

神戸市外国語大学 学術情報リポジトリ

El adulto usuario de L2:cognición bilingüe y aprendizaje

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Summary

This dissertation presents an overview of two topics that are currently in debates on the multilingual mind: 1) the revived theory of linguistic relativism and 2) retroactive interference from L2 to L1. Linguistic relativism is the theory that states that there are certain aspects of the world that are perceived differently depending on the native language that one speaks. Retroactive interference is a concept that describes the changes observed in the native language of a person as a result of becoming multilingual. About these two topics, the dissertation offers both a review of the existing literature and some original experimental research carried out by the author. It is our opinion that the value of this dissertation lies fundamentally in the fact that there are no comprehensive overviews of these two aspects of the theory of the multilingual mind that we know of, at least in Spanish. Therefore, the thesis may serve as the starting point for other pieces of work in the field of multilingualism. Whereas not all the data of the original research by the author can be considered conclusive or strong, the experiments may serve as a guide for other researchers of bilingual and multilingual phenomena.

Contents of the dissertation

The first part of the dissertation —linguistic relativism— comprises chapters 1 and 2. Chapter 1 offers a review of the state of the art concerning the issue of linguistic relativism. As the author shows, this theory, initially proposed by Humboldt in the 19th century and later popularized by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf in the 20th, was heavily criticized for its circularity and lack of scientific rigor. The author of this thesis analyzes some misunderstandings that are at the basis of this over reaction from scientists. Then, he goes on to review some papers that have been recently published on a new version of this hypothesis. This revival is mainly lead by Vivian Cook. This kind of research is empirical and is based on gathering data from speakers through different techniques. Rodríguez classifies the studies concerning vocabulary in categories, like those on color terms, emotion terms, spatial relations, and perception of movement. Then, he reviews those studies concerning the executive control in

the multilingual mind (ability to suppress the terms or grammatical features from languages that the speaker knows but he is not speaking at a given moment).

This chapter serves as the introduction for the research presented in chapter 2. The author carried out an experiment on perception of materials and shapes based on some findings by Imai and Gentner (1997). These authors found that speakers of different languages use different parameters of classification of objects: for some, the material of which the object is made is more relevant perceptually, whereas for others, it is the shape of the object. Cook, Bassetti, Kasai et al. (2006) and Kasai et al. (2009) compared speakers of English and Japanese, and explored the preferences of Japanese users of English. Rodríguez carried out an experiment that constitutes an expansion of this one, examining the behavior of Japanese speakers who are advanced users of Spanish. Spanish monolinguals differ from Japanese monolinguals in that the former prefer the shape to the material when asked to compare objects for and look for similarity. The latter prefer the material. In the case of Japanese speakers who are advanced users of Spanish, the author found that, when the objects are complex, the speakers behave similarly to native speakers of Spanish. The experiment shows a change in the perceptual preferences when speakers become bilingual.

The second part of the dissertation deals with the issue of retroactive interference and comprises chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 3 reviews the existing literature on the mutual influence that the languages of a multilingual exert on one another. The research is classified on experiments on syntactic issues, on pragmatics, and on emotional issues. This chapter introduces the experiments carried out by the author at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies, which are explained in chapter 4. The experiments used subjects belonging to the Spanish Department (the multilingual group for the purposes of the research), and in some cases with subjects from the Department of International Relations, who act as a control group. The latter are also multilingual, since they speak English, but the focus of their studies is not the language. The first study compared the use of oral and written Japanese by students of the fourth year of both departments. Some significant differences were observed, and the question was to establish whether the two groups are different before they come to the University and they become multilingual. The question of whether a certain type

of speaker would choose a language-oriented career was answered with a control experiment evaluating the first year students of both departments. No significant differences were found, and therefore it was concluded that the differences observed in the fourth year are due to the multilingualism of the Spanish department subjects.

The following study tried to unveil when the multilingualism starts causing influence in the learners of a language. What level does a person have to achieve in a language for his L1 to be visibly affected? When can our students be considered “multilingual”? The exploration of this topic presented the difficulty of how to measure changes in the students by comparing them with a control group. The only technique that seemed possible was to “create” an experimental group by activating their Spanish mode right before submitting them to the tasks in Japanese. This group would be considered the “multilingual” group. The control group was a group of students whose Spanish was not activated prior to the experimental tasks. The tasks were performed by students that are in their second, third and fourth year at the university. The data did not yield conclusive results. The main finding was that activating the Spanish mode on the students lead to a more extensive production in Japanese, but it was difficult to identify the places where the grammar changed as a result of multilingualism.

Results of the dissertation defense

The oral defense took place on February 4th, 2014, at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies, from 13:00 to 15:00. The committee was presided by Prof. Montserrat Sanz, a full professor at the Department of Spanish of that University, and was composed by Prof. Noritaka Fukushima and Prof. Ryujin Nomura, full professors at the same department, and by Prof. Chise Kasai, associate professor at Gifu University. The candidate had 30 minutes to make his oral defense. After that, questions were posed by the members of the committee. The questions were answered appropriately by the candidate.

The committee pointed out the following shortcomings:

- The linguistic roots of linguistic relativism (differences in perception between English or Spanish speakers and Japanese speakers) must be explained theoretically in detail, crediting the researchers who stated the explanations.
- There is an imbalance in the weight of the different parts of the dissertation.

The review parts are extensive, but discussion on the data of the research carried out by the author could be lengthened.

- There are further analyses that can be performed on the data: for instance, a comparison between the subjects in their first year and in their fourth year, etc.
- The information about the subjects must be made more precise (age and gender of subjects, level attained, hours of Spanish taken at each level, etc.)
- The references must be unified in style.

In spite of the shortcomings above indicated, the committee considers that the dissertation has potential value for other researchers, since it is the only study of its nature carried out to date. Also, the review parts are extensive and detailed. Therefore, this dissertation fulfils the requirements of this university for the doctorate degree, for which it deems the candidate approved.

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