Universiteit Utrecht Block 1 2018/2019

BA-Thesis English Language and Culture

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The Perception of the Placement of *Only* in Dutch Learners of English:

An Empirical Investigation into the Position of *Only* in Different Focus Conditions

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29 November 2018

4433 words

Abstract

Focus is the new or contrasted information in a sentence. Speakers use prosody and focus particles to express focus in a sentence. The focus particle *only* creates a contrast between the explicit referent and the set of alternatives that is activated by the word *only*. Prosodic information such as accent placement is used to infer this set of alternatives. Previous research has shown that native speakers of Dutch are able to combine the semantics of *only* and accent placement and interpret them correctly in their L1 (Mulders & Szendröi, 2016). However, Dutch learners of English are not able to integrate the semantics of *only* with prosodic information in online language processing in spite of the fact that that they are sensitive to the use of accent placement in English (Ge, Chen & Yip, 2018; Ganga, 2018).

These findings raise the question whether Dutch learners of English have sufficient knowledge of the correct usage of *only*. This study investigated the usage of *only* in Dutch secondary school vwo pupils, in particular, the placement of the word *only* in English and Dutch. The placement of *only* can be explained by means of two constraints. The focus-marking constraint predicts that the word *only* precedes the focused word. The adjacency constraint, on the other hand, predicts that the direct object should immediately follow the verb. The adjacency constraint is the stronger constraint in English, but in Dutch, the focus-marking constraint is stronger.

By means of an assessment task, two groups of participants with different levels of proficiency in English were asked to assess the position of the word *only* in different focus conditions, i.e. object focus and verb focus. The participants showed a preference for the postverbal position of the word *only* over the preverbal position regardless of focus conditions. This shows that native Dutch secondary school vwo pupils are not aware of the strength of the constraints on the placement of *only* in their L2 English.

Table of Contents

Abstract 2

1. Introduction 4

2. Theoretical background 5

2.1 Focus particles 5

2.1.1 Focus and focus particles 5

2.1.2 The semantic, prosodic & syntactic properties of the focus particle *only* 6

2.1.3 Constraints on the placement of focus particle *only* 8

2.2 Previous studies on the processing of sentences with *only* 10

3. Research question and hypotheses 11

4. Method 12

4.1 Participants 12

4.2 Materials 14

4.3 Procedure 16

5. Analysis and Results 17

5.1 Results of the sentences with *only* 17

5.2 Results of the sentences with *too* 19

6. Discussion 20

6.1 Results on the preference for position 20

6.2 Results on the effect of proficiency 21

7. Conclusion and further research 21

Acknowledgements 23

References 24

Appendix 1: Language Background Questionnaire 26

Appendix 2: Experiment instructions 27

1. Introduction

This study aims to investigate how Dutch learners of English perceive the placement of the word *only* in different focus conditions. *Only* is a contrastive focus particle which can have an ambiguous meaning. According to Paterson, Liversedge, Rowland, and Filik (as cited in Ganga, Struiksma, Ge, Yip & Chen, 2017), contextual cues, a focusing pitch accent and a set of alternatives activated by the word are used to identify the correct meaning. The placement of the English word *only* is different from the placement of the Dutch counterpart *alleen*. Specifically, in English, the verb is preferably placed adjacent to its direct object and consequently, *only* is preferably placed before the verb regardless of focus condition, whereas the Dutch equivalent *alleen* typically precedes the focal word in the sentence (Ganga et al., 2017) and consequently the focus particle can be placed before the direct object if it is in focus in Dutch.

For second language (L2) learners, focus is a complicated concept because it involves information from different linguistic levels, operating on the interface between prosody, semantics and syntax. This makes focus an interesting research area for investigating how L2 learners process multiple sources of linguistic information. Especially since the placement of the focus particle *only* is different in both languages, Dutch learners of English have to change their native language (L1) constraint preferences in order to acquire the correct placement of the word *only*.

This study investigates to what extent Dutch learners of English adhere to the English preference for the placement of *only* in different focus conditions by looking at both the preverbal and postverbal placement of *only* in contexts where either the main verb or the direct object is in focus.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Focus particles

2.1.1 Focus and focus particles

Focus is the new or contrasted information in a sentence. In English, focus is most often realised using prosody, for example by putting stress on a word or phrase. Focus can also be expressed through syntactic means, such as left-prepositioning (1b) and cleft constructions (2). Left-prepositioning is defined as a "movement operation by which a constituent is moved into a focus position at the beginning of a clause in order to highlight it" (Radford, 2004, p. 338).

