

Crosslinguistic influence on L2 pronoun interpretation: does typological proximity facilitate acquisition?

One major question addressed by SLA research concerns the factors which influence the course of interlanguage development. Among these factors, crosslinguistic influence has been shown to play a significant role. There is convincing evidence that there are differences in the developmental paths of learners from different L1 backgrounds when (macro)parametric properties are involved (for example, whether or not null subjects and associated properties are available in the grammar). L1 transfer tends to be facilitative when the target property is similar in both languages, as is often the case in typologically closely related language pairings. However, it is not clear whether this facilitative effect of L1 transfer is maintained for grammatical properties which, despite being superficially similar in the L1 and L2, differ in very subtle ways (for example, how null and overt pronominal subjects may be interpreted in null-subject languages). There is increasing evidence that this kind of microparametric variation may be a potential source of difficulty for L2 learners (e.g., Liceras & Alba de la Fuente 2015; Cuza, Jiao & López-Otero 2018).

The goal of this talk is to examine the role played by L1 transfer in the acquisition of a Romance language (European Portuguese - EP) by speakers of other Romance languages (Spanish / Italian), focussing on the interpretation of two types of pronouns: subject pronouns, null and overt (EP: *(Ele) está aqui* '(He) is here'), and the reflexive pronoun *si* 'himself/herself' (EP: *Ele apontou para si* 'He pointed at himself'). These pronouns are found in the three languages, but they display slightly different interpretative properties in each of them. In the talk, I will discuss the potential contributions of several studies which have investigated the acquisition of these properties (Fiéis & Madeira to appear; Teixeira, Fiéis & Madeira 2020; Lobo, Madeira & Silva 2019) to the question of whether the facilitative role of L1 transfer in typologically close language pairings is overridden whenever the target property differs in the L1 and the L2 at the microparametric level. I will conclude with a brief discussion of some of the implications which this research carries for language teaching.