The Role of the Background Languages in Third Language Acquisition. 
Romance Languages as L1, L2 or L3 

Stockholm University February 5th-6th 2009 

Björn Hammarberg 

Some conceptual and terminological issues in L2 and L3 research 

Research on individual multilingualism and third language acquisition has expanded greatly in recent years. A theoretical correlate of this is the recognition of the fact that humans are potentially multilingual by nature, that multilingualism is the normal state of language competence, and that this in turns has implications for an adequate theory of language competence, use and acquisition. The distinction between L2 and L3 acquisition means that language learners are being differentiated according to the complexity of their language background. Among other things, this gives raise to reflection about some of the currently used basic terminology in the field. 

In this talk I will consider some conceptual problems in connection particularly with the notion third language (L3). The common practice of labelling a multilingual’s languages along a chronological scale as L1, L2, L3, L4 etc. is shown to be untenable. Trying to define the notion of L3 in relation to current conventional use of the terms L1 and L2 leads to a different conception, but it also raises some empirical issues which need to be resolved. I will finally take a look at some attested, but less widely spread alternative notions and consider what they imply, how reasonable they are, and whether it would be a viable option to adopt them on a more regular basis. 

Jean-Marc Dewaele 

Variation in self-perceived communicative competence and communicative anxiety in French: The effect of other languages in the multilingual mind 

In this contribution, I investigate the effect of the knowledge of other languages on self-perceived communicative competence and communicative anxiety in French. I tested the hypothesis that the knowledge of other Romance languages, and to a lesser extent
the neighbouring Germanic languages, might have a strengthening effect on self-perceived communicative competence in French, a lessening of communicative anxiety using that language. Using the database collected though a web based questionnaire (Dewaele & Pavlenko, 2001-2003), I focused on participants who had French as an L1 (n =159), L2 (n=303), L3 (n=324) or L4 (n =167). The results generally confirmed the hypothesis for French L2 and French L3. However, no significant correlations were found for French L1 and L4. It thus seems that when a language is either very strong or very weak in the mind of a multilingual, the effect of other languages on these specific dependent variables is either not necessary or insufficient to make a difference. However, when the language is relatively strong to very strong, the knowledge of typologically related languages has a positive effect.

Christina Lindqvist

Lexical cross-linguistic influences in advanced learners’ French L3 oral production

The aim of this study is to examine lexical cross-linguistic influence in advanced Swedish learners’ oral production of French L3. In a previous study (Lindqvist 2006), I studied formal cross-linguistic influences (code-switches and word construction attempts) in three groups of learners and could conclude that the most advanced group had a significantly lower proportion of this type of influence than the beginners and the intermediate learners. In fact, the advanced learners made very little use of their background languages for code-switching and word construction. Research on vocabulary acquisition has shown that the learner focuses more on formal and phonological aspects of words at an initial stage, and that deeper semantic knowledge is developed at a later stage (cf. Singleton 1999). In the present study I test the hypothesis that cross-linguistic influence is more often related to the meaning of the words rather than to their form in advanced learners’ French L3.

The data include 14 advanced learners of French as a third language. The notion of L3 is here used in order to refer to the language that is currently being acquired (cf. Hammarberg 2001), i.e. not in a chronological sense. In fact, all the informants have Swedish as L1, English as main L2 and French as L3, but several of them also have knowledge of one or more additional foreign language(s) (Italian, Spanish or German). These additional languages will be labelled L2 in the present study. The 14 learners (students in their 2nd or 3rd university year as well as PhD students) have been classified at the advanced high stage and the advanced medium stage on the basis of morphosyntactical criteria (cf. Bartning & Schlyter 2004, Sanell 2007). All the learners perform the same task, namely an interview with a native speaker of French.

A further aim is to investigate which of the background languages that is the main source of influence. Research on L3 acquisition has shown that semantic transfer is more common from a background language in which the learner is highly proficient (cf.
This would mean that, in the present study, L1 Swedish and L2 English would be used rather than the L2s Italian, Spanish and German, in which the learners’ proficiency is generally lower. However, L3 research has also shown that cross-linguistic similarities between a background language and the L3 trigger cross-linguistic influence (cf. Bardel & Lindqvist, Cenoz 2001, Singleton & O’Laoire 2006, Ringbom 2007). In that case, one would expect lexical influences from the romance languages Italian and Spanish L2, since these languages are related to French. Another hypothesis is that, in the case of these advanced learners, who have developed a rich vocabulary, semantic transfer is can also be intralinguistic. That is, the L3 itself can be the source of lexical deviances.

