

ACQUISITION OF INTERROGATIVE FORMS FROM A1 TO B2 LEVEL BY MACEDONIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract. This article aims to provide an overview of the verb forms EFL learners use in the process of acquisition of interrogative forms. It also explores learners' L1 (Macedonian) influence on L2 acquisition. The research is based on data taken from the Macedonian Corpus of English Interlanguage, which contains written language of students aged 8-15, A1-B2 level. As the research shows, learners have no difficulties in acquiring interrogative forms. Nevertheless, the number of errors remains stable across all levels. In addition, there is minimal influence of L1. L1 transfer related errors could also be treated as developmental errors, since they also appear in learners with L1 other than Macedonian. The existence of developmental errors proves that language learners have their own interlanguage. Such errors help teachers adjust their expectations and teaching methods.

Keywords: acquisition, interrogative form, corpus, interlanguage.

1. SUBJECT AND AIM OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of this article is to study the acquisition process of interrogative forms in all verb tenses in the English language by Macedonian speakers. Data from the MELC (Macedonian English Learner Corpus) corpus were used for the needs of the research; in particular, texts written by students aged 8 to 15, whose level of English ranges between A1 to B2, according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Texts included three narrative and descriptive stories and a dialogue.

The research has two objectives. The first one is to explore how interrogative forms are acquired throughout all levels in the corpus. The related hypothesis is that the number of errors is expected to be greater at lower levels (A1 and A2), reducing significantly at B1 and B2 level. The second objective is to test the hypothesis whether and how Macedonian, being the learners' mother tongue (L1), influences the acquisition of interrogative forms in the English interlanguage of Macedonian learners. The hypothesis here is that L1 has an insignificant influence on word order. Omission of auxiliaries might be expected as a result of L1 language transfer.

The article begins with a brief overview of ways of forming interrogative forms in English language and a comparison with its Macedonian counterparts, in order to identify the differences which might lead to errors or difficulties in their acquisition. This is followed by an explanation of the research methodology and presentation of results for each level separately. In the penultimate chapter results are summarized and finally, a conclusion and pedagogical implications are provided.

2. QUESTION FORMATION IN ENGLISH AND MACEDONIAN

The interrogative form in English is made by subject-verb inversion. Word order remains unaltered, no matter whether it is a yes/no or a wh- question. In simple tenses, the auxiliary is placed initially, i.e. in second position when the question begins with a question word and is followed by the subject and the main verb in infinitive. Compound tenses form questions by inverting the (first) auxiliary with the subject, whereas the main verb remains in the same position and in the same verb form as in its positive form. When *to be* is used as a main verb, the interrogative form is made in the same way as when it is used as an auxiliary. Modal verbs form their interrogative form in the same way as other auxiliaries, i.e. by inverting the modal verb and the subject.

As in all Romanic languages in Macedonian interrogative sentences are made by inverting the grammatical subject with the main verb or the modal. What is typical about Macedonian is that there are interrogative particles which are used in yes-no questions, which are not used in wh-questions. The interrogative form in yes-no questions is made in three ways:

- (1) by using an affirmative sentence with a rising intonation: (*Ti imash brat?/(You) have a brother?*)
- (2) by placing the interrogative particle *dali* in front of the verb with a personal verb ending: *Dali sakash da mi pomognesh?/Would you like to help me?*
- (3) by using the interrogative particle *li*, with the following word order: (particle for future tense *kje*) + conjugated (modal) verb + *li* + (subject) + complement (da-construction, object/adverb/adjective).

Only the *sum/to be* copula verb in Macedonian differs from the main and modal verbs. Namely, it is a clitic and cannot stand alone at the beginning of a question; hence it cannot act as an auxiliary for the interrogative particle *li*. In yes-no questions *sum/to be* is used with *dali* (*Dali e Goran doma?/Is Goran at home?*) or in a positive sentence with a rising intonation (*Goran e doma?/Goran is at home?*)

According to the classification of questions in Macedonian by Minova-Gjurkova (1987, 1990, 1994) the Macedonian language has a wider range of yes-no questions in comparison with English. Macedonian learners may add a certain translation equivalent in their English interlanguage of the particle *dali*, where only inversion of the subject and verb is necessary, or they may omit the auxiliary verb in English.

