Cross-Language Interaction during Trilingual Production

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Abstract: *This is a case study which focuses on the pragmatic component of language competence, the trilingual's ability to make the appropriate linguistic choices in monolingual, bilingual, or trilingual communication modes, and the potential developmental stages learners undergo. Pragmatic competence is a key factor for successful language communication in socio-cultural surroundings and a language aspect that causes many challenges for FL learners. Although pragmatic competence is generally neglected in second language acquisition, learners should be fostered to develop pragmatic skills in the target language. For many years, learning a foreign language was equated with linguistic or grammatical accuracy but since the adoption of the communicative approach, the focus has moved to the achievement of functional abilities in the target language, language understanding and language production which are appropriate to the communicative situation in accordance with specific sociocultural parameters.*

Mia is the research subject who has grown up in a trilingual language environment of German from birth (L1), English since the age of four (L2), and Bulgarian when she was five (L3). She is a trilingual child who has been brought up with two home languages (English and Bulgarian) which are different from the one spoken in the wider community (German). Mia has grown up with rich exposure to all three languages while her parents followed practices that promoted language development. For this reason, she has developed active trilingual language abilities, although she seemed to favour German over English and Bulgarian for spontaneous language production.

The aim of the study is to analyse the nature of the trilingual's interlanguage competence and cross-language interaction through examining her performance data, which will undoubtedly contribute to the research of trilingualism and multilingualism and ascertain the importance of different environmental factors in fostering active trilingualism. The present study investigates how trilingual's native and non-native languages interact in the process of language production. It disputes Chomsky's Universal Grammar and his view that human language faculty is innate and proves that languages are learned through experience and exposure to stimuli in the environment rather than being innately endowed.

Language exposure, the quantity of input for each language, interlocutor language, and parenting language strategies are considered as key factors to trilingual language acquisition and active trilingualism. Mia's language production was observed in her natural environment as particular attention was given to the influence of language exposure patterns and parenting language strategies.

In conclusion, this study follows the language development of a trilingual child but it also looks for evidence that trilingual children have later in their years an

advantage over their monolingual peers because they can use structural knowledge of three languages instead of one language only. Language creates culture and emotions, and moving from one country to another could influence one in a different way.

Keywords: *trilingualism; cross-language interaction; language production; pragmatic competence;*

Introduction

Languge is not only a means of communication and the connection between the past and the present but it is also the bridge between cultures. Thus, having knowledge of other languages and cultures can increase awareness and empathy with other cultural values and mindset as well as foster cultural equality. The present study shares the assumption that language and culture are the fundamental parts of the two-way process of communication – TL culture is a process that shapes language and at the same time it is shaped by language. Most studies on trilingualism have extended bilingual acquisition and the theoretical framework of bilingualism research. Cenoz and Genesee (2000), on the other hand, describe multilingualism as the final result of the process of acquisition of several non-native languages, thereby clearly making it an attribute of the individual. The present study supports their viewpoint and proves that the acquisition of a third/forth/etc. language changes the cross-language influence but since thirteen percent of the world population are trilingual, the developmental process of trilingualism needs its own research agenda.

As the prefix *tri-* in the key term 'trilingualism' suggests, the present study describes the connections in a language triangle.

German

English   Bulgarian
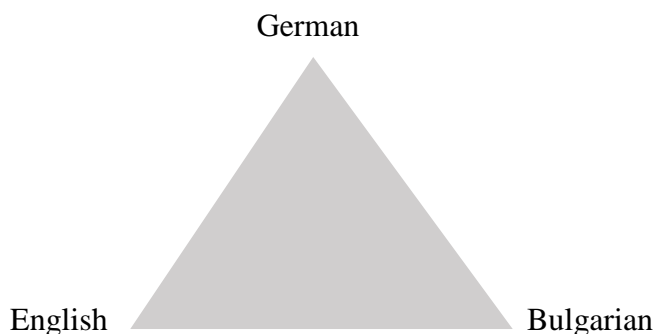
Figure 1. *A language triangle*