Rebekah Rast

*The use of prior linguistic knowledge in the early stages of L2+ language acquisition*

This paper examines Kellerman’s (1983) thesis on psychotypology for L3 acquisition. According to Kellerman, not all forms of a language are transferable, and it is not necessarily the structure of the language that determines the limits of transferability. It is, rather, the linguistic judgement of the learners themselves. A given form in the L1 may be treated as neutral and is therefore transferable to the L2, or it may be treated as specific to the L1 and is therefore not transferable. This specificity may be related to the degree of markedness of a given L1 form. It follows then that the perceived distance between two languages (the learner’s "psychotypology") is not necessarily enough, in and of itself, for the transfer of a form to occur. Kellerman suggests that the learners’ judgements on the L1-L2 relation filter the L2 activity even in cases where the two languages share structures, and that the notion of transferability may vary from one learner to another.

We examined these claims in our study of what learners do when faced with a language they know little to nothing about. The subjects, native French speakers with English as a common L2 (other L2s varied) exposed to Polish (L2+) for the very first time, were tested on initial exposure and then at various intervals up to 8 hours. The input provided to our learners from the moment of first exposure was recorded and transcribed. This methodology allowed us to analyze how the target language “input” (as opposed to the “target language” per se) and learners’ prior linguistic knowledge (L1 and other L2s) influenced their performance on tasks in Polish. Tasks included repeating and translating words and sentences, judging grammaticality and rearranging words in sentences.

Our results provide evidence for Kellerman’s thesis on psychotypology by showing that it is the learners themselves and their perception of the relationship between their known languages (L1 and L2s) that determine what will or will not be transferred. Although French and most of the other languages known by our subjects are traditionally
considered typologically different from Polish, we observed that our learners used their knowledge of these other languages to process the Polish input and perform tasks in Polish. We also observed the effects of other factors that are not necessarily cross-linguistic in nature.


Camilla Bardel & Ylva Falk

Some methodological problems in L3 research that remain to be solved

In this contribution, we discuss some methodological problems that frequently arise in L3 research. They regard the complexity of the background languages in many learners, the intertwining factors that apparently determine activation of/transfer from the background languages, more or less successful combinations of languages and the kind of data collected in L3 studies.

L3 research has traditionally regarded mainly cross-linguistic influence at a lexical level, but in recent years other aspects of the special status of the L3 have been explored, e.g. grammar, and interesting results indicating the roles of L1 and L2 in different linguistic domains of L3 have been obtained. Why, then, is L3 specifically problematic to study, compared to L2? To put it shortly, considering that L3 is not the first non-native language encountered by the learner, more variables come into play than when investigating true L2 acquisition. In fact, a great deal of what is generally called L2 research is actually research on L3/Ln. In studies on adult non-native language acquisition, learners often have knowledge of three languages, including – or not – the language that is being acquired/observed. In many European learners, English is present as one of the background languages, and moreover, many are bilinguals from early age. When it comes to the acquisition of Romance languages, the learner most often has at least two languages in the background. In the Scandinavian countries and in the Netherlands, the first foreign language encountered is typically English, and its proficiency level is generally high in adult L3 learners, especially in learners of a high level of education, i.e. the kind of learners that are often considered in L3 studies.

As soon as one decides that one is not working with L2 but with L3 research, a number of intertwining factors have to be taken into account, that seem to determine the activation of known languages other than the one currently selected for use, and there is a call to find efficient ways to tease apart these factors (e.g. recency, proficiency, typology, psychotypology, the L2 factor). The possibility to do this depends on the design of the study, as far as the choice of L1, L2 and TL is concerned. Furthermore, in order to discern the role of objective linguistic similarity or dissimilarity (typology and language relatedness) from the learner’s apprehension of similarity or dissimilarity between languages (psychotypology), precise definitions of these notions are needed.
Interesting test cases are combinations of Romance and Germanic languages, which differ both in vocabulary and syntax. They can make it possible to distinguish positive as well as negative transfer in studies with the right language pairings. English is a special case: as for its internal characteristics, it is problematic, because of its grammar being to some extent different and less complex with respect to other Germanic languages (e.g. do-insertion, -V2), and its vocabulary heavily influenced by Latin/Romance, and thus similar at a lexical level to the Romance languages. In order to distinguish L1 transfer from L2 transfer into L3, successful combinations are e.g. L1 Germanic – L2 RomanceA – L3 RomanceB vs. L1 RomanceA – L2 Germanic – L3 RomanceB.

As in all language data collection, the task on the basis of which learners produce data will have a great impact on what one will be able to tell from the data. We will show some examples of how this has particular consequences on L3 data, because of the complexity of the background languages and the different hypotheses that are under examination in current L3 research.

