Possessor-Adj-N</th>
<th>Effect size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beginner vs Controls*</td>
<td>p&lt;.05</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>p&lt;.05</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate vs Controls*</td>
<td>p&lt;.05</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>p&lt;.05</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginner vs Intermediate</td>
<td>p=.65</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>p=.65</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*= statistically significant !!= worth considering but not statistically significant

Looking at the non-target patterns in more detail, two sub-groups could be identified: one group of L2 learners consisting of n.3 Intermediate speakers and n.1 Beginner constantly insert the determiner in complex DPs. In such a context the possessor occurs in postnominal position. As a consequence, a contrast emerges between the two structural configurations (possessor-noun and possessor-adjective-noun) as far the co-occurrence determiner-possessor is concerned. The relevant patterns are given in (7) a vs b:

(7) a. Mario ruft [Giselas Lehrerin] an
    ‘Mario phones Gisela’s teacher.’

    b. Der Polizist sucht [die rote Tasche Ilses]
    ‘The policeman is looking for Ilse’s red bag.’

It is worth mentioning that –s Genitives appearing in postnominal position as in the example (7)b are, in most cases, extremely marked, if not ungrammatical in Modern German. Lindauer (1999) claims that, nowadays, German speakers waver between two morphological analyses of the –s affix: either case marker or possessor marker, with the preference for the latter over the former. When the –s marker is analysed as a “possessor” marker, it is licensed in prenominal position where all the attributive adjectives show up in Germanic languages. On the contrary, when an –s Genitives occurs postnominally, we must assume that it has been analysed as a determiner-less genitive and licensed in the genitive case position available for full genitive nominals in the German DP. Interestingly, concerning the tendency found in Controls of SCT, only 7 out of 40 –s Genitives occur in postnominal position. This fact seems to confirm the claim made by Lindauer (1999) that the unmarked order in German
possessive constructions containing a bare proper name possessor is possessor-noun. A second group of L2 learners consisting of n. 4 Intermediate speakers and n.2 Beginners also shows a different performance with respect to Controls. In this case, L2 learners resort to the insertion of determiners in –s Genitive constructions regardless of structural configurations. However, this fact does not correlate with the postnominal position of –s Genitives. Examples (8)a-c illustrate this pattern:

(8) a. Sie haben (*die) Annas Pizza gegessen
‘They ate Anna’s pizza.’

b. Der Polizist sucht (*die) rote Ilses Tasche
the policemen looks for the red Ilse-gen bag

c. Der Polizist sucht (*die) Ilses rote Tasche
the policeman is looking for Ilse’s red bag

Finally, a third group consisting of n. 4 experimental subjects (n.3 Intermediate L2 learners; n.1 Beginner) do not differ from Controls in either context. Now let us focus on the data of the PDT group.

6.3 Possessive constructions in the Picture Description Task

The PDT was designed to elicit –s Genitive constructions orally as answers to questions made by the investigator. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that L2 learners resorted to different options – some of them are not grammatical in the L2 – to express the possessive relation. An overview of the various constructions produced is given below; it is based on the production of pre- vs. postnominal possessors across the two contexts under investigation:

Prenominal Possessor
(9) a. Das ist Peters Buch
‘This is Peter’s book.’

b. Das ist Inges blaue Bluse
‘This is Inge’s blue shirt.’
As already pointed out, the use of –s Genitives as in (9)a and b represents in German the most natural answer to the question *Wessen Buch ist das?* (Whose book is this) when the possessor is a bare proper name and is specified as [+ animate].

**Postnominal Possessor**

(10) a. *Das ist das Buch Peters*  
‘This is Peter’s book.’

(10) b. *Das ist das Buch des Peters*  
‘This is the book Peter’s.’

As pointed out in section 6.2, (10)a represents a very marked option in German, whereas in (10)b, the genitive declension of full common nouns has been applied to a proper name, resulting in a non-target structure. In other cases, L2 learners only resort to possessive constructions with non pronominal possessor which are available in their L1, and are, however, possible L2 options:

(11) Das ist das Buch von Peter  
‘This is the book of Peter.’