(1) a. I will certainly try to give up smoking.

b. *Give up smoking*, I will certainly try to. (Radford, 2004, p. 72)

(2) What John bought was *a car*. (Radford, 2004, p. 106)

A distinction is made between broad and narrow focus. There is broad focus when a constituent larger than one lexical word is the focus, such as a VP in (3a). Typically, there is narrow focus when one lexical word is focussed, for example a main verb (3b) or a direct object (3c) (Ganga et al., 2017).

(3) a. The rabbit is [baking a cake].

b. The rabbit is [baking] a cake.

c. The rabbit is baking [a cake].

Sometimes information is emphasised because it is new, other times focus can be contrastive. Contrastive focus can be encoded via focus particles, such as *only*. Focus particles

are linguistic devices that create a contrast between the focal element and information that is not made explicit in the sentence (Kim, 2011).

There are different types of focus particles. Some focus particles, such as the word *too*, are additive particles, which extend the meaning of something that is being said over at least one alternative (Krifka, 1998), as can be seen in (4a). There are also scalar particles, for example the word *even*, which can be used to place constituents in a scaled order, as can be seen in (4b). The third, for this study most relevant type of particle is the exclusive or contrastive particle such as the word *only*. Contrastive focus particles create a contrast between what is made explicit in the focal element and a set of alternatives. A sentence without a focus particle could be *the rabbit is baking a cake*, where the subject (rabbit), action (baking) and object (cake) are made explicit. When a focus particle such as *only* is used in a sentence, as can be seen in (4c), the focus particle creates a contrast between the referent *rabbit*, which is part of the focal set, and other possible agents who could bake the cake but did not.

(4) a. The rabbit is baking a cake. The dinosaur is baking a cake too.

b. The rabbit is baking a cake. Even the dinosaur is baking a cake.

c. Only the rabbit is baking a cake.

2.1.2 The semantic, prosodic & syntactic properties of the focus particle *only*

When interpreting sentences with focus particles, listeners use syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and prosodic information to parse the meaning of the particle in a specific context (Kim, 2011). In example (4c), the position of *only* implies a set of alternatives to *the rabbit*. However, when *only* is placed in a different position in the sentence, more information is required to infer which element is contrasted. In sentence (5a), for example, there are two

possible ways to interpret the sentence and the set of alternatives. One possible interpretation would be that *only* contrasts the direct object *cake* and a set of alternatives, so the rabbit does not bake anything else, only the cake. The other interpretation would contrast the verb *baked*, so the rabbit did not do anything else with the cake, other than baking it. There is no way to infer the correct meaning of the utterance without access to extra information, which can be given semantically by providing extra information in the utterance as done in (5b). The information *not the cookies* is the set of alternatives to *the cake*, where the cake is the object being baked and the cookies are the alternatives that are not baked.

(5) a. The rabbit is only baking the cake.

b. The rabbit is only baking the cake, not the cookies.

In spoken discourse, extra information can also be given by prosodic clues, such as accent placement, causing the accented word to be spoken with more prominence. For example, in (6a) the object *cake* has narrow focus marked by a contrastive pitch accent, which contrasts *cake* to other possible baked goods. Similarly, in (6b) the main verb *baking* has narrow focus marked by a contrastive pitch accent, which contrasts *baking* to other activities such as *eating*, *slicing*, or *decorating* the cake.

(6) a. The rabbit is only baking the [CAKE].

b. The rabbit is only [BAKING] the cake.

Knowledge of accent placement and semantics of the word *only* is needed in order to process sentences with *only*. Dutch learners of English encounter difficulties in processing sentences with *only* in English because of semantic and syntactic differences between *only*

and *alleen* ‘only’ (Ganga et al., 2017). The word *alleen* ‘only’ is lexically ambiguous in Dutch; it can also be the counterpart of the adjective *alone* (Bouma, Hendriks and Hoeksema, 2007). In this study, *alleen* ‘only’ is analysed as the counterpart of the adverb *only*. The lexical ambiguity will therefore not be addressed.

In the light of their corpus-based research, Bouma et al. (2007) proposed that two general constraints on word order can explain the placement of *only* and *alleen* ‘only’ in languages like English and Dutch. More specifically, the strength of the two constraints in English compared to Dutch could explain the differences in the placement of focus particles. These constraints are discussed in 2.1.3.1 and 2.1.3.2.

