Grammatical gender agreement in third and additional language acquisition: Investigating the role of the non-native language

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Most L3/Ln acquisition studies to date have employed different types of untimed linguistic tasks. Therefore, it is still an open question as to how previously learnt languages affect L3/Ln learners' performance on tasks that tap into implicit knowledge (Lago et al. 2020).

To fill this research gap, our study explores the acquisition of morphosyntax in L3/Ln through the lens of sensitivity to morphosyntactic violations in sentence processing (Jiang 2018: 286ff.). We focus on a specific morphosyntactic feature, namely gender agreement within the noun phrase, particularly because previous research has observed facilitative cross-linguistic influence in that domain, both in bilinguals (Sabourin et al. 2006) and multilinguals (Krenca et al. 2020). We recruited two groups of adult L1 Polish learners of Swedish matched for proficiency with and without prior knowledge of non-native German (n = 40). They completed a self-paced reading task in Swedish that involved sentences with grammatical and ungrammatical gender agreement. We employed two types of gender marking: the indefinite article, which is realised similarly in Swedish and German, and the definite suffix, which is uniquely present in Swedish.

We analysed the reading-time data using generalised linear mixed models. For the indefinite article, both groups were sensitive to gender agreement violations, but they were more disruptive for learners with knowledge of German. For the definite suffix, only learners with knowledge of German showed sensitivity to gender agreement violations. Since the definite suffix is uniquely present in Swedish, the advantage of learners with knowledge of German cannot be ascribed to transfer of similar gender marking. We will provide two explanations for these results, including transfer of the abstract gender feature from German and increased sensitivity to new features and structures in an additional language. Crucially, the study indicates that the gender system in a non-native language rather than the native language, might be more helpful for the acquisition of gender agreement in a new language.

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