Word Order and Information Structure in Russian as a Heritage or Second Language

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1. Introduction

This paper reports on an experimental study that investigates the relationship between word order and information structure (IS) in the Russian of heritage speakers (HSs) and L2-learners (L2ers). HSs and L2ers are exposed to the target language (in this case, Russian) in quite different circumstances and at different ages: HSs are exposed to it primarily at home, beginning in early childhood, whereas adult L2ers acquire it only after puberty, and typically in a classroom setting. Yet there are also many similarities between the two groups: the target language (in this case, Russian) is typically not the dominant language for either L2ers or HSs, with much individual variability (see Montrul (2008); Polinsky (2018) for extensive discussion of heritage speakers).

There are many studies on adult heritage Russian speakers in the U.S., which provide evidence of incomplete acquisition and/or attrition in a variety of morphosyntactic phenomena, such as case, gender, grammatical aspect, and relative clauses (e.g., Polinsky (2007, 2008, 2011); Laleko (2011); among many others). However, to date, there are very few comparisons of HSs and L2ers of Russian. Such comparisons can provide information about the relative importance of age of acquisition vs. of input and use (see Montrul (2008) for more discussion), as well as about cross-linguistic influence (see, e.g., Montrul and Ionin (2012)). In this work, we compare HSs and L2ers of Russian on a phenomenon that brings together word order, information structure, and prosody, thus combining elements of grammar and meaning. We ask whether HSs have an advantage over L2ers in this domain.

2. Russian word order
2.1. Word order and information structure in Russian

In this paper, we examine SVO and OVS orders of Russian sentences. The canonical, default word order of Russian is SVO; in addition to being the syntactic...
default, SVO is also the most frequent word order, accounting for 79% of all three-member sentences in written Russian (Bivon (1971), reported in Bailyn (1995), p. 12). Russian is a free word order language, and all possible permutations of the subject, verb and object are possible, given the right discourse context. The most frequent non-canonical (scrambled) word order is OVS: according to Bivon (1971), OVS accounts for 11% of all three-member sentences in written Russian, which is more than any other non-canonical word order. OVS is more common in written than in spoken Russian: 16% to 30% in written Russian vs. 7% in spoken Russian, according to Sirotinina (1965), reported in Slioussar (2011), p. 2054.

Russian is a case-marking, article-less language. In this paper, we focus only on those nouns for which subject (nominative) and object (accusative or dative) forms are distinct. An example is given in (1).

(1) a. Sobaka ukusila košku. SVO  
dog.Nom bite.Past cat.Acc  
'The dog bit a cat.'  
b. Košku ukusila sobaka. OVS  
cat.Acc bite.Past dog.Nom  
'A dog bit the cat.'

The different word orders in Russian can convey a variety of IS functions. For the purposes of this paper, we restrict our attention only to 'non-emotive' sentences, that is, sentences with neutral prosody (stress on the rightmost constituent) and no element in contrastive focus (cf. King (1995), Junghanns and Zybatow (1997)). In this type of configuration, SVO is used to answer object questions (e.g., (1a) would answer "Whom did the dog bite?"), while OVS is used to answer subject questions (e.g, (1b) would answer "Who bit the cat?"). Thus, under neutral prosody, the preverbal element typically denotes old information, and the postverbal element - new information.1

The distinction between old and new information is closely related to the distinction between definites and indefinites. Russian lacks articles, and a bare, determiner-less NP is ambiguous between definite and indefinite readings. Under neutral prosody, the preverbal bare NP is typically construed as definite, and the postverbal one - as indefinite, as shown by the glosses in (1). However, it would not be accurate to say that Russian word order corresponds directly to the (in)definiteness distinction: non-anaphoric definites, as well as proper nouns (which are definite by definition), can convey new information, in which case they are postverbal, as shown in (2). Thus, Russian word order reflects the IS configuration rather than the semantic (in)definiteness distinction.

