

AGREEMENT ERRORS IN NORWEGIAN L1, ENGLISH L2 QUANTITY PSEUDOPARTITIVES

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Abstract. The pseudopartitive is a construction which is used by L2 learners but is not taught explicitly in Norwegian schools. Further, it shows non-canonical agreement properties (agreement with the embedded noun), which may make it challenging for learners. In this study, we investigated subject-verb agreement accuracy in quantity pseudopartitives among Norwegian L1, English L2 learners. English and Norwegian show similar headedness properties for the pseudopartitive, but unlike English, Norwegian lacks a system of verbal agreement. We collected learner data from the Tracking Written Learner Language corpus (Dirdal *et al.* 2022), and found a subject-verb agreement error rate of 29.1%, suggesting that despite the overlap in headedness in the two languages, learners struggle to produce agreement correctly. We also found cases of negative transfer, mostly related to specific lexical items (*lack, pair*). Altogether, this shows that the negative transfer of some properties, e.g. agreement marking, may limit the positive transfer of other structures, e.g. headedness in pseudopartitives.

Keywords: pseudopartitives, agreement errors, Norwegian L1, English L2, transfer.

1. INTRODUCTION

The generative view of language acquisition is built on the assumption that humans possess an innate language faculty which interacts with language input (Chomsky 1980, 1986). Young children are able to acquire any language they are exposed to as long as they have access to varied language input over time (Berko Gleason and Ratner 2009; De Houwer 2009; Unsworth 2016; White 2003). However, the availability of this language faculty after acquiring the first language (or languages in cases of bi/multilingual first language acquisition) has been debated (see Rothman and Slabakova 2018 for an overview). On the one hand, only some second language learners are able to achieve native-like proficiency, which would suggest that the process of acquiring additional languages is qualitatively different from the first language(s) (Bley-Vroman 1990, 2009; Herschensohn 2009; Montrul 2009). On the other hand, experimental studies show that second language learners are aware of subtle rules in their L2 which are usually not taught explicitly, suggesting that they must have used the same or similar processes as L1 learners to acquire these rules from the input (Belikova and White 2009; Schwartz and Sprouse 2013; Slabakova 2016; White 2003).

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The pseudopartitive is a construction which is not normally a subject of explicit English L2 instruction (see section 2.1). It has a similar structure in both English and Norwegian, which should aid acquisition, but it also shows atypical properties, for example, in terms of agreement, which may make its acquisition complex. Given this, the pseudopartitive may provide insight into transfer and interlanguage properties of young Norwegian L2 learners of English, in a context where explicit instruction is missing. The learners examined in this paper are still in the process of acquiring their L2 and they have not reached their final attainment (learners of this age in Norway are normally between A2 and B2 on the CEFR scale, Council of Europe 2020). It is, therefore, not our goal to provide evidence in the debate of access to UG or the lack of such in second language acquisition but rather to discuss specific difficulties that learners may have with some of the features of pseudopartitives in English. Nevertheless, mapping the degree of adherence to untaught subtle rules of the use of pseudopartitives in L2 in this learner group could contribute to a better understanding of the acquisition process.

In this study, we investigate pseudopartitives of quantity in corpus data from L1 Norwegian, L2 English learners in Norwegian schools. We chose to focus on pseudopartitives of quantity because they show unique agreement properties (agreement with the second noun of the binominal), are frequent in the input, and are well-studied in the literature. We ask the following research questions in this paper:

- a) Do Norwegian learners of L2 English mark agreement in a target-like manner, i.e. the second noun as the syntactic head, or do they follow a simplified L2 rule, i.e. agreement with the first noun in the subject nominal?
- b) Does transfer aid acquisition, i.e. help learners establish that it is the second noun which is the syntactic head, or does it hinder it and in what way?

Based on the corpus data we show that Norwegian learners struggle with agreement marking when pseudopartitives are involved. However, it is not clear whether their problems stem from the application of an (incorrect) overt rule or whether they generally struggle with agreement due to the lack of a subject-verb agreement system in Norwegian (negative transfer). We also discuss other instances of transfer-induced errors in the data.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The main goal of this paper is to study the use of quantity pseudopartitive constructions in the interlanguage of Norwegian English L2 learners. There are several factors that can influence the accuracy of the production of this specific construction in the English as a second language (ESL) context, and we present some of them in this section. First, we touch on relevant aspects of instructed second language acquisition, specifically how English is taught in Norway in section 2.1. Section 2.2 focuses on the pseudopartitive itself, introducing the basic properties of the construction and its headedness, specifically with regard to agreement. Section 2.3 summarizes some relevant morphosyntactic differences between the two languages and suggests how transfer can influence the accuracy of the L2 production. Finally, in section 2.4 we present our predictions for this study.

