More on optionality in native and non-native grammars

Paper presented at the Joint Departmental Conference, 21-23 May 1997
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http://www.ed.ac.uk/~spapp/index.html

1. Introduction

In second language (L2) acquisition reasearch there has been a long-standing paradox. Adult L2 learners' utterances do show similarities to that of child (L1) learners'. At the same time, there are differences in L1 and L2 development, due to L1 influence in L2 acquisition (see e.g. Bley-Vroman *et al* 1988 for references). The question is how can we reconcile the phenomena? The traditional answer of access/no-access to UG principles is no longer considered, as it is commonly assumed that L2 learners do have access to UG. However, L2 learners are still not found to perform as well as natives on either production or intuitional tasks. The question has to be refined more precisely: What characteristics of the input data and which parts of the learners' L1 have a role in influencing the development of L2 acquisition? To what extent does the L1 influence the L2 acquisition process in the various stages of development, particularly the stage of ultimate attainment?

2. Experimental study

Our experimental questions included ones concerning the status of categorical, quasi-optional, and optional target language rules in the interlanguage of learners. Would they be represented as convergent, incomplete, divergent, or still optional rules at the near-native level where learners are supposed to have completed the acquisitional process?

2.1 Subjects

We conducted a study of linguistic intuitions about the acceptability of Hungarian focused sentences among native English speakers who learnt Hungarian after their childhood. There were 43 non-native speakers of Hungarian with English as L1 and 27 native speakers of Hungarian as controls. The non-native speakers were tested on general proficiency level by a 48-item cloze test. Because of the high level required for the cloze test, beginners were excluded from the study. Table 1 displays the details of the subjects in the study:

Table 1 Details about the subjects participating in the study

	Level 1	**Level 2**	**Level 3**	**Native**	**All**
Number of subjects	14	13	16	27	70
Average age	37.3 ys old	33.2 ys old	34.8 ys old	25.7 ys old	32.7
Cloze scores (of 48 items)	0-12 (ave 7.5)	13-20 (ave 16.7)	20-48 (ave 33.1)		
Average age of exposure	32.9	26.9	26.7	0	
Average time spent in Hungary	2.9 years	3.2 years	4.6 years		

2.2 Method and materials

Subjects had to rate 136 sentences on a 10-point scale with respect to their acceptability in context. Additionally, they were asked to fill out a questionnaire eliciting information about themselves and their previous language learning experiences. Finally, there was a cloze test of 48 items with a time limit of 20 minutes in order to measure there general proficiency level. All test materials can be found at the following web-site: **http://www.ed.ac.uk/~spapp/index.html**. All materials were posted to

approximately 120 non-natives, and a self-addressed stamped envelope was provided. 47 answers were returned, of which four had to be excluded on the grounds that they turned out to be bilinguals (child learners of Hungarian). 27 native controls were tested in a similar way on the acceptability judgement task. Prior to the experiment, a series of pilot tests were carried out, one with 19 native speakers of Hungarian, one with 27 non-native speakers in the UK. Both pilots were administered as a magnitude estimation test, the first on the computer, the second as a pencil and paper exercise. Ultimately, the main test was changed into a rating task, for reasons of face validity and easy administration through the post. The cloze test was also piloted on 17 native speakers, other than the ones who took part in the main experiment.

The acceptability judgement test contained 62 pairs of sentences related to the designated focus position in Hungarian. There were two tokens of each sentence type (i.e. two lexicalizations). An additional 12 pairs of distracter items were included testing knowledge of morphology that will not be analysed here. There was no time limit imposed on the acceptability task.

The experiment tested 12 constructions: neutral, focused, negative, negative adverb, positive adverb, wh-questions, double focus, double wh, focused infinitive, long extraction of focus, partial wh-movement, and embedded sentences. These construction-types were chosen as they have different status in the Hungarian language according to their acceptability and frequency of occurrence.

3. Results

3.1 Performance on individual constructions

The judgement scores were analysed using multivariate ANOVA tests with repeated measures for the linguistic variables and with proficiency level as a grouping factor. Each of the 12 construction types had to be individually analysed since there are different number of linguistic variables with various levels in each. The results show that there is a significant difference between the groups in the judgements given to the grammatical and ungrammatical version of the following constructions: neutral, focused, negative, negative adverb, positive adverb, wh-questions, focused infinitive, long extraction, partial wh-movement, and embedded clauses. This strongly suggests that subjects across the board were making the right distinction between the grammatical and ungrammatical versions of the same construction. However, this does not apply to the double focus and double wh constructions. This is as expected, as double focus and double wh-questions were found optional in the target language. Significant main and interaction effects were investigated using a post-hoc Tukey test. The following simplified figure shows where the significant differences lie among the groups on each of the constructions. This figure represents the results of the Tukey test testing the source of the statistically significant interaction between level and greammaticality:

Figure 1 Significant interaction of level by grammaticality within groups

		Groups			
Sentence types	Intermed	Advanced	Near-native	Native	F
Neutral			*	*	***
Focused		*	*	*	***
Negative		*	*	*	***
Neg adverb			*	*	***
Pos adverb			*	*	***
Wh-question		*	*	*	***
Foc infinitive			*	*	*
Long extraction		*	*	*	**
Partial wh-mv			*	*	***
Embedded			*	*	***

Notes:
*$p<0.05$
**$p<0.01$
***$p<0.001$

The simplified figure above shows each group's ability to distinguish between the grammatical and ungrammatical versions. It can be seen that the near-natives make the correct distinction, similarly to the natives. Moreover, in some cases even advanced students make the right distinction (focused, negative, wh-questions, and long extraction).

