Previous studies have examined the acquisition of determiner-noun gender concord in Romance Languages in the context of L2; however, there is a lack of studies regarding this process in L3 Spanish. Gender assignment and gender concord is generally mastered by the age of 3 in L1 acquisition of a gendered language, such as French or Spanish (Socarrás, 2011). Many studies have addressed the acquisition of gender features in an L2 by speakers of a non-gendered L1 (Bruhn de Garavito and White, 2005; Franceschina, 2005). Furthermore, the debate for L3 acquisition of gender becomes even more complicated because there are more variables to be considered. Some proposals for L3 acquisition have claimed that the main source of transfer is the L1, the L2 (Bardel & Falk, 2007), both in a cumulative fashion (Flynn et al., 2004), or that transfer is selective according to the typology of the language (Rothman, 2011). The present study investigates this phenomenon in the context of L3 acquisition with two gendered (French and Spanish) and one non-gendered language (English) in the speakers’ inventory.

Nouns in both Spanish and French have inherent and interpretable gender. Based on the gender of the noun, agreement is triggered between the determiners and adjectives within the same DP. This study investigates gender assignment and agreement in DPs in L3 Spanish in two experimental groups of trilinguals: (1) L1 English, early L2 French and late L3 Spanish (n=15); (2) L1 French, early L2 English and late L3 Spanish (n=6); and (3) L1 Spanish controls (n=10). Test materials consisted of a linguistic background questionnaire, two proficiency tests (for both French and Spanish) and an oral production task in Spanish. This task consisted of a Power Point presentation with 64 slides where each slide contained two pictures of the same object, which differed in certain features (see Appendix). While being audio recorded, participants were asked to produce one DP containing an adjective for each picture, for a total of 128 DPs per participant. The nouns were carefully selected through combinations of four variables:

1. Cognates / Non-cognates: whether the Spanish noun is a cognate of the French translation (el lago – le lac, ‘the lake’).
2. Same / Opposite gender: whether the Spanish noun and its French translation have the same gender (el laco, le lac ‘the lake’) or not (el zapato, la chaussure ‘the shoe’).
3. Masculine / Feminine: whether the noun in Spanish is masculine (el coche, ‘the car’) or feminine (la casa, ‘the house’).
4. Canonical / Non-canonical: whether the ending in Spanish is –o for masculine (el suelo, ‘the floor’) and –a for the feminine (la mesa, ‘the table’), which makes the ending be canonical or not (la llave, ‘the key’).

Following Rothman’s TPM (2011), we predicted transfer of gender assignment from French, regardless of whether it was the L1 or L2, into L3 Spanish. Lowest accuracy was expected for the combination of Opposite Gender Cognates, since errors in this case would clearly index gender being transferred from French.

The results revealed that assignment errors are far more common than agreement errors and that the most problematic variable does not seem to be cognates /non- cognates. The highest error rate was indeed found in non-canonical endings, especially in the feminine gender for both groups. In terms of differences between groups, the L1 French group seems to have been transferring the genders from their L1. However, the L1 English group relied mostly on the Spanish morphology due to the lack of gender in their L1.
Appendix

Figure 1 Example of item for the combination: Non-cognates - Opposite gender – Masculine – Non-canonical

Figure 2 Example of item for the combination: Non-cognate – Same gender - Masculine – Canonical

Figure 3 Example of item for the combination: Cognate – Opposite gender – Femenine – Non-canonical

Figure 4 Example of item for the combination: Cognate – Same gender- Masculine – Non-canonical

References


