

# Linguistics, Language Acquisition, And Language Variation: Current Trends And Future Prospects

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## Chapter 3: Testing the Current Models of Third Language Acquisition

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### Abstract

In this chapter, we argue that another factor should be brought into the general picture of third and additional language acquisition: the comprehensible linguistic input. Predictions of current models have been predominantly based on the cognitive-psychological prominence of the three languages (native or not, adult-onset or not, naturalistic or instructed, proficient or not) as well as on the structural linguistic properties to be acquired, which may overlap or contrast. We argue that even keeping these two factors constant, discrepancies in learning outcomes still arise, which have to be explained by the linguistic experience of the learners. We support our arguments with results from two recently published studies, which document diverging developmental paths for two properties that should have been acquired in a similar manner.

Keywords: third language acquisition, cross-linguistic influence, null objects, Topicalization, comprehensible input

### 1. Introduction

Research on third (L3) or additional (Ln) language acquisition within formal linguistic perspectives has increased dramatically in the last decade. We define L3/Ln as languages learned successively after a second language has been acquired, most commonly in adulthood.<sup>1</sup> This enhanced interest is warranted because new knowledge on the competence and performance of L3/Ln learners is in a position to illuminate important questions on how the native and additional languages influence each other in the ensuing linguistic development. At issue is what factors play a decisive role in this cross-linguistic influence. One possible factor is the cognitive and psychological prominence of the languages from which transfer<sup>2</sup> is possible. The native language is normally considered to be the most prominent and stable in terms of linguistic competence; the second language (L2) may be acquired in adulthood or in infancy, acquired naturalistically or in

<sup>1</sup> Research on three languages learned in childhood is almost non-existent but promises to yield highly interesting findings; see Barnes (2006).

<sup>2</sup> We use "transfer" and "cross-linguistic influence" interchangeably in this chapter.

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