Testing the predictions of the 'Scalpel Model' in L3/Ln Acquisition

Maria Clements, Laura Dominguez
University of Southampton, United Kingdom

Currently, there are four main proposals for L3/Ln transfer at the initial state; L1 only transfer (e.g. Na Ranong & Leung, 2009), L2 only transfer (Bardel & Falk, 2007), and two models that support L1/L2 transfer, the 'Cumulative Enhancement Model' (Flynn et al, 2004) and the 'Typological Primacy Model' (Rothman 2010, 2011, 2015). The 'Scalpel Model' (SM) (Slabakova, in press) predicts that 'wholesale' transfer is not required at the initial state and that L3 acquisition occurs property-by-property (also predicted by the 'Linguistic Proximity Model', Mykhaylyk et al, 2015). Additionally, non-facilitative transfer is possible.

We test these hypotheses by investigating the acquisition of subject pronouns by L1 English/L2 Spanish/L3 Chinese learners at different proficiency levels. Neither background language is typologically related to Chinese but both have similar linguistic properties associated with the use of subject pronouns. Chinese and Spanish both allow null subjects in finite clauses whilst English does not. It is predicted that there will be transfer from L2 Spanish in the acquisition of null subjects, although this is not necessarily facilitative as the L3 learners need to learn the appropriate syntactic licensing in Chinese. Furthermore, we may see transfer from English in the behaviour of embedded overt subjects. In Spanish, embedded overt subjects are restricted by the OPC principle (Montalbetti, 1984), i.e. the antecedent cannot be quantified, whilst English and Chinese are not. This could show that transfer occurs property-by-property.

30 L3 Chinese learners’ took a pronoun interpretation task with bi-clausal sentences with either an overt/null subject in the embedded clause and either a referential/quantified antecedent in the main clause. Results show some support for the SM (transfer is not always facilitative and does depend on the property acquired), although existing cross-linguistic differences in the representation of such properties seem to play a role as well.

Keywords: L3, transfer, Scalpel Model.