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1 SVO is also used in wide-focus contexts (e.g., in answer to "What happened?"); but we leave such uses aside and focus only on narrow-focus contexts, where either the object or the subject conveys new information. In principle, SVO can be used to answer subject questions (so that the subject is new information), but this requires non-neutral prosody, with stress on the subject.
(2) a. Ministra uvolil prezident.
   minister.Acc fire.Past president.Nom
   'The president fired the minister.'

b. Sobaku pogladila Marija.
   dog.Acc stroke.Past Maria.Nom
   'Maria stroked the dog.'

2.2. Acquisition of Russian word order

While SVO order predominates, non-canonical word orders are attested in
the speech of monolingual Russian-acquiring children as early as 18 months
(Dyakonova (2004)). Studies with children bilingual in Russian and another
language (Dutch, Hebrew) generally show an overreliance on word order instead
of case-marking for determining subject vs. object roles (Janssen and Peeters-
Podgaevskaja (2012); Janssen and Meir (2018)). At the same time, there is
evidence that bilingual children are sensitive to the relationship between word
order and IS. Mykhaylyk (2013) found that young Ukrainian/English bilinguals
were very similar to Ukrainian monolinguals with regard to their production of
object scrambling in Ukrainian (which is similar to Russian with regard to the
word order / IS relationship).

Turning to adults, there is much evidence that English-dominant adult HSs
of Russian overrely on canonical SVO order in production (e.g., Polinsky (2007)).
With regard to adult L2ers, VanPatten, Collopy and Qualin (2012) found that L1-
English L2-Russian learners misinterpreted SVO order as OVS; the L2ers
improved in their interpretation of OVS with Input Processing instruction.

A prior study that tested the relationship between word order and IS in L2-
Russian is Cho and Slabakova (2014). In this study, L1-English and L1-Korean
L2-Russian learners completed a written Felicity Judgment Task, in which they
rated the acceptability of OVS sentences in contexts that established either the
object or the subject as old information. Cho and Slabakova (2014) described
the learning task of the L2ers in their study as involving a mapping between word
order and (in)definiteness: in OVS order, the preverbal object is definite while the
postverbal subject is indefinite (see (1)). However, as described above, definite
subjects can in fact be postverbal when they denote new information, as in (2).
The L2ers in Cho and Slabakova (2014) correctly rated OVS higher when the
object was definite / old information, and lower - when the object was indefinite
/ new information; however, the difference did not reach significance for all
groups tested. Some limitations of the task were that it did not include a control
condition of SVO order, and also did not control for prosody.

We are aware of two prior studies that directly compared L2ers and HSs of
Russian on their understanding of Russian word order. Ionin and Luchkina (2019)
compared English-dominant L2ers and HSs with regard to the relationship
between word order, quantifier scope, and prosody; neither group was target-like,
but HSs appeared to be more sensitive to word order manipulations than L2ers.
However, since the HSs in that study were also more proficient than the L2ers, it
is not clear whether the advantage stemmed from overall proficiency or specifically from early exposure. Laleko (2017) compared L2ers and HSs of Russian on the relationship between word order and IS, testing them on both written and auditory acceptability judgment tasks. In the written AJT, both L2ers and HSs preferred SVO to OVS in response to subject questions, while native speakers (NSs) accepted both equally. In the auditory AJT, the results were similar, and HSs also overgeneralized OVS order to contexts where it is not acceptable. Laleko (2017) is an unpublished conference presentation, so few details about the study are available.