In Macedonian the interrogative form in wh-questions has the following word order: question word + (*kje*) + (modal) verb + (subject) + da-construction/adverb/adjective/object? (e.g. *Kade raboti majka ti?/Where does your mother work?*)

In wh-questions the copula verb *sum/to be* is inverted with the subject and it placed immediately after the question word (*Zoshto si tazhen?/Why are (you) sad?*).

Due to significant differences in the formation of interrogative forms learners are expected to encounter certain difficulties when acquiring interrogative forms.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the needs of the study texts and dialogues from the MELC were used, ranging from A1 to B2 level, written by students aged 8 to 15. The corpus contains approximately 157, 500 words, with a total of 1043 questions. A quantitative method was used to count and classify the questions. This was performed both manually and with the use of the AntCoc programme. Interrogative forms were processed manually only, as the computer programme could not distinguish between yes-no and wh-questions.

Questions were classified according to two criteria: the first one is whether they are yes-no or wh-questions, and the second criterion is the way of formation of the interrogative form. Questions were divided into these two categories because a) in Macedonian question formation depends on the question type (see previously subchapter 2) and b) in this way it can easily be inferred whether and how Macedonian influences the acquisition of interrogative forms. In table 1 the classification of interrogative sentences is presented.

yes-no questions	wh-questions
a) a positive sentence with a rising intonation e.g. * <i>You like it? /Ti se dopagja?</i> * This example has been taken from the MELC, written by an A2 level learner.	a) question word + positive sentence with a rising intonation e.g. <i>Why you buy it? /Zoshto go kupi?</i>
b) inversion of <i>to be/sum</i> as a main verb and the subject e.g. <i>Are you angry? /Dali si lut?</i>	b) question word + <i>to be/sum</i> + subject + complement e.g. <i>How are you? /Kako si?</i>
c) auxiliary + subject + main verb e.g. <i>Did you agree? /Dali se soglasi?</i>	c) question word + auxiliary + subject + main verb e.g. <i>What do we need? /Shto ni treba?</i>
d) modal verb + subject + verb in infinitive e.g. <i>Can you show me? /Mozhe li da mi pokazhesh?</i>	d) question word + modal verb + subject + verb in infinitive e.g. <i>What time should I be there? / Vo kolku chasot (treba) da bidam tamu?</i>

Table 1 Classification of interrogative statements according to the question type and the way of formation of interrogative sentences

Questions such as *Why not?* are not included in the interrogative sentences as they do not contain a verb. After sentence classification correct and incorrect verb forms were counted in each category and for each level (A1-B2). This made it easier to determine a) the acquisition process of interrogative forms; b) if and how Macedonian influences their acquisition; and finally, c) to make a comparison across levels in order to notice the pace of progress of acquisition of these forms.

It is debatable how high the frequency of a certain form should be in order to be considered acquired. According to Bailey et al. (1974), Brown (1973) and Dulay and Burt (1974) 90% of correct usage suggest that a certain structure has been acquired. Unlike these authors, Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1994) accept only 60%. In this article we accept the thesis that the very occurrence of a certain structure can be considered as acquisition evidence, or more precisely as proof for presence of the form (Grondin and White 1996; White 1992).

4. DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF INTERROGATIVE FORMS ACROSS LEVELS

Results of the analysis of the sentences are shown in tables for each level separately. The number and percentage of correct, incorrect and a total number of interrogative forms is presented for each level. This is followed by an overview of the structures of the incorrect forms, which are further analyzed and discussed through the error analysis method and contrastive analysis. Errors are then analyzed in the following order:

- most typical errors are presented and described
- errors are classified as a) developmental or b) transfer errors from L1
- both error types are explained
- trends are determined and the hypothesis about L1-L2 transfer is tested.

4.1 Interrogative forms at A1 level

The subcorpus of A1 level contains approximately 13,500 words and 121 questions. All interrogative sentences were divided into two groups of question types: yes/no questions (a total of 86) and wh-questions (35). Yes-no questions mostly contain the interrogative form of the modal *can*, because the instructions for both dialogues that the students are asked to write contain a given model of a polite request. Namely, the set phrase *Can you help me?* is used in most dialogues.

