

DESCRIPTION FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

Although many people around the world are multilingual, the acquisition of the third foreign language is a very complex process. It is affected by the similarities and differences between the languages already known by the learner (e.g. the native Polish and the second foreign language English) and the new language (e.g. Italian). In essence, some features of the known languages are transferred to the new language, which may either enhance or hinder the learning process. For instance, those features that are shared by the languages may be helpful and those features that differ across the languages may be an obstacle. However, this is a simplified view. Recent research suggests that the influence of the known languages on the new, third language (L3) may be shaped by a number of additional factors, including the circumstances in which the languages are acquired, the learner's proficiency in other languages or individual differences in the aptitude for language learning. The nature of the complex relations between the features of known/learned languages and factors related to the person of the learner is still a mystery. Our project aspires to change this.

In this project we aim to advance knowledge of how L3 vocabulary is acquired. To that end, we will conduct a large-scale study on the learners of L3 Italian who speak Polish as their first language, and English as their second language. We will investigate whether and how the knowledge of Polish and English shapes their acquisition of Italian words that are (or are not) similar to Polish and/or English. First, using fine-grained psycholinguistic measures, we will gather data on the learners' proficiency in the known languages and their learning aptitude relevant to language (e.g. their working memory, general capacity for learning new facts, etc.). Next, we will test their knowledge of a number of carefully chosen words that are either similar or different across those three languages. We also want to model how the knowledge of those words and structures depends on the cross-linguistic similarity, learners' proficiency in the languages and their learning abilities. Then, we will verify in a classroom experiment how new Italian words are learned in the real-world setting. Finally, in the course of an experimental study run in a laboratory, we will investigate the process of learning new Italian words by Polish speakers who know English, but have never learned Italian or other Romance languages (Spanish, Portuguese, French, etc.). In sum, our research aims to provide some explanation of the mechanisms underlying the acquisition of vocabulary in L3. It may draw us closer to understanding the phenomenon of multilingualism.