Furthermore, the results show that there is few significant differences between the near-natives and natives on other linguistic variables within each category. There are differences in the judgements on the ungrammatical version of the sentences with positive adverbs, where natives judge the ungrammatical significantly lower than near-natives. The second difference between near-natives and natives in ability to distinguish between the grammatical and ungrammatical sentences is in the judgement of the extraction site in the embedded sentences, where near-natives judge subject extraction significantly higher than natives. Otherwise, the statistical difference usually lies between the intermediate/advanced groups on the one hand, and the near-native/native groups on the other. Thus, our results support the position that adult learners can indeed attain native-like ability to distuinguish grammatical from ungrammatical versions of certain related L2 constructions (see White and Genesee 1996 and in it references to Asher and Garcia 1969, Seliger *et al* 1975, Ioup *et al* 1994, Birdsong 1992). But does this ability to make a distinction indicate the same strength of judgements that native speakers have when they judge sentences in their L1? Our investigations attempted to find out the difference between the representations of native speakers and near-native speakers at the level of ultimate attainment. Even though L2 speakers' competence can be shown to be similar to native speakers, the near-native learners' performance might very well be found below that of natives' under real-life production circumstances. Note that in our experiment there was no time limit, i.e. subjects were allowed as much time as they needed to make their judgements which might have contributed to the extent to which near-natives' judgements resemble that of natives'.

Now that we have established that for categorical rules learners' judgements can be similar to native speakers, we need to further investigate the nature of their representations as well as address the question of L2 representations for less categorical rules.

3.2 Optionality in non-native grammars

3.2.1 Introduction

As we have indicated in the introduction, in second language acquisition (SLA) research the ultimate attainment of L2 learners has been investigated in order to bear upon the issue of access to Universal Grammar (UG) (Coppetiers 1987, Birdsong 1992, Sorace 1993, White and Genesee 1991, 1996). However, the precise character of L2 learners' competence at near-native level has been given unduly little attention, with the exception of Sorace (1993) and Ratwatte (1995). This paper is an attempt to clarify and refine some of the issues about the characterisation of L2 competence at ultimate attainment.

3.2.2 Types of representation at ultimate attainment

Sorace (1993) distinguishes between two different kinds of representation that can comprise the near-native grammar:

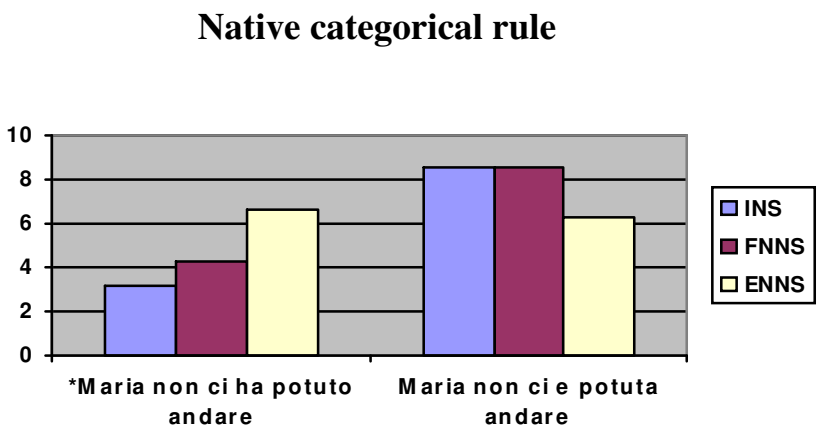
- **incomplete**, i.e. 'lack of given L2 properties', and
- **divergent**, i.e. 'interlanguage representations of L2 properties that are consistently different from native properties' (Sorace 1993:22)

The question that immediately arises is the following. How do you define completeness (convergence), divergence and incompleteness in relation to the 10-point rating scale that is one of the conventional techniques for measuring acceptability judgements in SLA research? Sorace (1993) does not give an explicit definition of these terms. She investigates categorical and optional rules in auxiliary selection in Italian as represented by French and English near-native speakers of Italian. The elicitation technique used in her study was magnitude estimation. The final results are reported using the geometric mean (the arithmetic mean of the scores that have been transformed into logs). Thus the geometric means calculated from the results of magnitude estimation are comparable to the values

gained from acceptability judgements elicited on a scale of 1-10. Using repeated measures ANOVA and the post hoc Sheffé test, Sorace examines the significant differences between the judgements of three experimental groups: Italian natives, and French and English near-natives.