(12) Das Buch gehört Peter  
‘The book belongs to Peter.’

Finally, L2 learners also used relative clauses or matrix clauses with the auxiliary *haben* (have) which, despite being totally grammatical in German, do not represent the expected answer in the elicited context, as in (13) and (14):

(13) Das ist Ute, die einen neuen Ring hat  
‘This is Ute who has a new ring.’

(14) Peter hat ein Buch  
‘Peter has a book.’

Let us now focus in some more detail on the production of –s Genitives across groups and contexts. Looking again at Graph 1, two facts are worth observing:

(i) the production of –s Genitives is absent in the first stage of acquisition and progressively increases in highly proficiency levels. This results in a sharp difference between Beginner L2 learners on the one hand, and Intermediate/Advanced L2 learners and Controls on the other hand. However, overall, the medium effect size found comparing the Intermediate L2 group with the Advanced L2 group and Controls in both contexts suggests that the contrast, although not statistical, is worth considering. Conversely, the small effect size found comparing Advanced L2 learners and native speakers confirms that the different performance of the two populations is not statistically significant. Furthermore, the medium effect size found between Beginner and Intermediate L2 learners on the –s Genitives production in possessor-adjective-noun contexts indicates a clear diverging contrast even though not significant;

(ii) differently from the SCT, no robust asymmetries are found in the production of –s Genitives in possessor-noun vs. possessor-adjective-noun contexts (*Z*=−0.450; *p*=0.653; *r*=0.10).

Statistics for Mann-Whitney tests in PDT is provided in Table 3 below:
Let us consider first the production of –s Genitives. Beginners only resort to possessive constructions similar to their L1 where the bare proper name possessor is licensed in situ through a case assigner as prepositions/verbs. Example (15)a vs b exemplify the L2 patterns:

(15) a. Das ist das Buch von Peter
   ‘This is Peter’s book.’

   b. Das Buch gehört Peter
   ‘The book belongs to Peter.’

Use of -s Genitives increases considerably in Intermediate L2 learners with respect to Beginners. Nevertheless, the performance of this group still diverges from that of Controls. Interestingly, -s Genitive constructions are not optional/random for this group of subjects. An analysis across individuals reveals that only a few (n.3) L2 speakers resort to this strategy to a greater extent in both contexts, whereas the others (n.7) prefer to use a case assigner, like the Beginners. Graph 3 illustrates this result:
Finally, Advanced L2 learners do not differ from Controls; -s Genitives represent the favourite option for expressing the possessive relation in both contexts, similarly to German native speakers.

6.4 Noun placement

This section deals with the analysis of the data on noun placement with respect to adjectives in both tests. Results are reported in Graph 4 and 5:
As clearly illustrated by the graphs, the most surprising finding is that the L1 linear order noun-adjective is absent in L2 learners in both tests, while the L2 linear order adjective-noun is produced at a high rate across the experimental subjects, whose performance do not differ from that of Controls. However, it is worth considering that the non-target patterns attested are mainly due to the omission of adjectives, especially in Beginner and Intermediate groups.

7. Discussion

In the first part of this section, the discussion of the main findings will focus separately on the two parameters under investigation, whereas in the second part we will propose some considerations on these results with respect to the predictions previously formulated.

7.1 The Possessor Parameter

As for Possessor parameter, the results of both experiments suggest that three stages of L2 development may be identified: (a) an initial state; (b) an intermediate and (c) a final state. Let us examine each state, starting with (a).

7.1.1 The Possessor Parameter in the initial state of L2 acquisition

In the initial state of L2 development, the interlanguage grammar is clearly influenced by L1 grammar, hence L1 is the starting point of L2 acquisition (cf. Schwartz and Sprouse 1996). This initial state is represented by Beginner L2 learners of PDT and by a subgroup of Beginner and Intermediate L2 learners of SCT. The L2 populations resort to the pattern they already know from their L1. The high rate of analytic constructions produced in PDT and the co-occurrence of determiners and possessors in SCT support this hypothesis.

