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EXPANDING THE MULTILINGUAL REPERTOIRE

Teaching cognate languages to heritage Spanish speakers

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Introduction

A significant proportion of students attending post-secondary educational institutions in the US have Spanish in their linguistic repertoire. Several institutions capitalize on these students’ bilingual skills to develop proficiency in additional languages, especially cognate systems that can be acquired faster, such as French, Italian, and Portuguese. Among the attributes that characterize the acquisition of cognate languages, one finds a faster acquisition process, high competence in receptive skills, and ease of communication from the beginning, all due to facilitative transfer. Non-facilitative transfer, on the other hand, is responsible for a great deal of unwelcome cross-linguistic interference and early fossilization of non-target like features. Given current evidence for the importance of typological similarity in L3 acquisition (e.g., Rothman, 2010, 2011), curricular designers have sought to develop methods that emphasize cross-metalinguistic awareness that is believed to facilitate acquisition of Italian (Donato & Oliva, in preparation), French (Donato, Bordage, & Rustin, 2012; Oliva & Donato, 2015), and Portuguese (Carvalho, Freire, & Silva, 2010; among others) by Spanish speakers in educational settings in the US.

In fact, the creation of special courses for Spanish speakers has resulted in a rapid increase in enrollment in Portuguese programs. Milleret (2012, p. 14) points out that the presence of Spanish speakers on university campuses has had the biggest impact on the growth of Portuguese programs nationwide. She adds that, as a whole, there are more Spanish speakers than non-Spanish speakers enrolled in Portuguese classes in US higher education institutions. Likewise, classes of both Italian and French especially catered to Spanish speakers are offered by California State University at Long Beach, UC Santa Barbara, and Long Beach City College. In addition, UC Riverside, UC Berkeley, and Miracosta College offer Italian courses for Spanish speakers. Finally, several high schools in the Los Angeles area offer courses in either
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French or Italian, capitalizing on the large Spanish-speaking population in California. Such initiatives respond to the realization among professionals that the growing number of students with competency in Spanish necessitates a language acquisition curriculum that takes advantage of their preexisting skills (Donato, 2014, p. 1). By capitalizing on the students’ knowledge of Spanish, the teaching of cognate languages to Spanish speakers complies with the recommendation made by the Modern Language Association that institutions promote “speakers who have deep translingual and transcultural competence” (p. 2), while meeting, in particular, the need to “encourage heritage speakers to learn additional languages” (MLA, 2007, pp. 8–9), as pointed out by Carvalho et al. (2010).

The potentiality that Spanish speakers’ bilingual repertoire can be expanded to include other languages in a couple of years of instruction is substantiated. It is by now evident that cognate languages can be acquired more rapidly and efficiently than more typologically distant languages. For example, Wiedemann (2009) claims that the numbers of hours necessary to learn Portuguese is double for English monolinguals than it is for Spanish speakers. In addition, there is consensus about the usefulness of teaching strategies that attempt to combat non-facilitative transfer and capitalize on facilitative transfer in order to aid in language acquisition, which justifies the creation of special courses or tracks that teach Romance languages to Spanish speakers (Carvalho, 2002; Carvalho, Freire, & Silva, 2010; Donato & Oliva, in preparation; among others). However, the assumption that Spanish speakers make up a homogeneous group with similar needs is yet to be proven.

In this chapter, after a brief review of the fields of L3 acquisition and the teaching of cognate languages, we propose that curricular designers need to be attentive to subdivisions inside the generic “Spanish speakers” label. By reviewing incipient research that investigates fine-grained differences among L1 Spanish speakers, L2 Spanish speakers, and heritage Spanish speakers when acquiring an L3, we stress the need to consider the context in which Spanish was acquired in order to better understand particular performance differences among these groups. For example, we discuss evidence that shows higher levels of metalinguistic awareness among L2 Spanish speakers than among heritage Spanish speakers (Child, 2013), and the consequences that this difference may have for the heritage Spanish speakers’ performance in classes that stress this type of awareness.