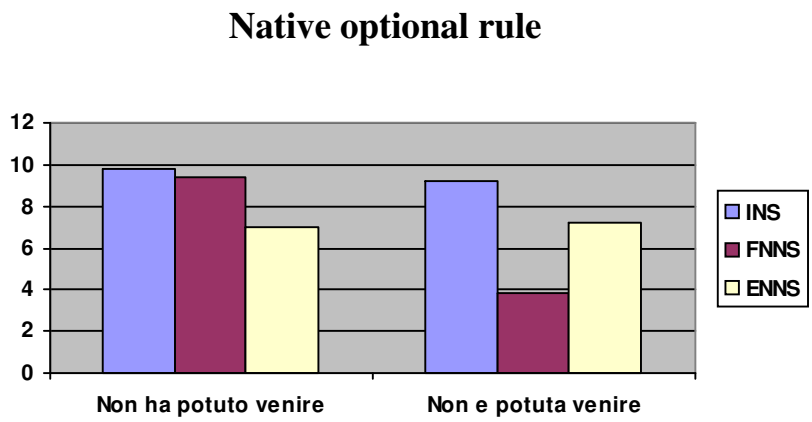
Her results show that in the case of a **categorical** rule in Italian, French learners (24 people) make similar judgements to that of natives', i.e. they distinguish between the correct and the incorrect sentence type to a significant degree (see Figure 1). However, her English subjects (20 people) gave an average of 6.286 and 6.623, respectively, to the two alternatives,as the same figure shows. Sorace thus concludes that her English subjects 'are unable to distinguish between the two types of sentences: their judgements are indeterminate' (Sorace 1993:40).

Figure 2 Chart from Sorace (1993:40)



When examining an **optional** native alternation, she finds that her English subjects behave in a similar way to the above, giving an average of 7.231 and 6.977 to the two sentence types (see Figure 2), concluding that 'the English subjects cannot decide between the two auxiliaries and produce indeterminate judgements on both sentence types' (1993:41). Noting the similar behaviour of her English subjects regarding both the categorical and optional target language rule, she concludes that these learners' representation of auxiliary selection in Italian is *incomplete*. The French subjects, on the other hand, make a significantly different judgement to the native optional sentence types, accepting one and rejecting the other (see Figure 2 again). In other word, they transform an optional rule into a categorical one, ending up with a *divergent* representation.

Figure 3 Chart from Sorace (1993:41)



As can be seen, there is no operational definition of incompleteness and divergence given by Sorace. It

is simply assumed that if learners' judgements are significantly different from native judgements, their IL contains a divergent representation. On the other hand, it is implicit in the treatment of the English judgements that if learners fail to distinguish between two sentence types, and their judgements centre around 6-7, their grammar is indeterminate, thus incomplete.

We would like to argue that it is necessary to make refinements to the distinction between incomplete and divergent representations. Apart from the refinements proposed, ultimately we need to have operational definitions for each of the different representations characterising the near-native competence with *precise* ways of measuring them. These operational definitions and criteria of measuring them will hopefully allow further research and comparison of results of studies on the nature of the ultimate L2 competence.

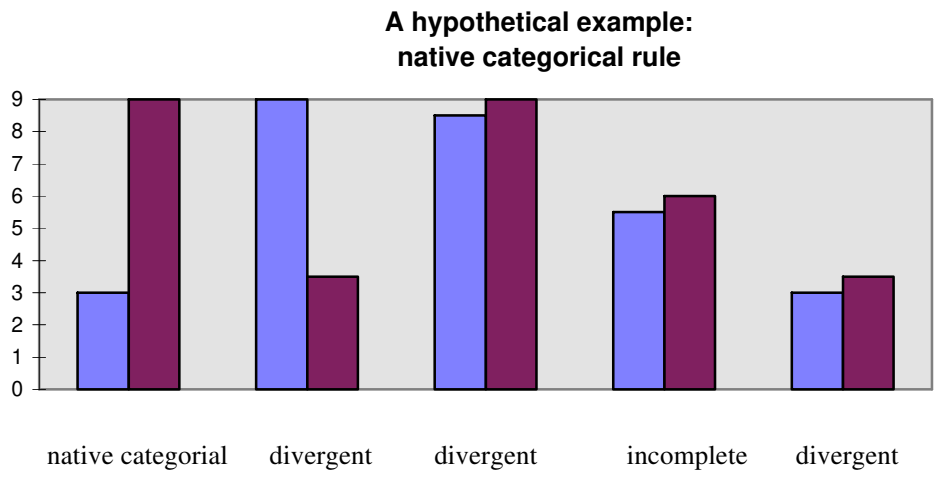
3.2.3 Proposed refinements

Before we present some of the refinements based on our own data, let us first consider the characteristics of learner representations in more detail.

A **complete/convergent** representation is by definition characterised by whatever the native judgements are. Native grammars can, of course, contain *categorical*, *optional*, and *quasi-optional* rules. For categorical rules there is a significant difference in the judgements to the correct and incorrect versions of a sentence given by native speakers. For optional rules, there is no significance between the alternatives, both of them are equally *accepted* by natives. Quasi-optional rules should show significant differences only in differing logico-semantic contexts. In other words, quasi-optional rules seem optional only on the surface, but carry different interpretations mostly depending on the context of utterance.