Similar findings have been reported for L2 Dutch by Van de Craats, Corver and Van Hout (2000) and for L2 English by Di Domenico and Bennati (2006). Van de Craats, Corver and Van Hout (2000) explore the acquisition of possessive constructions in Moroccan/Turkish adult and children L2 learners of Dutch, pointing out the fact that
during the first stage of acquisition L2 learners resort exclusively to the pattern available in their L1 grammar to express a possessive relation. Hence, analytic constructions (of-insertion) can be found in the Moroccan data from early on due to the fact that the L1 grammar allows such construction, while the same tendency is rare in the Turkish data because this option is not available there. The work by Di Domenico and Bennati (2006) deals with the acquisition of L2 English Saxon Genitive constructions by Italian native speakers. They investigate original L2 English data collected through written elicitation tests from a group of n. 94 Italian teenagers learning L2 English in a formal environment. Similarly to the results obtained in the SCT of the present study, they found a persistent tendency to insert the definite determiner when bare proper name possessors appear in prenominal position. Taking into account the results of the current study, this finding could be interpreted as a confirmation of a more general L2 strategy adopted by Italian learners to extend a property of the L1 pronominal possessive constructions (co-occurrence determiners and possessor) to L2 non-pronominal possessive DPs. Turning to the non-target patterns produced by L2 learners of SCT, it is worth noticing that the compatibility determiner–non pronominal possessor represents a possible UG option attested cross-linguistically in standard varieties such as Hungarian (Szabolci 1987, 1984), High Old German (Marzolla 1991) as well as across different dialects, as in Rom dialects (Boretzky 2000) or in Scandinavian dialects (Holmberg and Sandström 1996 for standard Swedish; Svenonius 1993 and Delsing 2003b for Northern Swedish; Marit 2004 for Norwegian and Faroese). Overall, the cross-linguistic data on the complementarity between articles and possessors indicates that the use of a determiner when a possessor is in prenominal position seems to be the marked option. Hence, when in a language the possessor can also fill the determiner position, this strategy is preferred as the more economical. Such a process is fairly common in languages like German (or English), where the definite article has undergone a process of grammaticalization. Haspelmath (1999) observes that in all languages with article-possessor incompatibility, the category of “definite article” appeared quite recently and a stage of optional use of definite articles in possessive constructions is often attested. As pointed out by Haspelmath West Germanic and Nordic Languages show a similar development: the optional use of the definite article in possessive constructions gradually disappeared in favour of determiner-less possessive DPs. In this respect the case of High Old German is particularly interesting, in that the process of grammaticalization of determiner-possessor complementarity is well attested: determiner-less possessive constructions alternate with full possessive constructions. Furthermore, a relative freedom in word order of possessives and adjectives with respect to the noun emerges. Marzolla (1991) reports that, contrary to Modern German, determiners may also co-occur with prenominal genitive complements, as exemplified in (16) to (18):

(16) Siones dohter
     Sion-gen daughter
     ‘Sion’s daughter.’

(17) dhemu Gotes sune
     The-dat God-gen Sohn
     ‘to God’s Son.’
Let us analyse such constructions in detail on the basis of the extended DP structure given so far, as exemplified in (19) to (21):

(19) [SpecDFin Siones [DFin [SpecIP tI [f [SpecNP tI [NP dohter]]]]]]
(20) [DFin dhemu [SpecIP GotesI [f [SpecNP tI [Sohn]]]]]
(21) [SpecDFin dhazs [DFin [IP [SpecFP almahtiga [f [SpecFP GotesI [SpecNP tI [NP chiruni]]]]]]]

Interestingly, at least three different positions seem to be available for non-pronominal prenominal possessors: the highest DP layer where the possessor is in complementary distribution with determiners (i.e. (19)); an intermediate position (namely SpecIP) where the possessor co-occurs with determiners (i.e. (20)) and a lower genitive case position, indicated in (21) as SpecFP. In this case the possessor co-occurs with articles and, when and adjective is present, it shows up in the linear order determiner-adjective-possessor-noun (i.e. (21)).

Considering such cross-linguistic phenomena, it appears that, in line with the predictions formulated so far, Italian L2 learners of German, being driven by properties of the L1 grammar during the first stages of acquisition, prefer the less economic derivation (the insertion of the determiner) over the more economic one (filling the determiner position with a possessor). Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that, while Modern German has lost the options (20), (21) in favour of (19), the interlanguage grammar of Italian L2 learners of German seems to access such possibilities even if they are available neither in their L1 nor in the L2.

