

Regressive transfer in the syntactic domain: the effect of L3 Danish, Swedish or Norwegian on L2 English among L1 Polish speakers

A holistic view on multilingualism is built on the assumption that all languages that a learner acquires become a part of one system, as opposed to co-existing, separate units. It follows that all the languages in the learner's mind interact with each other. As a consequence, when learning a new language, we can often observe a strong impact of the languages we already know. It can be words and expressions from another language in our repertoire, but also the way we construct new sentences. The current theories on multilingual acquisition disagree on whether it is the first language that has the strongest influence, the second one or both of them combined. It can be however observed that the more proficient the learner becomes in their third or additional language, the less influence from the previous languages they experience. The current study extends that reasoning and speculates that once the learners become proficient in their third language, the direction of the influence will be reversed, and it is mostly the second language, but potentially also the first one, that will begin to be influenced by the third one instead. Therefore, the main questions that the study will consider are: does the acquisition of the additional language impact the languages that we have known before? Does it only impact the non-native language, or is the native language influenced as well? Does the level of proficiency in the third language play an important role?

The study will recruit three groups of trilingual speakers. While their first language will be Polish and the second one English, the third one will vary, being either Norwegian, Swedish or Danish. The study will recruit learners at different levels of proficiency in Scandinavian, but each participant will only be tested once. They will be asked to participate in a series of tasks. Firstly, they will be presented with a number of sentences and asked to provide their judgement as to whether they consider them acceptable or not. Secondly, they will be asked to produce some sentences themselves. The application of tasks that measure both reception and production will allow to compare whether one of them is more significantly impacted. In order to isolate the effect that the third language may have, their answers will be compared with those of groups of bilingual and monolingual speakers, who will participate in the same tasks. In addition, all participants will be asked to provide background information on all languages that they know, as well as to fill out language placement tests.

The project will inform a number of unanswered questions regarding third or additional language acquisition. More specifically, it will examine the ways in which the newly acquired language impacts the ones that the learners have known before. By testing participants at different stages of proficiency, the study will additionally provide a large pool of data on the acquisition of Scandinavian languages as third ones. The study will not only produce data on each of these separately, but will also enable cross-linguistic comparisons. All in all, it will provide innovative insights on how multiple languages interact in multilingual learners' minds. This can in turn produce some didactic implications on the challenges that the multilingual students can face and how they can be supported in their learning process.