

Title: Transfer effects in the case of pronominal possessors by L1 Hungarian L2 Romanian L3 English learners

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Introduction

My aim is to investigate the source and nature of syntactic transfer (from a generative approach) in the acquisition of L3 English in the case of pronominal possessors in the early stages of learning. Two L3 acquisition models of syntactic transfer serve as the foundation for my analysis: the Scalpel Model (Slabakova 2017) and the Linguistic Proximity Model (Westergaard et al. 2017), which argue that transfer occurs property-by-property, initial stages are not characterized by wholesale transfer, any of the learners' languages may be utilized, and transfer can be both facilitative and non-facilitative to the language learning process.

The acquisition of pronominal possessors in English poses challenges for the learners (see Montrul & Potowski 2007; Tsimpli 2014). In the three languages implied the target grammatical feature occurs with different word order and is represented differently: in Hungarian and Romanian possessors occur together with the definite article, but in English this is ungrammatical, as examples 1a) and b) show.

1 a) George plays with John's ball because his ball is flat.

b)*George plays with John's ball because the his ball is flat.

Research question

In the early stages of learning English, what is the effect of transfer from the learners' L1 Hungarian and L2 Romanian on their acquisition of L3 English with regard to pronominal possessors?

Methodology

The participants consisted of 16 trilingual learners (with B2 Romanian and A2 English proficiency level), and 12 native English speakers serving as controls. Participants completed an acceptability judgement task, with experimental conditions featuring pronominal possessors in grammatical and ungrammatical sentences (copying Hungarian and Romanian word order), and filler sentences via Google form. Participants had to rate the test sentences acceptable or unacceptable.

Results

In the case of the ungrammatical sentences with Hungarian word order 83,5% of the learners' answers were correct and 16,5% were incorrect, whereas in the case of ungrammatical Romanian word-ordered test sentences 74,2% of the answers were correct and 25,8% were incorrect. When I compared the correct and incorrect answers given to the ungrammatical Hungarian and Romanian word-ordered sentences the chi-square test showed statistically significant difference (chi-square statistic: 4.5, p-value: .03). This result may indicate non-facilitative transfer from the learners' L2. The data confirm the hypothesis which predicted non-facilitative transfer from the learners' L1 or L2. Thus, the result seems to be in line with the Scalpel Model and the Linguistic Proximity Model.

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