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THIRD LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THE PRO-DROP-PARAMETER IN THE INTERLANGUAGE OF GREEK STUDENTS OF GERMAN

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Περίληψη

Η εργασία αυτή διερευνά τη διαγλώσσα Ελλήνων/ίδων που κατακτούν τη Γερμανική ως τρίτη γλώσσα, ενώ έχουν ήδη κατακτήσει σε υψηλό επίπεδο και την Αγγλική. Προκειμένου να μελετηθεί η διαγλώσσα τους διενεργήθηκε μία Δοκιμασία Δήλωσης Προτίμησης, όπου εξετάστηκε η Παράμετρος του Κενού Υποκειμένου. Τα αποτελέσματά της σε συνδυασμό και με άλλες πειραματικές δοκιμασίες δείχνουν ότι καμία από τις ήδη κατακτηθείσες γλώσσες δε φαίνεται να παίζει σημαντικότερο ρόλο από την άλλη κατά την κατάκτηση της τρίτης γλώσσας. Το θεωρητικό μοντέλο που ερμηνεύει επαρκέστερα τα ερευνητικά δεδομένα είναι το Μοντέλο Αθροιστικής Ενίσχυσης της Γλωσσικής Κατάκτησης των Flynn κ.ά. (2004).

Keywords: Third Language Acquisition, Pro-drop Parameter, Interlanguage

1. Introduction

One of the main issues in the discussion of theoretical and experimental approaches on the acquisition of a foreign language is the source of linguistic transfer of syntactic structures and functional categories (Gass 1996, Odlin, 1989, 2003) in the interlanguage of non-native speakers (NNS) during the acquisition process (Selinker 1972, Sharwood-Smith 1994, Han & Tarone 2014). The study of the acquisition of any foreign language as a second language and the ignorance of the knowledge of foreign languages previously

acquired (Klein 1995, Leung 2007) apparently has led to errors regarding the identification of the source of language transfer during the acquisition of the target language since there was not only one language that could be the source of it but two (or even more).

However, the fact of whether or not the speaker already knows an additional foreign language, thus having not one but two (or even more) sources of linguistic transfer, is often neglected, possibly leading to wrong conclusions about the source of language transfer.

Coming to the investigation of the interlanguage, in cases where the NNS already know two languages, the source of language transfer cannot be easily identified, unless the studied syntactic parameter is differently valued at their *mother tongue* (L1) and at their *first foreign language* (L2), whereas their *second foreign language* (L3) is similar to or different from one of the two.

The aim of this study to fill the gap in this research field. The paper is structured as follows: Firstly, the most important theories and research paper hypotheses about the complex phenomenon of *Acquisition of L3* (L3A) are presented. Then, there is a short reference to the syntactical phenomenon that has been studied with special reference to the reasons advocating its choice. Then, the description of the study's design and methodology is given. Finally, the most significant results are presented accompanied by the discussion.

2.Theoretical approaches to L3A

Research on L3A was initially based on theoretical hypotheses made about L2 Acquisition. However, they might not always be sufficient for the analysis and interpretation of the L3A. Mostly, in the last decade, the research has led to new theoretical approaches adapted to describe as coherently as possible the multidimensional data of the new scientific field. Therefore, the four main theoretical approaches to the L3A and their basic principles are presented below.

2.1 Developmentally moderated transfer hypothesis (DMTH) (Håkansson, Pienemann & Sayheli 2002)

According to this hypothesis, the L1 still has a privileged role to play in L3A. The L1 is the exclusive source from which morphosyntactic features can be transferred to the interlanguage of the NNS. The linguistic influence from the L1 to the foreign language follows a concrete evolutionary process.

2.2 Second language status factor hypothesis (L2SFH) (Williams & Hammarberg 1998)

The basic idea behind this hypothesis is that there is a separate mechanism that is activated by acquiring every foreign language which is not the same to the one for the L1 acquisition. All non-native languages are somehow grouped in an area of the mind separate from the L1. During the L3A, there is faster and more direct access to the L2 than to L1. Therefore the L2 has more influence on the interlanguage of the NNS during the L3A than the L1.