4.1.1. Acquisition of interrogative forms

As shown in the table below both types of questions mostly consist of the interrogative form of the verb *to be* (total 55%), followed questions with the modal *can* (37%) and an auxiliary verb + subject + main verb (22%). There is only one example of formation of yes/no questions where a positive statement with a rising intonation is used.

A) yes-no questions	correct form	incorrect form	total number of forms
a positive sentences with a rising intonation e.g. <i>You training too?</i>	/	1 (1%)	1 (1%)
inversion of <i>to be</i> + subject e.g. Are you fine?	36 (30%)	/	36 (30%)
auxiliary + subject + main verb e.g. <i>Do you need help?</i>	11 (9%)	2 (2%)	13 (11%)
modal verb + subject + verb in infinitive e.g. Can I ask you something?	36 (30%)	/	36 (30%)
B) wh-questions	correct form	incorrect form	total number of forms
question word + positive form with a rising intonation	/	/	0
wh-word + <i>to be</i> + subject e.g. <i>Where are you?/Kade si?</i>	25 (20%)	/	25 (20%)
wh-word + auxiliary + subject + main verb e.g. What are you doing?	7 (5%)	2 (2%)	9 (7%)
wh-word + modal verb + subject + verb in infinitive e.g. <i>What can I do?</i>	1 (1%)	/	1 (1%)

Table 2 Interrogative forms at A1 level

4.1.2 Error analysis

The number of errors is insignificant, and they occur when the interrogative form of main verbs is made (*Are you have a car?; What time is the match starts? Where do you going?*). These are not transfer errors, because question formation in Macedonian never involves insertion of an auxiliary; only interrogative particles (*dali, li*) are inserted into yes/no questions, which is not the case with wh-questions. Errors are developmental because despite the presence of erroneous forms an auxiliary of some kind is used. This suggests that learners are experimenting with their interlanguage, until they are able to find the correct forms and start using them consistently, as is the case at higher proficiency levels.

Using the positive form with a rising intonation is an example of a developmental error, although in Macedonian this is also one of the ways of question formation. According to Gas & Schachter (2003) this

is a sensible means, which is both grammatically and communicatively comprehensible, and it, therefore, rarely promotes acquisition of a new form.

According to the results we can conclude that the acquisition of interrogative forms as early as at A1 level is not difficult for Macedonian learners, in spite of the differences between L1 and L2. This also proves that L1 has an insignificant influence on L2 acquisition.

4.2 Interrogative forms at A2 level

At A2 level there are 70,000 words and 321 interrogative sentences, with 166 yes/no questions, and 155 wh-questions. At this level, too, there is a considerable increase in the number of questions. The great number of yes/no questions with a modal, just as at A1 level, is due to the fact that the dialogues have been written following a previously given model of making polite requests. The only difference here is that at this level the form with *could* is used (*Could you give me a ride?*), and learners used this memorized question throughout all dialogues several times.

4.2.1. Acquisition of interrogative forms

At A2 level there is great usage of the interrogative forms of modals, primarily from the verb *can*, and the reasons thereof have been listed in 4.2. It is worth noting that the interrogative form of the verb *to be* is used only in 3% of the yes-no questions, and in as much as in 31% of the wh-questions. Only in 4 of the yes-no questions a positive form is used with a rising intonation (*You like it?*). In the other question type there are 14 such examples (*When you will come?*). The number of errors is very small (11.5%), which leads us to the conclusion that although this is a higher level, error percentage remains almost unchanged (10% at A1 level versus 11.5 % at A2 level).

A) yes-no questions	correct form	incorrect form	total number of forms
a positive sentence with a rising intonation e.g. <i>You will help me?</i>	/	4 (1.5%)	4 (1.5%)
inversion of <i>to be</i> + subject e.g. <i>Are you crazy?</i>	9 (3%)	/	9 (3%)
auxiliary + subject + main verb np. <i>Did you agree?</i>	35 (11%)	2 (0,5%)	37 (11,5%)
modal verb + subject + verb in infinitive e.g. <i>Could you do me a favour?</i>	108 (34,5%)	2 (0,5%)	110 (34,5%)
B) wh-questions	correct form	incorrect form	total number of forms
question word + positive form with a rising intonation np. <i>Where we will go?</i>	/	14 (4%)	14 (4%)
wh-word + <i>to be</i> + subject e.g. <i>How are you?</i>	99(31%)	1 (0,3%)	100 (31,5%)
wh-word + auxiliary + subject + main verb e.g. <i>What do we need?</i>	26 (8%)	5(2%)	31 (10%)
wh-word + modal verb + subject + verb in infinitive e.g <i>How could you do that?</i>	10 (3%)	/	10 (3%)

