From previous research on cross-linguistic influence we know that people often transfer knowledge from previously learned languages (L1 and L2) while acquiring a new language (L3)(see Murphy 2003 for an overview). In this paper we investigate whether L2 knowledge also plays a role in receptive multilingualism. Receptive multilingualism is a term used for situations in which people speaking different but related languages communicate each using their own language, without having acquired that language.

We report on the findings of two experiments in which we tested whether L2 knowledge of German helps L1 speakers of Dutch to successfully decode Danish words without having prior knowledge of Danish. The first experiment contained written stimuli, the second experiment contained spoken stimuli. In both experiments we used the same list with Danish nouns. Half of the stimulus words only had cognates in Dutch and half of the stimulus words only had cognates in German. There were two conditions. In the first condition the participants translated the isolated Danish words. In the second condition the participants got a hint in the form of a semantic category to which the word belonged.

In both experiments we find that L2 knowledge of German indeed helps L1 speakers of Dutch to successfully decode Danish words. Also, we find evidence for the existence of a foreign language mode (Selinker & Baumgartner-Cohen 1995). The participants with a high L2 German proficiency translate more Danish-German cognates than Danish-Dutch cognates correctly. However, this effect disappears when the participants translate the words with the help of a semantic category.


Selinker, Larry & Beatrice Baumgartner-Cohen. 1995. Multiple language acquisition: ’Damn it, why can’t I keep these two languages apart?’ Multilingualism and language learning: 8(2). 115-123.

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