2.3 Cumulative-enhancement model for language acquisition (CEMLA) (Flynn, Foley & Vinnitskaya 2004)

According to this model, neither L1 nor another language plays a dominant role in the acquisition of the sequent language. Every language that has already been acquired is equally important and available to the same extent to play a role in acquiring the target language. Furthermore, it can contribute to the development of the syntactic structure of each subsequent language only in a manner, that is either positive or neutral, which means there is only “positive language transfer” or no linguistic transfer at all to the target language.

2.4 Typological primacy model (TPM) (Rothman 2011)

The basic principle of this model is that the linguistic transfer during a foreign language acquisition does not always have a positive effect and does not always seem to facilitate the L3A. The initial stage of the acquisition of a foreign language is determined selectively from the (psycho)typological distance or proximity that exists between any given pair of interacting languages. This is true either when this proximity is objective or a subjective perception of the NNS. It is also applicable even if it is not the most economical choice or simply even when it actually hinders instead of facilitating the development of the L3.

3. The Pro-Drop Parameter

In order to identify the source of linguistic transfer, a syntactic phenomenon with specific properties must be selected and studied. This syntactic phenomenon must be realized differently in the L1 and the L2 of the NNS while their L3 resembles either the one or the other language as regards this phenomenon. After studying the syntactic properties of the three test languages, Greek (L1), English (L2) and German (L3), the syntactic phenomenon, which was chosen to be studied in this research is the 'Pro-drop Parameter' or the 'Null-Subject Parameter' (NSP), a parameter in which the three examined languages have different values (White 1989).

The existence or not of null subjects in one language, ie, whether the subject (*pro*) of an inflected verb of a sentence can be dropped or not, is controlled by the NSP (Chomsky 1981a, 1981b, Jaeggli 1982, Rizzi 1982, 1986, Huang 1984 among many others).

3.1 Linguistic typology

The NSP is so significant for the linguistic typology, that its realization or not in a certain language is a basic factor of languages classification. Therefore, D'Alessandro (2014) makes the following categorization of languages:

- Canonical Null-Subject Languages (CNSL)
 - eg Greek, Italian
- Radical Null-Subject Languages
 - eg Chinese, Japanese
- Partial Null-Subject Languages
 - eg Finnish, Hebrew
- Expletive Null-Subject Languages (ENSL)
 - eg German, Danish
- Non Null-Subject Languages (NNSL)
 - eg English, French

According to this categorization, Greek is a CNSL and English is a NNSL. This, among other properties of the NSP, means that in Greek a pronoun does not necessarily have to be realized in subject position, that is, overt grammatical subjects may be omitted (eg both *ego trexo* and \emptyset *trexo* are correct). On the contrary, in English the pronominal

subject cannot be omitted in order to form a grammatically correct sentence (eg *I run* but not **∅ run*).

3.2 *The NSP and German*

German is classified by many researchers (eg Cabredo Hofherr 1999) as a NNSL. Therefore, characteristics similar to those of French are ascribed to German as well, because in most cases German does not allow the omission of the overt grammatical subject (eg *ich renne* but not **∅ renne*). In fact, in German there are some instances, where omission of the expletive subject 'es' is permitted, as well. Therefore, current theoretical approaches classify German among ENSL (D'Alessandro 2014). The cases where the expletive subject can also be omitted in German are identified in the *Passive Voice* (PV) of specific verb classes.

3.3 *The Passive Voice in German*

In German it is possible only for certain verb classes to appear without subject but only if these verb classes are used in the PV. In particular, these verb classes are: verbs that accept complement in dative, verbs that accept as a complement a prepositional phrase and unergative verbs. Subsequently, the verbs that belong to these verb classes are allowed to appear in the PV either with the expletive subject 'es' (example 1) or with no subject at all (example 2).

- (1) Es wurde der Journalistin nicht geantwortet.
 ES AUX_{3 SG IMPERF} the journalist_{DAT SG} not answered_{PASS PART}
 'They didn't answer to the journalist.'

The NSP is studied in the present research, because in German it is realized in some cases in the same way as in English and in others as in Greek.

- (2) Der Journalistin wurde nicht geantwortet.
 the journalist_{DAT SG} AUX_{3 SG IMPERF} ∅ not answered_{PASS PART}

4. The experimental procedure

In order to investigate the interlanguage of the NNS an experimental study consisting of two tasks, a Grammaticality Judgement Task (GJT) and a Preference Task (PT), was conducted. These tasks have measured the judgments and preferences respectively of three groups of participants. Only the PT is described in this paper.

