Revisiting grammatical gender in L1 and L2 French speakers

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To address the theme of the conference, Looking back, looking forward, this talk will summarize the research in the L2 acquisition of French grammatical gender (GG) assignment and agreement revealing that learners struggle with both (e.g., Ayoun 2007; Sabourin et al. 2006) due to an ambiguous input (Ayoun 2010; Poirier & Lyster 2014) and phonological difficulties (Dewaele 2015). It will be argued that L2 learners are held to a standard that even French native speakers (NSs) cannot meet, contrary to the traditional view that NSs make very few errors (e.g., Schriefers & Jescheniak 1999). This claim will be supported by empirical data from French NSs (n=40) who performed a GG assignment task, a preference/GJT and an acceptability judgment task exemplifying idiosyncracies/incongruencies in GG assignment and agreement. Preliminary findings indicate that NSs tended to accept rather than reject ungrammatical stimuli and show strong lexical and gender effects with accuracy averages well below the expected NS range. Suggestions for future L1 and L2 research will be made.


Ayoun, D. 2010. Corpus Data: shedding the light on French grammatical gender... or not. EUROSLA 10: 119-141


Keywords: native speakers, grammatical gender, morpho-syntax, second language learners.