Third language acquisition meets cognitive linguistics.

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The present paper focuses on third and following language (L3/Ln) acquisition, a field of research that has not yet received much attention within the cognitive linguistics paradigm. Taking a usage-based approach, we address cross-linguistic influence between previously acquired languages and L3. The main research question is whether the L1/L2 influence can be traced and to which extent such influence is facilitative. On the methodological plane, the question is whether and how the toolbox of cognitive linguistics can facilitate L3 research.

In order to answer these questions, we carried out a pilot experiment focusing on the acquisition of the reflexive vs. non-reflexive distinction in possessive pronouns in learners of Russian as a foreign language by adults whose first language (L1) was Swedish and second language (L2) is English. This language combination provides an exciting testing ground, since while L1 and L2 are typologically closer related than L1 and L3 or L2 and L3, respectively, the L1 and L3 share a number of properties.

The reflexive/non-reflexive distinction exists in L1 Swedish and L3 Russian possessive pronouns (e.g. Swedish *hans/hennes* 'his/her' vs. *sin* 'his/her own', and Russian *ego/eë* 'his/her' vs. *svoj* 'his/her own' where the former refers to someone else's than the subject in the sentence while the latter is co-referential with the syntactic subject of the sentence), but lacks in L2 English. The L1 Swedish and L2 English group of learners (N=8, mean age 28) was also compared to L1 Russian speakers (N=17, mean age 43) and L2 Russian speakers with L1 lacking the reflexive vs. non-reflexive distinction (N=27, mean age 27), e.g. Italian, thus following the subtractive group design in the experiment (Westergaard et al. forthcoming). Using QuestionPro as a platform, we collected acceptability judgements along a 5-point Likert scale from all three groups of participants. The experiment results suggest that Swedish and English interact in non-trivial ways and affect the acquisition of Ln Russian in L1 Swedish and L2 English learners. The results of the pilot experiment indicate that the presence of the reflexive/non-reflexive distinction in L1 Swedish does not seem to facilitate the acquisition of this distinction in L3 Russian, furthermore, the experimental results suggest non-facilitative influence from L2 English.

It seems fruitful to analyze the category of possessive pronouns in terms of a radial category. In such a radial category, non-reflexive possessive pronouns clearly represent the prototype while reflexive possessives are less prototypical (Taylor 2019). A simple corpus search suggests that in Russian, non-reflexive possessives are at least three times more frequent than their reflexive counterparts. The results of our pilot experiment suggest that the prototype is acquired first and generalized over less prototypical members of the category regardless of the fact that a similar category with a similar structure exists in the L1 of the learner.

The study has clear pedagogical implications, since better understanding of the interactions of previously acquired languages and a new language can improve our foreign language teaching methods.

References

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