2.1. Instructed second language acquisition³: the case of English teaching in Norway

Traditionally, there is a distinction between second language acquisition, which usually happens in natural circumstances, e.g. after a relocation to a speech community using the target language, and foreign language learning, which usually takes place in a classroom setting removed from a speech community using the target language (Loewen 2015). English in Norway is not an official second language in the traditional interpretation of the term (Kachru 1992) but it can be argued that the omnipresence of English in Norwegian society, especially prevalent in social media and popular culture, creates conditions which are favorable to natural second language acquisition and the status of English in Norway has previously been referred to as moving from foreign to second language (Graedler 2002; Rindal and Piercy 2013). In other words, the learners of English in Norway are, in most cases, exposed to natural English input in several different contexts in addition to the instructed language learning in their English classes.

Since the implementation of the 1987 curriculum (Kirke- og undervisningsdepartementet 1987), English teaching in Norwegian schools has been heavily influenced by the ideal of communicative competence (Fenner 2020), which means that explicit grammar explanations are rare, and if present, they focus on issues which may cause communication breakdowns (Askland 2020). Askland also finds that explicit grammar instruction in Norwegian ESL classes is unsystematic and often unpopular among both teachers and students (Askland 2020: 75–76) but Norwegian learners nevertheless generally achieve very high English L2 competence (Education First 2023). Since these learners are heavily exposed to English outside of school through social media, popular culture and games (90% of 9-18-year-olds are social media users and 76% play digital games, The Norwegian Media Authority 2022), it is reasonable to assume that much of their internalized grammar comes from natural language acquisition through exposure to English in these settings and not from formal instruction. As a result of this combination of naturalistic and instructed language learning, the linguistic behavior of these learners displays some typical interlanguage features (Selinker 1972) such as traces of L1 transfer or overgeneralization of some L2 rules, which we explore in the present paper through pseudopartitives.

In the following sections we review some specific features of the pseudopartitive construction which may cause problems for second language learners but also some additional features of English (L2) and Norwegian (L1) which are relevant for the discussion of the data in section 5.

2.2. Pseudopartitives

The construction we investigate in learner data is the pseudopartitive, a binominal construction in which the first noun, N1, modifies the denotation of the second noun, N2. The term pseudopartitive reflects a family of constructions, where the N2 is counted (*a lot*

³ While some scholars distinguish between the subconscious process of language acquisition and the conscious process of language learning, we use these terms interchangeably in this paper because, as we argue, language learning in the classroom must contain a component of subconscious attendance to input since features which are not explicitly taught are still acquired.

of books), measured (*a kilo of potatoes*), portioned (*a piece of cake*), contained (*a glass of wine*), collected (*a group of students*), or classified (*two types of cake*) (Vos 1999). In pseudopartitives of quantity, the target of the present paper, the N1 indicates the cardinality or amount of the N2, as in *a lot of books* and *a lot of water*. Despite this apparently quantificational function, N1 resembles a noun given the preceding article *a* and the following preposition *of*. This mix of noun-like and quantifier-like properties has stimulated research into the pseudopartitive construction and contributes to the challenge for learners.

In the following sections, we introduce relevant properties of the pseudopartitive (2.2.1) and headedness in pseudopartitives, with a particular focus on verbal agreement (2.2.2).

2.2.1. Properties of pseudopartitives

The pseudopartitive has been investigated in several Germanic languages, notably English (Keizer 2007; Selkirk 1977), German (Löbel 1989; van Riemsdijk 1998; Vos 1999), Dutch (van Riemsdijk 1998; Vos 1999), Swedish (Delsing 1993), Danish (Hankamer and Mikkelsen 2008), and Norwegian (T. Kinn 2001). The pseudopartitive is puzzling in several respects, but in the literature, special attention has been given to the question of headedness. Unlike a canonical binominal construction in which N1 is unquestionably the head (as in *a review of the arguments*), in pseudopartitives, it is the N2 that often appears to act as the head. In this section we briefly review the unique properties of pseudopartitives, with an aim towards establishing headedness.

A first property of the pseudopartitive is that the N1 is necessarily relational (Alexiadou *et al.* 2007: 405): it is complement-taking, requiring another noun that can be quantized. Removing the N2 creates an ungrammatical result (see also Keizer 2007):

- (1) *A lot entered the store.

T. Kinn (2001: 6) points out that the N1 and N2 are co-categorizing and hence co-extensive. For T. Kinn (2001), this is one of the defining features of the pseudopartitive, which separates it from similar seeming constructions like the partitive, where the N1 and N2 refer to different sets (e.g. *a lot of the books* which marks a subset relation; see also Selkirk 1977). Further evidence in favor of co-extensiveness is the inability of N2 to carry determiner-level material of its own (Alexiadou *et al.* 2007).

- (2) *that bottle of the/tha/tthis/my wine (Alexiadou *et al.* 2007: 399, ex. 11)

This has been interpreted as evidence that N1 and N2 belong to the same extended projection (Klockmann 2017; van Riemsdijk 1998). This is a core fact that has made its way into analyses where N2 is the head.