2.1.3 Constraints on the placement of focus particle *only*

2.1.3.1 The focus-marking constraint

One of the two constraints is the constraint of focus marking, which entails that focus particles must precede the focal word. When there is focus on the main verb, in both Dutch and English, the focus marking constraint predicts that the focus particle should appear before the verb. This results in English sentences such as (7b) and Dutch sentences such as (8b).

If the direct object is in focus, the focus marking constraint predicts that the focus particle should appear before the direct object. This would result in the order main verb – focus particle – direct object in English, as in (9) and focus particle – direct object – main verb in Dutch, as in (8a), placing the focus particle in a postverbal position in English, but in both languages the focus particle is supposed to be placed before the direct object, according to this constraint. This is indeed the preferred position of *only* in Dutch, but for English, this position rarely appears (Bouma et al. 2007). Bouma et al. (2007) proposed a second constraint that could provide an explanation for this difference between Dutch and English, which is discussed in 2.2.3.

(7) a. The rabbit is only baking the [CAKE]. (object focus)

b. The rabbit is only [BAKING] the cake. (main verb focus)

c. The rabbit is only [BAKING THE CAKE]. (VP focus)

(8) a. Het konijn is alleen de [TAART] aan het bakken. (object focus)

The rabbit is only the [*CAKE*] *baking*

'The rabbit is only baking the [CAKE]'

b. Het konijn is de taart alleen [AAN HET BAKKEN]. (main verb focus)

The rabbit is the cake only [*BAKING*]

'The rabbit is only [BAKING] the cake'

c. Het konijn is alleen [DE TAART AAN HET BAKKEN]. (VP focus)

The rabbit is only [*THE CAKE BAKING*]

'The rabbit is only [BAKING THE CAKE]'

(9) The rabbit is baking only [THE CAKE].

2.1.3.2 The adjacency constraint

The second constraint proposed by Bouma et al. (2007) is the constraint of adjacency. The adjacency constraint entails that direct objects must appear adjacent to the verb. Bouma et al. (2007) observed in their corpus study that in English the preferred position for the word *only* is the preverbal position, both when there is focus on the main verb and when there is narrow focus on the direct object. This results in an ambiguous meaning of the word *only*, because the position of the focus particle does not indicate which word is focussed. This ambiguity can be prevented by placing the word *only* in a postverbal position to highlight the direct object, as seen in (10) and as is preferred in Dutch sentences. However, this is not the preferred position for the focus particle in English. The preverbal position is the preferred position for the word

only, according to the constraint of adjacency. This leaves no option for the placement of the focus particle in the preverbal position to mark the focus of the verb, which would be what the focus-marking constraint predicts. So, one of the two constraints must be violated, and as proven by the corpus research done by Bouma et al. (2007), in English the constraint of focus marking is the weaker constraint that is often violated. As a result, the focus particle *only* typically precedes the main verb when the direct object is focused. However, in Dutch the adjacency constraint is weaker than in English.

(10) The rabbit is baking only the cake.

2.2 Previous studies on the processing of sentences with *only*

Mulders and Szendröi (2016) investigated the processing of sentences with *alleen* in Dutch by Dutch native speakers in an eye-tracking study. They found that Dutch native speakers instantly process the prosodic information to anticipate the upcoming contrast. Similar findings were reported by Ge (2018) for native speakers of English. In contrast, Ge, Mulders, Chen and Yip (in prep), as reported in Brouwer (2017), tested advanced Dutch learners of English on the same materials used in Ge (2018) in an eye tracking study. They found no evidence that advanced Dutch learners of English make use of the semantic information of *only* and the prosodic information in the accented words to anticipate the upcoming contrast.

Ganga (2018) also investigated how Dutch learners of English process sentences with *only* in English in an electrophysiological study using electroencephalography (EEG). Her study aimed to investigate whether the participants formed expectation patterns for the positioning of the prosodic focus and whether the processing of the prosody was influenced by discourse context. The results showed that regardless of L2 proficiency, the Dutch learners of English processed English accentuation, but they expected the focus to be placed

immediately after *only*, according to the preferred focus placement in their L1 Dutch. This indicates that the position of *only* has a larger influence on the processing of the focus than the prosody.

Together, these studies show that native speakers of Dutch and English can use and process prosodic information combined with the syntactic and semantic information of the focus particle in their L1, but Dutch learners of English fail to do so in English. The question that arises is whether Dutch learners of English have adequate linguistic knowledge of the placement of *only* in English.

