

## Discovering Morphosyntactic Properties in L2A: On the English 's Morpheme

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‘Acquisition studies can [...] provide a special kind of data for linguistic theory’ [Belletti 2009: 226]. In this work I’ll discuss data coming from different experimental settings ( an elicited production task, a grammatical decision task and a cross-sectional study including various tasks) concerning the L2 acquisition of English 's Genitive Constructions by different groups of native speakers of Italian ( beginners or near- beginners of L2 English) aged 10-12. As any other ‘construction’, an 's Genitive Construction will be derived from some more basic properties. If parameters are in the (functional) lexicon (Borer 1984; Kayne 2005; Rizzi 2011) and the triggers are vocabulary items with their idiosyncratic properties, in L2A, as in L1A, the acquirer will be faced with new lexical items whose properties ( including merge, move, and spell-out parameters as in Rizzi (2011) ) will have to be discovered. As Xanthos et al. (2011) have shown for L1A, the morphological richness of a language favors morphological acquisition. Assuming that the reason underlying this finding is that morphological richness is directly related to the transparency of a morpheme, we may predict that the English 's morpheme will be particularly hard to acquire. In this respect, our data show that:

- a) It is significantly more difficult (in terms of number of errors) to decide what is 's ( a genitive or the reduced form of 3SPres BE) in some syntactic environments ( 1a and 1b ) than in others (2), i.e. when 's is at a ‘choice point’ in the sense of Fodor (1998)
- b) *Is* is produced instead of 's when a genitive is required (3)

- (1) a. Jodie's in the garden  
b. Rosie's dog is very friendly
- (2) Is this Jack's tracksuit?
- (3) Q. Where are the belts?  
A. The Belt is Brom is on the table. The belt is Katrina is on the chair.

Taken together, these data show that the underlying hypothesis that subjects make is the following:

- (4) *Is* and 's are allomorphs of one and the same morpheme that can be merged both DP – internally and CP- internally.

Interestingly, this is basically the hypothesis advanced in den Dikken (1998,1999), which has been questioned by Bernstein and Tortora (2005), who argue that 's corresponds instead to the verbal suffix *-s*, in turn a (singular) Number morpheme as in Kayne (1989,1993). I will discuss each argument proposed by Bernstein and Tortora (2005) ( agreement and anti-agreement arguments, as well as arguments related to the morpho- phonological status of 's) arguing that the 's=*is* Hypothesis can be maintained assuming that the featural content of this morpheme is Person, and not Number. I will also assume, following cartographic guidelines (and departing from den Dikken 2006), that the syntactic head of which 's is the spell-out (F in den Dikken 1998,1999,2006, F a linker), and in the Spec of whose projection (FP in den Dikken) the possessor is moved in English 's Genitive Constructions, has the same (interpretable) featural content, i.e. Person, analyzing (3) as the base-generated version of an English 's Genitive Construction. Finally, I will devote some space to the question of why (3) doesn't seem to be attested in the L1 acquisition of English 's Genitive Constructions, arguing in favor of a different (transitory, as the cross-sectional study shows) setting of a Spell-out parameter (in the sense of Rizzi 2011) concerning functional morphemes, which can be extended to the phenomenon described in the literature as ‘BE over-generation’ (Ionin and Wexler 2002), a hallmark of L2 acquisition (Paradis *et al.* 2008),