The relationship between word order and IS has been investigated, directly or indirectly, in a number of other target languages. For example, in a series of studies with child and adult L1-English L2-Dutch learners, Unsworth (2005, 2007) found that with increased proficiency, the L2ers were able to acquire the relationship between object scrambling and definiteness/specificity of the object. In a study of L2-German, Hopp (2009) found that at lower proficiency, L1-Russian L2-German learners outperformed L1-English L2-German learners with regard to the relationship between object scrambling and IS; since Russian and German are similar with regard to the word order / IS relationship, this finding was attributed to L1-transfer. Finally, in a study of focus in L2-Spanish, Leal, Destruel and Hoot (2018) found that L1-English L2-Spanish learners differed from NSs with regard to the production of object focus: learners were more likely than NSs to move the object to the rightmost position.

To sum up, there is evidence that learners often differ from NSs with regard to the relationship between word order and IS, and that the native language has a role to play. Very little is known about how L2ers compare to HSs in this domain.

3. Research questions

Acquiring the relationship between word order and IS in Russian is a challenging task, given the relative infrequency of non-canonical word order, and the lack of classroom instruction on this topic. We might expect HSs to have an advantage over L2ers in this domain, given the evidence that non-canonical word order is acquired early in childhood. The relationship between word order and IS is closely related to prosody, and HSs are more likely than L2ers to receive aural input in the language, including a variety of prosodic contours. At the same time, corpus data (cited earlier) suggests that non-canonical word order is more common in written than in spoken Russian. HSs may receive more exposure to spoken Russian than L2ers, but may also receive less exposure to written Russian, if their exposure is primarily at home rather than in the classroom. Given the reduced input that HSs get relative to monolinguals, they may receive fairly little evidence of OVS order and not acquire the IS properties of this word order.

As discussed above, Cho and Slabakova (2014) proposed that the learning task concerning Russian word order is about (in)definiteness; we have argued that, rather, it is about IS. One of the goals of this study is to tease apart those two hypotheses by comparing contexts where IS corresponds to (in)definiteness vs.
contexts where it does not. If learners equate word order with (in)definiteness, then they should be more target-like in those instances where IS is in a one-to-one relationship with (in)definiteness: when the preverbal element is old information and definite, while the postverbal one is new information and indefinite. In contrast, learners would be less target-like if both the preverbal and the postverbal elements are definite (while differing in information status), since a mapping between word order and (in)definiteness would not lead to the right result.

Our research questions for this study are as follows:

(3) a. Do L2ers and/or HSs of Russian whose dominant language is English recognize that word order (SVO vs. OVS) is related to information status (old vs. new)?

b. Do L2ers and/or HSs of Russian incorrectly map word order to (in)definiteness rather than IS?

c. Do HSs have an advantage over L2ers in this domain?

4. Methodology
4.1. Participants

The participants in this study were 43 Russian NSs living in Russia, 20 English-dominant Russian HSs and 32 L1-English L2-Russian learners (seven of the L2ers were bilingual in English and a non-Slavic language: four – in Spanish; one – in Cantonese; one – in Tulu; and one was trilingual in English, Spanish and Portuguese). Demographic information about the HS and L2 participants is given in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>HSs (N=20)</th>
<th>L2ers (N=32)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>age at testing</td>
<td>mean 20 (range 18-31)</td>
<td>mean 24 (range 18-48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AoA of Russian</td>
<td>19 at birth</td>
<td>1 at age 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 at age 6</td>
<td>14 at ages 14 through 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>17 at ages 18 and over</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AoA of English</td>
<td>17 at age 5 or below</td>
<td>28 at birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 at ages 6 through 8</td>
<td>4 between ages of 3 and 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(learned Spanish or Chinese first)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>age of U.S. arrival</td>
<td>12 born in the U.S.</td>
<td>29 born in the U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 at age 1</td>
<td>2 born in other English-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 at ages 4 and 5</td>
<td>speaking countries (Australia, Canada)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 at age 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 at age 11</td>
<td>1 born in Mexico (moved to the U.S. as a baby)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Demographic information for HS and L2 participants
4.2. Tasks and procedure

The L2ers and HSs completed a language background questionnaire and three tasks, in the following order: a case check task that examined whether learners can use case marking rather than word order to determine who did what to whom; a bimodal Acceptability Judgment Task (AJT) consisting of dialogues that established the IS configuration; and a proficiency test. The NSs completed only the language background questionnaire and the AJT.

