L2 Acquisition of the Semantics of Russian Dative Subjects

I will present results of an ongoing study on the L2 acquisition of the semantics of dative subjects in Russian (1b-2b) by native speakers of English. The topic of the semantics of dative subjects has not been studied in the L2 acquisition literature. While L2 research (e.g., White et al. 1999, Montrul 1998) suggests that the syntax of dative subjects is a developmental issue and is attainable to the near-native extent, Coppieters (1987) draws linguists’ attention to the fact that even very advanced learners, who have seemingly mastered the syntax of the target language, still have difficulties with certain semantic distinctions. My results indicate that the semantics of datives is not attainable to the near-native one.

In terms of the syntactic approaches to dative constructions of the type (1b), at least two existing analyses can be applied: 1) Rivero (2003) proposes that the dative nominal generates in the Spec of Applicative heads with the rest of the structure being its semantic complement, and 2) Benedicto (1995) argues for the Modal head that hosts dative subjects and assigns them relevant semantic properties. For current purposes I assume that nominative (2a) and dative (2b) experiencers are subsumed under one syntactic transitive structure. However, as far as my study is concerned, nothing seems to hinge on the syntactic derivations.

In this talk I propose that the semantic difference between nominative and dative subjects pertains to Inability/Ability to Control states/events and can be coded by the feature [-/+ Control] (or [+/-C]) respectively. Namely, nominative agents (1a) and experiencers (2a) are coded [+C], whereas dative nominals (1b-2b) are [-C]. When contextualized, the difference can be seen as follows: the experiencer in (2a) reads as ‘Marina is in a conscious state/capable of controlling her perceptual processes and she thus volitionally thinks of a cherimoya’ – the reading stressed by an agentive adverb (cf. (1a)), whereas in (2b) ‘Marina receives some signal from the outside that uncontrollably provokes her to desire the fruit’, the reading that disallows agentive adverbs (cf. (1b)). Wierzbicka’s (1996: 69) research on identical Russian constructions emphasizes that dative constructions are semantically marked in contrast with nominative structures in that that nominative subjects (Ya xochu=I want) are usually responsible for mental activities, whereas dative constructions explicitly deny such a responsibility on a part of a dative experiencer. Wierzbicka’s insight supports my proposal. One more observation I will address relates to the correlation between case and aspect. Thus, the nominative construction implies that the state described by the verb can be thought of as complete or having a telic interpretation, or there is a boundary to the end of that state (cf. Pylkkänen 2000). Conversely, the dative constructions lack such a completeness reading and, instead, involve an atelic interpretation regardless of the verbs’ aspect.

It was hypothesized that a) if the learner is partly constrained by the L1 grammar (Partial Access hypothesis to UG, e.g. Clahsen & Muysken 1989), s/he will successfully acquire the morphosyntax of Russian dative constructions (due to its morphemic visibility – dative ending and reflexive -sjà), but the morphosyntactic clues will not prompt the learner to attain the target-like semantic interpretation; b) If the learner is not constrained by the L1 grammar (Full Access hypothesis to UG, cf. Schwartz & Sprouse 1996), s/he will successfully access semantic subtleties of the constructions with dative subjects. The morphosyntax will serve trigger to the semantics.

Methodology and results: participants (advanced L2ers who have lived in Russian-speaking countries up to 12 months) performed a Semantic Acceptability Task for the 32 short story-sentence combinations with two types of verbs - psychs and optionally transitive. Story contexts were contrasted for -/+control properties and dative/nominative subjects. Preliminary results (n=8) indicate that 1) learners are conservative in the acquisition of the target semantics – they are not sensitive a) to the fact that dative subjects are not allowed in the contexts where [+C] argument is required, b) to the dative subjects favoring -C contexts with both types of verbs thus supporting hypothesis (a), and 2) learners, however, do not seem to transfer lexical properties of a particular verb, but they are rather
sensitive to verbs’ lexical classes of the target grammar. I will also explore a possible frequency explanation by presenting the occurrences of Dat+V-sja vs. Nom+V in most known classical texts that learners are exposed to during the learning process.

Examples:
(1) Optionally Transitive Verbs (4 tested: chitat’ read, gulyat’ walk, rabotat’ work, and spat’ sleep)
   a. Ya prochitala rasskaz s udovol’stviem umyshlenno.
      I.Nom read.Pst.Prf.F tale with pleasure /intentionally
   b. Mne rasskaz prochitala s udovol’stviem /*umyshlenno.
      ‘I read the tale with pleasure.’

(2) Psych Verbs (4 tested: xotet’ want, slyshat’ hear, mechtat’ dream, and pokoryat’ woo/conquer)
   a. Marina (umyshlenno) xotela chirimoyu.
      Marina.Nom (intentionally) wanted.Impf.F chirimoya.Acc
      ‘Marina wanted cherimoya.
   b. Marina (*umyshlenno) xotelos’ chirimoyu.
      Marina.Dat (*intentionally) wanted-Refl.Impf chirimoya.Acc
      ‘Marina wanted cherimoya/Marina felt like eating cherimoya.’

Cited References: