

# Gradient acceptability and language proficiency as factors in L3 acquisition of syntax

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In this talk we would like to report on the results of the first stage of a larger-scale longitudinal study of multilingual acquisition, in which we investigate the interaction between the acquisition of selected syntactic phenomena and language proficiency (for previous related research, see e.g. Westergaard 2021, Puig-Mayenco et al. 2020). We examined L1 Polish speakers with L2 English and L3 Norwegian acquired in an instructed setting. Two multilingual groups of learners, at initial (N=24, mean age 20) and upper-intermediate (N=15, mean age 22) L3 levels participated in this part of the study. The syntactic phenomena selected for investigation involved pronominal binding (cf. Hestvik 1992 for Norwegian, Witkoś et al. 2020 for Polish), as in (1a-c), and the position of adverbs of frequency (2a-c).

- 1a Jan<sub>1/?2</sub> znalazł swoje<sub>1</sub> / jego<sub>2</sub> klucze. (Polish)  
Jan found self his keys
- 1b John<sub>1</sub> found his<sub>1/2</sub> keys. (English)
- 1c Jan<sub>1/\*2</sub> fant nøklene sine<sub>1</sub> / hans<sub>2</sub>. (Norwegian)  
Jan found keys self his
- 2a Janek rzadko czyta (%rzadko) e-booki. (Polish)  
Janek seldom reads seldom e-books
- 2b John seldom reads (\*seldom) e-books. (English)
- 2c Øystein (\*sjelden) leser sjelden e-bøker. (Norwegian)  
Øystein seldom reads seldom e-books

Although both types of constructions put Polish and Norwegian in one group as opposed to English, only in the case of pronominal binding the two languages are structurally similar, whereas for the position of adverbs the similarity is superficial. Crucially, both phenomena are characterized by gradient acceptability for the marked conditions (subject orientation of the possessive pronoun *jego* in (1a) and the post-verbal adverb position in (2a)) in Polish, but not in English and Norwegian. The aims of the study were not only to establish the source and nature of cross-linguistic influence, but also to examine the effect of gradient acceptability in L1 and the role of structural vs. superficial similarity between L1 and L3 on the acquisition of syntactic phenomena in L2/L3.

Three grammaticality judgment tasks (one per language) were administered to each group in separate language blocks (cf. Keating & Jegerski 2015). The experiment design featured certain methodological choices which account for its novelty. First and foremost, partially acceptable L1

constructions have been included so that their effect on multilingual acquisition could be observed. Secondly, a 5-point Likert scale was used instead of a binary forced choice to accommodate the anticipated finer-grained responses. Finally, the data were collected from each of the three languages to fully account for the effect of gradient acceptability on the L2 and L3 acquisition.

The collected data confirmed the presence of gradient acceptability in Polish, as L1 marked sentences were rated higher than L2 and L3 ungrammatical ones. However, statistical analyses showed no clear indication of L1 facilitation for L3 Norwegian in either group. In the lower proficiency group, this absence of effect might have resulted from insufficient knowledge of the constructions under investigation, which was confirmed in a comparison of differences between grammatical and ungrammatical sentences (per participant and per item). Additionally, higher L3 proficiency correlated with higher acceptability for partially acceptable / marked conditions in L1 in the lower proficiency group but not in the higher proficiency group.

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