ABSTRACT

This research is on the second language acquisition of English by speakers of Gikuyu first language background. Focus is on the aspects of syntactic information packaging, or how units of propositional meaning are realised in the structure of linguistic continua or sentences. The study investigates whether learner-speaker performance in the second language exhibits a trend that is developmental, and whether markedness differentials between parallel structure in L_1 and L_2 co-relate to optimal performance in the second language. The extent to which transfer of L_1 parameters to the interlanguage of the learner-speakers may be a factor of acquisition is also investigated.

A linguistic contrastive analysis between the syntactic structural configurations of English and Gikuyu languages is first instituted. Parallels of contrast and likeness between corresponding parameters in both languages are noted. In addition, corresponding markedness differentials in language particular terms are determined across parallel parameters in the first and second languages. The contrastive analysis is deemed as an important tool for linking the learner-speaker performance data with second language acquisition theoretical standpoints related to the study. A purposive sample of 120 learner-speakers in schools from five districts of the Central Province of Kenya is involved in the investigation. Each of

the learner-speakers is subjected to a quasi-communicative information packaging test (I.P.) in which the interviewer informally communicates with him or her in English language. The learner-speaker responses are tape-recorded as performance data.

The learner-performance data collected by the test instrument is then analysed vis a vis the variables of markedness, transfer and the development continuum. This paves way for an informed discussion of the findings in relation to second language acquisition theory. The research establishes a clear developmental trend in the interlanguage data in consonance with Corder (1981). Markedness differentials between parallel structures in L_1 and L_2 are also seen to be significant in learner-language development. The transfer of L_1 parameters to L_2, especially where a corresponding parallel does not exist in the latter characterises the interlanguage. Where parallels exist, transfer is only evidenced at the initial stages and may not be said to be rampant.

In relation to the findings of the research, proposals for theoretical adjustments are given, and recommendations for pedagogic orientation and strategy in particular and general second language acquisition situations suggested.