

Positive and Negative Influence on the Form and Function of Definiteness: A Case Study of Chinese Learners' L3 Swedish Productions

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Previous studies on third language (L3) acquisition have focused on language combinations where a certain category is present and similar in two of the learner's three languages, and have aimed to define whether L3 acquisition is influenced by the learners' first or second language (L1/L2). The present study explores the acquisition of obligatory definiteness when the category is absent in L1 but exists in both L2 and L3, filling the same function albeit expressed through different forms.

Unlike Mandarin, languages like Swedish and English obligatorily mark definiteness and indefiniteness through articles. Whereas English uses pre-nominal articles, the Swedish definite article is a suffix. In addition, Swedish has a pre-adjectival definite article, yielding a redundant double definiteness construction: "den röda bil-en" (the red car-the). The combination of L1 Mandarin, L2 English, and L3 Swedish thus makes it possible to disentangle form and function.

Four intermediate Mandarin-speaking learners of Swedish (CEFR level B2), with prior knowledge of English (B2–C1), participated in this case study. A production task was designed to elicit approximately 40 noun phrases: definite/indefinite, modified/non-modified. The learners' production of English and Swedish were tested in different sessions separated by a week. Control data were collected from native speakers (n=2x8) of English and Swedish.

Results indicate rare but existent errors in English (L2) article production. In the Swedish (L3) data, function errors are scarce but form errors frequent: both overuse of the pre-adjectival article and omission of the suffix occur, e.g. "den djur" (the animals; target: "djur-en", animals-the). In this case study, more proficient article use in English coincides with more formal errors in Swedish. Moreover, the only learner making function errors in English also make such errors in Swedish. These findings suggest that the L2 English influence on L3 Swedish article production is positive for function but negative for form.

Keywords: definiteness, Swedish, articles, L3 acquisition.