Suzanne Flynn

*Understanding the human capacity for language: Insights from L3 Acquisition*

In this paper I argue that the investigation of third language (L3) acquisition by adults and children provides essential new insights about the language learning process that neither the study of first language (L1) nor second language (L2) alone can provide. The focus of this paper concerns the role the learner’s L1 plays in succeeding language acquisition. Specifically, does the L1 maintain a privileged role in subsequent language acquisition? Results from several ongoing L3 acquisition studies investigating adult and children learning English as an L3 whose L1 is Kazakh and whose L2 is Russian are reported in this paper. Learners' patterns of acquisition in production of three types of restrictive relative clauses are compared both in terms of amount correct and patterns of errors. Results indicate that the L1 does not play a privileged role in subsequent acquisition. At the same time, results indicate subtle differences between adults and children. We argue that such findings would not be possible in the context of an L1 or L2 study alone. Results are used to support the proposed *Cumulative Enhancement Model for Language Acquisition*. Results are also discussed in terms of recent L3 research.

Jason Rothman

*On the Typological Economy of Syntactic Transfer: High/Low Attachment Preference in Relative Clause Interpretations in L3 Brazilian Portuguese*
One central question in the formal linguistic study of adult multilingual syntax (i.e. L3/Ln acquisition) involves determining the role the L1 and/or the L2 play(s) in the formation of L3 initial hypotheses and the implications of such for L3 developmental sequencing and ultimate attainment, (e.g. Flynn et al. 2004; Bardel and Falk 2007; Rothman and Cabrelli-Amaro 2007, forthcoming; Rothman forthcoming; Foote 2009). Whereas Flynn et al. (2004) predict that multilingual transfer is cumulative and only positive, whereby available L1/L2 properties become neutralized for transfer if such transfer would be negative; Rothman and Cabrelli-Amaro provided data suggesting that L3 transfer could be negative under particular conditions. Given the language pairings in their methodology — L1 English, L2 Spanish learning L3 French or Italian — they were unable, however, to differentiate between the following two reasons for negative L3 transfer: (a) it obtains due to an "L2 factor" effect (Bardel and Falk 2007) or (b) due to the influence of typological proximity between one of the previous languages and the L3, which in this case was also the L2. The present study attempts to tease apart the variables that can determine the extent to which (negative) L3 transfer obtains for either (a) or (b). To do so, the initial state of L3 Brazilian Portuguese (BP) is examined for of two groups of advanced L2 learners: English native learners of L2 Spanish and Spanish natives of L2 English for properties relating to word order and relative clause attachment preferences. Consider the following (minimal paired) sentences:

(1)

a. I want to meet the son of the doctor (that) I saw yesterday.
b. (Yo) quiero conocer el hijo del médico que vi ayer.
c. Eu quero conhecer o filho do medico que eu vi ontem.

In a language with restricted word order like English and Brazilian Portuguese (e.g. Carreiras and Clifton 1999; Miyamoto 1998), the default interpretation opts for low attachment, that is, the "doctor" in the above example is who was seen. Conversely, in languages with liberal word order like Spanish, French, and Russian (Dussias 2004; Papadopoulou and Clahsen 2003; Zagar, Pynte and Rativeau) high attachment is preferred, that is, the "son" is the person who was seen. Since attachment preference is assumed to be dependent on language-variable principles of syntactic analysis that guide the parser to process input — captured under the processing principles of Recency (Gibson and Pearlmutter 1998) for low attachment preference languages and the Predicate Proximity Principle (Gibson et al. 1996) for high attachment ones — testing it empirically in the abovementioned populations is assumed to provide insight into the issues at hand, especially since previous research has demonstrated that advanced L2 learners acquire the native processing strategies in this very domain at advanced levels (Dussias 2004).

Data from two experiments will be provided, one that tests for word order restrictions in the L3 and the other which probes for relative clause attachment preference. If there is an "L2 factor effect", we expect all groups to allow or not word orders congruent to their L2 (English or Spanish) and favor low or high attachment depending on the word order
possibilities of the L2. This would mean that only the Spanish learners of L2 English will perform in line with the BP native control group. If typology, however, is the factor that selects initial transfer, then we would expect that both groups transfer Spanish in this domain, predicting that both groups will perform differently than the BP control. Finally, if the Cumulative Enhancement Model of Flynn et al. (2004) is correct that both groups should perform like the native BP controls since they can transfer English in this respect, allowing for us to differentiate between three theoretically tenable accounts of multilingual syntactic transfer. Data is currently being collected and it is too early to determine what they will tell us.

