

”Tonight I go to school in Danish”

A complexity theoretical investigation into the linguistic development of three learners with Danish as a second language

KRISTINE RODE LARSEN

In the article I present an analysis of how the written language of three learners with Danish as a second language develops with regard to four linguistic dimensions – fluency, target language conformity, grammatical and lexical complexity. My study shows that the development of the respective dimensions is individual for each learner and changes between periods of progression and regression. This accords with the complexity theoretical view of second language development but opposes more traditional theories which describe the development as a linear progression that is uniform across learners – a view that has shaped the organization of The Danish Education for Adult Foreigners.

My study shows that an important factor behind the variable development is the interaction between the different dimensions of the complex linguistic system. Target language conformity, for example, tends to decrease as complexity (grammatical as well as semantic) increases; conversely, as complexity decreases, target language conformity increases – as such, the two dimensions display a competitive relationship.

I conclude the article by showing how variability in the use of idiomatic expressions conforms to an interlanguage system, which is different from the target language system due to insufficient exposure to authentic L1 language use. This demonstrates how idiomatic language use develops due to exemplar-based learning.