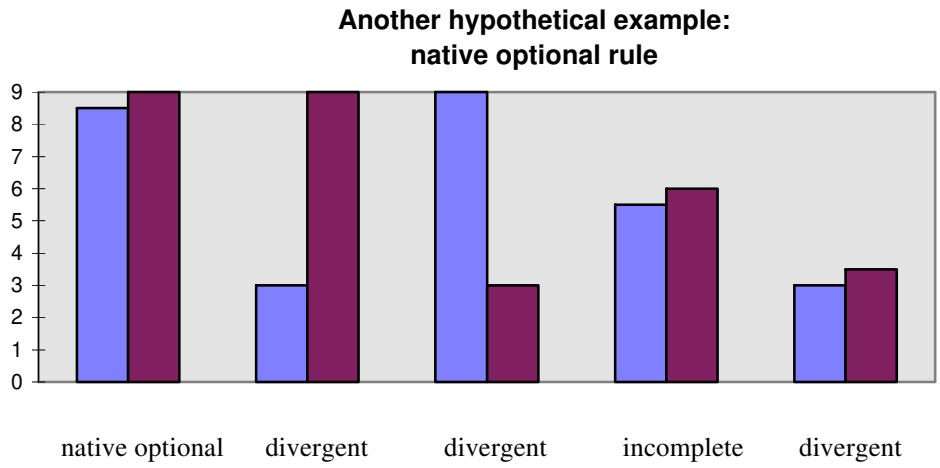
A **divergent** representation implies a difference in quality from the native representation. There must be a statistically significant difference between the native judgements and the divergent representations. In the case of *categorical* rules, divergence can be manifest if learners optionally accept or reject both sentence types. Additionally, they can come up with a divergent representation if their judgements are diametrically opposed to that of natives': they accept the incorrect and reject the correct sentence type (see Figure 4).

Figure 4



In the case of *optional* rules, we can call learners' representations divergent, if they turn the native optional rule into a categorical rule by making significantly different judgements for the two alternatives. Their representation can be still be optional but divergent if they equally reject both alternatives (see Figure 5).

Figure 5



Quasi-optional rules resemble categorical rules in that they are given significantly different judgements in differring semantic contexts. Thus the same scenarios apply with regard to the possible representations in L2 grammars as to the categorical rules. In each of these scenarios learners create a different rule from that of the target rule.

An **incomplete** representation has to be defined *in relation to* the native grammar, just as divergence is. Incompleteness as defined by Sorace (1993) implies a difference in quantity from the native representation. One of the questions is whether learners' judgements have to be significantly different from the native judgements or not. See Sorace (1993) where in the case of the native optional rule the near-native judgements are significantly different from natives', in the case of the native categorical rule significance is not reported, thus its absence is assumed. The main characteristic of incomplete representations is that they are *indeterminate*. Judgements average around the high intermediate numbers of 6-7 without any significant difference between the scores given to the grammatical and the ungrammatical versions. Note that this is one type of optionality, but with less theoretical interest than that of the optionality in divergent representations. Incompleteness only shows 'lack of given L2 properties' (Sorace 1993: 22). It only tells us about the incomplete nature of the IL representation.

This conception of incomplete representations raises the question whether there is a possibility for a grammar containing an incomplete representation for further progress. In other word, given time and sufficient amount of continued exposure would incomplete representations turn into either divergent or complete representations? The question slightly paraphrased is whether representations at ultimate attainment where the IL grammar appears to be asymptotic on the surface are still impressionable and capable of changing?

From the above discussion we can conclude that optionality can be a characteristic feature of both divergent and incomplete grammars, as well as complete grammars. Of these, optionality in complete (mature) grammars is of utmost interest from the point of view of linguistic theory, see references in Chomsky (1995), Hayse (1997). Optionality in divergent grammars is theoretically interesting in SLA research as it could ultimately explain fossilisation. However, the third type, incomplete optionality is also worthy of concern as it sheds light on the potential at even the so-called 'ultimate' level of L2 competence for further progress.

As it must have become clear so far, these concepts need expressly to be defined more precisely, if progress is to be made in both linguistic and SLA theory. Operational measurements need to be set up in order for linguists to be able to make their claims more precise and valid.

3.3 Optionality in the English-Hungarian data

Let us see how some of the above ideas are born out in our data on English-Hungarian interlanguage (IL) representations.

3.3.1 Native optional rules

In this paper we will discuss three constructions that are ususally claimed optional in the theoretical discussions on Hungarian syntax. The first is the so-called double focus construction, the second the focused infinitives, and the third the alleged interchangability of long extracted and partially moved operators. Let us see them individually.

(a) The **double focus** constructions in Hungarian are supposed to be theoretically **optional**. It follows that the two alternatives should be treated equally by native speakers. Double focus constructions either contain a preposed wh-phrase and a postverbal focused phrase, see example (1), or a focused phrase in both preverbal and postverbal positions, as in example (2). In the literature on Hungarian syntax the exact syntactic position of the postverbal focused expression has been debated. There seems to be two positions where the postverbal focused element can optionally occur: either between the moved verb and the prefix left behind by verb-movement (the (a) examples in (1) and (2)), or after both the verb plus prefix (the (b) examples in (1) and (2)).

(1) Mondtam, hogy Katit **PÁRIZSBAN** ismertem meg.
said that Kati-ACC Paris-in knew-I PREF
'I said I met Kati in **Paris**.'

