

Cross-Linguistic Influences in the Acquisition of Generic Reference in Spanish and English

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This paper reports on a study investigating the acquisition of generic reference by L1-Spanish L2-English learners and L1-English L2-Spanish learners, and discusses the implications for heritage speakers of Spanish.

Languages differ in whether they use articles for generic reference. In English, generic reference is expressed by bare (article-less) plurals; use of the definite article *the* changes the interpretation from generic reference to specific reference. For example, (a) is a generic statement about the kind *hungry dogs*: it states that members belonging to this kind are dangerous. Whereas (b) can only be a statement about a specific group of hungry dogs – it cannot be a statement about the entire kind.

- (1) a. Hungry dogs are dangerous. [$\sqrt{\text{generic}}$]
b. The hungry dogs are dangerous. [$*\text{generic}$; $\sqrt{\text{specific}}$]

In contrast, Spanish (as well as other Romance languages, e.g., French, Italian) requires a definite determiner for generic reference, as illustrated in (2). Example (2a) shows that bare plurals in subject position are ungrammatical in Spanish. On the other hand, (2b), with a definite determiner, can be a statement either about the kind *hungry dogs* (generic reading) or about a particular group of hungry dogs (specific reading). (For theoretical accounts of this cross-linguistic difference, see Vergnaud and Zubizarreta 1992, Longobardi 1994, Chierchia 1998, among others).

- (2) a. * Perros hambrientos son peligrosos. [$*\text{generic}$]
dogs hungry are dangerous.
b. Los perros hambrientos son peligrosos. [$\sqrt{\text{generic}}$, $\sqrt{\text{specific}}$]
the dogs hungry are dangerous

In our study, we examine the implications of this cross-linguistic difference for adult second language acquisition of both English and Spanish. Our study uses an online Truth Value Judgment task with Spanish speakers learning English in Argentina, and English speakers learning Spanish in the U.S., as well as Spanish-speaking and English-speaking controls. Results so far indicate that cross-linguistic transfer plays a role in the acquisition of generic reference, and that transfer is furthermore more persistent in the Spanish→English direction than in the English→Spanish direction. This is consistent with theories of learnability: learning a new interpretation (the generic interpretation of definite plurals in Spanish, as in (2b)) is easier than *unlearning* an interpretation (the generic interpretation of definite plurals in English, as in (b)), because unlearning cannot be done through positive evidence alone.

We discuss the implications of these findings for heritage language acquisition of Spanish, as well as the heritage language acquisition of generic reference in other languages, with particular attention paid to Brazilian Portuguese, a language whose system of marking genericity differs in interesting ways from both Spanish and English (Müller 2002).