

The Lexical–Syntactic Interface in L2 English: Evidence from Learner Variation

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Word order variation in L2 English reflects the interaction of multiple constraints at the lexical–syntactic interface. This study investigates whether structural similarity between the L1 and English facilitates target-like particle placement or instead promotes transfer-driven preferences. It aims to illustrate how learners’ interlanguage grammar emerges from multiple interacting influences rather than a single determinant.

The research addresses three main questions:

- (1) Does the L1 influence particle placement preferences?
- (2) Does semantic complexity, namely idiomaticity, object weight, and definiteness affect the placement of the particle?
- (3) Does learner proficiency play a role?

These questions are examined through rating and production tasks with separable phrasal verbs, investigating learners' choice between adjacent (V–Prt–Obj) and split (V–Obj–Prt) particle placement. The data were analyzed using mixed-effects logistic regression models. The dataset comprises 341 participants (114 native speakers of German, 112 of French, and 115 of English), representing multiple proficiency levels. German and French were selected as L1s for their differing structural constraints: German requires verb-particle separation in most cases, while French lacks phrasal verbs entirely. English native speakers served as a control group to provide native-speaker baseline data.

Results indicate that L1 exerts the strongest influence. German learners show the strongest preference for adjacent particle placement (V–Prt–Obj), native English speakers show the strongest preference for split placement (V–Obj–Prt), and French learners occupy an intermediate position between the two groups. Rather than facilitating target-like performance, structural similarity appears to promote stronger transfer effects, pointing to more complex transfer dynamics than originally assumed. Semantic complexity has a rather limited impact: while object weight shows a moderate effect, definiteness only a minor tendency, and idiomaticity shows no measurable effect. Proficiency appears to play a minimal role.

By framing particle placement as the outcome of competing constraints, this study contributes to understanding the lexical-syntactic interface in cross-linguistic L2 acquisition and illustrates how structural similarities, differences, and processing demands interact in learners’ interlanguage grammar.

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