Historical perspectives

While the teaching of additional languages and the effect of linguistic transfer in the acquisition process have received great attention in Europe, in the US these issues have only recently fostered experimental research. In the aftermath of the dismissal of Lado’s strong claim for contrastive analysis and his emphasis on the primary role of L1 in L2 acquisition patterns, in addition to the embracing of the communicative approach by US language teachers, little was left to the instructor teaching cognate languages. However, the constant presence of Spanish in the students’ production when learning Portuguese experienced by instructors gave rise to some studies examining students’ errors that were largely due to Spanish transfer (Azevedo, 1978; Jensen 1989; Teixeira-Leal, 1977), while others called for the use of contrastive analysis in the classroom to combat these errors (Garrison, 1979; Jordan 1991; Pletsch de García, 1993). It was only recently that experimental research became available that included studies on pragmatics, morphosyntax, phonetics, and the impact of teaching methods, mostly motivated by questions about the acquisition of Portuguese as L3 among Spanish-English bilinguals. This recent trend brought to the subfield of Portuguese for Spanish Speakers much needed empirical evidence
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that justifies differential pedagogical treatment in the teaching of cognate languages, showcased in five symposia on the topic for Portuguese for Spanish speakers and several publications (see Carvalho, 2013 for references).

Also based on the premise that Spanish speakers need a language curriculum that considers their previously acquired systems when learning cognate systems, interest in the teaching of French (Isaacar, 2013; Munoz-García & Panisall, 2010; Stevens, 1990) and Italian (Arroyo Hernández, 2009; Bordonaba Zabalza, 1998; Calvi, 2004; Montalto Cessi, 1999; Musto, 2010; Trovato, 2012) for Spanish speakers resulted in several publications on the topic. More recently, Donato and associates have developed a special method of teaching Italian (Donato & Oliva, in preparation) and French (Donato et al., 2012) to Spanish-speaking high school and college students in California. Their proposal is based on a model that originated in Europe, “Intercomprehension,” that focuses on the acquisition of reading knowledge of additional languages in a multilingual context. Adapted to the US reality, American Intercomprehension uses Spanish and English as dominant resources in the acquisition of French or Italian and includes all four skills. What is unique about this proposal in comparison to current practices in the Portuguese for Spanish speakers classroom is the use of several Romance languages as a crucial element. The approach not only includes English and Spanish as ‘reference languages’ and Italian or French as ‘target languages,’ but also constant references to other Romance languages such as Portuguese, Catalan, French, Italian, and Romanian as ‘auxiliary languages’ (Donato & Oliva, in preparation). Of ultimate importance is the opportunity that Spanish speakers have to learn about other similar languages through contrast and comparisons that such an approach encourages, which ultimately enhances their motivation and ability to expand their multilingual repertoire.

Critical issues on the topic

A constant premise in the field of teaching and acquisition of cognate languages is that learners will transfer a great deal from the previously acquired cognate system. Transfer, here, is meant to refer to a cognitive process by which the learner perceives a very high possibility of success in transferring knowledge from any previous language to target language production and reception (Faerch & Kasper, 1987). For the purposes of this discussion, “perception” could mean both a conscious awareness of overt similarities among the languages involved (what could be termed a form of meta-linguistic knowledge), as well as a subconscious process where “true grammatical similarity is assessed and determined subconsciously by the linguistic parser very early in the L3 process based on an implicationally hierarchical continuum of linguistic cues” (Rothman, 2015, p. 180).

Assuming, with De Angelis and Selinker (2001), that all linguistic systems present in the speaker’s mind may be simultaneously interacting and competing in language production, the proneness for both facilitative and non-facilitative transfer among Spanish speaking learners of other Romance languages explains the characteristics that have defined this group of learners, i.e.,

• a faster acquisition process;
• high competence in receptive skills from the beginning;
• eases of communication from the beginning;
• high motivation due to lessening of the affective filter and decreased anxiety level;
• cross-linguistic transfer at all levels of grammar, sometimes inducing early fossilization of an interlanguage.

