

Individual Paper Session 5
Bilingualism
Tuesday, July 4
2:15-2:45pm

The acquisition of Chinese nominal phrases in L3A: a comparison between L1 Thai-L2 English-L3 Chinese and L1 English-L2 Chinese groups

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This paper investigates the acquisition of Chinese nominal phrases by two groups of learners: native speakers of Thai who are L2 advanced learners of English and L3 beginner learners of Chinese on the one hand and native speakers of English who are L2 beginner learners of Chinese on the other. It focuses on how the learners transfer syntactic properties from previous languages (L1, L2) and whether L1 has a privileged status in L3 acquisition given that L1 and L3 are typologically close. In terms of syntax of a nominal phrase, Jenks (2005) claimed that Thai and Chinese have classifier category and has no article system equivalent to that in English. On the other hand, Chinese and English are similar with regards to head directionality.

Our prediction is that given that L1 and L2 have an influence on L3A, L3 learners of Chinese may perform well in the acquisition of Chinese nominal phrase because they may transfer features from both L1 (the notion of classifier) and L2 (word order) to their L3 acquisition. In contrast, the L2 learners of Chinese may perform worse as they may be able to transfer word order pattern from their L1 English but have to establish the Classifier category.

To investigate the above, 20 L3-Chinese learners and 13 L2-Chinese learners had to complete a) a biodata questionnaire, b) a Chinese proficiency test (HSK) and c) a computerized grammaticality judgement task which consists of grammatical/ ungrammatical sentences with four types of nominal phrases (adjective-noun with/without linker 'de', possessive-noun, demonstrative-noun). Also, each subject's reaction time was recorded to complement data from grammaticality judgement task.

The preliminary result confirms our prediction that L3 group outperforms L2 group which suggests that both L1 and L2 play an important role in L3 acquisition and that L1 has no privileged role.