L3 acquisition of gender and number concord among Mandarin and Russian learners. Does the task matter?

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Grammatical gender presents persistent difficulty for adult learners of Spanish in L2 acquisition; however, there is a literature gap in L3 acquisition of gender (e.g., Bruhn de Garavito, & White, 2003; Fernández-García, 1999; Gamboa Rengifo, 2012; McCarthy, 2008). In this project, we investigate the acquisition of L3-Spanish gender agreement (Det.-N, N-Adj.) by adult L1-Mandarin and L1-Russian speakers of L2-English residing in Canada. Studying these languages is particularly interesting because some exhibit an explicit grammatical gender marking system (Spanish and Russian[1]) while others do not (English and Mandarin). Also, Russian and Spanish mark number on nouns and adjectives, while adjectives in English and Mandarin do not agree with the nouns they modify. In order to examine the effect of L1/L2 influence of two typologically different languages, 31 beginner participants (14 L1-Mandarin, 7 L1-Russian, 10 L1-English speakers completed a translation task (Task 1), in which the they were asked to translate a paragraph from their first language into Spanish, and a grammaticality judgement task (Task 2), consisting of a series of questions each with four possible answers in Spanish where only one answer was grammatically correct in gender and number concord. The data from Task 2 was comparable to the results of the 10 Spanish controls prior to testing. The L3 participants completed a brief questionnaire to determine their language use, as well as a short interview in their L1 to ensure their proficiency. A total of 2156 tokens were analyzed according to the linguistic variables of noun gender class (masc./fem.), morphological gender marking (canonical/noncanonical), number (singular or plural), and L1 type. For the Russian group, response data was also analyzed according to matching and mismatching of gender assignment between the Russian and Spanish noun class systems. Results indicate that in both tasks all beginner learners demonstrated a similar pattern in which canonically marked masculine nouns presented the least difficulty whereas noncanonical feminine nouns were the most difficult, thus corroborating previous findings (e.g., Montrul, Foote, & Perpiñán, 2008). Higher accuracy on canonical nouns indicated that beginner learners use noun morphology as a cue for gender agreement, a trend that was most pronounced for L1 Russian participants, indicative of a nativelike cue. It is, however, important to note that most non-canonical errors for Russian speakers were with gender mismatching (e.g., *la clase* (fem in Spanish, but masc. in Russian), which suggests possible transfer from L1 of the gender assignment category. Regarding the number variable, the Mandarin group outperformed the Russian and English groups, but produced more errors with plural nouns, in contrast to the other two groups which produced slightly more errors with singular forms. Despite error similarities, participants produced more errors in Task 1 than Task 2 (by roughly 20%), suggesting that tasks where orthography cues are available present less difficulty for learners and demonstrates higher accuracy in gender and number agreement. Overall, this research contributes to the growing literature on L3 acquisition, particularly gender and number agreement, and provides evidence that language typology and L1/L2 transfer play a role in L3 acquisition.

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[1]While in Spanish the gender feature is binary, Russian presents 3 genders (masculine, feminine, and neuter). For this study, only masculine and feminine gender in two languages were tested.

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