

PUBLIC LECTURE

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Institute of Multilingualism | University | HEP Fribourg
Rue de Morat 24, 1700 Fribourg, room K0.02

What the eyes don't see (or the ears don't hear), the mind won't learn: Investigating the cognitive learning difficulty of linguistic features in second language acquisition

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Abstract

Key to understanding how languages are learned is understanding the difficulties that are associated with it. And there is ample evidence that, overall, learning a second language is indeed difficult (at least compared to learning a first language), though obviously for some learners more so than for others, and under certain learning conditions more so than under others, and some features of language more so than others.

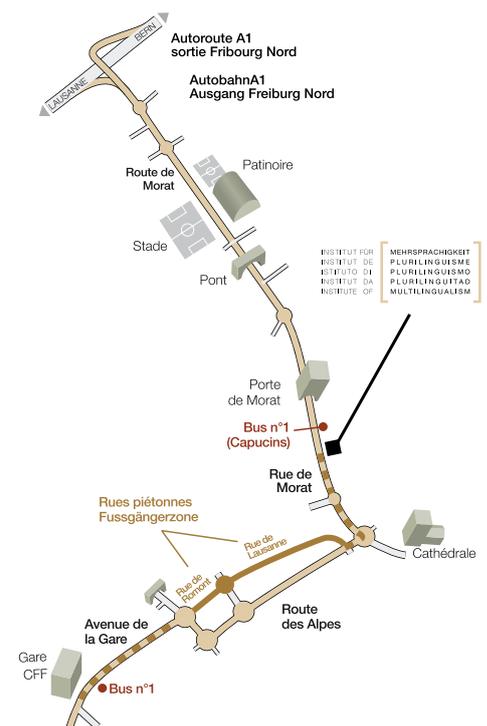
In this talk I will focus on what makes some linguistic features (phonemes, morphemes, words, patterns, rules, ...) in a second language more difficult to learn than others, for all learners and under all learning conditions. In doing so, I will take a psycholinguistic or cognitive (rather than a social, linguistic or neurological) perspective on the issue and define language learning difficulty as *cognitive complexity*: how demanding a given language feature is for a given language learner in terms of the mental resources and cognitive mechanisms that (s)he has to deploy in processing and internalising the feature.

I will discuss a number of factors that may impinge on the cognitive complexity of language features during the early stages of second language learning, with particular attention to the *salience* of the target features (Housen & Simoens 2016). Salience has been claimed to be “the ultimate predictor of second language acquisition” (Goldschneider & DeKeyser 2001: 36) yet SLA research has only just begun to consider its nature and role (cf. Ellis 2016). I will present results from a series of experimental studies using a semi-artificial language (Englishti) and, amongst others, eye-tracking to explore how salience influences the difficulty that language learners experience in learning inflectional morphology in a new language under both implicit and explicit learning conditions.

References

- Ellis, N. C. (2016). Salience, cognition, language complexity, and complex adaptive systems. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 38(2), 341-351.
- Goldschneider, J. & DeKeyser, R. (2001). Explaining the ‘natural order of L2 morpheme acquisition’ in English: A meta-analysis of multiple determinants. *Language Learning*, 51(1), 1-50.
- Housen A. & Simoens, H. (2016). Cognitive perspectives on complexity and difficulty in second language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 38(3) 163-175.

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