The role of L2 learner's L1 in the acquisition of grammatical gender: Evidence from German and English learners of L2 Spanish

In the last two decades, the study of second language learners (L2 learners) and the possible influence of their native languages on their interlanguage grammars (IL grammars) have served as a way to better understand bi- and multilingual grammars. In the literature, there are two main views which posit that L2 learners use as a starting point the grammatical features present in the L1. Proponents of the deficit view (e.g. Hawkins & Chan 1997, Tsimpli 2003) assume that formal features, in particular, uninterpretable features which are not instantiated in the L1 of L2 learners cannot be added by past-puberty L2 learners to the IL grammar. Advocates of the full access view (e.g. Schwartz & Sprouse 1994, 1996), however, argue that ultimate attainment is possible for L2 learners irrespectively of whether interpretable feature in the L1 are present or absent. Within this view, the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (Lardiere 2009, 2013) posits that the acquisition of features such as gender do not always involve parameter resetting but rather requires learners to continuously reconfigure existing features from the L1 during the acquisition process until reaching the target representation.

The present study will compare the acquisition of grammatical gender in Spanish by German-speaking learners (n=60) and English-speaking learners of L2 Spanish (n=60) at three proficiency levels, that are, low, intermediate and advanced. Regarding the phenomenon of grammatical gender, the L1s involved in the study differ from the L2. In contrast to the Spanish two-gender system, German has a three-gender system (see examples 1-3) (Eichler et al. 2012). By contrast, in English the distinction of three gender classes is only retained in 3rd person singular pronouns (Corbett 1991). The typology of the languages, thus, shows reverse patterns. Although none of the three grammar systems is equal to another one, there are some similarities: in the case of grammatical gender, German is nearer to Spanish.

In this study, I employed a written Forced-choice Selection Task and an Oral Elicitation Task, containing two conditions: (1) gender assignment and (2) gender agreement (plus filler items). Findings show that in all cases, German-speaking L2 learners of Spanish outperform English-speaking L2 learners of Spanish, suggesting that the language combination has a significant effect of participants’ gender accuracy. The results also show an interaction between participants’ language combination and proficiency level. Highly proficient speakers of Spanish as a L2 display higher gender accuracy rates than less proficient ones. Persisting problems are found in both L2 learner groups when focusing on linguistic variables such as noun morphology, noun gender etc. The results reveal that there is an interaction of the linguistic variables, which affect both English and German speakers of L2 Spanish, but in different ways. In case of English speakers of L2 Spanish, the majority of errors are overgeneralization of the masculine, whereas in the case of German speakers of L2 Spanish most errors are due to CLI. In contexts, in which the German noun and its translation into Spanish have different gender value, German speaking learners of L2 Spanish transfer the gender value from German to the Spanish noun, especially with nouns ending in –e. This is an indication of negative transfer from the native to
the target language (see example 4).

**Examples**

(1) die (Sg., Fem.) Tür (Sg., Fem.) – the door
(2) der (Sg., Mask.) Tisch (Sg., Mask.) – the table
(3) das (Sg., Neut.) Auto (Sg., Neut.) – the car

(4) Sp. *la (Sg., Mask.) puente vs. Ger. die (Sg., Fem.) Brücke – Engl. the bridge

**References**