L1 and animacy effects in the Acquisition of Gender Agreement in Arabic

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Abstract

Previous research in second language acquisition has revealed that grammatical gender is one of the most difficult structures that non-native learners need to acquire (Dewaele, & Véronique, 2001; Sabourin et al, 2006). There are two views on gender acquisition: (i) gender features cannot be acquired in adulthood unless L2 learners have similar features in their L1 (Franceschina, 2001, 2002; Hawkins, 1998; Tsimpli & Mastropavlou, 2007) and (ii) L2 learners can acquire gender features regardless of age or L1 (Bond et al, 2011; Slabakova, 2000; White et al, 2004). The first view supports Hawkins and Chan's (1997) Failed Functional Features Hypothesis (FFFH), which states that linguistic features that are not present in L1 fail feature checking in L2 acquisition. In contrast, (ii) supports the Full Transfer/Full Access hypothesis (FTFA) (Schwartz and Sprouse, 1994, 1996), which claims that L2 learners have full access to Universal Grammar (UG) and have the same ability as L1 learners to acquire L2 features. All studies agree that L1 transfer has an effect in the initial stages of acquisition. The difference lies in their claims regarding the final outcome that L2 learners can expect to achieve.

The present study investigates the acquisition of subject-verb gender agreement in advanced L2 learners of Arabic. There were two groups: native speakers of Arabic serving as a control group (n=15), and a group of L2 learners (n=21). The L2 learners were divided into two subgroups, -Gender and +Gender, based on whether or not their L1 has grammatical gender. Examples of L1s in the +Gender group (n=9) are Urdu and French; examples in the –Gender group (n=12) are English, Chinese and Tajik. The reason for having these two groups was to determine how the native language could positively or negatively affect L2 gender acquisition, and thus shed light on the role of UG in L2 acquisition.

Participants performed a Grammaticality Judgment Task (GJT) with matched and mismatched subject-verb gender agreement. In addition to grammaticality and gender, the task was also controlled for animacy. The results revealed that the Arabic learners performed significantly worse than the native speaker control group in all task variables (over all accuracy, p<.001). There was also a significant difference between the L2 learners' subgroups. Interestingly, the –Gender group outperformed +Gender group in all task variables (over all accuracy, *p* = .032). These results provide converging evidence for the FTFA rather than FFFH model, as it appears that the –Gender group was able to reset their L1 gender parameter according to the L2 gender values. As for L1 transfer, the results suggest that while this effect may be found at the initial stages of acquisition, it disappears as the learners reach the intermediate and advanced proficiency levels. The outperformance of the –Gender group over +Gender group could be due to proficiency in the L2 as the former group obtained a better score on the proficiency task, or it could be that +Gender group showed negative transfer from their L1s. Although the learners in this study are advanced, they did not perform as well as the native speakers, which is inconsistent with both the FTFA and FFFH hypotheses. However, as they are still learning the language we can assume that they have not yet reached their final state of acquisition. The results also showed that animacy had a positive effect on acquiring gender. The Arabic learners performed better on sentences with animate nouns than on sentences with inanimate nouns.

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