'Early trilingualism', also called 'infant or child trilingualism' refers to the age of the trilingual at the time of third language acquisition and describes

the process of language development when the child is in contact with three languages from birth or early childhood. This case study examines the early trilingual pragmatic development of Mia, the research subject, now aged twenty-one, and the reason lies in the assumption that early trilingualism has a beneficial impact on the adult's ability to learn foreign languages. Mia has grown up in a trilingual language environment of German from birth (L1), English since the age of four (L2) and Bulgarian when she was five (L3). She is a trilingual child who has been brought up with two home languages which are different from the one spoken in the wider community. Mia has grown up with rich exposure to all three languages while her parents followed practices that promoted language development. For this reason, she has developed active trilingual language abilities, although in the beginning she seemed to favour German over English and Bulgarian for spontaneous language production.

The controversy about whether acquiring two ot three languages benefits or hinders the production of either language provoked the topic of the study. Thus, the *aim* of the current study is to analyse the nature of the trilingual's interlanguage competence and the cross-language interaction through examining her performance data, which will undoubtedly contribute to the study of trilingualism and multilingualism and ascertain the importance of different environmental factors in fostering active trilingualism.

The study investigates how trilingual's native and non-native languages interact during language production. It disputes Chomsky's Universal Grammar and his view that human language faculty is innate and proves that languages are learned through experience and exposure to stimuli in the environment rather than being innately endowed.
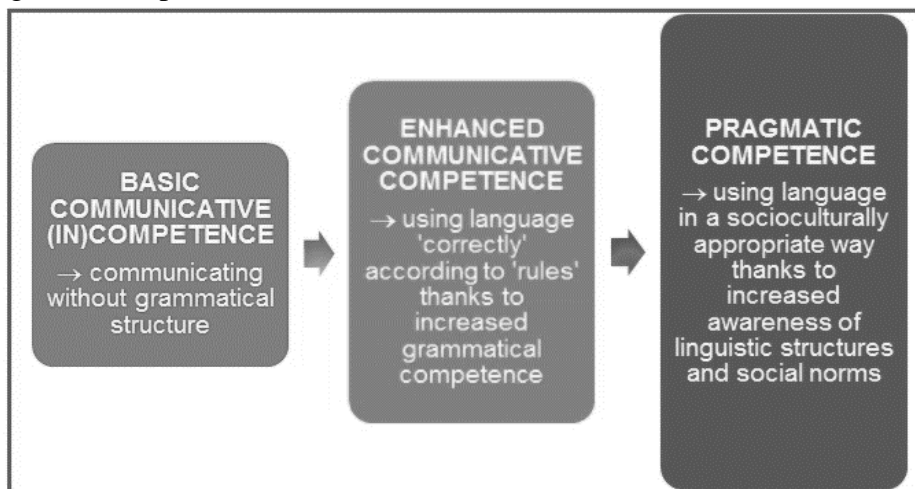
Research questions:

1.   How do trilingual's native and non-native languages interact beyond initial stages of language acquisition?

2.   Why do trilinguals experience interference between non-native languages?

Pragmatic competence

Trilingual's pragmatic competence is crucial for effective communication. Taguchi (2009) explains the reason why the ability to use a second language effectively in a social context is of great importance with the factors involved in speech act production and employment of various languages for various purposes. For language learners, embedding cultural competence in different speech communities is as important as their linguistic competence in order to understand and produce language in accordance with sociocultural parameters. Language learners must be able to grasp the culture and fit in with the new speech community (Bennett 1993). Second language learners must also master

the pragmatic and cultural features of the target language. Figure 2. below outlines the stages of communicative language competences a second language learner should go through – basic communicative (in)competence and enhances (linguistic) communicative competence – in order to reach the pragmatic competence.