4.1 The Preference Task

The PT consisted of 72 experimental utterances, all in the PV. A total of 36 verbs were used twice each, in two versions of the same sentence, one of it was right and the other was wrong. The verbs were derived from six verbal classes and 6 verbs were used from each verbal class. The verbs used are divided into two broad categories of verbal classes as far as the subject omission is concerned: A) those that do permit the omission of the subject in the PV (see §3.3) and B) those that do not permit the omission of the subject neither in the active nor in the PV¹. The verb classes of the Category A in the right version had only the expletive subject 'es' (*Experimental Condition*, EC: [-lex. sub./ +es]) (3) and in the wrong version had no subject at all (\emptyset) (EC: [-lex. sub./ -es]), but the auxiliary verb was placed incorrectly in the first place in the sentence (4). The sentences containing the verb classes of the Category B in the right version had a lexical subject as well as the expletive subject 'es' (EC: [+lex. sub./ +es]) (5) and in the wrong version had only a lexical subject (EC: [+lex. sub./ -es]), but the auxiliary verb similarly to the Category A was placed incorrectly in the first place in the sentence (6). 72 distractor sentences were used as well.

(3)	Es	wird	bei uns	viel	gelacht.
	ES	AUX ₃ SG PRES	at our place	a lot	laughed PASS PART
(4)		*Wird	bei uns	viel	gelacht.
	\emptyset	AUX ₃ SG PRES	at our place	a lot	laughed PASS PART

'At our place we laugh a lot.'

¹ That is, verbs that accept complement in accusative, verbs that accept two complements both in accusative and in dative and verbs that are allowed to build impersonal passive, as well.

- (5) Es wurden zahlreiche Artikel über den Unfall geschrieben.
 ES AUX₃ PL IMPERF many articles NOM PL about the accident written PASS PART
- (6) *Wurden zahlreiche Artikel über den Unfall geschrieben.
 AUX₃ PL IMPERF many articles NOM PL about the accident written PASS PART
- ‘Many articles were written about the accident.’

4.2 *The participants*

The preferences of 73 people in total, who formed three groups, were taken into consideration. 49 NNS constituted two homogeneous groups with different levels of proficiency in German (basic: B1 and advanced level: C1), but with the same level of proficiency in English (advanced level: C1)². The third group consisted of 24 native speakers of German (C1 in English) and served as control group (CG). All NNS participated in placement tests for English and German and completed a questionnaire on their demographic data. They were asked to state which one of the two versions of the same sentence they preferred most.

4.3 *Research hypothesis*

In order to inquire the source of transfer in the interlanguage of the NNS, we supposed that if the preferences of the NNS are more successful with the EC [-lex. sub./-es], which is similar in Greek (L1) and German (L3), but different from English (L2), the L1 has more influence on their interlanguage. Conversely, if their preferences are more successful with the EC [+lex. sub./+es], in which German has the same syntactic properties as English, while at the same time differs from Greek, then we assume that the L2 has greater influence when acquiring the L3.

5. Results and discussion of the theoretical hypotheses

In this section, the results of the PT are discussed in conjunction with the four theoretical approaches about the L3A that have been mentioned in §2.

² According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2007.

5.1 DMTH (Håkansson et al. 2002)

According to DMTH, the L1 still has a privileged role in the L3A. In Figure 1 the results for the sentence pairs containing the EC [\pm lex. sub./ -es] are presented.