7.1.2 The Possessor Parameter beyond the initial stage

In the intermediate stage the L2 value for a given parameter may not be completely gained, so that variability in word order is found. This pattern is particularly evident in a subgroup of Intermediate and Beginner L2 learners of SCT. The tendency emerged here suggests that L2 subjects may go through a stage during which they seem to have reset the L2 value for a given parameter only in specific contexts (simple DPs) but not in others (more complex DPs containing and adjective). The peculiarity of this performance relies on the postnominal position of bare proper name possessors in DPs containing an adjective and, consequently, on determiner insertion only in this environment. Hence, the pattern with the word order possessor-noun...

11 It is worth pointing out that the adjective almahtiga refers to the head noun and not to the genitive complement gotes. This fact is confirmed by the adjectival ending -a which marks the singular, neutral nominative case.
12 The existence of two genitive case positions available for non prepositional genitives in German has been proposed by Longobardi (2000) to account for double genitive constructions like Joans Beschreibung Berlins/der Stadt (John’s description of Belin/of the city). According to this proposal the higher case position (GenS) is preadjectival and is projected below D, the lowest case position (GenO) ist postadjectival ad is projected above the lexical layer. In Longobardi’s proposal, the activation of one or both positions is subject to parametric variation among languages.
13 A further interesting remark concerns noun placement in High Old German. In (21) the fact that the noun follows both the possessor and the adjective suggests that the noun does not move further to a higher functional projection as in Modern German. Interestingly, this kind of word order also emerges in a group of L2 learners of the present study and supports the claim that, in their interlanguage grammar, the Noun Parameter converges neither to the L1 nor to the L2 values.
noun alternates with the pattern determiner-adjective-nounPossessor, and we observe variability in placement of bare proper name possessors. White (1990/1991), Hawkins et al. (1993), Herschensohn (1998) proposed for the first time an analysis of variability in L2 parameter resetting. According to this proposal, L2 learners may show different strategies in dealing with a parametric variation including the fact that a parameter could be “partially” set to a new value: L2 learners start adopting the L2 value only in specific contexts but not in others. As a consequence, interlanguage grammars may suffer from lack of clustering effects in intermediate stages of acquisition during which L2 learners are trying to abandon the L1 value for a given parameter.

The question that arises is whether such pattern is a possible UG option, similarly to what has been observed on previous non-target patterns. Interestingly, Norwegian possessive constructions (Vangsnes 1999) suggest that this seems to be the case. Specifically, Norwegian allows both pre- and postnominal possessor. Crucially, the prenominal position of possessor precludes the presence of the definite enclitic markers on the noun, as illustrated by the minimal pair in (22):

(22) a. Pers bok
    Per-poss book
    *Pers boka
b. Per-poss book-def
    ‘Per’s book.’

The same alternation holds in possessive constructions containing an attributive adjective. The prenominal position of the possessor precludes any type of determiners:

(23) min gamle hest
    ‘my old horse.’
(24) * min gamle hesten
    my old horse-def
(25) *den min gamle hesten
    the my old horse-def

Conversely, when the possessor occurs in postnominal position, both determiners are possible:

(26) den gamle hasten min
    the old horse-DEF my
    ‘my old horse.’

Vangsnes’ (1999) description of Norwegian data is mainly restricted to pronominal possessors. Nevertheless, he points out that the same holds for non-pronominal possessors in –e possessive constructions of the type in (22). Adopting the DP structure proposed in (3), it out that at least two positions for possessors seem to be available in Norwegian, as illustrated by the derivation in (27) and (28):

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14 One of the peculiarities of Scandinavian languages lies in the fact that the definite marker has two morphological realizations: an enclitic element attached to the head noun (–en) or a free morpheme (den). Both elements co-occur in DPs containing an adjective, as in the example den gamle hasten (the old horse). This kind of constructions are called Double Definite Construction since definiteness is marked twice: through suffixation on the noun and through an expletive determiner.
The possessor may target the outer specifier of the DP (i.e. (27)) or, alternatively, when a determiner is inserted, it occurs in a lower position (i.e. (28)). Such data shows that the alternation possessor-noun/det-noun-possessor conforms to UG. When acquiring the morphosyntactic properties of –s Genitive constructions, L2 learners seem to run into the “Norwegian option”: they license the possessor either in prenominal position – in which case, the determiner and the possessor do not co-occur – or in postnominal position, in which case, as in Norwegian possessive constructions, L2 learners adopt the “last resort option” to insert an expletive determiner.

