
This collection is the latest in the Multilingual Matters series on second language acquisition (SLA). The provenance of the volume is cognitive linguistics and the emphasis is on the universality of the mental processes associated with SLA. The book is broadly divided in two, offering a theoretical and empirical snapshot of contemporary work in language transfer and contrastive analysis. The first five chapters take a theoretical perspective, chapters 1 - 3 dealing with the notion of transfer; the following four chapters report original empirical studies; the penultimate chapter discusses crosslinguistic influence (CLI) in third language acquisition; and the final chapter presents an overview of the volume.

All first three chapters perform an essential function in problematizing the notion of transfer, and Odlin (chapter 1) and Cook (chapter 2) expressly reject its historical association with behaviourism. Instead, by viewing SLA as ‘multiple directional relationships between multiple languages’ (page 35), Cook asserts that language influence is much more than the primacy of the first language (L1). Adopting a distinction between conceptual understanding and speech production, Ringbom’s (chapter 3) starting point is that transfer occurs more readily in language comprehension. In this respect, transfer is a process more likely to occur between related languages.

Lucy (chapter 4) asks not whether learning a second language (L2) changes learners’ view of the world, but whether general cognitive effects arising from the L1 influence the learning of the L2. Like Ringbom, Lucy distinguishes so-called ontological relativity from the transfer and interference that he associates primarily with speech production. Because ‘each language involves a particular interpretation of reality’ (page 55), Lucy claims, as is implicit in Cook (chapter 2), that the learning of a second language can be as responsible as a first language for linguistic relativity. Helms-Park and Dronjic (chapter 5) discuss the role of cognate facilitation in lexical transfer, asking whether cognates share a single lexical entry in the bilingual lexicon or exist as two discrete morphological entries, and whether activation of the cognate is triggered semantically, lexically, morphologically or at a sublexical level of representation.

In the first of the empirical studies, Alonso Alonso, Cadierno and Jarvis (chapter 6) investigate spatial prepositions produced by first language speakers of Danish and Spanish learning English, and the likely influence of their L1 spatial construal patterns, ie the way in which the first language expresses spatial relationships. The authors found a strong role for such patterns in the advanced learners, which is felicitous when, as with Danish and English, the spatial construals are largely congruent. In a study of motion event construal, Treffers-Daller and Ziyan (chapter 7) report both push (L1) and pull (target language or TL) factors as a result of inferred exposure to the TL in the production of native-like verb forms by intermediate / advanced Chinese L1 learners of English. However, the inference is made on the basis of corpora and original frequency data from native speakers rather than from any evidence of classroom input. Ekiert and
Han (chapter 8) present a study of the L2 acquisition of English articles by Slavic speakers, whose L1s have no articles. The results of a series of elicitation tasks show wide individual variation in their sample’s production of articles. The authors conclude that Slavic speaking learners of English need to acquire both a new form and ‘a new grammaticalised meaning’ (page 166), so giving another example of how transfer is less likely to occur between structurally distant languages. In the last of the empirical studies, Athanostoupolos and Boutonnet (chapter 9) report the results of an experiment exploiting voice attribution technique (VAT). With increasing exposure to L2 French, adult L1 English learners tended to assign a female voice to English nouns such as ‘table’ (la table) and a male voice to nouns such as ‘book’ (le livre). The learners appeared to have internalised the French concept of grammatical gender, thus demonstrating the mediating role of language in changing their cognitive patterns and providing further, indirect evidence for linguistic relativity.

Jessner, Megens and Graus (chapter 10) adopt the metaphors of dynamic systems and complexity theory (DCT) to review a comparatively recent area of concern: differences and similarities between SLA and third (and subsequent) language acquisition (TLA). Reviewing the preceding chapters, Arabski and Wojtaszek (chapter 11) note the variety of approaches and highlight the evidence that learning a second language involves some degree of cognitive restructuring in more than one direction, i.e. at least between languages and possibly in more general cognitive directions.

Despite their kaleidoscopic nature, the 11 chapters contain a series of illuminating parallels, such as the tempering of crosslinguistic influence according to the distance between L1 and L2 (chapters 3, 5, 6, 7 and 10), the influence of language learning on cognitions (chapters 2, 4, 7, 8, 9 and 10), as well as cognition on language learning, and by extension the role of linguistic relativity (chapters 4, 6, 8 and 9). Although there is only passing reference (in chapters 3, 5 and 10) to the comparatively new area of crosslinguistic neurolinguistics, and the scope of the volume might have been broadened by the inclusion of work on CLI and syntax, phonology or paralinguistic features such as gesture, the focus of the empirical chapters, viz. the acquisition of prepositions, motion event construal, articles, and grammatical gender, is representative of current concerns in crosslinguistic SLA research. Following Ringbom’s death, Chapter 3 was left in the original draft, and the coherence of other chapters too would have benefitted from additional editing. A more muscular Preface would have systematically explored the ‘occasional points of possible disagreement’ (page xiv) in the succeeding chapters, alerting readers to essential differences in the authors’ approaches. And disappointingly, the volume includes an author index but no subject index.

A collected edition inevitably creates its own lens through which the subject is viewed. Here, the emergent themes are the existence of multi-directional cross-linguistic and cognitive-linguistic influence; the counter-intuitive notion that target language features similar to those in the learner’s L1 are not necessarily easier to acquire; and the difficulty the learner will likely have in conceptualising features of more distant languages. These chapters provide further evidence that CLI plays an important role in second language learning and cognitive development more generally, but they also
remind the reader that language transfer is selective, depending on the developmental stage of the learner and the conceptual proximity of L1 and TL. Compared to more substantial anthologies on the market, this collection is affordable, thought-provoking and topical, earning its place on personal bookshelves as much as within institutional libraries.

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