When Articles Have Different Meanings: Acquiring the Expression of Genericity in English and Brazilian Portuguese*

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This paper reports on an experimental study of the expression of genericity in the acquisition of English by native speakers of Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese, and in the acquisition of Brazilian Portuguese by native speakers of English and Spanish. English, Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese exhibit a three-way distinction in terms of which NP types are allowed with generic and kind interpretations. This difference leads to specific, testable predictions for the effects of cross-linguistic influence on the expression of genericity in second language acquisition. These predictions are tested in a small-scale study, by means of a written, context-based Acceptability Judgment Task. The results show that transfer from the learners' native language has a limited effect, and is overridden by considerations of register and/or input frequency. The findings pose interesting questions for further research.

1 Introduction

An important question in the field of second language (L2) acquisition is how L2-learners map syntax to semantics (see Slabakova 2008 for an overview). The interpretation of articles in the second language is one of the areas in which this question has been explored. A number of studies have examined how L2-learners use and interpret articles, and what learners' patterns of article (mis)use and/or (mis)interpretation can tell us about the factors involved in

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L2-acquisition (Huebner 1983; Thomas 1989; Ionin et al. 2004; Trenkic 2008, among many others). In the case of L2-learners whose first language (L1) lacks articles, many studies examine what factors (explicit strategies, input and instruction, access to semantic universals) influence learners’ acquisition of article meaning. When the learners’ L1 does have articles, the role of cross-linguistic influence, or L1-transfer, is considered, and studies ask to what extent learners transfer the meaning of articles in their L1 to those in their L2. Most studies on articles and nominals in the L2 have focused on non-generic contexts of article use; some non-generic uses are exemplified in (1), where the indefinites (a lion, lions) are interpreted existentially, and the definites (the lion, the lions)—anaphorically. Our current research program focuses instead on generic contexts of article use, exemplified in (2): unlike the sentences in (1), the ones in (2) talk about lions in general, rather than about any particular lion(s). (We consider only nominals in subject position, as in (2), leaving the interpretation of nominals in other syntactic positions for further research).

(1)  
   a. A lion is running towards us. The lion is hungry.
   b. I see lions in the distance. The lions are asleep.

(2)  
   a. The lion is a dangerous animal.
   b. Lions are dangerous animals.

In a series of recent studies, we have experimentally examined the expression of genericity with native speakers of English, Spanish, and Brazilian Portuguese (BrP) (Ionin et al. 2011a), and we have investigated the role of L1-transfer in the interpretation of NPs with and without articles in generic environments in the L2-English of Spanish speakers as well as in the L2-Spanish of English speakers (Ionin et al. 2013); we have also looked at how L2-English learners learn about the relationship between articles and genericity when their L1 (Russian or Korean) lacks articles (Ionin et al. 2011b). We have recently extended this investigation to the acquisition of BrP by English and Spanish speakers, as well as the acquisition of English by BrP speakers. As discussed in the next section, English, Spanish, and BrP differ from one another in how they express generic interpretation for NPs with and without articles; the three-way difference allows us to make testable predictions, based on L1-transfer, for the L2-acquisition of one of these languages by speakers of another. Here, we report on a small-scale study testing these predictions, and show that while L1-transfer does play a role in the expression of genericity in the L2, it is overridden by such considerations as input frequency of generic expressions and register. After discussing the findings, we pose questions for further research.