7.1.3 Possessor Parameter and the end-state

In the final state of L2 acquisition, the L2 target parameter value is gained and speakers’ performance is target-like. This stage of acquisition is well represented by both Advanced L2 learners of PDT and a subgroup of Intermediate and Beginner L2 learners of SCT. Their interlanguage grammar does not diverge from the German native speakers at the level of the morphosyntax of –s Genitive constructions. Although the experimental subjects of this group appear to converge to L2 parameter value, it is worth pointing out that “L2 final state” seldom corresponds to a native-speaker knowledge of L1 grammar. Despite the fact that their syntax is extremely good, “expert L2 learners” often show incompleteness of peripheral aspects of the morpholexicon or at the level of the syntax/semantics interface (see White 2003, Sorace 2003, Belletti, Bennati and Sorace 2007 for relevant discussion of end-state grammar and near-nativeness in L2).

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15 We are not concerned here with the position of the noun in Norwegian DPs. However, due to the presence of the definite suffix in (28) and to the linear order noun-possessor, it is reasonable to assume that the noun targets a different functional position with respect to the derivation in (27).

16 One may ask why the “Norwegian option” of inserting an expletive determiner is restricted only to possessive constructions containing an adjective in the interlanguage grammar of this group of L2 learners. A way to account for such a pattern is claim that the adjective blocks possessor raising to the DP layer. Let us briefly consider the German possessive construction under investigation again:

(i) Ilses rote Tasche
IlseGEN red bag
‘Ilse’s red bag.’

The prenominal and preadjectival position of the possessor is grammatical in Modern German. This means that, on the basis of what has been assumed so far, possessor movement over prenominal adjectives conforms to locality condition, consistent with what was proposed by Rizzi (2002) on the left periphery of the clause. Possessors and adjectives do not share the same categorial features, hence they do not have the same categorial status. Whatever kind of movement the possessor undergoes during the derivation, an adjective that intervenes between this element and its trace cannot function as antecedent for the possessor trace. Hence, possessor movement over adjectives is possible and the construction in (i) is grammatical. However, in the interlanguage grammar of L2 learners of this group, the presence of an adjective seems to act as intervenor between the raising possessor and its trace. A possible explanation of this pattern is to suppose that the prenominal possessor is analysed as an adjective element by the Italian L2 learners in analogy with the fact that possessive pronouns have such a categorial status in this language. As a consequence, the insertion of an attributive adjective might block the movement of the possessor to the higher DP-layers.
7.2 The Noun Parameter

Concerning the Noun parameter, no significant differences emerge in learners’ performance, despite their different level of proficiency in the L2. Resetting of the word order parameter that determines position of nouns with respect to nominal modifiers seems to be an easier goal to achieve. This result contrasts with other research carried out on L2 German nominal syntax. Parodi, Schwartz and Clahsen (2004) found that Romance language speakers produced *noun-adjective order to varying degrees in their interlanguage grammar depending on proficiency levels. However, it is worth noting that the rate of *noun-adjective order produced by the Italian L2 learners in Parodi, Schwartz and Clahsen’s (2004) study is fairly low from early on. In this respect, the total lack of the *noun-adjective pattern found in the present study could be attributed to the higher level of proficiency of the Beginner L2 subjects, since they had received at least one year of formal instruction in German at the time the test was administered; on the contrary, Parodi, Schwartz and Clahsen’s (2004) experimental subjects were untutored L2 learners.