A second property of the pseudopartitive is the N2 must be mass or plural. Singular N2s are not permitted as illustrated below:

- (3) A lot of money / ideas / *idea

Vos (1999) describes this in terms of semantic cumulativity, or alternatively divisibility. Combining or dividing the “stuff” denoted by a plural or mass N2 results in the

same “stuff”; combining or dividing a singular N2, however, results in different “stuff”, e.g. a plural or a part. The pseudopartitive requires the N2 to adhere to cumulativity or divisibility, and speakers will creatively assign interpretations that respect this requirement. For example, *a lot of dog* will be assigned a mass interpretation (e.g. the “universal grinder”, Pelletier 1975).

A third property concerns how the N1 and N2 combine. In English, a preposition-like linker *of* is required. Such linkers are found in pseudopartitives in other Germanic languages as well, e.g. *av* ‘of’ or *med* ‘with’ in Norwegian.

- (4) Ein flokk med / av kattar
 A.M flock.M with / of cats
 ‘A flock of cats’ (T. Kinn 2001: 4, ex. 9)

However, while the English pseudopartitive largely requires *of* (*couple* being an exception), in the other Germanic languages, a juxtapositional construction is also available and often, more common (e.g. T. Kinn 2001 on Norwegian). In the juxtapositional construction, N1 and N2 are juxtaposed, without a linker:

- (5) Ein haug sand
 A.M heap.M sand
 ‘A heap/mound of sand’ (T. Kinn 2001: 88, ex. 8)

Van Riemsdijk (1998) proposes that the N1 in the juxtapositional construction is semi-lexical, a hypothesis also developed in Vos (1999) for Dutch and Hankamer and Mikkelsen (2008) for Danish; this hypothesis is extended to the English prepositional construction in Klockmann (2017). Treating the N1 as semi-lexical is intimately related to the question of headedness – if the N1 is semi-lexical, then it is the N2 that is lexical and therefore more likely to be the head. The *of* in this type of account is therefore not quite a preposition, but rather a type of head marker (T. Kinn 2001) or marker of nominality (Klockmann 2017).

2.2.2. Headedness in pseudopartitives

Tests for headedness are both semantic and syntactic. Keizer (2007) proposes a battery of tests for evaluating headedness in English pseudopartitives, which include semantic selection and subject-verb agreement, among other things. Delsing (1993) and T. Kinn (2001) also discuss predicate agreement in Swedish and Norwegian; given that the mainland Scandinavian languages lack subject-verb agreement, agreement on predicative adjectives and participles has been used instead to argue for headedness.

Headedness differs depending on the type of pseudopartitive. In this section, we focus on pseudopartitives of quantity, our object of study.⁴ For this type of pseudopartitive,

⁴ While measure nouns and container nouns also arguably convey a quantity interpretation, they have unique properties that have led us to omit them from the present analysis. Container nouns are often ambiguous between an object reading and a quantity reading, for example (i) *I broke a bottle of wine* and (ii) *I drank a bottle of wine*. In (i), we are dealing with a container as a physical object, while in (ii) we are dealing with a container as an amount. See Löbel (1989), T. Kinn (2001), and

the consensus in the literature seems to be that the N2 is the head. Keizer (2007) reports for English quantifier N1s (e.g. *lot*, *ton*) that N2 is the semantic head and likewise, that N2 is the target of agreement. For example, in (6) below, a verbal predicate compatible with the N2 is allowed, but not one compatible with the N1.

- (6) *Semantic selection, English*
 a. A lot of customers entered the building.
 b. #A lot of customers increased.

Likewise, verbs agree in number with the N2, not the N1, regardless of whether the N1 looks singular or plural:

- (7) *Subject-verb agreement, English*
 a. A lot of children were / *was screaming.
 b. Lots of milk was / *were spilled.

Similar conclusions are found in Delsing (1993) who reports on Swedish pseudopartitives. Delsing's "genuine quantifiers" (1993: 203) require or prefer predicative agreement with N2:

- (8) *Swedish*
 Nyligen har ett antal rika turister blivit *rånet/rånade
 recently has a number.N rich tourists been robbed.N/robbed.PL
 'Recently a number of rich tourists were robbed.' (Delsing 1993: 207, ex. 56)

This finding is repeated in T. Kinn (2001) for Norwegian "primary quantifiers" (2001: 86), though he also points out that it holds for both juxtapositional and prepositional pseudopartitives.

- (9) *Norwegian*
 Eit ton (med) eple blei *(?)stole/stolne.
 A ton.N (with) apples became stolen.N/stolen.PL
 'A ton of apples were stolen.' (T. Kinn 2001: 188, ex. 28)

Such evidence has been taken to suggest that in pseudopartitives of quantity, the N2 is the head, and therefore, it is the N2 which determines properties like semantic selection and agreement. This is an assumption that we also largely adopt in this paper.

