

Reversed crosslinguistic transfer of masculine generics in Dutch/German Bilinguals

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The usage of masculine generics (i.e., the gender-neutral usage of personal nouns in masculine form) is a topical subject as they reduce the presence of female referents in language. A survey study by De Backer and De Cuypere (2012) demonstrated that even related languages can show differences in how masculine occupational and non-occupational personal nouns (e.g., *the teacher* or *the reader*) are interpreted. German native speakers rated these words as referring only to male persons, while Dutch native speakers rated them as including referents from both sexes.

The aim of the current study was to confirm the findings by De Backer and De Cuypere (2012) with an on-line method and, furthermore, to investigate whether there is a crosslinguistic transfer from the second language (L2) to the first language (L1) in Dutch learners of German and in German learners of Dutch with different proficiency levels.

Therefore, a self-paced reading task in Dutch and in German was performed. The sentences in this study had a gender-neutral occupational or a non-occupational noun in masculine form as head and a personal pronoun (*he*, *she*, or *they*) as anaphor referring to the noun. To date, 103 subjects were tested in person and virtually in their L1 while living in the country of their L1. The participants were subdivided in four main groups: Dutch learners of German (n = 33), German learners of Dutch (n = 40), and two L1 control groups (n = 15 each). Furthermore, the L2 learners were subdivided into a low proficiency (German n = 14; Dutch n = 8), an intermediate proficiency (German n = 14; Dutch n = 15), and a high proficiency group (German n = 12; Dutch n = 10).

The preliminary results indicate that German L1 speakers prefer a gendered interpretation of masculine nouns, while for Dutch L1 speakers, there was no significant difference between the feminine and the other conditions. Furthermore, the data suggests that learners with a low or a high proficiency of both L2 learner groups experience a reversed transfer while reading sentences in their L1. This U-shaped pattern of transfer is in line with findings of a study by Athanasopoulos et al. (2015) on motion event cognition in L1 English learners of German. The findings suggest that language-specific gender typology is subject to a reversed crosslinguistic transfer which impacts the language processing in the L1, and that this transfer appears to be U-shaped.

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