BASIC COMMUNICATIVE (IN)COMPETENCE
→ communicating without grammatical structure

ENHANCED COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE
→ using language 'correctly' according to 'rules' thanks to increased grammatical competence

PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE
→ using language in a socioculturally appropriate way thanks to increased awareness of linguistic structures and social norms

Figure 2. *Pragmatic competence in a second language*

The ability of the trilingual to use the right linguistic options in monolingual, bilingual, or trilingual communication modes is the study's main focus. In contrast to grammatical competence, which is the knowledge of form and meaning, Chomsky defined 'pragmatic competence' as the "knowledge of conditions and manner of appropriate use (of the language), in conformity with various purposes" (Chomsky 1980, 224). According to Canale & Swain (1980), pragmatic competence is also known as sociolinguistic competence and it is the understanding of how to use language in context. Later, Canale (1988, 90) broadened this definition to include "illocutionary competence, or knowledge of the pragmatic conventions for performing appropriate language functions, and sociolinguistic competence, or knowledge of the sociolinguistic conventions for performing appropriate language functions in a given context".

According to Bachman (1990), the term can be used to indicate the ability to use language to express a wide variety of functions whereas their illocutionary force in discourse is determined by the sociocultural context in which they are used. Another researcher, Rose (1999) defined pragmatic competence as the ability to use available linguistic resources (pragmalinguistics) in a contextually appropriate way (sociopragmatics). The pragmalinguistic transfer is the process of using L1 strategies to perform a linguistic function which is different in L2 such as the use of the imperative to make a request in Slavic languages (e.g. *Open the window!*). The

sociopragmatic transfer is the process of applying L1 sociocultural norms to L2.

Figure 3. *Intercultural communication and removal of cultural barriers*

From the trilingual's perspective the benefit of pragmatics is understanding the meanings of language from a broader intercultural aspect and interpreting the context in the intercultural communication. In this way after raising intercultural awareness, trilinguals will be more responsive to people's intended meanings implanted in worldwide communication. There is no constraint of how many unfamiliar cultures a child should get acquainted with. But undoubtedly the more traditions learned, the superior international communication the child can achieve. Intercultural knowledge is the way to pragmatic competence. There are no typical patterns in each speech act of a certain language but everybody should learn as many dissimilar patterns in customs and pragmatics as he can.

On the way to trilingualism… key factors
Together with language exposure (Chevalier 2015), the quantity of input for each language (Arnaus Gil et al. 2021), and interlocutor language, parenting language strategies (Ronderos, Castilla-Earls & Ramos 2021) were considered as key factors to trilingual language acquisition and active trilingualism. Mia's language production was observed in her natural environment as particular attention was given to the influence of language exposure patterns and parenting language strategies.

Mia was born in Germany by a Bulgarian mother who speaks fluent German and an English father. For this reason, the family had no doubts to raise a trilingual child. Although these three languages were acquired in different environments, in a classroom as opposed to at home or in the community, they did not hesitate what language they should speak to their

child nor which one will be dominant. It is always best to speak your mother tongue because this is the language you are proficient in. Therefore, speaking the most common ways of exposing a child to a language is one of the most important aspect of language learning for babies starting from the very birth the way speaking also takes a central role in language instruction.

Living in Germany to the age of four, Mia was exposed to German every day and became quickly a native German even though she was expected to be rather English or Bulgarian. She managed to express herself in a confident way and used to say rather 'Gurke' instead of 'cucumber' or 'crastavitsa' or her favourite 'Pfütze' instead of 'puddle' or 'lokva' many years after acquiring her L2 and L3. On the other hand, culture can have an impact on language acquisition and prepare the child for further social integration so it cannot be detached from its cultural context. If you want to expose your child to the culture of the country where you grew up, it is important to promote it to your child.

At the age of four, moving to England, Mia was aware that people outside her home can speak English and not Bulgarian nor German. She would switch in combination with self-correction: 'Здравейте, деца… hi everyone!'

On another occasion, paraphrasing her mother's words: 'Идвааам ей сега, кажи на тати след малко е вечерята', Mia is switching to English for clarification: 'Mum is getting ready, she said dinner would be ready in a minute'. This finding shows more L3 than L1 intrusions during L2 use, despite L1 being more proficient and most used language by far.

Concentrating on knowledge about the L2 she speaks could actually be a great benefit because in this way Mia could navigate newly acquired vocabulary and patterns. Being exposed to three languages as a sequential bilingual, Mia developed metalinguistic skills at a very young age and this helped her develop language awareness faster than her peers.