Some complexity arises when considering a broader set of quantificational N1s. While the focus in previous studies appears to have been on frequent and established quantificational N1s like *lot* or *bunch* in English and *mengd* 'quantity' in Norwegian, less

Keizer (2007) for more discussion of container nouns. To avoid issues in determining whether a learner intended an object or quantity reading, we have set such nouns aside. Measure nouns are special in that in many Germanic languages, they cannot pluralize in their measure reading, as shown in (iii) for Norwegian; we have also set them aside.

- (iii) To liter vann
 two liter water
 'Two liters of water' (T. Kinn 2001: 96, ex. 33)

attention has been given to more infrequent and metaphorical quantity N1s (but see Benigni 2022; Benigni and Latos 2024 for recent usage-based contrastive investigations). For example, nouns like *flood* and *sea* can be used in a pseudopartitive to indicate a large quantity which resembles the N1 in some way, as shown below.

- (10) a. A flood of customers entered the store.
 ‘A lot of customers similar in nature to a flood entered the store.’
 b. A sea of faces looked back at me.
 ‘A lot of faces, so many that they were similar to a sea, looked back at me.’

While we might expect these to behave similarly to other quantificational N1s, data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (hereafter COCA, Davies 2008-) suggests otherwise. We investigated verbal agreement patterns in a small set of metaphorical quantificational N1s (*flood*, *sea*, *wave*, *trickle*) and found that both N1 and N2 could function as the agreement target, with no discernable morphosyntactic or semantic explanation. Two examples are given below; when N1 is singular and N2 is plural, agreement can target either.

- (11) a. A flood of words gushes forth. (COCA)
 b. A flood of immigrants were changing the look of America. (COCA)
- (12) a. And that sea of people goes all the way! (COCA)
 b. A sea of people were seen running towards the hills. (COCA)

In cases where N1 is plural, agreement seems to consistently target N1. This is a striking difference from established quantity N1s like *lots* and *tons*, which cannot control agreement (Klockmann 2017).

- (13) a. As floods of newsprint have explained... (COCA)
 b. Though trickles of information have made it out. (COCA)
- (14) a. Lots/tons of newsprint has/*have explained...
 b. Lots/tons of information has/*have made it out...

Note that in these examples, the semantic and syntactic head appear to differ; as seen in (13), it is the newsprint and information that have explained something or made it out, not a flood or a trickle. Despite agreement with N1, semantic selection still appears to be with N2.

Learners will likely be exposed to a wide variety of pseudopartitive expressions, many of which are pseudopartitives of quantity. Presumably both the more established and predictable types (N2 as the head) as well as the less predictable metaphorical types (N1 or N2 as the head) will occur in the input. Such apparent inconsistencies in the input may further complicate the acquisition task for the learner: learners need to eventually internalize that syntactic headedness is not only determined by the type of pseudopartitive (e.g. quantificational) but also by the N1 itself. This, in turn, has consequences for agreement. The learner needs to appropriately identify the syntactic head to produce correct agreement. In the next section, we discuss additional factors that may influence the accuracy of agreement marking; these stem from general morphosyntactic differences between English and Norwegian.

2.3. Relevant morphosyntactic differences between English and Norwegian and the potential for transfer

English and Norwegian are closely related languages with many cognates and partially overlapping grammatical features, which makes the learning of English fairly easy for Norwegian L1 speakers as compared to speakers of other, typologically more distant languages. It is well-established in the literature that learners of typologically similar languages progress faster in their L2 learning because they can take advantage of the similarities between their L1 and the target L2 language (positive transfer), but they may also suffer from making assumptions which are not true about the target language and produce transfer-induced errors (Eckman 2004; Jarvis and Pavlenko 2008; Ringbom 2007). Even though the term transfer was initially used to refer to lexical borrowings or phonological transfer in the form of a foreign accent, transfer actually affects all domains of language (Jarvis and Pavlenko 2008; Odlin 1989, 2003), including syntax (Bohnacker 2006; Meriläinen 2010). Despite some additional granularity in the descriptions of factors influencing transfer proposed in the last decades (Jarvis and Pavlenko 2008; Odlin 1989; Odlin and Jarvis 2004), the consensus in the literature is that the two main conditions for transfer to happen are psychotypology and transferability (Jarvis and Pavlenko 2008; Kellerman 1983, 1995; Odlin 1989), i.e. the perceived similarity between the L1 and L2 and whether the features in question are perceived as marked or language-specific in the L2. The pseudopartitive structures in English and Norwegian are similar and partially overlapping in the two languages and they are not particularly marked, which should facilitate transfer (Gass 1984; Kellerman 1983). However, this transfer can be both facilitative and detrimental (Jarvis 2017: 19). On the one hand, the L1 intuitions of the learners might often apply to their L2 making learning faster and target-like production more frequent. On the other hand, the overt similarities can invite to a “wholesale” transfer despite the differences in the details (Odlin and Jarvis 2004). In other words, the learners may overestimate the similarities between the two languages and produce more or less direct translations from their first language (Odlin and Yu 2016: 4).

