L2 Greek morphological agreement

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Abstract

This is a study of morphological agreement in L2 Greek verbal and nominal domains by L1 Russian, Bulgarian, and Turkish speakers, with various features such as person, number, gender, and case involved, following Tsimpli et al. 2005. Russian, Bulgarian, and Greek are similar in terms of phi-feature agreement, but different from Turkish. A further distinction will be made for the L2 Greek, between Standard Modern Greek and Cypriot Greek. The analysis of the oral interviews shows that gender, an uninterpretable feature that lacks semantic content (Tsimpli 2004, Franceshina 2001), was the most problematic feature for non-native speakers of Greek, both in the verbal and in the nominal domain. L2 learners either relied on phonological agreement or used the default neuter gender.

Key words: L2 acquisition, morphological agreement

Introduction

According to the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (Haznedar & Schwartz 1997, Lardiere 1998, Prévost & White 2000), L2 acquisition is UG-constrained, so the operation Agree is available to L2 learners. Morphological agreement is realized post-syntactically at the PF-interface. Syntax and morphology develop independently in L2A without a straightforward mapping between them (Smith & Tsimpli 1995). It is difficult for L2 learners to access and match the morpho-phonological form with the relevant feature(s) (Lardiere 2005). The variability of L2 output by non-native speakers depends on their L1 and the length of exposure and age of onset to L2, the domain of agreement, locality issues, and morphosyntactic features involved.

The present study investigates morphological agreement in L2 Greek verbal and nominal domains by L1 Russian, Bulgarian, and Turkish speakers, with various features such as person, number, gender, and case involved (following Tsimpli et al. 2005). Russian, Bulgarian, and Greek are similar in terms of phi-feature agreement, but different from Turkish. For example, Greek and Bulgarian are +determiner/clitic languages, while Russian and Turkish are –determiner/clitic languages, and Russian, Greek, and Bulgarian are +gender languages, while Turkish is a –gender language.

The study

This study investigates grammatical aspects in the L2 acquisition of Greek, both Standard Modern Greek (SMG) spoken in mainland

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Greece and Cypriot Greek (CG) spoken in the Republic of Cyprus. The data come from 40 oral interviews conducted in Greece (with 8 Russian–SMG adult speakers) and Cyprus (with 17 Russian–CG, 8 Bulgarian–CG, and 8 Cypriot Turkish–CG adults). Table 1 shows information on the participants.

The interviews included four parts (Tsimplici et al. 2005): (1) natural conversation on background information, (2) story-telling while describing of eight sets of pictures, (3) two-instruction-giving tasks, and (4) general discussion on various daily life topics.

Participants	Russian-SMG	Russian-CG	Bulgarian-CG	Turkish-CG
N	8	16	8	8
Gender	5 male 3 female	16 female	5 female 3 male	3 female 5 male
Age mean	31.5	32.8	40.7	64.3
Origin	2 Kazakhstan 2 Georgia 2 Russia 2 Moldavia	6 Russia 4 Belarus 5 Ukraine 1 Moldova	8 Bulgaria	8 Cyprus
Job	6 low 2 high	10 high 6 low	6 low 2 high	2 high 6 low
Education	5 school 3 university	12 university 4 school	4 school/ 4 university	2 university 8 school
LoR mean	13.5	10	2.8	64.3
AoO Mean	19.5	23	37.8	0
MLU	5.05	7.26	4.33	4.27

Results

The analysis of the participants' oral production showed that Bulgarian–CG and Russian–CG speakers omitted more determiners than the other non-native groups. In addition, there were more omissions for neuter and feminine than for masculine determiners. Russian–SMG speakers omitted more feminine determiners than the other participants, while Russian–CG, Bulgarian–CG, and Turkish–CG speakers omitted more neuter determiners. Feminine determiners singular in nominative and accusative case and neuter determiners singular and plural in accusative case had the highest omission rate (Table 2).

Russian–SMG speakers omitted more clitics than the other non-native groups, Bulgarian–CG and Turkish–CG speakers had nearly the same clitic omission rate and performed worse than the Russian–CG speakers. Overall, participants omitted more determiners than clitics. Neutral singular clitics in accusative case had the highest rate of omission (Table 2).

All non-native groups performed more proclisis than enclisis. The participating residents of Cyprus had more enclitics than the participants who live in Greece. This can be explained by the influence of their L2 CG (Table 2). The position of pronominal object clitics in CG is mainly post-verbal, except for certain syntactic environments, such as negation and subjunctive embedded clauses with *na*, which require proclisis, both in CG and SMG. The default clitic placement in SMG is pre-verbal, apart from some syntactic environments, which enforce enclisis, for example, imperatives (Terzi 1999, Grohmann 2011).

All L2 learners had more utterances with null rather than overt subjects, Bulgarian–CG and Turkish–CG speakers had a higher percentage of null subject than the other groups. Turkish is a language with an agglutinating pronominal paradigm and so allows radical pro-drop, while Bulgarian and Russian have fusional or invariant pronominal paradigms and do not allow radical pro-drop; pronouns are not present only in certain contexts (Neeleman & Szendroi 2007).

Table 2. Determiner and clitic omission by L2 groups.

%	Russian-SMG	Russian-CG	Bulgarian-CG	Turkish-CG
Determiner omission	41	53.31	68.8	42.6
Clitic omission	13.5	5.18	11	10.12
Proclisis	5.62	11.68	8.25	15.75

The Russian–CG and Bulgarian–CG non-native groups had more agreement errors than the other non-native groups. Within DP, gender was the most problematic; in subject–verb agreement L2 participants had more errors in number, and subject–adjective mismatches observed were mainly due to gender. Overall, the gender feature was the most problematic in agreement relations for L2 participants (Table 3).

Table 3. Agreement mismatches by L2 groups.

Agreement mismatch %	Russian-SMG	Russian-CG	Bulgarian-CG	Turkish-CG
Features total (41)	4	15	13	9
Gender (23)	3	8	7	5
Number (7)	1	2	3	1
Person (1)	0	0	0	1
Case (10)	0	5	3	2

The analysis of the recordings shows that gender was the most problematic feature for non-native speakers of L2 SMG and CG, in both the verbal and the nominal domain. Grammatical gender is an uninterpretable feature as it does not coincide with natural gender and lacks semantic content (Franceschina 2001, Tsimpli 2004), so L2 learners have problems assigning

gender features and gender concord. L2 learners of either variety of Greek in this study either relied on phonological agreement or used default neuter gender. It has also been found that length of exposure to L2 influences the production of surface morphology (Table 4), in line with findings by Gess & Herschensohn (2001), Lardiere (2005), and Tsimpli et al. (2005).

Table 4. Variables and determiner and clitic omission and agreement mismatches

Variable %	Determiner omission	Clitic omission	Agreement errors
LoR 0–5	66	11	17
LoR 6–10	47	7	9
LoR 11–15	49	6	13
LoR 16–...	42	9	7

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