

Wholesale or Property-by-Property Transfer? Evidence from Initial-State L3 Chinese Acquisition

Abstract: Zhao & Safaryan (2019) report that 95% of non-native Chinese learners study it as a third (L3) or additional language (Ln). The present paper addresses the following questions: What is the initial state of Chinese as a third language (L3) acquisition? Is there transfer from previously learned languages (PLLs) into L3 Chinese? What is the mode of transfer: wholesale or property-by-property? And what variables condition transfer? Evidence is supporting the position that transfer at the initial state of L3 Chinese is predominantly wholesale and is influenced by cognitive optimization and (psycho)typology. To demonstrate this, we analyze data from mirror-image groups of initial-state L3 Chinese learners (L1 English → L2 Japanese vs. L1 Japanese → L2 English) in their acquisition of two properties: (a) plural forms of inanimate nouns and (b) word order in basic declarative sentences. The data show that, irrespective of group membership, participants demonstrated a clear preference for transferring only one PLL within the same linguistic property—allowing only one grammatical form per property (e.g., only +men or -men, but not both ±men; and only SOV or only SVO, but not both)—and a strong tendency to transfer that same PLL into the second property. Irrespective of L1 or L2, Japanese-like syntactic rules were applied to the initial state L3 Chinese by most participants, resulting in wholesale transfer from Japanese. However, some learners who perceived English as unsimilar to Chinese, still transferred English, doing so in a wholesale manner as well. Few allowed two forms per property—accepting both +men and -men as grammatical, or applying both SOV and SVO as grammatical in Chinese—leading to a novel type of language representation not present in any PLL. A few others exhibited traits of hybrid transfer from both PLLs. We conclude that wholesale transfer may constitute a default tendency at the initial state of L3 Chinese acquisition. The present data partially align with predictions of the Typological Primacy Model, suggesting that (psycho)typologically closest language is transferred wholesale into L3, since Japanese was perceived as psychotypologically closer to Chinese; however, correlation analysis was insignificant, suggesting that transfer cannot be reduced to (psycho)typology alone. We further explain the results in terms of cognitive optimization, whereby learners reduce representational complexity by committing to a single coherent grammar rather than maintaining competing alternatives across languages.

Keywords: Initial state, L3, Chinese¹, transfer, English, Japanese, plural, word order

¹ The term “Chinese” is used here to refer specifically to Mandarin Chinese, also known as Putonghua.