The Influence of Dutch (L1) and English (L2) on Third Language Learning: The Effects of Education, Development and Language Combinations

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Summary

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To what extent does English as a second language (L2) affect learning a third language (L3) for students in Dutch secondary schools whose first language (L1) is Dutch? This dissertation concentrates on this particular group of adolescents, so as to gain more insight on how background languages are used in learning a foreign language in Dutch secondary schools. We present six different empirical studies in which influence of Dutch and English is investigated in L3 acquisition. The studies examine two Dutch educational contexts, different stages of L3 development, and two L3s (L3 French and L3 German). L1/L2 transfer in L3A is measured amongst students who are in their first four years of secondary school and are enrolled in either a Dutch/English bilingual stream programme or in a mainstream Dutch programme. As such, L1/L2 influence can be tested in students who are exposed to English to various degrees and who have varying L2 and L3 proficiencies. Furthermore, the comparison between two different L3s – L3 French and L3 German – allows us to compare transfer in two different language combinations while the L1 and L2 are kept constant.

The third language acquisition (L3A) field is a relatively young field of research. In recent years, several L3 studies have been carried out to explain transfer from the L1/L2 in L3A. So far, these studies have presented conflicting results, a fact that underscores the complex nature of L3 acquisition. Some scholars propose a default role for the L1 (including Hermas, 2010) or the L2 (e.g. Bardel & Falk, 2007). Others see no preferred role for the L1 or the L2 and suggest that transfer occurs based on perceived typological resemblance (such as Rothman, 2015) or on structural resemblance (e.g. Mykhaylyk et al., 2015). Moreover, it has become increasingly clear that supplementary factors such as L2 and L3 proficiency, L2 exposure, and development also affect L1/L2 transfer in L3A (e.g. Hammarberg, 2009; Jaensch, 2009a, 2009b; Pajak et al., 2016). In this dissertation, the roles of L2 exposure, L2 proficiency and the developmental
stage in the L3-learning process are investigated in relation to L1/L2 transfer in L3A. We also investigate the effect of language combinations on L1/L2 transfer in L3A.

The effect of L1 Dutch and L2 English on learning L3 French and L3 German is examined on a syntactic level using two different constructions in which one of the background languages and the target language differ. To detect possible influence from Dutch on French, we look at V(erb)-to-C(omplementiser) movement (+Dutch, –French), leading to XVSO (V2) surface structures in sentences containing a sentence-initial adverb: *Vandaag eet Jan een appel* ‘Today eats John an apple’, *Aujourd’hui mange Jean une pomme* ‘Today John eats an apple’ and to detect transfer from English into French and into German, we look at V(erb)-to-T(ense) movement (–English, +French, + German) resulting in an V-Adv surface structure in sentences containing a manner/frequency adverb. In English, there is no V-to-T movement, which leads to an Adv-V surface structure: ‘Manon sometimes goes to the zoo’ *Manon parfois va au zoo, *Manon manchmal geht in den Zoo. These two verb placement constructions are kept constant throughout the whole dissertation so as to be able to compare possible transfer in different groups of learners. In what follows, each chapter is summarised.

Chapter 1 introduces this dissertation and presents and explains its three different perspectives: an educational perspective, a developmental perspective and a cross-linguistic perspective. The educational perspective concentrates on the effect of type of education on the role of L1 Dutch and L2 English in L3 French acquisition. The developmental perspective approaches the question of L1 Dutch and L2 English influence in L3 French acquisition in different stages of L3 development. The cross-linguistic perspective concerns the effect of language combinations on language transfer from the L2 into L3A. The introduction also discusses several studies from the L3-field of research that are relevant to this dissertation, the secondary school context where the experiments are conducted and the constructions used to measure transfer. Finally, the introduction presents the outline of this dissertation.

Chapter 2 reports the findings of a grammaticality judgement task and focuses on the acceptance of Dutch XVSO word order and of English Adv-V word order in L3 French in third-year bilingual stream and mainstream secondary school students. As such, we compare two different
educational contexts. One of the L3-models – the L2 status factor hypothesis – is tested by comparing the number of XVSO vs Adv-V errors the students make in L3 French. Contributing a more important role to the L2, the L2 status factor hypothesis would predict more influence from English than from Dutch. The empirical study reveals that whereas in the mainstream group, the L1 and the L2 appear to be almost equally important sources of transfer into the learning of L3 French, the bilingual stream students prefer the L2 over the L1 as a source of transfer in the learning of L3 French, which is in line with the L2 status factor hypothesis. The data from the same study show that the mainstream students use their L1 Dutch to a greater extent than do the bilingual stream students, a fact we attribute to the larger role of the L1 as compared to the L2 in mainstream education. These findings imply that the type of L2 education (and related to that, the amount of L2 exposure in the daily school context) affects L1 and L2 transfer in the learning of L3 French.

