

L2 Acquisition of Gender and Number Agreement in Romance and Scandinavian Languages

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Introduction

Main question: How does L2 acquisition of gender and number noun-article-adjective agreement relate to Romance languages versus that of Scandinavian languages?

Agreement: “some systematic covariance between a semantic or formal property of one element and a formal property of another” (Corbett & Zubin, 2003).

Simpler terms: making sure that the number and gender of a noun match up with the words used to describe it, which also change according to number and gender

Romance languages

- Derived from popular Latin, some Scandinavian influence
- Typically includes Portuguese, Spanish, French, Italian, Rumanian, Occitan, and Catalan
- Originally had three genders, neuter fell out of use, today only masculine and feminine

Scandinavian languages

- Part of Germanic language family, languages split because of geography and politics
- Typically includes Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Faroese, and Icelandic
- Retained the third neuter gender alongside the feminine and masculine genders

Limitations

Scandinavian languages

- Much more research has been conducted on Romance languages- especially Spanish
- Scandinavian languages only studied as L2 upon the “major influx of immigrants who would soon be acquiring the language of the host country,” only dates back a few decades (Bohnacker & Westergaard, 2010)
- Seek to compare to a reasonable degree

Article 1: Gender and number agreement in adult L2 learners of Scandinavian languages, Glahn et al, 2001

Hypothesis: Pienemann (1998) and his hypothesis about Processability Theory

1. Word/lemma "Words"
2. Category procedure Lexical morphemes
3. Phrasal procedure Phrasal information exchange
4. S-procedure Interphrasal information exchange
5. Clause boundary Main and subordinate clause

Participants were prompted to produce phrases with agreement using adjectives, gender, and number. This is an example:

English word	Conjugated	Norwegian word	Conjugated
the	the	det	den
yellow	yellow	gul	gule
car	car	bil	bilen

- Study examined adult learners of Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish, 47 participants total
- "The three phenomena we have chosen to focus on are adjective agreement in NPs, agreement between noun and predicative adjectives, and placement of negation in subordinate clauses" (Glahn, Håkansson, Hammarberg, Holmen, Hvenekilde, and Lund, 2001)

Findings

- Participants struggled to produce correct agreement with an adjective, were better with number (around 50% or less accuracy with gender)
- Opposite of Pienemann, students acquire number before gender
- No overt endings, Scandinavian languages difficult to discern gender of noun
- Gender has no meaning, but speakers can intend number
- Tended to overgeneralize and overuse the masculine gender

Article 2: Gender agreement in adult L2 and heritage speakers of Spanish, Alarcón, 2011

Hypothesis/earlier research: Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (Prévost & White, 2000), posited that L2 acquisition of gender is similar to L1 acquisition, adult learners are capable of producing these forms no matter whether gender is or is not present in their L1. Failure to produce correct forms stems from performance, not competence. Many L2 learners produce consistent errors in gender agreement, especially in oral production.

Romance languages have many overt endings, making gender easier to discern. “-o” indicates masculine, “-a” indicates feminine.

English word	Conjugation	Spanish word	Conjugation
the	the	el/la	la
yellow	yellow	amarillo	casa
house	house	casa	amarilla

- Speakers had to produce utterances with gender agreement, compared L2 learners of Spanish with heritage learners
- Half of nouns had overt endings, the other half non-overt endings
- Wanted to compare L2 speakers with heritage speakers
- Written component, proved that oral production was much more error-prone than written production

Findings

- Late bilinguals: 85.6%, heritage speakers 97.1%, native speakers 100% (Alarcón, 2011)
- Much more accurate than previous study
- Gender evasive, even for advanced speakers
- Overgeneralization of masculine form, like in previous study
- Problem with oral processing rather than lack of competency

Article 3: Gender and number agreement sensitivity in L2 learners of French in regards to working memory, Coughlin & Tremblay, 2013

Hypothesis/earlier research: studies about working memory show its importance in oral production, researchers believed that working memory would positively influence gender and number sensitivity to L2 learners

Working memory: short-term memory, pieces of information that are readily available in the brain- adding in new component to research

“This study focuses specifically on L2 learners’ sensitivity to number agreement violations in third-person direct object clitics that are close to or distant from their antecedents” (Coughlin & Tremblay, 2013).

Unlike other studies, participants were asked to identify whether the phrases were correct or incorrect in regards to agreement.

- L2 learners of French identified agreement errors
- Task was given in both native language and French in order to get a good reading of working memory capacity

Findings

- Slight correlation between performance and WM capacity
- Agreement suggests something about language acquisition as a whole
- Found that “L2 learners become more sensitive to agreement morphology in sentence processing as their proficiency in French increases” (Coughlin & Tremblay, 2013)

Conclusion

- Gender acquisition in Romance languages and Scandinavian languages tend to be more similar than different
- Tendency to overuse masculine gender in both language groups
- Gender perhaps more difficult to acquire in Scandinavian languages- more genders, no overt endings
- Gender remains persistent problem for the majority of advanced learners- one can intend number, but not gender
- Working memory has a positive impact on language learning capabilities, as well as agreement
- Difficult to make any broad conclusions, lack of body of research on Scandinavian languages

Agreement is a good way to measure language proficiency. It tends to be an indicator of other L2 skills. Also, gender is a grammatical concept that can be acquired at any age, though fossilization may occur.