Moreover, as a talkative, outgoing, easily adaptable child, eager to express herself, Mia would catch up with her second language, English, much smoother than her Polish bilingual friend who was at this age rather quiet, timid and reserved. Later on, throughout the years this would change to prove that the temperamental influence predicted their level of proficiency.

Furthermore, the study shows that this has noticeable consequences for non-native language production, which was negatively affected by cross-linguistic intrusions from the other non-native language. This is likely because L2 was at a much lower proficiency level than L1, potentially making this language more susceptible to intrusions than L1.

After L2 production Mia's L1 words are less accessible than L3 words. One explanation for these findings has been given in the form of L2 status hypothesis (Bardel and Falk 2007, 2012), which argues that L2 and L3 are more cognitively similar than L1. Another explanation was ascribed to the way

trilinguals apply more L1 than L3 inhibition. Trilinguals might acquire L2 and L3 in similar environments and in similar life stages (e.g., in later childhood or adulthood as opposed to from birth) but little is known about how L2 and L3 interact.

The main task of Mia's family, while being in England, was to use German and develop Bulgarian in parallel with English. Those were the years that built the foundations of three language systems simultaneously. Mia's family managed to provide trilingual parenting background for her. That was the time of the fastest language acquisition of L2 and L3 as they lived in an English environment where L2 was dominant and one of the parents is a native speaker. Attending an independent school in the UK, Mia made good friends and manners and impeccable English pronunciation. That resulted in subtractive bilingualism as the second language (English) had replaced the first language (German) because English was dominant in the surrounding and German was not being reinforced.

There is also an example of initiated repair. On her mother's request, Mia repeated her German utterance in English. As a trilingual child, Mia was able to switch between input languages at the early age of four in order to interact with her parents speaking different native languages:

'Mama ist fertig! Wir fahren los, sag bitte Papa!'

The girl knew very well that her father did not understand German. Thus, she needed to find the way to express herself in English: 'Daddy, Mum is ready, we are off, just to let you know, ok?'.

An exact depiction of when she started switching was difficult because of the acquisition of three languages, however, this process was determined by the English environment and her peers at the Reception class. Trilingualism had inhibited her L1. This suggests that a trilingual's non-native language (L2 or L3) might experience more interference from another non-native language than from her L1 and the non-native languages influenced each other more strongly than the native language.

Williams and Hammarberg (1998) described a similar case study with trilinguals (speakers of English, German, and Swedish) who switched more frequently to their L2 (German) than to their L1 (English). Tomoschuk et al. (2021) who also examined trilinguals (speaking Dutch, English, and French) with a high proficiency in their L1 and L2 but lower language proficiency in their L3 showed similar patterns with more interference between non-native languages than between a native and non-native language.

A great number of experiments have proved that bilinguals inhibit their L1. According to Tomoschuk et al. (2021), trilinguals may block their L1 more forcefully than their L2, which could explain the increased interference from L2. The fact that trilinguals apply more inhibition (or apply it more successfully) over their native language leads to increased interference

between non-native languages. According to Green's Inhibitory Control Hypothesis (1998), bilinguals use inhibition to avoid interference from L1 (the non-target languages) in order to successfully produce in the target language. This hypothesis contends that the strength of the inhibition is relative to the proficiency in that language and the degree of linguistic competency. Language switching research (Meuter and Allport 1999) suggested that bilinguals who had a higher level of proficiency in their L1 than L2 can show asymmetrical switch costs, with larger costs when switching back to their L1 than L2. This could be the result of bilinguals applying high levels of L1 inhibition during L2 use, which takes much time to release this inhibition when switching back to L1.

Talking about the status of the motherese hypothesis, being a fluent German, Mia's mother used simple words and sentences as well as simplified grammar in order to give her child the opportunity to interact and learn. This spontaneous mother-child communication is crucial to the child's emotional, social and language development. Mia's mother used vocabulary related to the environment (repetitive words and phrases), a large number of questions, some of them only words with rising intonation 'Ja? Nicht wahr? Naa?', but avoided the initial 'goo-goo', 'ga-ga'.