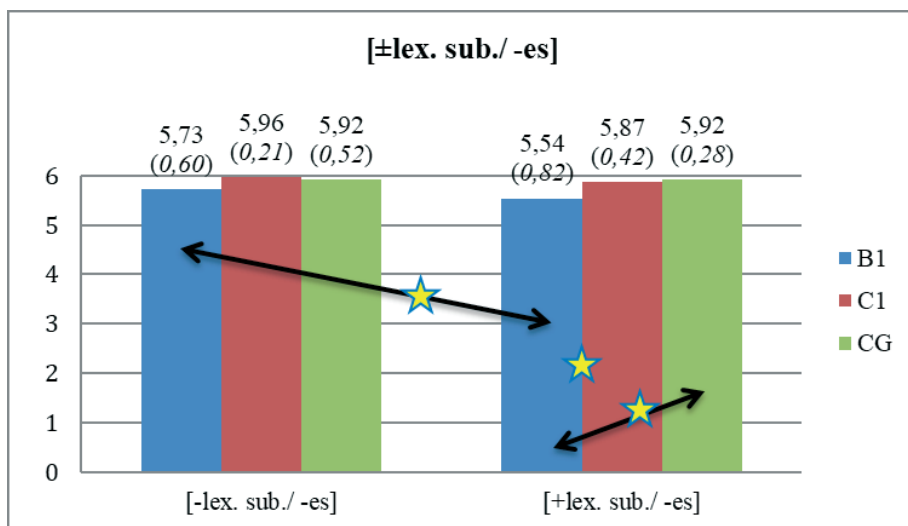


Figure 1 | Results for the sentence pairs containing the EC [\pm lex. sub./ -es]

The results indicate that in the comparison between the two structures (EC: [\pm lex. sub./ -es]) both experimental groups (B1 and C1) prefer the structure without a subject (EC: [-lex. sub./ -es]), but only in the B1 there is statistical significant difference (*Paired Samples T-Test*: $t(25)=2.586$, $p=0.016<0.05$). These results are not consistent with the relevant results of the GJT (Michalopoulou 2015a, 2015b), where it has been found, that even the C1 is hesitant to accept as correct the structure without a subject in the PV. So maybe, one could assume that there is a task effect, since in the PT they have to choose among two versions of the same sentence, so they seem to be more risky than in GJT (White 1989: 147).

In addition, the fact that the C1 group has poorer performance than the B1 shows that the NNS have no consistent attitude towards the NSP. Therefore, we could not presume that the NNS transfer into their interlanguage the structure without a subject from their native language where it is grammatically correct.

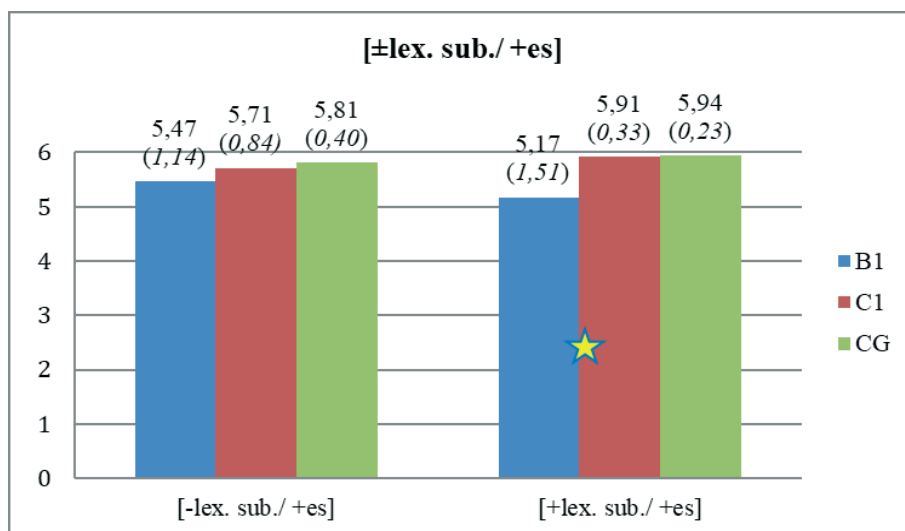


Figure 2 | Results for the sentence pairs containing the EC [\pm lex. sub./ +es]

5.2 L2SFH (Williams & Hammarberg 1998)

According to L2SFH, the L2 has more influence than the L1 on the interlanguage of the NNS when acquiring their L3. In Figure 2 the results for the sentence pairs containing the EC [\pm lex. sub./ +es] are presented.

On the contrary, like in the GJT, it seems that the NNS consider as more grammatical the EC in which there is only one subject. There is actually a rising tendency between the performance of individuals of groups B1 and C1, with the first to appear less certain in their choices and to have no constant preferences, statistical significant difference was found in B1 (*Paired Samples T-Test*: $t(25)=2.724$, $p=0.012<0.05$). Conversely, people of the C1 group made more consistent choices. The results of both groups of the NNS do not show that there is a particular influence on their interlanguage from their L2, English.

