Psychotypology in conceptual cross-linguistic influence: Data from Finland-Swedish functional bilingual learners of English

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Speakers of two or more languages have several perhaps conflicting language systems to build upon. Psychotypology, the perceived language similarity between the source and target languages, might guide the language learner in the degree of which features of the source languages are transferred to, or used in the target language. In order to explore whether psychotypology influences the degree of conceptual cross-linguistic influence, 15-year-old Finland-Swedish functional bilingual speakers of Finnish and Swedish (N=41) were tested using a word pair similarity perception task with items where a single translation equivalent in Finnish exists for two words in English.

The stimuli was piloted by native Finnish speakers (N=27) using a translation task to ensure both translations were activated. For the baseline, a group of 15-year-old native Swedish speakers (N=17) and Finnish speakers (N=20) rated the items for similarity. The difference between the Finnish and Swedish comparison groups was significant (t(25)=3.55, p=0.02 (two-tailed)).

The functional bilingual participants rated the same items where cross-linguistic influence from Finnish had been established. For psychotypology, the participants were asked to agree or disagree on a likert-scale with statements regarding the general-, sound-, and vocabulary- similarity, and the ease of learning between Finnish, Swedish, and English.

At the group level, the functional bilinguals rated the items with a shared translation equivalent in Finnish higher in similarity than the Swedish comparison group, but lower than the Finnish comparison group. At the individual level, the perceived distance between the three languages correlates significantly (r=-0.33, p=0.04) with the participants’ quantified conceptual cross-linguistic influence from Finnish to English. Neither proficiency in Finnish or Swedish correlated significantly with the item ratings. Hence, psychotypology should be considered as one of the factors guiding the degree of conceptual cross-linguistic influence in relation to which features are attached and suppressed in post-L2 lexical development.

Keywords: psychotypology, L3, cross-linguistic influence, lexical development.