Optionality in Second Language Grammar*

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This study addresses the question of whether adult second language grammar is optional. Nineteen Mandarin adults of L₂ English, with an average of 10;3 (year;month) length of residence in the United States and 14.4-year exposure to English, were tested, along with nineteen native-speaking controls, on their spontaneous knowledge of resultatives and depictives and canonical constructions. Participants were subjected to four tasks that varied in the amount of processing loads. Task effects were found to affect, across the board, both the native and nonnative groups. Both groups tended to produce and process resultatives and depictives variably, when the critical constructional information was withheld. All subjects, under this circumstance, were inclined to resort to the canonical constructions. There was no evidence showing that Mandarin-English bilinguals were unduly controlled by their native grammars. Effects of modality were also found, leading to greater variability in production than in comprehension. Subjects were also found to create novel expressions based on their learned knowledge of verb usages and argument types. In all cases, both groups lagged behind the expectations of the ideal grammar. These findings suggest that L₂ speakers, who sometimes are observed to use the target language variably, actually represent the target grammars in ways akin to native speakers.

Key words: optionality, L2 grammar, L1 transfer, resultatives, depictives

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