4.2.1. The case check test

The case check test consisted of 20 items: 10 SVO and 10 OVS Russian sentences, presented in written form, as in (4a). Each sentence is followed by a comprehension question in English, with multiple-choice answer options, as in (4b). Learners who follow the canonical-order strategy would be 50% correct on this task. The case-check used the same nouns and verbs as the main task (the AJT), and thus also provided a vocabulary refresher.

(4) a. Zebru nenavidit orel.
    zebra-Acc hates eagle-Nom
    ‘An eagle hates the zebra.’

   b. Who is doing the hating? zebra   eagle

4.2.2. Proficiency test

The proficiency test was a 58-item cloze test, with three multiple-choice options per blank, and only one correct answer. This test was developed from the cloze test in Luchkina and Stoops (2013).

4.2.3. Bimodal AJT

In the bimodal AJT, each item consisted of a short dialogue, presented both in written form at and auditorily. The auditory stimuli were recorded by two female native Russian speakers. The bimodal presentation ensured that neither HSs nor L2ers had an advantage, since it has been found that HSs tend to have an advantage on aural tasks, and L2ers - on written ones (Montrul, Foote and Perpiñán (2008)). Additionally, the auditory presentation controlled for prosody. In the target items, which were recorded with neutral prosody, sentence stress always fell on the rightmost constituent. Only felicitous dialogues were recorded, and the sound files were spliced in order to produce infelicitous dialogues.

Each dialogue was a simple question-answer pair; participants rated the appropriateness of the answer on a scale from 1 (unacceptable) to 5 (acceptable). The target items corresponded to two separate experiments. The purpose of having two experiments was to examine whether learners would equate word
order with (in)definiteness, per the RQ in (3c). In Experiment 1, bare common nouns were used, so that information status corresponds to (in)definiteness, with the preverbal NP being definite, and the postverbal one - indefinite. In Experiment 2, proper nouns were used: since these are definite by definition, there is no correspondence between (in)definiteness and information status. If learners think that Russian word order encodes (in)definiteness, they should be more target-like in Experiment 1 than in Experiment 2.

Each experiment had a 2X2 design, crossing the type of question (subject question vs. object question) with the word order in the answer (SVO vs. OVS). A sample token set for Experiment 1 is given in (5) and (6): each question type ((5a) and (6a)) was paired with each answer type ((5b) and (6b)). The same holds for the sample token set for Experiment 2, in (7)-(8).

There were 24 token sets built for each experiment, and the items were distributed across four lists using a Latin-square design, with six tokens per condition per list. Most object NPs were in the accusative case, but a few were dative. Only nouns with unambiguous nominative vs. accusative / dative case endings were used. All lexical items were taken from beginner Russian-language textbooks. An adverbial was always included in the answer to make it slightly longer and to add variety. Each list contained 48 target items and 72 fillers; the fillers tested a variety of word orders and prosodic contours.

(5) a. Kogo včera uvidel orel? Experiment 1, object question
   whom yesterday see.Past eagle.Nom
   'Whom did the eagle see yesterday?'

   b. Orel uvidel lisu. Experiment 1, SVO answer
      eagle.Nom see.Past fox.Acc
      'The eagle saw a fox.'

(6) a. Kto včera uvidel lisu? Experiment 1, subject question
   who yesterday see.Past fox.Acc
   'Who saw the fox yesterday?'

   b. Lisu uvidel orel. Experiment 1, OVS answer
      fox.Acc see.Past eagle.Nom
      'An eagle saw the fox.'

(7) a. Kogo segodnja uvidit Lena? Experiment 2, object question
   whom today see.Fut Lena.Nom
   'Whom will Lena see today?'

   b. Lena uvidit Ninu. Experiment 2, SVO answer
      Lena.Nom see.Fut Nina.Acc
      'Lena will see Nina.'