7.3 L2 parameter resetting: an interplay of internal and external factors

Let us now turn to the predictions formulated so far in light of the Subset Principle and the role that the L1 may have in the first stage of acquisition. First of all, prediction (1) on the nature of the initial state of L2 acquisition is largely confirmed, including the fact that L2 learners do not start with the most restrictive grammar, as implied by the Subset Principle, but rather with their L1 grammar. Concerning prediction (2) on the way parameter resetting takes place, this is only partially fulfilled. In fact, an interesting result evidenced by the data analysis is the delay between the gradual use of –s Genitive constructions with respect to the earlier production of adjective-noun linear order, thus suggesting that, while resetting of the Possessor parameter takes place gradually and it is vulnerable to L1 transfer, the Noun parameter can be resetted earlier. In this respect, the prediction formulated according to the Subset Principle is not fulfilled, given the counter evidence that even lack of positive evidence may result in a successful L2 parameter resetting. However, the question that arises is why this is the case. A possible way to account for this finding is to consider the role that negative evidence may play. The morphosyntactict properties of the German nominal system under investigation here, such as the position of attributive adjectives with respect to nouns and the realisation of –s Genitives for expressing a possessive relation, are introduced in levels A of the Framework and are taught in Beginner and Intermediate language courses. The interesting fact that emerges from this study is that negative evidence may have a positive impact only with respect to the Noun Parameter but not with respect to the Possessor Parameter, whose gradual resetting, on the contrary, seems to be triggered by an internal unconscious grammatical restructuring that obeys a precise developmental path rather than by a conscious application of formal rules from early on. Given the subset-superset relation of the Noun Parameter setting in the L2 with respect to the L1, it is plausible to assume that negative evidence may represent a possible source of L2 knowledge for “reducing” the interlanguage grammar to the most restrictive and economic option of a given parameter only when positive evidence cannot completely fulfil this requirement, because it is also consistent with the L1 grammar17. In such a case, classroom L2 input seems to be a sufficient condition for parameter resetting. This resembles Rothman and Iverson’s (2007)

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17 In this sense, positive evidence are not “informative” enough to trigger parameter resetting.
finding on the Null Subject Parameter. Conversely, negative evidence has a limited impact on “expanding” the interlanguage grammar to new options, as seems to be the case for the Possessor parameter: the interlanguage can expand only when faced with linguistic input (positive evidence) that the system cannot parse, as correctly predicted by the Subset Principle.

8. Conclusion

The study has focused on L2 multiple parameter resetting within the German DP domain. Specifically, two major word order parameters have been investigated: Noun Parameter and Possessor Parameter. Data from two groups of L2 learners have been collected through two different kinds of task: an Oral Picture Description Task and a Written Sentence Completion Task. Overall, results show that learners are able to change the parametric values responsible for word order differences between their L1 and the L2, such as the different position of possessors and nouns in –s Genitive constructions.

However, our findings suggest that only resetting of the Possessor Parameter is characterized by a clear developmental path, whereas resetting of the Noun Parameter seems to be possible from early on. It has been proposed that several factors may interact in different ways resulting in such a discrepancy as actually predicted by the Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis: the role of L1 transfer in the first stages of acquisition; access to UG in non-initial interlanguage grammars and possible effects of negative evidence in the process of parameter resetting, whereas the subset-superset relation of the two parameters with respect to the L1 and the L2 seems to have a limited role.

To sum up, the observations developed throughout the paper lead to the conclusion that in adult L2 acquisition some parameters cannot be reset in an “all or nothing” manner, but gradually. This is particularly evident during the so-called “intermediate stage”, during which L2 learners are trying to abandon the L1 value for a given parameter and, at the same time, they seem to “test” hypotheses about the L2 grammar. Interestingly, these hypotheses still reflect options made available by UG, as shown by cross-linguistic data on the distribution of determiners, possessor, adjectives and nouns. This fact also sustains the view that instances of parameter inconsistency observed in some L2 learners of this study can nevertheless be taken as evidence for access to UG. Such stage of L2 language development represents an important area of research in order to try to better understand the strategies adopted by L2 learners when dealing with a parametric variation. The present study offers only a first step in this direction and, hopefully, a tempting suggestion for further research in this particular domain of nominal syntax.
References


