In recent years, there has been revived interest in the influence of the mother tongue in language acquisition. This study investigates the role of the L1 in one important aspect of second language acquisition, fossilization. Despite the fact that Dutch learners of English and French may achieve high levels of proficiency in general, they often fail to do so when it comes to the grammatical expression of hypotheticality. In order to access the role of the mother tongue in the acquisition process, this study offers a new semantic description of (Dutch) hypothetical conditionals, as well as an extensive corpus-based investigation of those structures.

Experimental investigation of the production of hypothetical conditional verb forms by Dutch learners of English and French reveals that the English problems can be explained in terms of the new description of Dutch, whereas the French data suggest that different strategies are used. An explanation for this difference can be sought in terms of typological distance.

This study shows how an initial concern with a learning problem in English and French as foreign languages has resulted in a thorough description of a hitherto inadequately treated part of the grammar of Dutch. As a result, the study is not only relevant for researchers in the field of second language acquisition and educators, but also for students of Dutch and those concerned with theoretical and descriptive linguistics in general.