(1a) De én azt kérdeztem, hogy **MELYIK VÁROSBAN** ismerted **ÉVÁT** meg?
but I that-ACC asked-I that which town-in knew-you Eva-ACC PREF
'But I was asking in which town you met Eva?'

(1b) De én azt kérdeztem, hogy **MELYIK VÁROSBAN** ismerted meg **ÉVÁT**?
knew-you PREF Eva-ACC
(op.cit.)

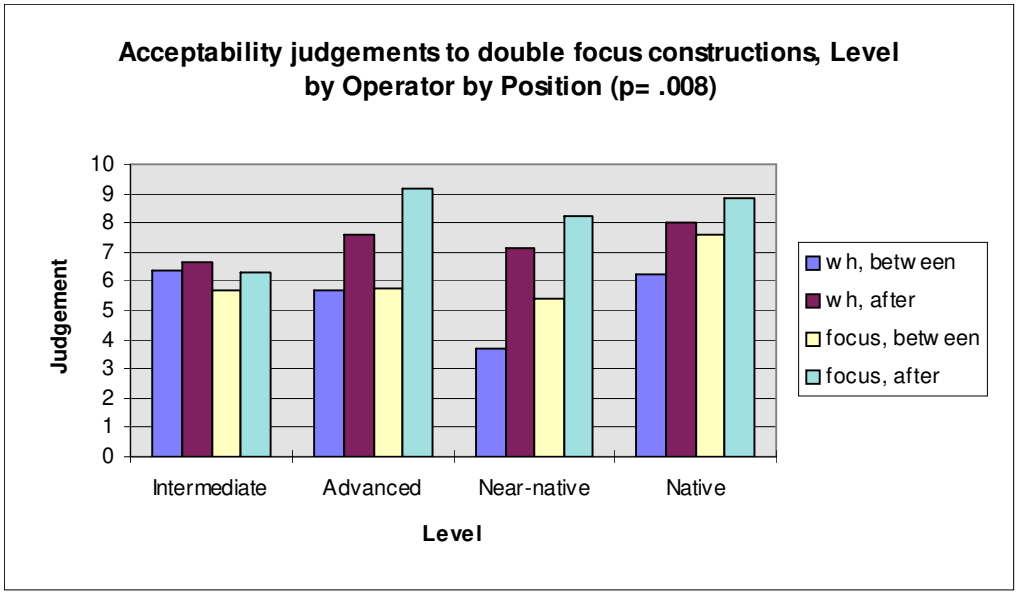
(2) **JÁNOS** bántott meg **TÉGED**, vagy fordítva?
John hurt-he PREF you-ACC or vice versa
'Did John hurt you or did you hurt him?'

(2a) Nem, **ÉN** bántottam **ÕT** meg.
no, I hurt-I him-ACC PREF
'No, I hurt him.'

(2b) Nem, **ÉN** bántottam meg **ÕT**.
PREF him-ACC
(op.cit.)

Here we will only discuss the relevant results to the question of representations of different grammatical 'rules' at native and near-native levels. The results are graphically shown in Figure 6 below. A multivariate repeated measures ANOVA test shows a significant interaction effect of level and operator and position, $F(3, 66) = 4.31$, $MS = 5.04$, $p < .01$.

Figure 6



The results of the post hoc Tukey test ($p < .05$, at a tabled value of q= 4.84) to these constructions show that the postverbal focused element in the sentence is preferred *after* the prefix, particularly when it is a full noun. This preference is exhibited by the significantly higher judgements given by native speakers to the *wh, after* as opposed to the *wh, between* version. This significant difference in judgements is manifested by other non-native groups as well except for the least advanced intermediate group. In other words (1b) is preferred to (1a), consistently with Varga's (1981) observation that end-weighted multisyllabic words most naturally follow the monosyllabic clitic-like elements in the postverbal part of the clause. Thus this construction is *not* judged as optional by native speakers contrary to the predictions found in the theoretical description of Hungarian. However, when the postverbal focused element is a monosyllabic pronoun, there is no significant difference in native judgements, so optionality is present between (2a) and (2b). As I mentioned above, learners in the advanced and near-native groups are similar in their preferences to native speakers on the full noun, but they turn a native optional pronoun rule into categorical rule by giving significantly different judgements to the sentences with pronouns. This non-native behaviour can probably be put down to the effect of creating an analogy with the full noun rule. This is evidence for a divergent grammar in the case of the near-native group. Judgements of learners in the intermediate group on both types of construction are centred around 6, an intermediate number on the scale, without any significant difference between the sentence types. This indicates an indeterminate, incomplete IL grammar.

(b) **Focused infinitives**, the second construction described in the literature as **optional**, are exemplified in (3) and (4). In these constructions the infinitival clause contains a focused element (either a negative adverbial as in (3), or a focused NP as in (4)). According to the literature this can be explained by assuming that non-finite T is optionally weak, thus the verb can either optionally stay in its base-generated position as in (a), or it can move leaving the prefix behind as in the (b) examples below:

(3) Átnézem még egyszer a feladatot, hátha van benne hiba.
look-through-I once more the task-ACC, in case is in-it mistake
'I'll go though the task again in case there is a mistake in it.'

