What drives learner errors in written L2 production?

Surface Overlap versus Derivational Complexity in the English Genitive Alternation

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BACKGROUND

The **English Genitive Alternation** refers to the variation in the expression of relationships between two noun phrases in either in the **s-genitive** (*the company's future*) or the **of-genitive** (*the future of the company*). It typically denotes a possessive relationship. Though this alternation is not unique to English, many other languages are more restrictive in the linear order of the noun phrases.

Spanish (head-initial)	English (head-initial)	Japanese (head-final)
n/a	the company's future	kaisha no mirai 会社の未来
el futuro de la empresa	the future of the company	n/a

The above crosslinguistic variation is a classic example of **surface overlap**, where Language A (here, Spanish or Japanese) allows one option and Language B (English) allows two. One of the two options in Language B corresponds to the form found in Language A.

The **Surface Overlap Hypothesis** broadly predicts that, where overlap exists, crosslinguistic influence would lead to a tendency for learners to favour the structure available in their L1 (Hulk & Müller 2000). The competing hypotheses here were developed in the context of L1 bilingual and monolingual acquisition

In terms of their respective **derivational complexity**, the s-genitive is more complex than the of-genitive. In order to assign genitive case, the s-genitive requires the raising of the possesum (*the company*, in the above example) to the specifier of the DP, while the of-genitive requires no such raising as the preposition assigns case (Hawkins 2001: 243-244).

The **Derivational Complexity Hypothesis** predicts that when faced with two structural options, the less complex one (here, the of-genitive) would be favoured. Some evidence suggests that in L2 acquisition, less complex structures appear earlier (Jakubowicz 2005).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS & METHODS

- What happens when L2 learners are faced with this 'new' optionality, with only one of the structures available in the L1?
- How and to what extent are usage and accuracy influenced by crosslinguistic influence (i.e. surface overlap) and derivational complexity?

- Cambridge Learner Corpus
- 1,639 written L2 English exam scripts (740k words)
- L1 Japanese and L1 Spanish speakers at A2-C2 levels
- All attempted s-genitives and of-genitives manually categorised according to: genitive type ('s/of); success (correct/incorrect); possessor number (singular, (ir)regular plural)

No. of words	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2	Total
L1 Japanese	-	1,182	7,755	164,977	110,674	85,933	370,521
L1 Spanish	-	1,283	8,128	131,250	93,638	135,215	369,514
Total	-	2,465	15,883	296,227	204,312	221,148	740,035

A1-B1 levels excluded from below analysis due to lower token numbers; further data processing to follow!

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

- Frequency of both s- and of-genitives increase with proficiency** but the collinear variable of document length may be partly responsible, allowing for greater 'opportunity of use' (Buttery et al. 2012)
- All learners are frequently attempting both genitive types** by B1 level (at latest)
- Accuracy rates (TLU; Pica 1983) are consistently higher for of-genitives than s-genitives, **indicating support for Derivational Complexity Hypothesis** (Fig. 1 vs. Fig. 2)
- L1 effects present in s-genitive contexts at B2 and C2, indicating **some influence of surface overlap** (Fig. 1)
- Effects of **both complexity and crosslinguistic influence** appear to be exacerbated **by the increased complexity of the plural feature** (Fig. 3)