Title of the thematic issue:

Typological perspectives on language and thought in L2

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Abstract of the issue

Over the past two decades research on typological contrasts across languages and their role in second language acquisition has been increasingly carried out on the basis of empirical and experimental research methods. Focus has been placed on the role of systematic cross-linguistic differences in different aspects of the lexicon and the grammar. Research carried out within the framework of ‘thinking for speaking’ (cf. Slobin, 1996) and its extension ‘seeing for speaking’ (cf. von Stutterheim & Nüse, 2003), for example, investigates the extent to which a speaker’s language(s) influences cognitive processing in the phase of conceptualization in language production (cf. Levelt, 1989). During this pre-verbal phase, the speaker prepares the conceptual content of the planned message, i.e., the information to be verbalized is selected, segmented and linearized. Cross-linguistic investigations of this phase aim to pin down what type of information is mapped onto what type of linguistic means, by using the same type of input (stimuli) for speakers of different languages, and looking at how linguistic performance (what people actually say) may differ. Recently, measures of cognitive processing during the carrying out of a linguistic task (eye tracking for example) have been used as well.

It has thus been shown how cross-linguistic variation in the way in which concepts are lexicalized (the type of information that is typically encoded in verbs vs. adjuncts, for example, cf. Talmy, 2000) leads to clear differences in the selection and encoding of information when speakers of different languages are asked to talk about (more or less complex) situations and events (Slobin 2006; Papafragou, Massey & Gleitman 2002; Hickmann, Taranne & Bonnet, 2009). These language-specific conceptualization preferences are seen to develop early in L1 acquisition (Berman & Slobin, 1994; Allen et al., 2007). Studies on cross-linguistic differences have also been carried out in the grammatical domain of verbal aspect (presence or absence of grammaticized means to express imperfective/progressive aspect, cf. von Stutterheim, 2003), showing how this form of variation gives rise to language-specific patterns in event conceptualization. Language-specific differences have been attested in the segmentation and selection of information both in the construal of events (cf. Carroll, v. Stutterheim & Nüse, 2004; Hickmann, 2006) as well as in the structuring and linearization of information in longer pieces of discourse (e.g., macrostructural principles and cohesive devices in narratives, Carroll & Lambert, 2006; Dimroth, Andorno, Benazzo & Verhagen, 2010). Other studies on atypical populations (e.g., speakers with aphasia who present dissociations between lexical and syntactic knowledge) demonstrate that linguistic diversity plays an important role for the development of language-specific strategies (i.e. reliance on specific types of grammaticalized/lexicalized information). The investigation of such populations underlines the importance of typology for the study of the language-thought interface more generally (cf. Nespoulous, 1999; Soroli, Hickmann, Sahraoui, 2011).

Based on these findings for both adult native speakers as well as children acquiring their first language, research has recently started to systematically look at the impact of language typology (i.e., differences and similarities in specific language pairs) on the processes and outcomes of second language acquisition (Pavlenko, 2011; Han & Cadierno, 2010; Brown & Gullberg, 2011; Hendriks, Hickmann & Demagny, 2008; von Stutterheim & Carroll, 2006; Kellerman & van Hoof, 2003). The central question addressed for L2 acquisition is whether and how deep linguistic variability affects speakers’ conceptual representations and processing patterns in both L1 and L2 production and comprehension; in other words, in how far does the selective attention installed during L1 acquisition remain resistant to restructuring, or to what extent is cognitive processing for language production flexible, in adult L2 acquisition?

The current special issue of LIA, in presenting studies within the research tradition outlined above, focuses on how language-specific variation affects performance by different types of language users, in particular second language speakers, on a variety of linguistic tasks. In other words, we look at language-specific conceptualizations in production tasks at different levels, ranging from the marking of intonational contrasts to global macro-structural planning principles in discourse. The role of crosslinguistic differences will be investigated by looking at 1) utterance level at patterns in information selection and segmentation, with a specific focus on the way in which native and L2 speakers construe events, and by looking at 2) discourse level and the way in which information is structured, highlighted / contrasted and linearized across utterances. The specific questions addressed in our special issue are as follows: How do different types of language users (e.g., native speakers, second language users, aphasics) deal with different forms of language-specific conceptualizations in different types of production tasks? To what extent, and by which intermediary steps, is it possible to restructure L1-based ‘thinking for speaking’?
References