In addition to the transfer potential in the pseudopartitive construction, there are other specific areas of English morphosyntax which are problematic for Norwegian learners due to negative transfer from L1. Two of the features which are exemplified below are subject-verb agreement and expletive constructions. While these features may be problematic for English learners of various L1 backgrounds, the non-target-like structures which the learners produce often differ due to the specific interplay between the features of their L1 and L2 English.

Functional morphology is considered to be the “bottleneck” of language acquisition (Jensen *et al.* 2020; Slabakova 2008, 2013) as the morphological development in L2 often lags behind syntactic and semantic progress. Even English L2 learners whose L1s mark subject-verb agreement often struggle with overt agreement marking in English, which results in the omission of the 3rd person -s. This is often ascribed to economy (Dröschel 2011), cognitive load (Hopp 2013), lack of communicative impact of the omission (Trudgill 2002), or simply performance errors (White 2003). Illicit inclusion of the overt marker, i.e. overgeneralization to other persons, is infrequent (Breiteneder 2005; Dröschel 2011) and errors in suppletive agreement are rare (Ionin and Wexler 2002; White 2003).

Unlike English, Norwegian does not have a system of verbal agreement, and Norwegian learners tend to have problems with agreement marking, especially in semantically or syntactically complex contexts (Garshol 2019). While agreement morphology is notoriously difficult for L2 learners (White 2003: 178), especially if not present in their L1, most English learners whose L1 does not have subject-verb agreement drop the agreement marker (3rd person *-s*) in obligatory contexts before they start producing target-like agreement morphology (see e.g. Muroya 2019 for Japanese L1). Norwegian learners, on the other hand, produce agreement errors which are not typical for L2 learners of English, namely suppletive agreement errors and overgeneralization errors (Garshol 2019; Killie 2021; similar error patterns are also reported for Swedish learners, Thagg Fisher 1985). Furthermore, they also accept incorrect overgeneralization errors more often than omission errors and reject correct unmarked verbs (Jensen *et al.* 2020). Garshol (2019) argues that these patterns of divergent L2 behavior are due to transfer from L1 Norwegian, likely a result of either incorrect feature reassembly (Lardiere 2009) assuming that the agreement marker is a tense marker (in the case of affixal agreement) or phonological similarities with the Norwegian forms (in the case of suppletive agreement). In other words, Norwegian English L2 learners struggle with agreement marking despite their general high language proficiency in English, and their difficulties with agreement might be related to transfer from their L1 even in straightforward cases involving simple subjects. As is discussed above, pseudopartitives pose an additional challenge to learners due to their syntactic complexity, which could lead to high agreement error rates in the learner data.

The second problematic feature for Norwegian learners of English is the use of expletives. English uses two expletive elements, *it* and *there*, while Norwegian, as other Scandinavian languages, uses only one element, *det* (Faarlund 1990; K. Kinn 2016; McCloskey 1991). While *it* checks both Case and phi-features, *there* lacks phi-features (Fernández-Fuertes 2001: 231; Groat 1995: 360), which has consequences for agreement. Constructions with *there* expletives may require post-verbal agreement, while constructions with *it* must be followed by a singular verb regardless of whether *it* has a referential or expletive function. This diverging agreement pattern, namely post-verbal agreement after existential *there*, can be problematic for learners. The added complication for Norwegian learners arises from the fact that they overuse English *it* in contexts where *there* is required (Dypedahl and Hasselgård 2018: 106), most likely because the Norwegian *det* also serves as an existential expletive equivalent to English expletive *there* and further, closely resembles English expletive *it* in its use as a referential pronoun. As we show below, this has consequences for the accuracy of agreement marking with pseudopartitives as subjects if they appear in existential constructions.

2.4. Predictions

In this section, we briefly discuss our predictions based on the preceding discussion. The goal of this paper is to investigate whether the complex nature of pseudopartitives creates specific problems in agreement marking for second language learners. Given that English and Norwegian are typologically similar languages with a long history of contact and mutual influence resulting in similar structures and many cognates, Norwegian learners of English might be prompt to transfer their L1 intuition to their L2 production. We predict

that the learners will generally be able to use a selection of quantity pseudopartitives correctly in the target language. However, there are several issues that come together in the acquisition of pseudopartitives which make it complex for learners.

