L3 Acquisition of articles in German by native Japanese speakers

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It is well documented that native speakers of languages which lack articles and have no morphological marker for definiteness show persistent variability in the use of articles in L2s where they are present and upon which definiteness is marked (Ionin, Ko & Wexler 2004). This and other studies of the L2 acquisition of articles that mark definiteness in the target language have shown (i) that development is different where the L1 lacks articles and where they are present; (ii) that speakers of L1s without articles use L2 articles to mark both definiteness and specificity for a considerable time. This poses some interesting questions for L3 acquisition, given the following scenario:

L1 Japanese [+arg,-pred] → L2 English [+arg,+pred] → L3 German [+arg,+pred]
(no articles) (obligatory articles/count sing. NPs) (same as L2)

Will learners whose L1 lacks articles still fluctuate in their L3 article choice when they have acquired an L2 where articles mark definiteness? Does L2 proficiency have an effect on L3? Both questions bear on the nature of transfer in non-primary language acquisition, and whether acquisition of specific linguistic properties in a second language facilitates learning of cognate properties in a third language.

Results are presented from written gap-filling and oral elicitation tasks from two groups of L3 German speakers with Japanese L1: a low proficiency L2 English group and a high proficiency L2 English group. A native control group was included. Results show strong evidence of L2 transfer effect, with L2 proficiency having more effect on the target-like behaviour of the subjects’ article choice than length of immersion or tuition in the L3. Unexpectedly, persistent overuse of the definite article appears to be more strongly linked to the Case of the noun than its specificity. The implications of this for the role of the L1 and L2 in L3 acquisition will be considered.

References