Multilingual Language Acquisition

The Role of Transfer, Metalinguistic Awareness and the Number of Previously Learned Languages
“A multilingual individual can be defined as a person who is able to communicate in two or more languages.” (Cenoz, Hufeisen, Jessner, 2003, p.2)
What is special about a multilingual?

- A higher level of metalinguistic awareness
- Cross-linguistic influence between the multilingual’s languages
- An increased level of cognitive control and a higher ability of interference suppression
Metalinguistic Awareness

• “the ability to focus on linguistic form and to switch focus between form and meaning” (Jessner, 2008, p. 277)

• “metalinguistic awareness, n. – an awareness, esp. when learning a language, that the rules of that language (grammatical, phonological, pragmatic, etc.) are an arbitrary linguistic code independent of meaning” (Oxford English Dictionary)

• Multilinguals are expected to have a higher level of metalinguistic awareness than monolinguals

• Highly proficient bilinguals tend to have a higher level of metalinguistic awareness than less proficient bilinguals

• Metalinguistic awareness is regarded as a key factor in language acquisition which accelerates the language learning process
Cross-linguistic influence and transfer

• “the influence of a person’s knowledge of one language on that person’s knowledge or the use of another language” (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2010, p.1)

• “Transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired.” (Odlin, 1989, p. 27)
Transfer

• Transfer can have a facilitating or inhibiting effect on language learning, production and perception (positive or negative transfer)

• Transfer can occur in all linguistic subsystems (syntax, lexis, morphology, phonology, orthography, pragmatics)

• Transfer can occur from the L1 or any other language, can be forward (L1 → L3) or reverse (L2 → L1) and uni- or bidirectional (L1+L3 → L2)

• (Positive) transfer is most likely to occur from a typologically closely related source language, an L2, a recently used and acquired language and a highly proficient language
Negative Transfer

• “negative transfer occurs when assumed similarities conflict with objective differences” (Jarvis and Pavlenko, 2010, p. 182)

• Results in mis-production or misinterpretation

• More frequent among less proficient learners
Positive Transfer

• “Positive transfer occurs when assumed similarities are compatible with objective similarities.” (Jarvis and Pavlenko, 2010, p. 182)

• Facilitating and accelerating effect of transfer in language learning

• More frequent among more proficient learners

• Is less easily detectable than negative transfer, since its outcome is correct language production or perception
Cognitive Control

• Multilinguals generally have a higher level of cognitive control than monolinguals do, especially a higher level of interference suppression.

• By speaking only one of several possible languages, a multilingual has to focus on one specific task (speaking that one language) and ignore task irrelevant information (the other languages s/he speaks) → interference suppression.

• The level of cognitive control among multilinguals is enhanced by language proficiency, a younger age of L2 acquisition, the frequency of using both (or more) languages, as well the time span of being multilingual.
Native and non-native language influence in additional language learning
- an exploratory study
Background

• Transfer is hard to measure and most previous studies are limited due to

  i. a low number of participants (case studies)

  ii. limited linguistic input

  iii. focus on restricted linguistic units (e.g. V2 transfer), no holistic picture
Research Question

• Does a multilingual use his language background differently than a monolingual when acquiring a new language?
Participants

• **main test group**: 27 adult learners of Danish; L1 English, most recent Ln Danish;
  12 monolinguals (L2 learners), 10 bilinguals (L3 learners), 5 trilinguals (L4 learners)

• **control group**: 8 adult learners of Danish; L1 German, L2 English, most recent Ln Danish;
  4 bilingual (L3 learners), 4 trilinguals (L4 learners)
Methods: Questionnaire

- Bio questions

- Linguistic background (which languages have been learned, at what age, to what proficiency, amount of language use)

- Self-rated influence of the previously acquired languages on the acquisition of Danish (on syntax, semantics, phonology, orthography and discourse)
Analyses

• Simple comparison: the self-rated previous language influence on the learning of Danish was compared among the monolingual, bilingual and trilingual test subjects.

• Statistical validity: the means of the self-rated occurrence of transfer from the L1 English for monolinguals and multilinguals were compared in an independent samples t-test (multilingual test subjects with a more closely related language to Danish than English were excluded).
L1 Influence of the monolingual, bilingual and trilingual subjects in the learning of Danish. The numbers represent the degree of self-rated language influence on Danish (3: very positive, 0: neutral, -3: very negative). The number of respondents is given in parentheses.
Results

• Independent sample t-test for monolinguals (n=12) and multilinguals (n = 11)

• The monolinguals had a lower group average for syntax (M = 0.167, SD = 1.642) than the multilinguals (M = 1.546, SD = 1.036); this difference (M = 1.379, SD = 0.579) is significant (t(21) = 2.382, p = 0.027)

• The difference between the two groups did not turn out to be statically significant in the area of semantics (p = 0.087)
Conclusions

• A multilingual seems to be able to activate his L1 for positive transfer, whereas a monolingual does not seem to be able to benefit from his L1 background

• There seems to be a tendency towards a higher benefit from the previous language background for trilinguals than for bilinguals

• An increased level of metalinguistic awareness might be the reason for an increased occurrence of L1 transfer among multilinguals

• Transfer more likely for multilinguals than for monolinguals

→ The results have to be regarded with caution, since the study is based on self-report
Future Research

• Does language learning become easier with each language learned?

• Does the number of languages increase the level of metalinguistic awareness?

• Does the number of languages trigger a higher occurrence of (positive) transfer, which at the same time facilitates and accelerates the language learning process?

• Is there a limit for the ideal number of languages studied? Does (successful) additional language learning compete with language maintenance and language attrition?

• Do the cognitive benefits of multilinguals increase with each language learned?

• Does an increased level of cognitive control/interference suppression facilitate and accelerate the language learning process?


