The Effects of Cognitive Individual Differences on the L3 Acquisition of French Grammatical Gender: Insights from Arabic- and Mandarin-speaking Learners

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One of the hallmarks of non-native language acquisition is the considerable inter-learner variation observed in linguistic competence, even with learners sharing a first language (L1). For example, learners of French differ widely in their ability to correctly realize gender agreement (e.g., mon petit problème ‘myMASC.SG smallMASC.SG problemMASC.SG’, ma grande idée ‘myFEM.SG bigFEM.SG ideaFEM.SG’; Bartning, 2000; Ayoun, 2007). Such inter-learner variation in grammatical competence can be explained in part by individual differences (e.g., Dewaele, 2013; Côté, 2021).

In this talk, I first review the importance of cognitive individual differences – namely, working memory, metasyntactic ability, statistical learning, and executive function – for non-native grammar learning (e.g., Williams, 2011; Roehr-Brackin, 2018; McDonough & Trofimovich, 2016; Segalowitz & Frenkiel-Fishman, 2005). I then present an on-going study of the third language (L3) acquisition of French noun phrase gender & number agreement. L1 Arabic/Mandarin-L2 English-L3 French learners were tested on their receptive vocabulary breadth and grammatical abilities in each of their three languages as well as on their statistical learning abilities, working memory (digit span task), attentional control (Simon task), and metasyntactic abilities (error replication). L2 English and L3 French noun phrase agreement was elicited via spoken picture identification as well as written and spoken storyboard narratives. The relative contribution of each of these cognitive individual differences as well as of L1 and second language (L2) linguistic knowledge to inter-learner variation is assessed via a quantitative analysis.

References