The study presented in Chapter 3 builds on the study in Chapter 2. We compare the findings from the third-year students to new data from a grammaticality judgement task gathered amongst mainstream and bilingual stream fourth-year students. Again, the L2 status factor hypothesis is tested by comparing the number of XVSO vs Adv-V judgement errors in L3 French acquisition. The previous study found an effect of L2 exposure on the role of the L1 and the L2. Consequently, considering that both fourth-year groups have received one year more of L2 exposure than third-year students, we predict to find support for the L2 status factor hypothesis in both fourth-year groups, as well as an increased L2 influence and a decreased L1 influence as compared to both third-year groups. Although in both fourth-year groups – just as in the third-year bilingual group – students make more errors based on English than on Dutch (supporting the L2 status factor hypothesis), the results of this study do not provide evidence with respect to the increase of English influence from year three to year four: the number of Adv-V errors decreased slightly from year three to year four in both tracks. With regards to Dutch influence, we found a significant decrease in errors from year three to year four, to the extent that fourth-year mainstream students scarcely make XVSO errors any more. An increased L3 proficiency may explain the decrease in number of errors with respect to both constructions after the third year.
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Since in the studies presented in Chapters 2 and 3 we found an effect of restricted L2 exposure in third-year mainstream students, entailing relatively more transfer from the L1, we decided to examine initial-state learners of French, who at the time of testing were not yet fully enrolled in the bilingual stream programme. Chapter 4 reports the results of a grammaticality judgement and a guided-production task. We look again at XVSO and Adv-V word order errors in French. The first-year students are found to both massively accept and produce the Dutch XVSO word order in French. Although in the grammaticality judgement task the L2 did play a role, the first-year students made almost no Adv-V mistakes in the guided production task. The massive transfer from the L1 is in line with the L1 transfer hypothesis (Hermas, 2010). In sum, the results indicate that students at the onset of learning French resort to their L1 more than to their L2.

The purpose of the study presented in Chapter 5 is twofold: it is a cross-sectional study in which we investigate the increase of the influence of the English Adv-V word order on French from first- to third-year bilingual stream and mainstream students. In addition, we study the relationship between the students’ individual L2 proficiency and the influence of the L2 in L3 French in both third-year groups: a factor that in previous studies has been found significantly associated to an increased L2 influence in L3A (Jaensch, 2009a, 2009b). Although the roles of L2 exposure and L2 proficiency are related, the relation between the two factors in L3A is unclear and often not sufficiently disentangled in L3 research. The students in the secondary school where we conducted our experiments receive different amounts of L2 exposure in the daily school context (depending on the type of education) and have varying L2 proficiencies depending on individual differences. Consequently, the context of study makes it possible to investigate the relation between the two variables. Influence from English is measured by means of a guided production task. The findings of this study show that in the bilingual stream the number of Adv-V errors increases significantly over the years, which is not the case in the mainstream group. This study shows that an increased L2 exposure in the daily context and over the years leads to more L2 influence in L3A. Moreover, this study demonstrates no correlation between L2 proficiency and L2 influence in L3A. Therefore, we tentatively conclude that L2 exposure – that is, the activation of the L2 – is more important than L2 proficiency for the L2 to play a role in the L3.
In Chapter 6, we extend our investigation on L3 development by presenting a longitudinal study in which we test the same students from the bilingual stream three times over a period of two years starting in the initial stages of L3 French acquisition. The findings show massive L1 transfer in the initial stages and a decrease of Dutch influence relatively quickly after the onset of L3 learning. Although in year two and year three, some judgement XVSO errors are still made, the decrease is highly significant and students barely make any XVSO guided production errors. Despite the increase in L3 proficiency, the role of L2 English remains stable across years. The results show an increasing tendency in the guided production data with respect to the number of Adv-V errors; however, these results are not in line with the results of the study presented in Chapter 5, where we did find a significant increase in English Adv-V production errors in the cross-sectional comparison between year one and year three. The cross-sectional third-year data were collected at the end of year three, whereas the longitudinal data were collected at the start of year three. We argue that it could take more time in the bilingual stream context for the L2 to present a group effect. In sum, the findings in this study underline that both background languages play a role in L3A depending on the developmental stage the L3 learner is in.

The study presented in Chapter 7 focuses on the role of L1 transfer and L2 transfer in relation to two different L3s, that is, German and French. To this end, we compare the number of English Adv-V errors in German and in French with a grammaticality judgement task and a gap-filling task in third-year bilingual stream students. The studies presented in Chapter 2 and Chapter 5 showed that the L2 can take on a strong role in L3 French acquisition, especially in the third-year of bilingual education. Since we found an L2 effect in L3 French, we decided to investigate to what extent the L2 remains stable as a background language when learning a different L3. The findings of this study show that L2 English plays a significantly smaller role in L3 German than in L3 French. We argue that this is probably due to the strong role of Dutch in L3 German.

Chapter 8 concludes this work with a discussion of when secondary school students make use of their background languages Dutch (L1) and English (L2) in L3A. We argue that taking different perspectives is essential in explaining L1/L2 transfer in L3A; a preference for either L1 Dutch or L2 English as background languages depends on the type of education the L3
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learner is enrolled in, the developmental stage the L3 learner is in and the language pairing under investigation. The three perspectives make a meaningful contribution to the understanding of third language acquisition in secondary school students. More generally, the combined data show that taking perspectives in L3 learning is important. For one, L3 research in secondary schools would be less complete without considering the (non-) bilingual educational context of the L3 learner, since factors such as L2 (vs L1) exposure affect the use of background languages. For another, the developmental stage of the L3 learner appears to be of importance with regards to the use of background languages. Finally, the language combinations affect the way in which background languages are used. It is an interesting idea that both background languages are used in L3A. If secondary school teachers and students are made aware of this in language classes, this could result in advantages to L3 learning.