Firstly, the pseudopartitive itself is complex. At the surface, these constructions resemble other nominals with post-nominal PPs, where the head is the initial noun. Yet, it is the embedded noun, the N2, which acts as the semantic and syntactic head of the construction; further, these properties can differ depending on the N1 itself (well-established vs. metaphorical). Secondly, explicit grammar instruction is limited in Norway, with the focus being on communicative competence. This means that learners are unlikely to have the explicit knowledge necessary to recognize the pseudopartitive or its unique agreement properties. The L2 learners may have learned simplified explicit rules regarding agreement which do not take into consideration nominals with more than one noun. In such a situation, they may apply this simplified rule, which would suggest agreement with N1. Finally, verbs in Norwegian do not agree, so learners do not have a verbal agreement system in their L1 to draw on in producing English.

Altogether, we predict agreement with pseudopartitives to be challenging for learners, with high error rates. We further expect complex structures to make agreement more difficult. For example, expletive structures show a different linear order of the subject and the verb, and relative clauses introduce additional structural distance – either of these may make the agreement task more difficult for the learner, leading to more agreement errors. We also predict that there might be other errors caused by transfer in the areas where English and Norwegian pseudopartitives differ, e.g. the use of the preposition-like linker *of*.

3. METHODS

In this study, we conducted a corpus study to investigate whether Norwegian learners of L2 English mark agreement in a target-like manner, and further, whether transfer appears to aid acquisition. As part of the data collection for this investigation, we performed a systematic search through learning materials (textbooks and workbooks) available for English teachers in Norway. Fifteen titles were searched including materials from four different publishers intended for the relevant ages. Pseudopartitives are not addressed in any of the textbooks specifically apart from including examples of partitives and pseudopartitives with other quantifiers. L2 learners must, therefore, acquire properties of pseudopartitives (headedness, definiteness, plurality) from the input. This makes pseudopartitives an interesting example of L1–L2 interaction in natural second language acquisition.

Using the TRAWL corpus (Tracking Written Learner Language, Dirdal *et al.* 2022), we collected data from learners aged 13–17 (7–11 years of formal English instruction) whose declared first language was Norwegian with both parents using only Norwegian at home (sub-corpus of 812 488 words). These learners all started learning English as a second/foreign language when they started school at the age of 5–6, and most of them started learning an additional foreign language (French, German, or Spanish) at the age of 12–13, i.e. at the start of the data collection. However, in most cases, their proficiency in their third language is fairly limited and this paper thus focuses only on the potential influence of their L1 (Norwegian) on their L2 (English).

In this initial investigation, we decided to focus on well-established quantity N1s, which appear in the learner data relatively frequently and which do not display variability in agreement marking in the native-speaker data. We, therefore, selected ten quantity pseudopartitive constructions for investigation, based on their total frequency in the TRAWL corpus. The total frequency is summarized in Table 1, along with the number of examples that were extracted per N1:

Table 1: N1 frequency

N1	Total hits (“N1 of”)	Extracted examples
lot	1057	261
couple	93	3
bit	57	3
lack	38	6
plenty	22	2
bunch	16	0
ton	15	3
pair	11	1
load	10	1
majority	8	3

Since some pseudopartitives may also appear in constructions without *of* (e.g. “couple hours”), we also searched for “N1 N” combinations with the ten selected N1s. The numbers above in Table 1 include all hits, including intended pseudopartitives with an omitted or incorrect preposition (ten hits distributed among *lot*, *couple*, *bit* and *lack*).

In step two of the data collection, we manually scanned each hit and extracted examples with pseudopartitives in subject position with an agreeing verb. We coded each example according to construction type (subject-verb order, expletive construction, relative clause) and the presence of agreement errors, and noted other errors we found. Examples which included an erroneous use of *it* instead of existential *there*, as in (15), were excluded from further analysis; agreement with a singular *it* is syntactically correct despite the real subject being plural.

(15) ...I hope it is a lot of great shops there. (TRAWL, Y09, P60115)⁵

There were 283 examples of pseudopartitive subjects in total, 56 of which had to be excluded due to confounding expletive errors; this left 227 examples for further analysis. All extracted examples also included information about the writer, specifically their age. However, no trends in the error rates correlating with the age of the writers were detected in the sample so the data is treated as one set in the following sections.

⁵ All examples from learner corpus are assigned the year/grade (Y08-Y11 corresponding to grades 8 through 11) and a learner ID.

4. RESULTS

In the following section (4.1), we report the results of the subject-verb error analysis connected to the use of pseudopartitives in learner texts. In section 4.2, we describe three additional error types which we discovered in the retrieved examples, namely *of*-dropping (section 4.2.1), article-dropping (section 4.2.2), and plural-dropping (section 4.2.3). Although these types of errors were not the primary focus of this study, they contribute to understanding the extent of transfer which these learner texts display.

4.1. Agreement errors

The overall subject-verb accuracy rates in all sentence types are summarized in Table 2 below with examples of the three sentence types with agreement errors in (16), (17), and (18), respectively.