(8) a. Kto segodnja uvidit Ninu? Experiment 2, subject question
   who today see.Fut Nina.Acc
   'Who will see Nina today?'

   b. Ninu uvidit Lena. Experiment 2, OVS answer
      Nina.Acc see.Fut Lena.Nom
      'Lena will see Nina.'
5. Results

5.1. Results of the proficiency and case-check tests

The HSs scored an average of 69% correct on the proficiency test, and the L2ers - an average of 60% correct. In order to allow for more closely proficiency-matched groups, the final analysis included only those learners who scored more than 50% on the cloze test. 18 of the 20 HSs met this cut-off, with mean proficiency score of 73%; 20 of 32 L2ers met the cut-off, with mean proficiency score of 71%. Even after the cut-off, the HSs were significantly higher in proficiency than the L2ers, based on an independent samples t-test; however, the numerical difference (73% vs. 71%) was quite small. For the 38 learners who met the proficiency test cut-off, the mean scores (%correct) on the case-check were 86% correct for HSs (range 55%-95%) and 84% for L2ers (range 55%-100%).

5.2. Results of bimodal AJT: group analysis

The AJT results were analyzed with a cumulative link mixed model for ordinal data, \texttt{clmm()} function in R (Christinsen (2018)). Results for Experiments 1 and 2 were analyzed separately, as were results for NSs (N=43) and learners (N=38). The fixed effects in each analysis were Question type (subject vs. object), Word order in the answer (SVO vs. OVS), and, in the learner analysis only, learner type (HS vs. L2). The random effects were item and participant. The dependent measure was the mean rating on a 1-to-5 scale. Significant interactions were followed up with pairwise comparisons via \texttt{emmeans()} (Lenth (2018)).

![Figure 1. Experiment 1 (common nouns), mean rating, by group and category](image-url)
The mean ratings are shown in Figures 1 and 2, for Experiments 1 and 2, respectively. As the figures show, both NSs and HSs rated SVO above OVS with object questions, but rated OVS above SVO for subject questions. In contrast, the L2ers rated SVO above OVS for both question types. The results for the two experiments look nearly identical, for all groups.

![Figure 2. Experiment 2 (proper nouns), mean rating, by group and category](image)

Table 2. Model outputs for Experiment 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contrast</th>
<th>z-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>Contrast</th>
<th>z-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question type: subject vs. object</td>
<td>18.39</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>Question type: subject vs. object</td>
<td>9.46</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order: SVO vs. OVS</td>
<td>19.30</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>Word order: SVO vs. OVS</td>
<td>11.15</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question type X word order</td>
<td>-21.44</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>Question type X word order</td>
<td>-11.57</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status: HS vs. L2</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>Question type X status</td>
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<td>&lt;.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order X status</td>
<td>-4.72</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>Word order X status</td>
<td>7.82</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question type X question type X status</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>
The outputs of the mixed effects models are given in Tables 2 and 3 for the two experiments, respectively. As these tables show, all two-way and three-way interactions were significant. Follow-up pairwise Bonferroni comparisons revealed the following. For both NSs and HSs, SVO was rated significantly above OVS with object questions, while OVS was rated significantly above SVO for subject questions, in both experiments. For L2ers, SVO was rated significantly above OVS for both object and subject questions, in both experiments. When we look specifically at performance on OVS sentences, both NSs and HSs rated OVS (with subject questions) significantly above illicit OVS (with object questions); in contrast, L2ers showed no difference in ratings between licit and illicit OVS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contrast</th>
<th>z-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>Contrast</th>
<th>z-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question type: subject vs. object</td>
<td>19.69</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>Question type: subject vs. object</td>
<td>9.68</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order: SVO vs. OVS</td>
<td>20.25</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>Word order: SVO vs. OVS</td>
<td>11.94</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Question type X word order</td>
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<td>Question type X word order</td>
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<tr>
<td>Status: HS vs. L2</td>
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<td>&lt;.001*</td>
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<td>&lt;.001*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Word order X status</td>
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<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>Word order X question type X status</td>
<td>8.13</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 3. Model outputs for Experiment 2