Mike Iverson

Informing the “age of acquisition” debate: L3 as a litmus test

The longstanding debate on the possibility of native-like ultimate attainment in adult acquisition has to date focused on observations and experiments regarding the L2 steady state. Following Rothman, Cabrelli, Iverson and Judy 2008, Iverson in press and others, I claim that the L3 initial state can be an important tool in investigating and testing claims made with respect to adult ultimate attainment, namely theories debating the importance of age of acquisition for UG accessibility. Representational Deficit (RD) approaches (e.g. Franceschina 2001; Hawkins & Chan 1997; Hawkins 2005, Hawkins & Hattori 2006) and Full Access (FA) approaches (e.g. Duffield & White 1999; Schwartz & Sprouse 1996; White 1989), both make specific and crucially different claims about ultimate attainment in adult language acquisition. RD approaches, which claim partial access to UG, contend that adults are unable to acquire new morphosyntactic features (at least uninterpretable ones) not instantiated in languages acquired as children (i.e. before the critical period). Thus, competence deficits in the target narrow syntax are thought to arise from the adult learners’ inability to acquire crucial target features. Alternatively, FA approaches maintain that new feature acquisition in adulthood is possible, and that observable variability/optionality in adult non-primary language results from other sources such as problems at interfaces and processing differences (see White in press). Assuming L3 language transfer (Bardel and Falk 2007; Flynn et al. 2004; Leung 2006; Rothman and Cabrelli in press), these hypotheses make implicit and importantly different predictions for the adult L3 initial state as well.

Given the right language pairings, examining the initial hypotheses of L3 morphosyntax can determine what was acquired/is acquirable during prior instances of adult language acquisition. Universally constrained grammatical knowledge present at the L3 initial state can be assumed to be transferred from either the L1 or the L2. In the case that the L3 initial state hypotheses reflect transfer that comes from the L2 (when the L1 is ruled out as a possible source), such evidence presents a problem of explanation for RD approaches. This is true since they predict that only features available from language(s) learned during childhood can be transferred, precisely because parameter resetting is
argued to be impossible in adulthood. FA approaches predict that, since new features can be acquired in adulthood, knowledge from any previously learned language will be available for transfer regardless of when that language was acquired. Herein, I demonstrate how L3 initial state studies with particular populations, namely a juxtaposition of childhood vs. adult bilingual learners with same language pairing learning the same L3, are as useful a source as L2 ultimate attainment studies for the “age of acquisition” determinacy debate for adult non-primary acquisition. I do so by reviewing two such recent L3 comparing simultaneous English/Spanish child bilinguals and adult sequential bilinguals (L1 English/L2 Spanish) learning L3 Portuguese in adulthood.

Iverson (in press) examined these groups’ knowledge of noun-drop, a phenomenon present in both Portuguese and Spanish (but not English) that hinges on the acquisition of uninterpretable gender (phi) features. Guijarro-Fuentes, Iverson, Judy and Rothman (2008) investigated knowledge of other properties of the Portuguese DP, namely knowledge of gender/number agreement (similar in Spanish/Portuguese, but not English) and the semantic interpretations available in Portuguese for bare and definite plural nouns, which is different across all three languages. In both studies, participants were examined at the initial state of L3 Portuguese, allowing one to appreciate what was transferred (and where it was transferred from). Both studies conclude that ultimately, adult L2 language learners are able to acquire new features insofar as they did not differ significantly from the childhood bilinguals at the L3 initial state where both demonstrate knowledge of the transfer of Spanish. Most importantly, however, these studies highlight the use of L3 knowledge as a valuable tool for the investigation of adult ultimate attainment and the timing of morphosyntactic acquisition.

María del Pilar García Mayo

The English interlanguage of Basque-Spanish bilinguals: A formal approach

The main goal of this presentation is to frame research on the acquisition of the syntax of English as a third language (L3) within the Universal Grammar (UG) approach. Leung (2007, 2009) has recently pointed out that L3 data may bring much to bear on our understanding of issues such as language transfer at the level of syntactic representation and interlanguage grammar formation. We will provide a brief overview of the role of UG in the acquisition of non-native systems and highlight the findings of recently published and ongoing research carried out with Basque-Spanish bilinguals learning English in a classroom setting. Although Spanish and Basque are languages with very different origins, the former a Latin-based language, and the latter a language with non-Indo-European roots, both belong to the group of null-subject languages and have a rich morphological paradigm. The examination of the oral production of Basque-Spanish bilingual learners of English will illustrate syntactic properties of their English interlanguage both at the verbal and the sentential domains.