

Cross-linguistic influence in the case of gender agreement in L3 Spanish

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Grammatical gender presents persistent difficulty for adult learners of Spanish in L2 acquisition ([1], [2], [3], [4], [5]); however, there is a literature gap in L3 acquisition of gender, specifically of typologically different languages. In this project, we investigate the acquisition of Spanish gender agreement (Det.-N, N-Adj.) by speakers of Mandarin, Russian and English. Studying these languages is particularly interesting because some exhibit an explicit gender marking system (Spanish and Russian) while others do not (English and Mandarin). In order to examine the effect of L1/L2 influence of typologically different languages during L3 acquisition of grammatical gender, 45 participants (15 Mandarin L1, 10 Russian L1, 10 L1 English speakers, and 10 Spanish native speaker controls) completed two tasks: a picture identification task and a grammaticality judgement task. Based on learners' L1 background, we predicted that noncanonical nouns would prove more difficult to acquire for English and Mandarin learners due to the lack of gender system in their L1s. Furthermore, we hypothesized that beginner-level learners of all language backgrounds would demonstrate lower accuracy scores and would have the most difficulty with noncanonical feminine nouns, due to the overgeneralization of the masculine form as default [3]. A total of 2064 tokens were analyzed according to linguistic variables (noun gender class (masc./fem.), and morphological gender marking (canonical/noncanonical)) and social variables (type of L1, and learner Spanish proficiency level (beginner/advanced)). Results indicate that although advanced learners of Spanish of all L1 backgrounds performed at or near ceiling, distinct patterns emerged for beginner level participants, which we present in Table 1. Overall, all beginner learners demonstrated a similar pattern in which canonically marked masculine nouns presented the least difficulty whereas noncanonical feminine nouns were the most difficult, thus corroborating previous findings (e.g., [4]). With regards to L1 influence, Russian beginners outperformed the other two learner groups, thereby indicating that they may be transferring, to some degree, the grammatical gender system of their L1. Accuracy scores on masculine nouns were higher for all participants, including Russian speakers, indicating that masculine as default may be a general processing strategy irrespective of L1. Higher accuracy on canonical nouns indicated that beginner learners use noun morphology as a cue for gender agreement, a trend that was most pronounced for L1 Russian participants (29% difference), indicative of a nativelike cue. The finding that L1 Mandarin participants patterned very closely with their L1 English peers could suggest that their common language, English, may play a role. Overall, this research contributes to the growing literature on L3 acquisition, particularly gender agreement, and provides evidence that language typology, L1/L2 transfer, and proficiency all play a role in L3 acquisition.

Table 1: Effect of linguistic variables per group for beginners on both tasks combined.

linguistic variables		accuracy scores per language group: beginners only			
		L1 Spanish (n=10)	L1 English (n=5)	L1 Mandarin (n=10)	L1 Russian (n=5)
class	masculine	97% (0)	69% (46)	75% (31)	84% (39)
	feminine	98% (3)	57% (47)	60% (48)	68% (44)
marking	canonical	98% (0)	74% (35)	80% (29)	91% (10)
	noncanonical	98% (3)	53% (48)	56% (48)	62% (49)
total score:		98% (2)	63% (46)	68% (44)	77% (42)

References:

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