Table 3 Interrogative forms at A2 level

4.2.2 Error analysis

Just as at A1 level the nature and number of errors at A2 is identical. What is typical of this subcorpus is the number of wh-questions containing a positive form of the verb and a rising intonation. This error type might initially seem a transfer error. However, the first studies on acquisition of interrogative and negative form, made by Cancino et al. (1975) and Klima and Bellugi (1966) with native speakers of English, show the following order of acquisition of the interrogative form:

1. Positive statement with a rising intonation
2. Questions with inversion
3. Question with an auxiliary
4. Wh-questions

This clearly shows that the first phase in native speakers is also using a positive sentence with a rising intonation, which means that this error type can be labeled as developmental.

4.3 Interrogative forms at B1 level

B1 level contains 62,000 words and the number of questions remains relatively the same as at A2 level. There are 312 questions, out of which 171 yes/no questions and 141 are wh-questions. We can notice here the use of more complex tenses, such as Present Perfect Continuous.

4.3.1 Acquisition of interrogative forms

At B1 level again yes-no questions most often contain the modal *can* (39%). They are polite requests from a pragmatic point of view, although they have the form of a question. Wh-questions with modals comprise only 5% of the total number, and most questions contain the verb *to be*. The percentage of incorrect forms is only 4%. This was expected, as it is B1 level and this where the interrogative form is more or less acquired completely.

A) yes-no questions	correct form	incorrect form	total number of forms
a positive sentence with a rising intonation	/	/	/
inversion of <i>to be</i> + subject	11 (4%)	1 (0.3%)	12 (4%)
e.g. <i>Are you Daniel?</i>			
auxiliary + subject + main verb	36 (12%)	/	36 (12%)
e.g. <i>Have you seen it?</i>			
modal verb + subject + verb in infinitive	122 (39%)	1 (0.3%)	123 (39%)
e.g. <i>Can you give me a ride?</i>			
B) wh-questions	correct form	incorrect form	total number of forms
question word + positive form with a rising intonation	/	9 (3%)	9 (3%)
e.g. <i>When we are going?</i>			
wh-word + <i>to be</i> + subject	102 (32%)	/	102 (32%)
e.g. <i>Where is it?</i>			
wh-word + auxiliary + subject + main verb	15 (5%)	/	15 (5%)

e.g. <i>What have you been doing?</i> wh-word + modal verb + subject + verb in infinitive	15 (5%)	/	15 (5%)
e.g. <i>What should I visit?</i>			

Table 4 Interrogative forms at B1 level

4.3.2 Error analysis

At B1 level the number of errors is minimal. The only error that remains the same as at lower levels is when a positive sentence with a rising intonation is used for wh-question formation (*When we are going?*). Although question formation is almost entirely mastered, yet ‘... students do not produce each structure without an error from the first time they start using it in their interlanguage’ (Braidı, 1999:60). Even at a level this high-level learners do occasionally fail to make the necessary inversion or insert an auxiliary in questions.

4.4 Interrogative forms at B2 level

At B2 level there are 41,000 words, 289 questions; 132 are yes-no questions and 157 wh-questions. There are eight correctly formed indirect questions that have not been taken into consideration, as they are used as polite requests. In view of the fact that this is a rather complex construction which is used at higher levels and it cannot therefore be compared to the results of the subcorpus at A1 and A2 level. In yes-no questions the most prevalent form is the modal *can* (31%), whereas in wh-questions the verb *to be* (34%) is most frequently used.