(3a) Nem lenne jó **HIBÁSAN** beadni.
not would-be good faulty PREF-give-INF
'It would not be good to hand it in with a mistake in it'

(3b) Nem lenne jó **HIBÁSAN** adni be.
give-INF PREF
(op.cit.)

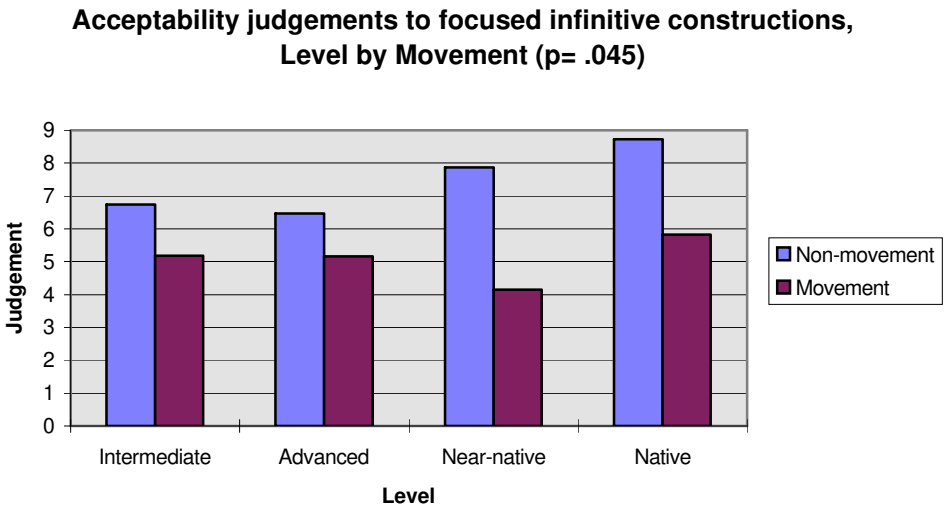
(4) Apu nem igazán tud ebben segíteni.
dad not really can-he this-in help-INF
'Dad cannot really help with this.'

(4a) Jobb lenne **ANYUT** felhívni.
better would-be mum-ACC PREF-call-INF
'We'd better call Mum.'

(4b) Jobb lenne **ANYUT** hívni fel.
call-INF PREF
(op.cit.)

The repeated measures ANOVA shows a significant interaction of level and movement, F (3, 66) = 2,83, MS=6.87, $p < .05$.

Figure 7



The results of the post hoc Tukey test (at a tabled value of q=4.29) show that these constructions are consistently judged by native speakers as being non-optional. The judgements given to the two constructions (*non-movement* vs. *movement* of the verb in the non-finite clause) by the native speakers differ significantly. They seem to prefer only one of the alternatives, namely the one where the focused phrase does not entail focus-movement, see (3a) and (4a). This has obvious implications for the theoretical description of Hungarian. The judgements of the native speakers show that non-finite T tends to be weak rather than strong. The near-native students make the same judgements, turning it into a categorical rule. However, the advanced and the intermediate learners do not show a significant preference towards either. Their judgements are between 5-7 (see Figure 7 above).

It can be argued that in this construction the native pattern shows an exception from the focus-rule which reinforces the IL developmental stage of non-movement and thus delays restructuring. This is one example where the ambiguity of the input may have an effect on learners' final representations in other syntactic constructions. Nevertheless, note that in the case of this construction near-natives seem to attain a native-like representation.

(c) **Long extraction** and **partial movement** of operators has been also claimed to be optional in Hungarian in the theoretical literature (Szalamin , Puskas 1996, etc.). Let us see some examples of it.

The repeated measures ANOVA shows a significant interaction effect of level by type of extraction, F

(3, 70) = 3.29, MS=10.13, $p < .05$.