3. Research question and hypotheses

As has become clear from the theoretical background section, the Dutch word *alleen* 'only' differs from the English word *only* mostly in syntactic placement. More specifically, the positioning of the word in a sentence is different, for in Dutch the postverbal position is preferred when the direct object is in focus. Previous research has indicated that Dutch learners of English seem to be able to process prosodic information in their L1, but when this is combined with syntactic information that is different in their L2 than in their L1, they fail to perform in a native-like manner. This raises the question as to whether Dutch learners of English have adequate knowledge of the placement of *only* in their L2. A second question that arises is whether Dutch learners of English at different proficiency levels show a difference in their understanding of the placement of the focus particle, since a higher proficiency level could indicate better knowledge of English syntax. That is why the following research question has been constructed:

How do Dutch learners of English at different proficiency levels of English perceive the position of *only* in different focus conditions in English?

Two hypotheses have been constructed:

Hypothesis 1: On the basis of Ganga (2018) and the adjacency constraint in Dutch (Bouma et al. 2007), it can be hypothesised that Dutch learners of English show a higher tendency towards the L1 position of *only*. It is thus predicted that Dutch learners of English prefer the preverbal position for *only* when the main verb is in focus, as seen in (11a), and they prefer the postverbal position for *only* when the direct object is in focus, as shown in example (11b).

(11) a. The rabbit is only baking the cake.

b. The rabbit is baking only the cake.

Hypothesis 2: On the basis of Ganga (2018), it has been shown that even advanced Dutch learners of English exhibit non-native processing in sentences with *only*. Since the participants of the current study are beginning learners of English at the assumed proficiency level of A2 and B2, the level of proficiency in English is hypothesised to make no difference to the preference for the postverbal or preverbal placement of *only* in either one of the two focus conditions.

The hypotheses were tested via a perception task on which participants judge the acceptability of sentences with *only* in different contexts differing in the position of *only*.

4. Method

4.1 Participants

Thirty-four monolingual Dutch-speaking VWO (voortgezet wetenschappelijk onderwijs, secondary school) second graders, hereafter 2vwo, and fourth graders, hereafter 4vwo,

participated in this study. Before taking part in the experiment, the participants were asked to fill in a background questionnaire which can be found in Appendix 1. The questionnaire enquired about the participants' date of birth, gender, language background and score in English from the previous year[1]. The individual level of English proficiency was accounted for by means of this score and the participants were told to check with their teacher what their score was to ensure that they filled in the correct score. Both the questionnaire and the experimental task were administered via a web interface.

The average test scores of both groups were normally distributed and there was a low standard variation between scores in each group. This indicates that the participants within each group were largely at a similar proficiency level of English at the time when this study was conducted. The mean test score and standard deviation can be found in Table 1. Average test scores indicate the individual proficiency level of each participant within the group level. Both groups have a different proficiency level of English. Proficiency levels are most commonly measured according to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) guidelines. The aim for Dutch bilingual secondary schools is that the students reach an end-term level of English B2 at the end of the third grade (Van Wilgenburg, 2016). Since both groups were tested at the beginning of the school year, the 4vwo participants were assumed to have reached the proficiency level of B2, whereas the 2vwo participants were assumed to have reached the proficiency level of A2 (Van Wilgenburg, 2016).

[1] The initial plan was to ask the teacher to provide the test scores of the participants. However, because of the AVG law (Algemene Verordening Gegevensbescherming, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)) the teacher could not provide such information. Therefore, it was decided to ask the participants to fill in the score themselves.

Table 1. *Mean Test Score (and Standard Deviation) for the 2vwo and 4vwo participants*

	2vwo	4vwo	Total
Number of participants	20	14	34
Male participants	10	10	20
Female participants	10	4	14
Mean age	12.88 (N = 17)	14.92 (N = 12)	13.72 (N = 29)
Mean test score (St. Dev)	7.63 (.88)	6.89 (.62)	N/A

4.2 Materials

In total, forty experimental stimuli and forty filler sentences were created based on those used in Ge (2018)[2]. In one half of the experimental stimuli, the focus particle *only* was placed in a preverbal position; in the other half, the focus particle *only* was placed in a postverbal position. In each half of the experimental stimuli, ten had focus on the direct object and ten had focus on the main verb. The stimuli were embedded in question-answer pairs, each of which was preceded by a short context story. This story was created to familiarise the participants with the agents and patients occurring in the question-answer pairs. The question preceding each answer was a wh-question on either the verb or the direct object, putting the verb or the direct object in focus in the corresponding answer sentence.