5.3. Results of bimodal AJT: individual participants analysis

The group results indicate that HSs and L2ers behave quite differently, but group results can hide much individual variation. Thus, we conducted an individual participants analysis, as follows. For each participant, we computed the average difference in ratings (on a 5-point scale) between SVO and OVS sentences (averaging across both common and proper nouns, since the results for the two experiments were largely the same). Recall that the target word order is SVO in answer to object questions, and OVS - in answer to subject questions. Therefore, we computed SVO and OVS advantage measures for each participant, per the formula in (9). For example, if a given participant gave average ratings of 4.8 and 3.6 to SVO vs. OVS responses for object questions, her SVO advantage
would be 1.2. Positive values for the SVO advantage and OVS advantage indicate preferences that go in the expected direction.

(9) a. For object questions:
   SVO advantage = mean rating of SVO – mean rating of OVS
b. For subject questions:
   OVS advantage = mean rating of OVS – mean rating of SVO

In Figure 3, we plot the SVO advantage against the OVS advantage for NSs. As the figure shows, nearly all NSs had a positive SVO advantage on object questions, as well as a positive OVS advantage on subject questions.

For learners, Figures 4 and 5 plot their SVO and OVS advantage scores against their case-check scores (out of 20), for HSs and L2ers, respectively. Most learners in both groups show a positive SVO advantage on object questions. On the other hand, while many HSs show a positive OVS advantage on subject questions, very few L2ers do. In general, both SVO and OVS advantage scores improve with better knowledge of case-making. In fact, for the full learner group, there were positive correlations between the case-check score and both the SVO advantage score ($r=.50$) and the OVS advantage score ($r=.29$, not significant).

Thus, as learners get better at recognizing the role of case-marking in determining who did what to whom, they also get better at recognizing the IS properties of word order. However, this holds more for HSs than for L2ers: as seen in Figure 5, even L2ers with high case-check scores still do not exhibit an OVS advantage on subject questions. But given the relatively small sample size, the results must be interpreted with caution.
We are now in a position to revisit the research questions in (3), repeated below. The answer to (3a) is a partial Yes: HSs, but not L2ers, recognize that SVO and OVS orders are used to answer object questions and subject questions, respectively. The answer to (3b) is No: the results were nearly identical with common nouns as with proper nouns, which suggests that learners do not confuse IS with (in)definiteness. The answer to (3c) is a clear Yes, as we observe native-
like behavior from HSs but not from L2ers, who prefer SVO order regardless of question type.

(3) a. Do L2ers and/or HSs of Russian whose dominant language is English recognize that word order (SVO vs. OVS) is related to information status (old vs. new)?
b. DO L2ers and/or HSs of Russian incorrectly map word order to (in)definiteness rather than IS?
c. Do HSs have an advantage over L2ers in this domain?

There are several possible explanations for why L2ers are non-target-like: they could be transferring the preference for SVO order from English, or they could be influenced by the canonicity and frequency of SVO order in their Russian input. In contrast, the HSs were able to acquire the word order / IS relationship despite the relative infrequency of OVS order in the input. Specifically, they were able to make a mapping between position (preverbal vs. postverbal) and information status (old vs. new). Their advantage is likely due to their early exposure to OVS order in naturalistic speech. However, we cannot fully rule out the role of overall proficiency, as the HS sample in our study had slightly higher average proficiency than the L2 sample. In future research, it is important to look at fully proficiency-matched L2 and HS groups, in order to isolate the role of early exposure. It is also important to explore what learners know about other IS configurations in Russian.

References


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