4.4.1 Acquisition of interrogative forms

A) yes-no questions	correct form	incorrect form	total number of forms
a positive sentence with a rising intonation	/	1 (0,3%)	1 (0,3%)
inversion of <i>to be</i> + subject pp. <i>Are you OK?</i>	7 (2%)	/	7 (2%)
auxiliary + subject + main verb pp. <i>Are you going on the match?</i>	33 (11%)	1 (0,3%)	34 (11%)
modal verb + subject + verb in infinitive e.g. <i>Can you drop me off somewhere near?</i>	90 (31%)	/	90 (31%)
B) wh-questions	correct form	incorrect form	total number of forms
question word + positive form with a rising intonation e.g. <i>Why we don't go to the centre?</i>	/	2 (1%)	2 (1%)
wh-word + <i>to be</i> + subject e.g. <i>Where have you been?</i>	97 (34%)	/	97 (34%)
wh-word + auxiliary + subject + main verb e.g. <i>What do you think?</i>	43 (27%)	3 (3%)	46 (30%)
wh-word + modal verb + subject + verb in infinitive e.g. <i>Where shall we go first?</i>	12 (8%)	/	12 (8%)

Table 5 Interrogative forms at B2 level

4.4.2 Error analysis

The number of incorrect forms is insignificant (only 4,6%), which is expected at this high level of language proficiency. The same types of errors are repeated as in lower levels, and their small number demonstrates the limited influence of L1, as previously explained in 4.2. and 4.3.

5. SUMMARY OF A1-B2 RESULTS

In this chapter we compare and analyze the data acquired from all levels and conclusions are drawn concerning the acquisition of interrogative forms, and L1 influence.

5.1 Acquisition of interrogative forms

According to the chart below learners tend to use questions more often in higher levels, although there is a slight decrease from A2 to B2 level (from 312 the number slightly drops to 287 questions). As the chart shows it is obvious that the gap between A1 and A2 is very big, and the number of interrogative utterances doubles in A2 level. This might be due to students' motivation, which is often very big at the beginning of learning a language, where students progress very quickly, but after reaching A2 level there is certain stagnation.

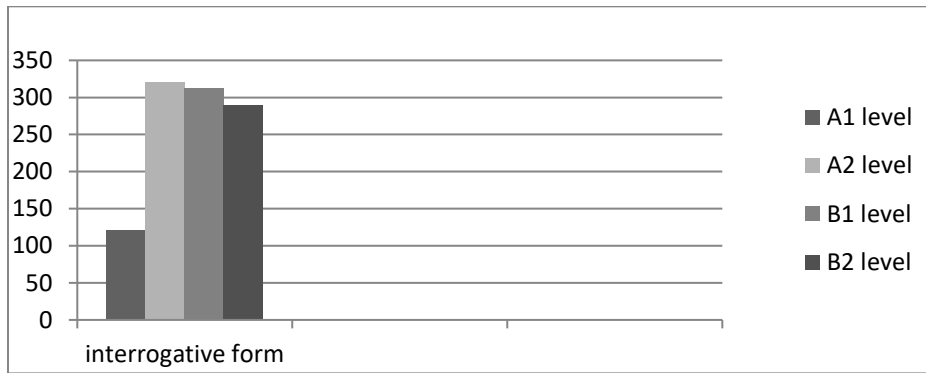


Figure 1 Usage of interrogative forms at A1-B2 level

Concerning incorrect forms results are quite surprising. Although the interrogative form should be difficult to acquire, students tend to make more errors in A2 level, rather than in A1. In addition, the number of errors seems to remain almost unaltered at A and B2 level.

