Bidirectional Transfer in the Acquisition of English Articles by Arabic-English Bilingual Adults and Children

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Acquiring English articles is difficult for second language (L2) learners of English. This difficulty seems to be mainly linked to two aspects: i) the complexity of the rules for using English articles; and ii) the influence of the first language (L1) of the speaker (transfer or cross-linguistic influence). Reasons for these difficulties are often sought in the lack of articles in the L1 or differences between the L1 and L2 rules for their use. However, age of onset is of L2 acquisition also impacts on learners' ability to use English articles in target-like ways, in that L1 influence is often more prominent in late and adult learners' use of L2 (Ionin, Zubizarreta, & Philippov, 2009). Most of the current studies in the acquisition of English articles involve adult speakers and only focused on examining the impact of L1-Arabic on L2-English. Much less is known about crosslinguistic influence in the opposite direction (from English onto Arabic) and about bilingual children's knowledge and use of English and Arabic articles.

The current study focuses on bidirectional crosslinguistic influence in the use of Arabic/English articles in Arabic-English bilingual adults (N= 40) and children between the ages of 7 and 12 (N = 13), and a group of monolingual Arabic controls (N=39) and monolingual English controls (N = 30). Article use was analysed with two tasks: a (semi-spontaneous) story-telling and a sentence repetition task (SRT) in both languages. In the SRT the different semantic and linguistic conditions for the use of articles were carefully controlled. In addition, tests of receptive grammar (TROG=2 for English and the Arabic sentence comprehension test (Shaalan, 2010)) were used to control for overall grammatical knowledge. In the narrative task, among adults, omission of "a/an" was the most common issue (53%), while for children it was use of "the" in indefinite contexts where "a/an" would be expected (46%). In the SRT, significant differences were found for overall accuracy in the use of "the", "a/an" and zero, as well as for accuracy in generic, [definite, specific], [indefinite, specific] and [indefinite, nonspecific] contexts. Finally, for the bilingual adults, Age of Onset of L2 was negatively related to accuracy in generic and [indefinite, non-specific] contexts and the general accuracy of using "a/an" and zero. For the bilingual children, however, Age of Onset of L2 was negatively related to accuracy of using "a/an" only within [indefinite, specific] contexts . Some errors made by the participants were related to problems with mastering plural forms in English. The Arabic sentence repetition task revealed no significant differences between the bilingual adults and the control group. No evidence was found for crosslinguistic influence from L2-English on the use of L1-Arabic articles.

References

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