Figure 8

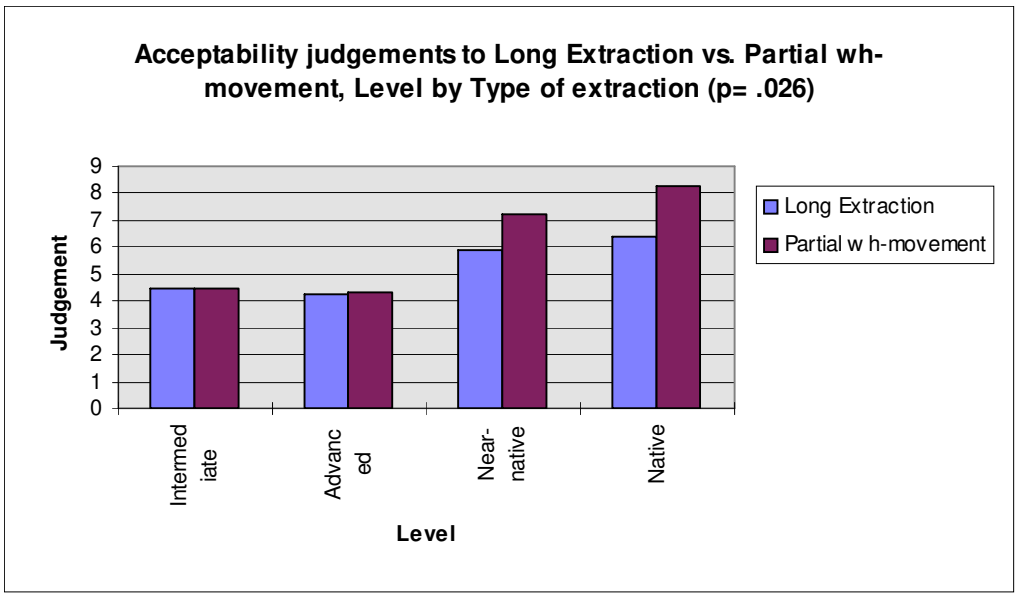


Figure 8 shows the results graphically. The obvious trends are confirmed by a post hoc Tukey test (at a tabled value of q=4.29). There is a significant difference between the judgements given by natives to the long extracted as opposed to the partially moved operators. They seem to prefer the partial wh-movement strategy to long extraction. This is again contrary to what the theory of Hungarian syntax would predict. The partial wh-movement seems to be more frequently accepted in grammatical judgements. This, however does not mean that native speakers do not produce long-extracted constructions in performance. The judgements of near native speakers already show a tendency of native-like intuitions, but the difference between the two judgements is not significant at $\alpha = .05$ level. Thus their grammar can be considered divergent, as they seem to accept both to the same degree. The two lower groups exhibit incomplete knowledge representations, as their judgements center between 4-5.

3.3.2 Summary

As we can see, rules that are claimed optional by the theoretical literature turn out to be non-optional on close inspection in the acceptability intuitions of native speakers. Learners, faced with input from the target language have to first work out the status of a rule in the L2 and then restructure their IL grammar accordingly. This is done successfully if the data are non-ambiguous. However, if the data are sparse or ambiguous, the IL development will be affected.

3.3.3 Native quasi-optional rules

(a) The **double wh** construction is supposed to be **quasi-optional** with slight semantic differences in interpretation according to context. Multiple preposing (as in (5b) and (6a)) has been claimed to carry the interpretation that more than two people are involved in the situation, i.e. more than one couple can be paired up in the answer. On the other hand, the construction similar to English multiple questions with one preposed and one in-situ wh-phrase (as in (5a) and (6b)) supposedly involves one pair of people only. See some examples:

(5) Laci és Éva telefonon beszélgettek.
Laci and Eva phone-on talked-they
'Laci and Eva were talking on the phone.'

(5a) **KI** hívott fel **KIT**?
who called up whom
'Who phoned whom?'

(5b) **KI KIT** hívott fel?
who whom called up

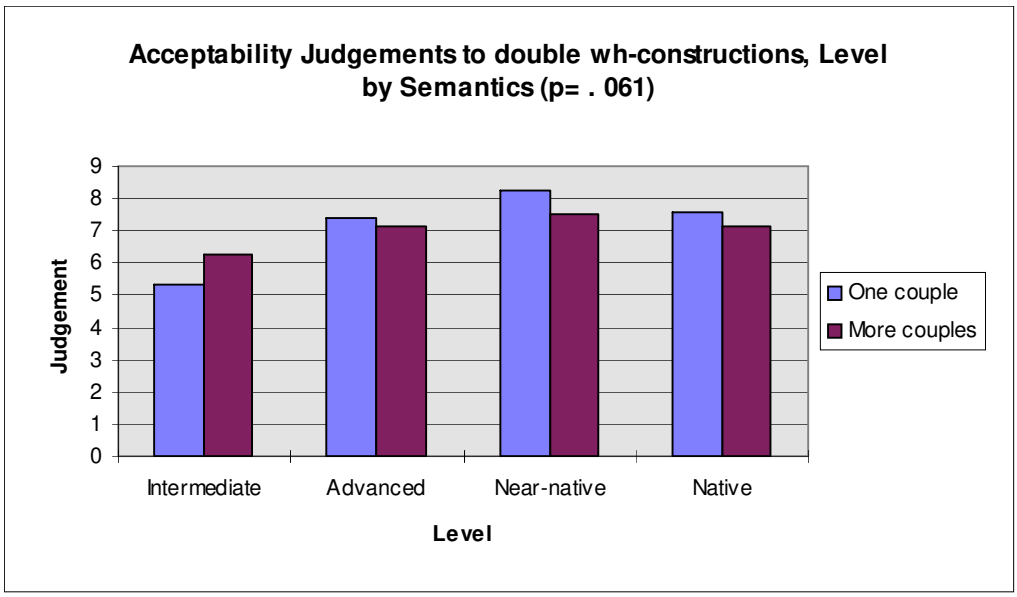
(6) Osztálytalálkozót tartottunk, és sokan eljöttek.
class reunion-ACC held-we and many people PREF-came-they
'We had a class reunion and lots of people turned up.'

(6a) **KI KIT** ismert fel?
who whom recognised PREF
'Who recognised whom?'

(6b) **KI** ismert fel **KIT**?
who whom

The repeated measures ANOVA shows that the interaction of level by semantics, F (3, 66) = 2.57, MS+ 2.97, p = .061 slightly misses significance. However, this result will be reported for its theoretical worth..