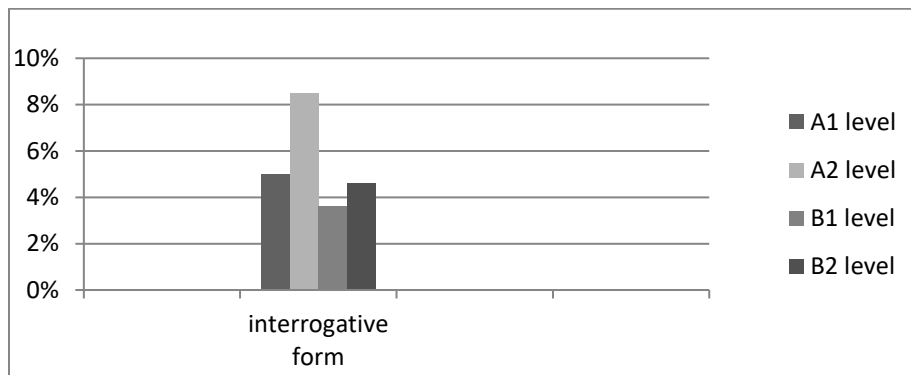


Figure 2 Error percentage in interrogative forms at A1-B2 level

As it can be seen from table 6 the number of errors is quite small across all levels. Although insignificant, the percentage is evenly distributed across all levels. To conclude, the acquisition of the interrogative form does pose certain difficulty for learners. As a result, these forms are acquired more slowly and certain errors from A1 and A2 level occur at B1 and B2 as well. In this regard, Roberto Lado's hypothesis (different=difficulty) can be confirmed, as there are differences between the ways of formation of interrogative form in L1 and L2.

	a positive sentence with a rising intonation	inversion of <i>to be</i> + subject	auxiliary + subject + main verb	modal verb + subject + verb in infinitive
A1 level	1%	/	4%	/
A2 level	5,5%	0,3%	2,5%	0,5%
B1 level	3%	0,3%	/	0,3%
B2 level	1,3%	/	3,3%	/

Table 6 Usage of incorrect forms in interrogative form from A1 to B2 level

Nevertheless, Macedonian as learners' L1 has an insignificant influence on the acquisition of interrogative forms in English*. This fact should be considered a great advantage which could lead to related pedagogical implications.

** Concerning L1 influence on acquisition of the interrogative forms by speakers of other languages, several studies have been conducted: Felix (1981), Ellis (1992), Milon (1974), Gillis and Weber (1975), Hanania and Gradman (1977) and Dulay and Burt (1973). All of these studies have shown that L1 has very little or no influence on the acquisition of interrogative and negative form in English as an L2. On the other hand, Butterworth (1972) and Cancino et al. (1975), who have worked with Spanish speaking students, confirmed there is L1-L2 transfer. As a result of these studies we can conclude that there is a lack of consensus on the influence of L1 on L2.*

5.2 Limitations

Research results are limited due to the following reasons:

- the number of errors is very small for reliable conclusions to be drawn;
- text types that students were asked to write do not lend the opportunity for the use of a great number of questions;
- dialogue instructions contain ready-made questions and the possibility for more spontaneous answers is limited, which means that the interrogative utterances do not always reflect students' actual language proficiency.

Results refer only to Macedonian learners aged 8 to 15. If results from older students were studied, there might be more differences in the acquisition process of interrogative forms.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Corpus analysis has partially confirmed the hypotheses set at the beginning of this article. The interrogative form is easily acquired and the number of errors is very small. However, the small number of errors does not decrease from A1 towards B2 level, but it varies, and so at A1 and B2 level the percentage of incorrect forms is almost identical, (5% at A1 level and 4,6% at B2 level), and at A2 level the percentage is the greatest (8,8%).

The hypothesis about L1 influence has not been confirmed. The insignificant influence of L1 on the acquisition of interrogative forms is most ostensibly noticed in the omission of auxiliary verbs when forming the interrogative form or using an incorrect auxiliary (10%), as well as using a positive form of the verb with a rising intonation (8%). After comparing these results to other studies, we can conclude that this error type can be defined as developmental, because such errors also occur in speakers with other L1. Hence, we can infer that Macedonian does not affect the acquisition of the interrogative form, i.e. its influence is insignificant.

7. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Conclusions drawn from the research conducted on the corpus may find its practical implication in teaching. It is particularly important that students at this age (8-15) do not show any difficulties in acquiring interrogative forms. Therefore, even the small number of errors ought to be taken as a sign of progress and restructuring the learner's language system.

Regarding teaching these two forms, teachers need not always provide explicit grammar instructions. As it has been shown, students at this age easily acquire these forms, and teachers may also expect them to acquire other, rather complex English structures with no explicit explanation, primarily due to the frequent usage of these structures.

The research has also shown that L1 influence on the acquisition of interrogative forms in English as an L2 is insignificant. This is a great advantage both for teachers and students. This means that teachers may rarely come across transfer errors, probably because students at the age between 8 and 15 do not have the so-called load of previous experience, unlike adult learners, who have already established their own learning techniques and are prone to drawing comparisons between L1 and the target language.

Further research should be carried out with students of other ages in order to confirm the hypotheses in this article.

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