In this way, four different types of stimuli were created: (1) the focus was on the direct object and the focus particle was placed before the verb (12a); (2) the focus was again on the direct object but the focus particle was placed after the verb (12b); (3) the focus was on the verb and the focus particle was placed before the verb (13a) and the fourth type had focus on the verb and the focus particle was placed after the verb (13b).

(12) The cat has a beer and a coffee. She was going to drink them. Then she changed her mind.

[2] Ge (2018) is currently in the process of being revised for journal submission, therefore it is not possible to make the stimuli available at this stage.

(a) Q: What is the cat drinking?

A. The cat is only drinking the coffee

(b) Q: What is the cat drinking?

A: The cat is drinking only the coffee.

(13) The cat has a coffee. She was going to drink and pour it. Then she changed her mind.

(a) Q: What is the cat doing with the coffee?

A. The cat is only drinking the coffee.

(b) Q: What is the cat doing with the coffee?

A: The cat is drinking only the coffee.

In addition, filler sentences with *too* were used in the experiment to see whether Dutch learners of English were able to recognise ungrammatical placement of focus particles and as a check on whether the participants would focus on the task and to avoid too much attention on the sentences with *only* and to prevent participants from getting bored. Examples of the filler sentences can be seen in (14a) and (14b) (object-focus) and (15a) and (15b) (whole sentence-focus).

(14). The rabbit has bought a phone. She saw the dinosaur in the phone shop as well.

(a) Q: Has the dinosaur bought a phone?

A: The dinosaur has bought a phone too.

(b) Q: Has the dinosaur bought a phone?

A: The dinosaur has too bought a phone.

(15) The rabbit has bought a phone. She saw the dinosaur in the phone shop as well.

(a) Q: What happened?

A: The dinosaur has bought a phone too.

(b) Q: What happened?

A: The dinosaur has too bought a phone.

The focus on the direct object for the fillers was created by asking the question: *Has the (subject) (verb+tense) the (direct object)?*. The question used to trigger broad focus on the verb was *What happened?*.

The experimental task using eighty stimuli was piloted before the experiment proper, to ensure that the participants could finish the test within a reasonable timeframe. Two participants with a similar education background to the participants in the proper experiment took part in the pilot study. The participants were instructed to assess the sentences on whether or not the answer sentence was appropriate. The participants finished the pilot test within 35 minutes but they reported that they focused on the plausibility of the content when assessing the sentences. The instructions were subsequently adapted to dilute the focus on the plausibility of the content.

4.3 Procedure

The task was administered in Google Forms[3], which the participants could access from their mobile phones. An example of a question in Google Forms can be seen in Figure 1. The participants completed the task during their regular English class. The stimuli and fillers were presented in two pseudo-randomised orders. The participants were asked to assess how acceptable the answer was to the question on a five-point equal-appearing interval scale, where 1 stood for ‘not acceptable’ and 5 stood for ‘highly acceptable’. A five-point scale was

[3] There was a separate Google Forms for both version A and B for each class:
2vwo version A: https://goo.gl/forms/B7MVquskQrW8D2Mz1
2vwo version B: https://goo.gl/forms/RZi8I8XktNZhzgi12
4vwo version A: https://goo.gl/forms/gVTQpohgkOeovU5l2
4vwo version B: https://goo.gl/forms/26jTSOjqYMbmM1tj1

chosen because it is commonly used in linguistic studies and the mid-point gives the participants the option of being neutral or uncertain about the acceptability of an answer sentence. The full instructions can be found in Appendix 2, together with four practice trials.

