

**Individual Paper Session 15**  
**Syntax/Morphology**  
**Wednesday, July 5**  
**4:45-5:15pm**

**Grammatical gender and agreement in L2 French: A minimalist approach**

**Ayoun Dalila**  
**University of Arizona**  
[ayoun@email.arizona.edu](mailto:ayoun@email.arizona.edu)

The results of the few empirical studies conducted within the minimalist framework in the L2 acquisition of grammatical gender (GG) are split between those that found L1 effects (e.g., Franceschina 2005; Hawkins 1998), and argue that adult L2 learners cannot fully acquire gender features unless they are present in their L1; and those that contend that learners can achieve native-like representation regardless of whether their L1 instantiates these features or not (e.g., Bruhn de Garavito & White 2002). Previous studies investigated L2 learners with various L1 backgrounds, but none has considered the learnability implications specific to English-speaking L2 French learners.

In the Minimalist framework (e.g., Carstens 2000; Chomsky 2001), GG is a lexical property of nouns. Gender agreement on adjectives is the overt reflection of either Specifier-Head or Head-Head agreement within the maximal projection of AgrP. Determiners and adjectives are assigned [*u*gender] features to be checked and erased by the [ $\pm$ fem] feature from the derivation to LF; they are then attributed the appropriate [ $\pm$ fem] feature.

L2 French adults must thus learn: a) That French has semantic and grammatical gender; b) The proper gender assignment of each lexical item; c) Proper D-N agreement; d) Proper A-N agreement; e) Proper word order placement of N Adj reflecting a strong Num feature lacking in the L1.

The results of a written grammaticality judgment task and production task confirmed the predictions tested (participants were more accurate on D/N agreement than on N/A agreement; and their overall accuracy and ability to detect conflictual gender assignment increased with proficiency), indicating that learners successfully reset the gender-marking parameter associated with Num in French (contra Hawkins 2001), and acquired the [ $\pm$ fem] gender feature in NPs, contra the Failed Feature Hypothesis (e.g., Hawkins & Chan 1997). The residual difficulties in consistently making N/Adj agreement are attributed to a lack of attention/motivation on the part of instructed learners for whom GG carries a low communicative load, is redundant, lacks salience, and must be learned from an ambiguous input with numerous exceptions.