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Exploring syntactic variability among multilingual speakers of Polish, English and Norwegian

The presentation summarizes the results of an exploratory study (as part of a larger-scale longitudinal research project) into patterns of crosslinguistic influence in the acquisition of syntax in the second and third language (see e.g. Westergaard 2021; Puig-Mayenco et al. 2020 for previous related research). The study involved 15 speakers of L1 Polish, L2 English and L3 Norwegian, aged 20. Two syntactic features, i.e. the distribution of reflexive / possessive pronouns (similar in Polish and Norwegian) and the position of adverbs of frequency (with English and Norwegian following a fixed word), were tested to establish the source and nature of cross-linguistic influence.

Three grammaticality judgment tasks (cf. Keating & Jegerski 2015) were administered for each language in separate language blocks. The experiment design involved certain methodological choices which account for its novelty. Firstly, we set out to investigate constructions which in Polish were less likely to elicit binary acceptability judgments. Secondly, anticipating variability and uncertainty, we used a Likert-scale (rather than binary options) to obtain finer-grained responses. Next, we decided to test the constructions in all three languages to observe how gradient acceptability in L1 translates into crosslinguistic influence in L2 and L3.

We analyzed the data using the Bayesian logistic ordinal regression model to mitigate the smaller data sample but also because it is superior in quantifying uncertainty. The results point to gradient judgments in L2 and L3 syntactic choices for partially acceptable L1 conditions. Our prediction that Polish and Norwegian should pattern together for the first feature (pronominal distribution), whereas English and Norwegian should be more alike for the second feature (word order) was not fully substantiated. However, high variability in L2 English and L3 Norwegian responses suggests that the absence of binary acceptability options in L1 has a non-facilitative effect on the L2 and L3 acquisition.

[299 words]

References:

- Keating, Gregory D. and Jill Jegerski. 2015. Experimental designs in sentence processing research. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* (37). 1-32.
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