

The acquisition of the grammatical gender in French as a second language: How Luxembourgish pupils from second to fifth grade deal with it?

Harmony Marchal¹, Maryse Bianco¹, Philippe Dessus¹ and Benoît Lemaire²

¹L.S.E. and ²Laboratory TIMC-IMAG

University of Grenoble, FRANCE

<first name>.<last name>@upmf-grenoble.fr

Abstract

Two experiments designed to explore the acquisition of grammatical gender in French as a foreign language are reported. A sample of 270 children belonging to schools in Luxembourg realized a gender assignment task with pseudo-words which endings were either marked as feminine (-elle) or masculine (-oir) in French. Children differed in their native tongue because they were from two nationalities: Luxembourgish or Portuguese. This factor has a great interest as the similarity between L1 and L2 grammatical gender systems is a matter of debate in theoretical explanation of the ease or difficulties of a foreign language. The main results show that from third grade onward children use morpho-phonological cues to assign a gender to a pseudo-word independently of their native tongue. The didactical implications of these results are discussed. We support the idea that a better understanding of the acquisition of grammatical gender has also some broader implications for foreign-language acquisition. Apart from gender, suffixes also contain semantic information. With a focus on suffixes it is thus possible to gain a rich information about the lexical properties of a foreign language and represents thereby a way to expand the vocabulary of the learner.

Extended summary

This study aims to explore the acquisition of grammatical gender in French as a foreign language. To understand how non native speakers of French achieve such a learning, we worked with Luxembourgish children who learn French at school from the second year of primary school onward. Gender assignment in French can be performed using two kinds of information. Firstly, lexical information, related to the co-occurring words (e.g., articles, adjectives) which most of the time marks the gender unambiguously. Secondly, sublexical information, especially noun-endings, which are pretty good predictors of the grammatical gender (e.g., all nouns ending in -elle are feminine).

The acquisition of the grammatical gender by L2 speakers remains a subject of debate. One of the concerns is the role played by the learners' native tongue. While most researchers recognize that the speaker's native tongue may influence the acquisition of grammatical gender, the question concerns the strength of this influence. Some researchers defend its major role (Franceschina, 2005), while others defend a minor one (White et al., 2004). The argument pertains to the presence of a grammatical gender system in the native tongue (such as in Spanish or German) or its absence (such as in English).

Our research was designed to determine if the gender system of a native tongue more or less similar to French exerts an effect on the acquisition of gender in French. The majority of pupils in our Luxembourg sample is either of Luxembourg or Portuguese nationality. Portuguese is a Romance language with a gender system similar to French (nouns have either masculine or feminine gender). Luxembourgish, by contrast, is closer to German and possess three genders (masculine, feminine, neutral). The results obtained from the Luxembourg and Portuguese pupils were compared to determine if the nature of the L1 grammatical gender

system influences pupils' performances and if there is a hierarchy of performances between these two groups.

To determine whether L2 child learners of French use the gender cues carried by the word endings we performed two experiments. We prompted 270 pupils from third to sixth grade to assign gender to pseudo-words with varying endings. These pseudo-words contained a pseudo-base associated with a suffix marked as either feminine or masculine in French (for example, the ending *-elle* in the pseudo-word *manielle* is feminine and the ending *-oir* in the pseudo-word *tranoir* is masculine). We manipulated several factors:

- The gender predictability of endings: some endings strongly predict a gender (e.g *-oir* predicts the masculine gender at 100%) while others do not (e.g *-age* predicts the masculine gender at 62%).
- The kind of endings: suffixes or phonemes. In grammatical gender acquisition studies, the kind of endings used often mixes up phonological, derivational and even orthographic cues. We supposed that the suffixe could be the most powerful cue thanks to the semantic information carried by this kind of ending.
- The pupils' nationality: Portugese or Luxembourgish. This factor will allow to examine the effect played by the L1 grammatical gender system in the acquisition of the grammatical gender in L2.
- The school level: we worked with pupils in the third, fourth, fifth and sixth grades. When the experiment was run, the third grade pupils were learning French for 6 months while the sixth grade children were learning French for 3 years and 6 months. This variable will allow to determine if the pupils' level of proficiency in French has an influence in the gender assignment of words.

The results obtained in the first experiment showed that from the third year of primary school onward, pupils are able to determine the gender of pseudo words at a rate significantly better than chance and that the number of correct responses tends to increase with age. So, even after a few months of French learning, pupils are sensitive to regularities in language and use morpho-phonological cues in word endings to deduce gender. The most interesting result is that there is no effect of the pupils' nationality. It seems that the nature of the L1 grammatical gender system (more or less similar to French) do not influence pupils' performances. This result contradicts the position that the L1 plays a major role in the acquisition of grammatical gender. These results, however, must be confirmed in a second gender-assignment experiment with a similar sample but a different set of endings. Data from this further experiment are under analysis.

Our study of L2 learners in Luxembourg allowed us to obtain additional data about the influence of the native tongue on the acquisition of grammatical gender, and facilitate a comparison with French native speakers. Our results show that the children of our sample (as L2 French learners) use the morpho-phonological cues to determine the grammatical gender as do French children very early. A better understanding of the acquisition of grammatical gender has also some implications for instructional design. Yet this study could have even broader implications for foreign-language acquisition. Some endings that predict gender with a high degree of reliability also possess a morphological value; they are frequent suffixes. Many words are formed from a base associated with morphological units (suffixes, prefixes...). Apart from gender, suffixes also contain semantic information. The ending *-ation*, for example, is a suffix added to a verbal base to form a noun, meaning 'action' or 'the action's result' (example: *réparer* (to repair) → *réparation* (reparation)). This suffix also predicts feminine gender in 100% of cases. With a focus on suffixes it is thus possible to gain

a rich information about the lexical properties of a foreign language. It would allow teaching and learning at the same time, the gender of names and some rules of word formation, thereby expanding the vocabulary of the learner.