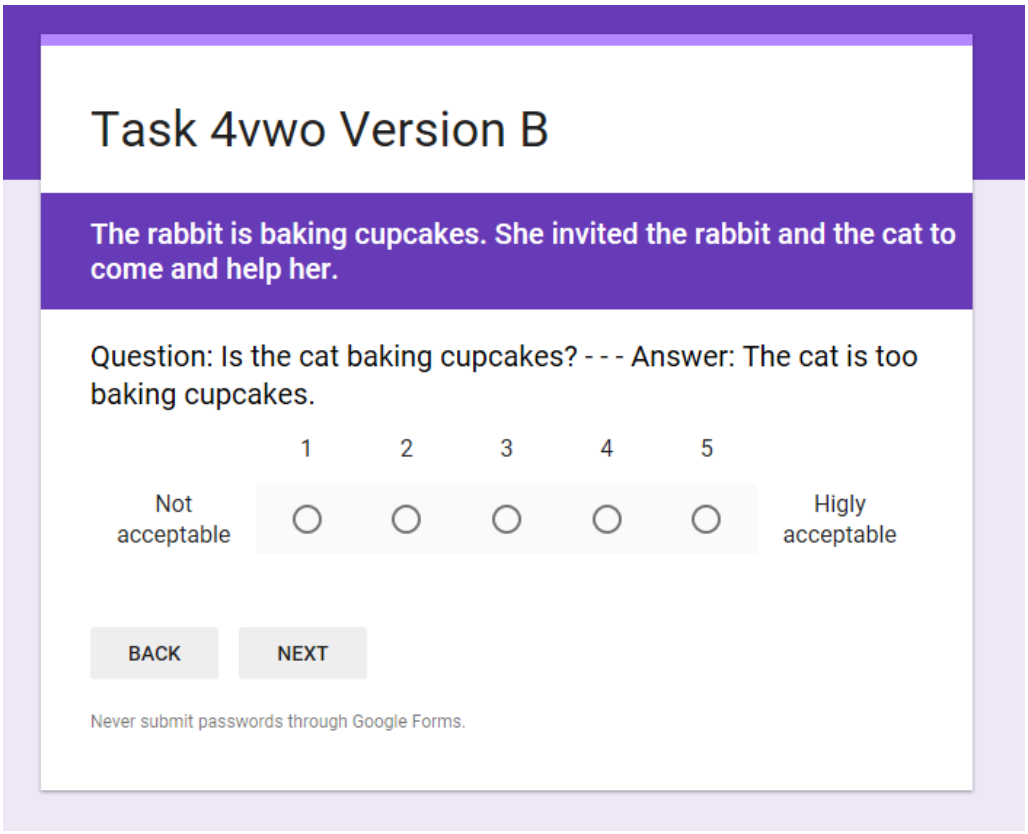

Figure 1. *Example of a Filler Trial in the Online Task.*

5. Analysis and Results

5.1 Results of the sentences with *only*

The scores of the sentences with the word *only* were analysed to answer the research question. The mean preference score was calculated per type of question for each participant. In most cases all 10 stimuli per type could be used, but in some cases there were missing values because some participants had skipped questions. These were excluded from the calculation. Due to technical difficulties, not all pupils who were present could complete the task.

The effects of focus condition, position of the word *only* and between-group differences were analysed using a mixed-design repeated measures ANOVA. Prior to

conducting the ANOVA, the assumption of homogeneity was tested in the acceptability scores by means of Levene's test for homogeneity of variances. It was found that homogeneity was violated in the object focus preverbal condition (p = .02), the object focus postverbal condition (p = .02) and the verb-focus postverbal position (p = .02). Only the verb-focus preverbal condition showed homogeneity of variances (p = .22). To correct the homogeneity of the conditions, a log transformation was used to transform the data for all four conditions, following Field (2013). The repeated measures ANOVA was performed on the log-transformed acceptability scores.

The analysis yielded no significant main effect of focus condition (F(1, 32) = .81; p = .38, η^2 = .03), but a significant main effect of position of the word *only* (F(1, 32) = 7.51; p = .01; η^2 = .19). As can be seen in Figure 2 and Table 2, the sentences with *only* in the postverbal position scored significantly higher than the sentences with *only* in the preverbal position. Furthermore, there was no significant interaction between focus condition and position (F(1, 32) = 1.93; p = .18; η^2 = .06), focus condition and group (F(1, 32) = .02; p =.90; η^2 < .01), position and group (F(1, 32) = 2.85; p = .10; η^2 = .08) or focus, position and group (F(1, 32) = .68; p = .42; η^2 = .02).

Table 2.

Means (and Standard Deviation) for the Score of Acceptability of the Word only *per Position and per Focus Condition.*

	Object focus		Verb Focus	
Group	Preverbal position	Postverbal position	Preverbal position	Postverbal position
2vwo (N = 20)	.43 (.22)	.39 (.22)	.39 (.18)	.45 (.21)
4vwo (N = 14)	.41 (.17)	.43 (.16)	.39 (.17)	.45 (.15)
Total (N = 34)	.42 (.20)	.41 (.19)	.39 (.17)	.45 (.18)

