

On the use of posture verbs by French-speaking learners of Dutch. A corpus-based study

It is generally acknowledged that French-speaking learners of Dutch have considerable difficulties with the use of the posture verbs *staan* ('stand'), *liggen* ('lie') and *zitten* ('sit'). Unlike in French, the three cardinal posture verbs have grammaticalised to basic location verbs in Dutch (a Type II language in Levinson & Ameka's 2007 classification, cf. also Lemmens 2002). This can be related to the larger typological differences between Germanic languages on the one hand, being satellite-framed languages (in the terminology of Talmy 2000) which favour the use of manner verbs to describe location (and motion), and Romance languages on the other, being verb-framed languages, where location is mostly expressed by a neutral verb (e.g., French *être* 'to be' or *se trouver* 'to find oneself').

The difficulties that French learners have with Dutch posture verbs have been confirmed by our quantitative corpus study, comparing Dutch essays written by French speaking learners with those written by native speakers. Against the background of the quantitative analysis, we focus in this presentation on a qualitative analysis of the uses of the posture verbs in both the learner corpus and control corpus. As such, the study has revealed three important tendencies. Firstly, in line with the typological differences between French and Dutch (where these verbs behave like noun classifiers), our analysis confirms the French-driven tendency of the learners for underusing these verbs. Secondly, seemingly paradoxical to the previous point, is that these learners occasionally overuse these posture verbs in contexts where no such verb is allowed. Thirdly, our qualitative analysis of errors reveals that the learners operate on grammaticised semantic distinctions drawn from the target language. Even if the categories used by L2 speakers may not be the same as those exploited by native speakers, our analysis suggests that the learner language *is* a linguistic system, in which grammaticised semantic distinctions drawn from the target language do play an important role (Klein 2008, cf. also Klein & Perdue 1993, Hiligsmann 1997). In other words, the L2 speakers thus seem to be aware of the patterns in the input (cf. also Rast 2008) and exploit, i.e. overextend, them in a fashion that may not differ all that much in kind from those in L1 acquisition (cf. Brown 1958, Clark 2003:211-212, Tomasello 2003:127-8). Strikingly, French learners have fewer problems with the contexts in which the posture verb is part of a particle verb (such as *opstaan* 'to get up') or those in which it is used as part of an expression (such as *centraal staan* 'to stand central', 'this is a central point'). This suggests that, at least to the learners, these contexts are less related to the other uses of the posture verbs than may be the case for L1-speakers and learnt as fixed units.

Our study not only further clarifies the difficulties that French-speaking learners of Dutch are facing when express posture and location in the target language, but also situates these in a larger typology as well as within a usage-based approach to (second) language acquisition.

References

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