Multilingual children's output in English is a great advantage because of the possibility of cross-linguistic influence from previously acquired languages. A few optional structures (in German and Bulgarian) could be qualified as equivalents for an English sentence:

English	**German**	**Bulgarian**
Dad is working.	*Papa arbeitet.*	*Тати работи.*
	Papa ist beim Arbeiten.	
	Papa ist am Arbeiten.	
	Papa ist arbeiten.	

Taking these characteristics of English, German, Bulgarian into consideration, some conclusions can be drawn:

- The only way to form the progressive aspect in English is with the help of the auxiliary 'be' and the present participle of the main verb.
- In German, however, we can find several constructions instead.
- Bulgarian differentiates between past imperfect and present.

This review serves the idea why English may cause problems for all learners of English. The situations above exemplify the important factors for developing active trilingualism. Mia's parents applied different strategies for raising her trilingual. Although her father used one person – one language strategy, her mother could assign different language to different activities (time and place strategy) to foster Mia's trilingual development. Thus, each parent

could speak his/her language with the child at home, at the playgroung, or in the street.

The question that arises is *When does a child become trilingual?* When a child is brought to a new linguistic environment, she does not automatically become bilingual/trilingual although she usually picks up the language that other children in her environment speak.

Research on the relationship between the native and non-native languages has mainly focused on people acquiring a third language (L3). Although L1 is at a higher (proficiency) level than L2, several studies have suggested L3 acquirers might be influenced (e.g., using syntactic structures from L1 or L2 in L3) by L2 rather than L1 (e.g., Bardel and Falk 2007, Falk and Bardel 2011, Rothman and Cabrelli Amaro 2010). A conscious effort, however, is often demanded by the parents if they wish. So, in the meanwhile, as a native Bulgarian, Mia's mother has decided to speak Bulgarian at home and teach her daughter to read and write in the Cyrillic alphabet. Bulgarian became a passive language as German already was her native one.

At the age of seven, however, Mia's family moved to Bulgaria so that Mia could finish school in Bulgaria and boost L3 acquisition. While acquiring Bulgarian both English and German remained relatively static. Mia was a carrier of a receptive (passive) trilingualism in terms of English and German and developed productive (active) competence in terms of Bulgarian. She would first decide to say 'Моля те, мамо, хайде да си ходим' , instead of 'Come on, Mummy, let's go home' or the even further one 'Mama, wollen wir nach Hause?'

These results, however, are not consistent with the literature on L3 acquisition, which frequently indicates that L2 has an impact on L3 acquisition (e.g., Mickan et al. 2020; Puig-Mayenco et al. 2020). They reveal how trilinguals develop according to their experience and background. Although there is a strong relationship between non-native languages, Mia exemplified passive trilingualism. The different circumstances of the acquisition of the third language have resulted in distinct patterns of linguistic development and proficiency.

A year later, approximately at the age of eight, she was obviously perfectly capable of separating the three languages she spoke and was fluent (but not native) in all three of them. The family continued to speak English at home and Bulgarian when out. German was studied as a school subject. Beside the similar acquisition of the phonological, grammatical and lexical levels of German and English, the language dominance, the role of parents, the social environment and the personality of the child should also be considered.

Sometimes the acquisition of a second language represents an expansion of the linguistic repertoire. This is known as additive bilingualism and it occurs mainly where both languages continue to be used. This is what

happens nowadays with the interlanguage performance: Mia speaks fluently English and Bulgarian but a year ago she started studying Chinese in a German university so German became dominant again. She also uses Russian when necessary.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study follows the language acquisition of a trilingual child but it also looks for evidence that trilingual children have later in their years an advantage over their monolingual peers because they can use structural knowledge of three languages instead of one language only. Language creates culture and emotions, and moving from one country to another could influence one in a different way.

Mia was living in a L1 dominant society that offers relatively low use of L2 and L3. Even in L1 surroundings, the trilingual's pragmatic development was facilitated by strategies employed by parents and caregivers to teach them the communicative practices of their social group. The study proves the close interaction between non-native language control and interference (cross-language intrusions) in trilinguals.

Future research will consider social status, age of onset, heritage language proficiency in order to account for other influencing variables. Apart from this, the grammatical area should be extended to the overall use of tense and aspect.

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