Table 2: Agreement errors

Sentence type	Frequency	Agreement errors	Error rate
<i>there</i> -expletive	123	41	33.3%
relative clause	29	10	34.5%
subject-verb	75	15	20%
Total	227	66	29.1%

- (16) There were a lot of religion conflict between Catholics and protestants, ... (TRAWL, Y11, P60692)
- (17) It is easy to make a lot of insects that is good to eat. (TRAWL, Y09, P60103)
- (18) A lot of new words was added and the grammar was simplified. (TRAWL, Y10, P01055)

The overall error rate in subject-verb agreement after pseudopartitive subjects is quite high (29.1%), with relative clauses (verb in a relative clause for which the pseudopartitive is the understood subject) and *there*-expletives (post-verbal agreement) causing comparatively more problems than sentences with a straightforward subject-verb order. As a comparison, the overall agreement error rate reported in Garshol (2019) was 8.02% (this included agreement errors with all types of subjects and constructions, including pseudopartitives).

4.2. Other observations

We also noticed other irregularities in the use of pseudopartitives in the learner texts, which are presented here as evidence of non-native like production. The errors which appear to be more than idiosyncratic mistakes, i.e. errors that emerged in texts written by several different learners, are reported on below.

4.2.1. *Of-dropping*

We conducted an additional search for cases of juxtaposition with each N1; this was an expanded search and also included examples in which the pseudopartitive was not the subject of an agreeing verb. The search “N1_N” returned ten relevant hits across all ten investigated N1s. In English, only *couple* permits a juxtaposed pseudopartitive construction. However, in the learner data there were only two examples of an *of*-omission after *couple* (19). The other hits included examples with N1s *lot* (5 hits, (20) and (21)), *bit* (2 hits, (22)), and *lack* (1 hit with a wrong preposition, (23)).

- (19) ...he had only one couple clots that was very dirty... (TRAWL, Y08, P60500)
- (20) I think a lot kids and teenagers that play video games online... (TRAWL, Y10, P60109)
- (21) It's a lot good things too. (TRAWL, Y08, P60507)
- (22) So it's a little bit romance in all of this. (TRAWL, Y09, P01064)
- (23) Another reason for early pregnancy may be lack for contraceptive. (TRAWL, Y11, P60114)

This may be a case of transfer from the Norwegian juxtapositional construction (see section 2.2.1). Alternatively, this could be influenced by the adverbial uses of *lot* and *bit*, which are illustrated below. When they modify adjectives or verbs, no *of* is used.

- (24) a. It's a lot easier now.
b. They were a bit unsteady.

4.2.2. *Article-dropping*

Dropping of the article was noticed specifically with the N1 *lack*. Data on article dropping was similarly collected through an extended search for “N1_N”, and therefore also included examples in which the pseudopartitive was not the subject of an agreeing verb. There were thirteen hits for N1 *lack* without an article (25).

- (25) ...if this is lack of good relations, lack of confidence or a lack of belonging somewhere (TRAWL, Y11, P60793)

This is very likely to be a case of transfer from Norwegian. Norwegian *mangel* ‘lack’ does not combine with an article:

- (26) Det er mangel på mat.
there is lack on food
‘There is a lack of food.’

4.2.3. *Plural-dropping*

In three cases, we noticed an unexpected singular for the N1 *pair*. This occurred with both numerals (27) and other determiners (28).

- (27) ...packing in his backpack a sleeping bag, ground pad, socks, underwear, 3 pair of pants, 5 t-shirts, 2 shorts, 2 long sleeves, money and passport. (TRAWL, Y09, P60112)
- (28) ...to avoid it from falling into a few pair of hands... (TRAWL, Y11, P60102)

This also seems like a very likely case of transfer from Norwegian. Norwegian *par* 'pair', being a neuter noun of one syllable, does not display overt plural marking in the indefinite plural.

- (29) ...med to par ski på taket
 with two pairs ski on roof.DEF
 '...with two pairs of skis on the roof'

5. DISCUSSION

In this study, we investigated the use of quantity pseudopartitives in L2 English learner data for grades 8–11 in the Norwegian school system. Pseudopartitives are not explicitly taught in schools and therefore, must be learned from the input, which as we discussed in section 2.2.2 above, may contain varying or contradictory evidence, depending on the choice of quantity N1. In this study, we were interested in whether L2 learners were target-like in their use of subject-verb agreement and further, whether transfer appeared to aid or hinder acquisition. In the learner corpus data, we found a high frequency of agreement errors (29.1%), suggesting a non-target-like performance. Further, we found sporadic cases of *of*-dropping, article-dropping, and plural-dropping, which may be related to transfer.

Learners use quantity pseudopartitives relatively frequently although they tend to keep to the most frequent and established ones (overwhelming majority of *lot*). This could suggest that the underlying similarity of the structures in L1 and L2 aids the acquisition, but there is also a high frequency of agreement errors with pseudopartitives (29.1%). This could be either due to the application of a simplified explicit rule, i.e. the first noun in the nominal is the head, or due to varying ability to mark agreement correctly in this learner population in general, as evidenced in previous research, due to the lack of subject-verb agreement system in Norwegian (see section 2.3).