The general conclusion from the examination of these two hypotheses is that the NNS do seem to transfer into their interlanguage structures that exist in both their L1 and their L2, in contrast with the structures that exist either solely in their L1 or only in their L2. The NNS resort to the choice of the structure they are familiar with and which is acceptable in both languages they already know. Not to the one that is grammatically correct in only one of the two languages that they have already acquired, regardless if this is their L1 or their L2.

An examination of the first two theoretical models shows that it is neither the L1 nor the L2, that plays the dominant role in shaping the interlanguage of the NNS of L3. Subsequently, the last two theoretical models that have been proposed about the L3A are examined.

5.3 CEMLA (Flynn et al. 2004)

According to this model, every language already acquired is important and available at the same extent to play a role when acquiring an additional language. It can contribute to the development of the syntactic structure of every subsequent language only in a positive or in an, at least, neutral manner.

If this model applies to the present data, then the structures that appear either only in the L1 or in the L2 of the NNS are transferred more easily to their interlanguage. But according to the data, which is presented above (combined with Michalopoulou 2015a, 2015b), the NNS are hesitant to choose both structures that appear either only in their L1 or only in their L2. They feel more confident to choose the structures, which are acceptable in both languages they already know. However, the differences occurred in behalf of the common structures in all three languages are not assessed as statistically significant.

However, in the hypothetical case that the NNS had not previously acquired Greek (L1), which allows the omission of the subject, or English (L2), where expletive subjects are allowed, but some other languages which do not have these syntactic properties, probably they would not formulate so target-like preferences, when acquiring German as L3. In contrast, in that hypothetical case statistically significant differences would be expected between their preferences for these particular structures compared to the others that appear in both languages that they would have already acquired. While in this study, no such differences were noted. Therefore, we assume that the prior knowledge of the languages in which such syntactic structures exist rather facilitates L3A, compared with the hypothetical case in which the NNS would face these particular structures for the first time in L3. Of course, in order to strengthen this supposition, the results of this research should be compared with experimental data of other researches, which would study participants with different L1 and L2, than those tested in the present study, in order to compare the preferences of the participants of both studies. If, in such a comparison, we notice statistical significant differences and the people of the present research would have performed better than the other group,

then we could confidently admit that the CEMLA describes adequately the present experimental data. Otherwise, we would have considerable evidence that the model is not sufficient for their interpretation.

5.4 TPM (Rothman 2011)

According to the TPM (Rothman 2011), both formal linguistic typology and psychotypology play an important role in acquiring a new language. By psychotypology, we mean the subjective perception of the speakers themselves about the distance or proximity between two languages (Kellerman 1977, 1992). In this particular case, two of the languages studied, English (L2) and German (L3), are connected genetically, as they belong to the same subgroup of the Indo-European language family, namely, the German languages. In addition, totally superficial factors, like the common alphabet, could make English and German closer according to the subjective psychotypological perception of the NNS. Contrary to the (psycho)linguistic perception of the NNS about Greek and German.

Therefore, if this model applied effectively to the present data, then, the preferences of the NNS would be more target like for the EC that exist only in English, compared not only to the structures that do exist only in Greek, but also to the common structures that exist in both L1 and L2. However, there were not such findings according to the results of the statistical analysis that have been applied to the data.

In order to be able to verify the TPM, it is necessary to have experimental data from another group of people who would have English as L1 and Greek as L2, when acquiring German as L3. And that is in order to be able to argue that the typological closeness is the one that plays the most important role, regardless of the chronological order in which the NNS have acquired the languages they already know before starting the L3A.

6. Conclusion

According to the present experimental data, from all the observations presented above and in comparison with results from the GJT (Michalopoulou 2015a, 2015b), it appears that none of the theoretical models fully describes the interlanguage of the NNS, when acquiring their L3. However, it could be concluded that the CEMLA (Flynn et al. 2004) is the one that best describes the interlanguage of the NNS, as it is in agreement

with the present experimental data. Ideally, this should be confirmed with data from individuals with different linguistic backgrounds, as mentioned above.

The research interest in the L3A remains large and can only grow more. Given that the theory of the L2 Acquisition can contribute significantly to the development of linguistic theory, then obviously the study of the L3A and multilingualism can contribute to this to an even greater extent. As the data show, L3A may be a rich source of information for linguistic theory, can reveal a different form of language economy rules and, finally, could help us understand deeply the function of the language system.

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