

Gender systems as a cause of interference in second-language processing

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While role nouns that end in “-er”/“-or” identify the referent as male in German (e.g., *der Gärtner* – ‘the [male] gardener’ vs. *die Gärtnerin* – ‘the [female] gardener’), they are not marked for gender in English (e.g., a male or female gardener). But do these morphological cues cause transfer effects in German speakers’ L2 systems? This experiment investigates whether German speakers are more likely to perceive English role nouns ending in “-er”/“-or” as referring to males than native speakers of English due to transfer effects from the grammatical gender system of their L1 (Hellinger & Bußmann, 2003). Transfer effects would be in line with models of bilingual processing which allow for interactions between the learner’s L1 and L2 systems, e.g. MacWhinney’s competition model (2005) or those that assume one system, e.g. Hudson’s word grammar (2008).

This project uses self-paced reading to capture transfer effects as they unfold online. The stimuli introduce an occupational noun (from Misersky et al., 2014) which varies in its stereotypical association (stereotypically “male”, e.g. *judge*, or “female”, e.g. *nurse*) and then refer back to this role noun with a gendered noun or pronoun (such as “men”/“women” or “he”/“she”). The occupational nouns either have an ending that is attested in both German and English (such as “-er” and “-or”) or rare in German to serve as a control group, since transfer cannot be expected to occur for these. See (1) below for an example:

- (1) Being in a nostalgic mood, the nurse/judge sat down, pulled out a thick photo album, and reflected on her/his childhood in the idyllic countryside.

Data from 96 participants has been collected, half of whom are native speakers of English who reside in the UK, and the remaining half are native speakers of German. A preliminary analysis using a linear mixed-effects model indicates an effect in the expected direction for German speakers: longer reading times for “-er” nouns in combination with a female resolution, but not for the other noun endings. This effect is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ and cannot be observed for native speakers of English, which suggests potential morphological transfer from German speakers’ L1 grammatical gender system into their L2 English. In a next step, data collection will be expanded to eye-tracking with German participants, with other relevant variables such as morphological awareness, language proficiency, and attitudes towards the generic masculine and gender-fair language being collected and analysed.

References

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