In addition to the facilitative role of transfer in the production of the pseudopartitive which is a fairly complex structure in the L2, the Norwegian L2 English learners might be influenced by some transfer-induced assumptions about English which are not true (see section 2.3). Underlying structures from the L1 seem to be transferred to some degree, as evidenced by *of*-dropping, article-dropping, and plural-dropping. While *of*-dropping may be influenced by the juxtapositional construction in Norwegian, suggesting negative transfer from the L1, there are also uses of *lot* and *bit* as adverbials in English, which may also influence the L2 production. Given the full set of data we considered, *of*-dropping was infrequent, suggesting that L1 transfer of the juxtapositional construction is not a major issue for L2 learners. Article-dropping was limited to the L1 *lack*. Norwegian quantity pseudopartitives largely require an article before the N1, the Norwegian *mangel* 'lack' being an exception. Cases of article dropping were relatively frequent in the *lack* data (13 out of 38 examples, making the error rate 34%), suggesting that this error might be

caused by negative transfer from the L1. For most pseudopartitives, transfer might aid the correct production of articles, given that both languages use articles in quantity pseudopartitives, but in the case of *lack* it hindered correct production. Examples with plural-dropping were also limited to a single lexical item, *pair*. Again, negative transfer from the L1 here is likely, given that in Norwegian, neuter nouns of one syllable like *par* ‘pair’ do not carry inflection in the indefinite plural. This idiosyncratic rule of Norwegian seems to have been carried straight into English in the learner texts. The error itself seems frequent: of the six examples involving *pair* in an indefinite plural context, only three correctly had the plural form, making the error rate 50%. At any rate, this type of transfer does not appear to be specifically related to the pseudopartitive construction itself, but rather the N1 *pair*.

The learner data has some limitations pertinent to the nature of written learner language. Some examples had to be excluded from the data set due to spelling errors which were difficult to interpret. In other examples, spelling or errors unrelated to pseudopartitives or agreement might have caused the resulting agreement mismatch, e.g. an incorrect plural marking of an irregular noun (30).

(30) There are a lot of woman who are strong... (TRAWL, Y10, P01152)

In addition, there was some difficulty in interpreting the use of *there is* versus *there’s*. In informal language, the contracted form *there’s* appears to act as a non-agreeing cluster (Quirk *et al.* 1985), e.g.:

(31) There’s two things to look for... (COCA)

It combines with both singular and plural post-verbal subjects. If taught, L2 English learners in Norway likely learn that *there’s* is an informal expression which should be avoided in written production; further, when the verb is spelled out, it needs to agree with its respective subject, i.e. *there is* or *there are*. We also assumed this rule in coding the extracted examples. There were only four examples with *there’s* detected in the data (out of 123 examples of *there* expletives), which suggests that learners generally follow the rule of spelling out contractions. However, given the nature of written texts, it is not possible to tell whether a learner who wrote *there is* in fact intended the non-agreeing cluster *there’s* but “spelled out the contraction” as formally instructed, or produced an agreement error. Excluding all examples with *there’s* or *there is* would significantly reduce the dataset (by 41 examples) as well as the error rate (by 26 examples, down to 18% for expletives).

In the current paper, we did not have enough data to examine the development of agreement accuracy. The overall error rate in agreement with quantity pseudopartitives was 20%, 35%, 27% and 47% in years 08-11, respectively. However, the number of extracted sentences was too low in some of the years to provide reliable data (e.g. the learners in year 11 contributed only 17 examples, out of which 8 contained agreement errors). More data is needed to investigate developmental patterns over time, ideally with the same learners (i.e. a longitudinal study).

In conclusion, the high error rate for subject-verb agreement suggests that learners are not yet target-like in their use of subject-verb agreement with pseudopartitives. They were expected to transfer the headedness properties of pseudopartitives from L1 Norwegian to L2 English, but this does not seem to be the case. The high agreement error rates might

be caused by an overgeneralization of the learned rule (the verb agrees with the first noun in the subject nominal) or by negative transfer from L1 concerning the agreement marking in general. Further, there also appear to be cases of sporadic negative transfer at the level of specific lexical items e.g. article dropping with *lack* and plural-dropping with *pair*, but negative transfer from the Norwegian juxtapositional pseudopartitive is minimal. In sum, the Norwegian quantity pseudopartitive seems to largely aid learners in their use of the English quantity pseudopartitive, with some sporadic trouble areas with negative transfer. However, verbal agreement with pseudopartitives in the subject position does not seem to be produced reliably in this learner population yet despite the same headedness rules in both languages. Verbal agreement, having no overlap with the Norwegian system, is challenging for learners and the added complexity of the pseudopartitive construction seems to cause more errors than simple nominals as subjects.

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