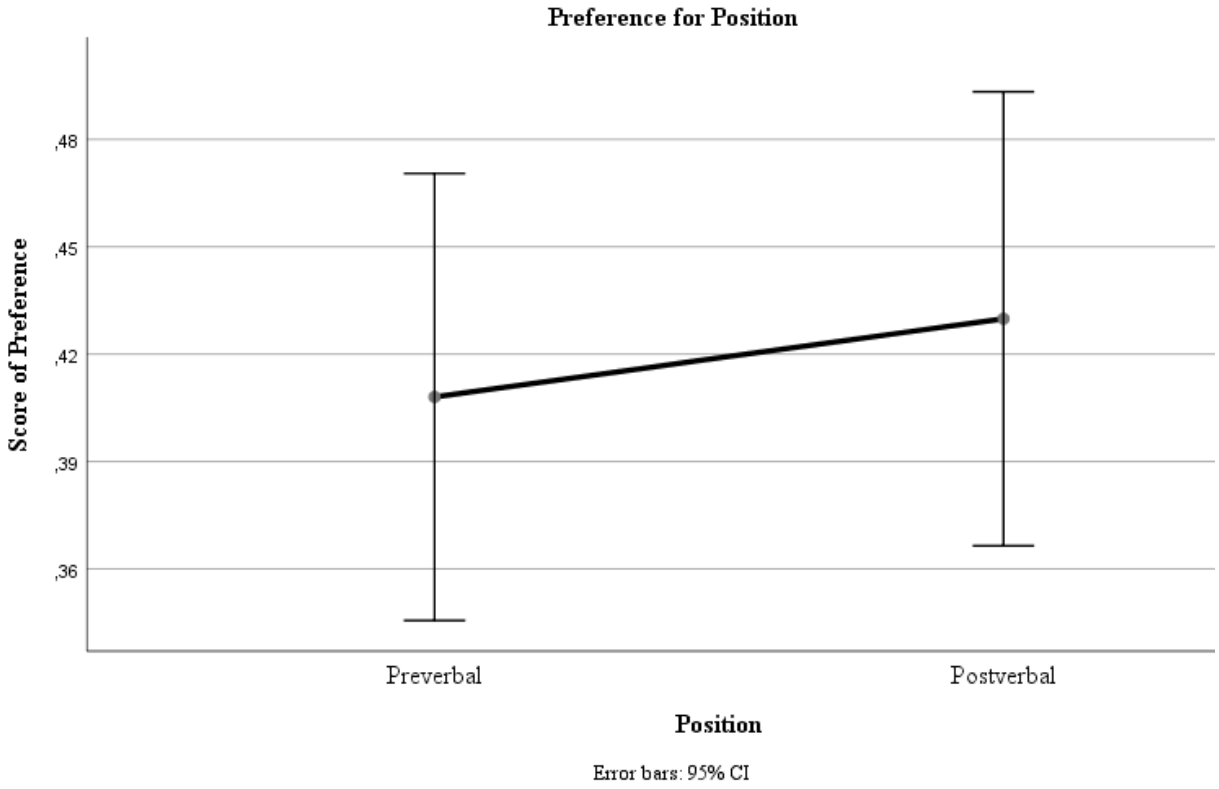

Figure 2.

Average Preference Score of Position for all Participants for the Word only.

5.2 Results of the sentences with *too*

Even though the analysis of *too* will not help answer the research question about the placement of *only*, the data provides useful insight as to what aspects of word order the participants recognise.

The analysis of the data on the placement of *too* showed that there was an interaction effect between focus condition and position. This interaction effect indicates that the participants preferred the grammatical sentence-final position for *too* when the verb was in focus, whereas they preferred the ungrammatical preverbal position for *too* when the object was in focus. According to the placement rules of the word *too*, there should not be a difference for its placement based on where the focus lies in the sentence. The results indicate

that both groups of participants failed to distinguish the grammatical use of *too* from the ungrammatical use of *too*.

6. Discussion

6.1 Results on the preference for position

The data has shown that the Dutch learners of English exhibited a preference for placing *only* in the postverbal position over placing this focus particle in the preverbal position without making a distinction between the focus conditions in English. Hypothesis 1 and its corresponding predictions are thus not borne out. The hypothesis was that Dutch learners of English would show a higher tendency towards the L1 position of *only*. Therefore, it was predicted that the Dutch learners of English would prefer the preverbal position of *only* when the main verb was in focus, and they would prefer the postverbal position when the direct object is in focus. The results indicated that there was no significant difference between the two focus conditions. This could indicate that the participants do not use the locus of the focus to assess the position of *only*.