Figure 9



The post hoc Tukey tests (at a tabled value of q=3.63) show that the native, near-native and advanced students are all significantly different from the least advanced intermediate group, whose judgements are indeterminate (hover between 5 and 7). The other three groups accept both to a similar degree. Thus the theoretical claim that these constructions are only quasi-optional cannot stand, since they are treated as optional by native speakers.

3.3.4 Native categorical rule

Negative adverbs in a focus position create a double motivation for the focus-rule, i.e. verb-movement. First they are negative, hence they inherently carry the focus feature. Second, they occupy the preverbal focus position, therefore they entail the focus movement. Consequently this is a very strong **categorical** rule which in the native grammar invariably entails focus-movement.

(7) Mindig ilyen rendetlen a szobád?
always this messy the room-yours
'Is your room always in such a mess?'

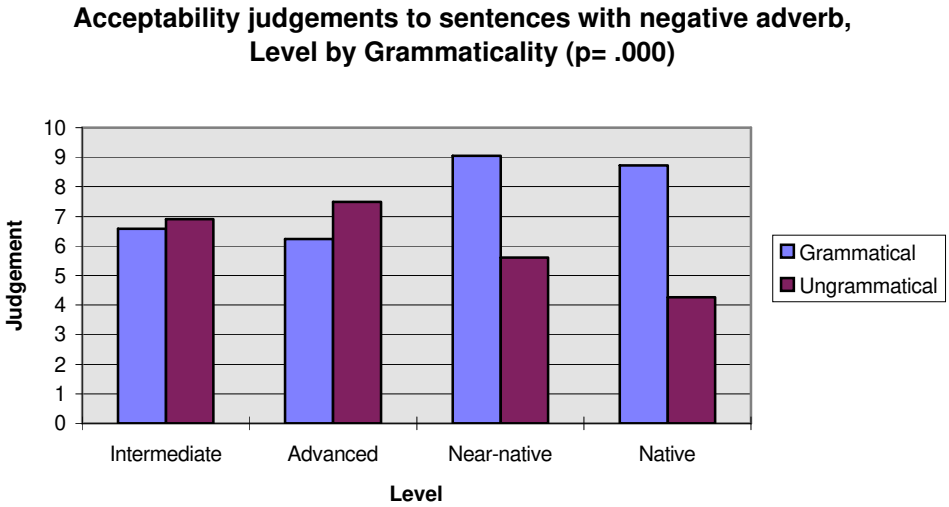
(7a) Igen, **RITKÁN** csinálok rendet.
yes, rarely make-I order-ACC

'Yes, I clean it only occasionally.'

(7a) Igen, **RITKÁN** rendet csinálok.
order-ACC make-I
(op.cit.)

The repeated measures ANOVA showed a significant interaction of level by grammaticality, F (3, 66) = 19.48, MS=10.49, $p < .001$.

Figure 10



As can be seen in Figure 10 above, and as the post hoc Tukey tests show (at a tabled value of q=4.29), native speakers make significantly different judgements for the correct and the incorrect version. The less proficient first two groups however actually *prefer* the ungrammatical version, i.e. they give slightly higher scores to them, although their preference is not significant. This goes to show that the acquisition of negative elements in the focus position is the latest, similar to the late acquisition of negative preposing in English by German speakers (cf. Robertson and Sorace 1993). The near-native speakers, however, make significantly strong native-like categorical judgements. The sudden change in representations between the advanced and near-native levels is rather surprising. It indicates a greater gap between the two levels than has been assumed. In other words the restructuring is delayed until the very last stage of development. When it finally occurs, it brings near-native representations in line with the native grammar. This restructuring needs to be captured by investigating more near-native speakers.

3.4 Discussion

The results of the experiments with optional, quasi-optional and categorical rules in Hungarian as represented by native and non-native speakers can be summarized as follows. The theoretically optional constructions are *not* treated as optional by native speakers, with the exception of monosyllabic postverbal focused elements. On the contrary, constructions that are argued to be only quasi-optional and thus in fact categorical depending on semantic context, *are* treated as optional by natives. It is worth calling attention to the fact that these are group results and thus individual differences are leveled out within each group. The native speakers' group comprising 27 natives contains several dialectal differences. For the theoretical description of Hungarian the fact that one of the alternatives in an allegedly optional construction is more acceptable than the other is not interesting. Moreover, for the grammatical theory even the fact that one of them is *significantly* more acceptable constitutes no counterargument. The reason is that theoretical linguists are simply interested in whether both of the alternatives are possible sentences of the language or not. They are not interested in the question to what extent they are acceptable within the population of native

speakers, neither are they interested in what proportion of natives accept which alternative. However, the extent to which a construction is acceptable does have a bearing on language acquisition, since the level of acceptability will be presumably reflected in the input the learner receives during acquisition. The reason why questions of optionality have not been appropriately handled may be found in the difficulty of measuring the extent of acceptability within a population of subjects (Schutze 1996, Cowart 1997). Resolving this issue will inevitably involve looking at individual differences and correlations within groups, and not only group results.

The results of the non-native learners judgements seem to support the viewpoint of those researchers who argue that representations at ultimate attainment do approximate that of native speakers, but with a considerable amount of differences. Other research has shown that non-native speakers' representations are less determinate (Sorace 1993, Ratwatte 1995). Our study has set out to investigate those non-native representations that are created in the face of less robust data.