The participants preferred the postverbal position for the word *only*, whereas the preverbal position is the preferred place for native speakers of English. This indicates that the participants showed no awareness of the adjacency constraint in English. If they had assessed the sentences according to the constraints, they would have shown a preference for *only* in the preverbal position when the verb was in focus and a preference for the focus particle in the postverbal position when the object was in focus.

6.2 Results on the effect of proficiency

It was hypothesised that the level of proficiency in English would make no difference in the preference for the postverbal or preverbal condition. The results of the analysis on *only* showed that there was no difference between the two proficiency levels, confirming the second hypothesis.

As mentioned in section 5, the placement of *too* is not part of this study but it can still provide useful insight to the abilities of the participants regarding word order. The results on the placement of *too* indicate that the participants do not recognise the ungrammatical position of *too*. It could be possible that Dutch learners of English at lower proficiency levels have not yet acquired the rules on the placement of focus particles.

The results on the analysis of both *only* and *too* indicate that the proficiency level of the participants was probably not high enough to be able to recognize the incorrect placement of these focus particles. Participants with a higher proficiency might show different preferences.

7. Conclusion and further research

The research question on how L1 Dutch learners of English at different proficiency levels of English assess the position of *only* in different conditions can now be answered. The participants did not vary their preference for one of the positions of *only* based on focus condition. They preferred the postverbal position of *only* over the preverbal position regardless of focus condition. Thus, their perception was neither L1-like or L2-like.

In conclusion, the current study showed that beginning Dutch learners of English do not have adequate knowledge of the constraints for the placement of *only* in English. The participants showed a preference for the postverbal placement of the focus particle without

making a distinction between focus conditions and the proficiency level of the participants did not make a difference.

For future research, it could be useful to focus on participants with a higher level of proficiency. The current study investigated participants were assumed to have a proficiency level of A2 and B2. It might be interesting to compare B2 and C2 instead, for the participants will have had more time to learn the rules on word order and more input of English in general.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to everyone who has supported me in realising this project. First, I would like to thank my supervisor Aoju Chen for all her help and advice. I also want to thank Martin Augustijn for allowing me to use his classes as participants for my empirical investigation. Thirdly, I want to thank Bart van Nuland and Boaz Braam for piloting my experimental task. Last, I want to thank my friends and family who have given me endless advice, hugs and encouragement.

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Appendix 1: Language Background Questionnaire

Please answer all the following questions to the best of your ability. If a particular question does not apply to you, please fill in the appropriate space with an N/A.

1. What is your name?

2. What is your date of birth?

3. What is your gender?

4. What is your country of birth?

5. Which language(s) is(are) your first/native language(s)?

6. Do you speak any other languages at home?

7. Rate your current overall language ability in English.

a) Native

b) Excellent

c) Good

d) Limited

e) Almost no knowledge

8. What was your average grade for English last year?

Appendix 2: Experiment instructions

Instructions

Before the task begins, there will be a short language questionnaire.

During the task you are going to read a number of short fantasy stories in English. In these stories, cats, dogs, rabbits and dinosaurs are capable of doing all kinds of things with everyday objects. Each story consists of a few sentences on the context and a question-answer dialogue between two children (child A, child B). You may come across the same or similar answer sentences in different stories. The answer sentences differ in their acceptability. Your task is to rate how ACCEPTABLE the ANSWER SENTENCE is in each story.

You can indicate your rating by ticking the relevant box on a five-point scale with the score ‘1’ standing for 'not acceptable' and the score ‘5’ standing for 'highly acceptable'. When in doubt, please use your intuition to give a score.

You will start with four practice trials. If you have any questions, please raise your hand.

Thank you very much for your time.

Trial questions:

Trial 1.The rabbit has made an extra jacket. She was going to give it to the dinosaur, but he already had a jacket.

Be aware that your job is not to assess the logic in the sentences. You can safely assume that all answer sentences are true. So in this case, it is true that the dinosaur made a jacket. Your task is to follow your intuition and see which answer sentences 'feel weird'.

Q: What happened?

A: The dinosaur has made a jacket too.

2. The rabbit has a cookie and a cake. She was going to eat them. Then she changed her mind.

Q: What is the rabbit eating?

A: The rabbit is only eating the cake.

3. The rabbit has made an extra jacket. She was going to give it to the dinosaur, but he already has his own jacket.

Q: What happened?

A: The dinosaur has too made a jacket.

4. The rabbit has a cake. She was going to bake and eat it. Then she changed her mind.

Q: What is the rabbit doing with the cake?

A: The rabbit is eating only the cake.