Both non-facilitative and facilitative transfer processes are interconnected, given that transfer is the result of the perception, both conscious and subconscious, of a great deal of cross-linguistic
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(psycho)typological relatedness (Kellerman, 1983; Rothman, 2013, 2015). However, even though transfer is responsible for several of the characteristics just mentioned and works as an important facilitating factor (see, for example, Bailey, 2013), most of the pedagogical emphasis has been on combating non-facilitative transfer (Carvalho, 2002, 2013). Although there is not a unified set of methods to teach cognate languages nor one that has been empirically tested, most of the pedagogical material that is available in the US attempts to expand students’ metalinguistic awareness by calling their attention to both cross-linguistic similarities and differences.

In the area of Portuguese for Spanish speakers, Com Licença (Simões, 1992) was the first book published in the US catering to Spanish speakers, followed by Pois Não: A Brazilian Portuguese Course for Spanish Speakers with Basic Reference Grammar (2009) by the same author. Both books present a plethora of explanations of grammatical differences between the languages, as illustrated in Figure 27.1. In addition, Bateman, Mattos, Brasiliero and Knapp (2017) have just published Perspectivas: Português Para Falantes de Espanhol, the first content-based, communicatively-oriented Portuguese for Spanish-speakers textbook that incorporates the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages’ (ACTFL) Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century.

For the teaching of Italian and French for Spanish speakers, the Intercomprehension method developed by Donato and associates presents multilingual examples that engage learners in exploring, deducing, and hypothesizing “about the concordances and divergences between target, reference and auxiliary languages while essentially performing exercises in the target language” (Donato & Oliva, in preparation). A (simplified) snapshot of this approach is given in Figure 27.2.

The teaching material designed by both Simões and Donato et al. emphasizes both commonalities and differences across the language systems and treats them as essential tools in the acquisition of cognate languages. Along the same lines, Carvalho and da Silva (2006) suggest that materials developed for teaching cognate languages should draw heavily on Schmidt’s (2001) claim that conscious processes facilitate L2 acquisition, given that mere exposition to input may be especially insufficient for the acquisition of opaque differences or non-salient forms. Because there are so many non-salient linguistic differences between Romance languages that do not interfere with communication and are often unnoticed by the learner, Carvalho and da Silva call for an approach that aims at the explicit teaching of rules in order to facilitate ‘noticing’ (in Schmidt’s terms) in order to improve mastery of the target language. Nevertheless, recent research that investigates potential differences among the types of Spanish speakers in the language classes (namely L1 Spanish, L2 Spanish, and heritage language speakers) brings incipient evidence that the teaching of cognate languages that emphasizes metalinguistic awareness through explicit grammar teaching may pose special challenges to the heritage language learner.

Current contributions and research

Awareness of the importance of both the order and context of acquisition of the background languages has not gone unnoticed by researchers in the field of L3 acquisition. In fact, many of the recent studies conducted in order to test theories regarding the role of the background languages in L3 acquisition (see García Mayo & Rothman, 2012 for a discussion on these theories) have looked at different groups of Spanish/English bilinguals acquiring L3 Portuguese. The theory that has received the most attention, the Typological Primacy Model (TPM) (Rothman, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2015), proposes that at the initial stages, cross-linguistic influence or transfer will come from the background language that “the learner’s internal mechanisms perceive” (Rothman, 2010, p. 246) to be the most typologically similar to the target language. And indeed, the majority of these studies have shown how Spanish/English bilinguals in the early stages
1. Words in Brazilian Portuguese are frequently stressed on the penultimate (next-to-last) syllable. In Spanish, the number of penultimate words seems to be higher (approx. 2/3) than in Brazilian Portuguese. Because this stress pattern is very common in both languages, words stressed on next-to-last syllable are less likely to have a stress marker, and for this reason they are considered unmarked. Examples:

**Brazilian Portuguese** | **Spanish**
--- | ---
carro | carro
domingo | domingo
interessante | interesante
complicado | complicado

2. Words ending in two vowels, followed or not by s, stressed on the penultimate syllable (antepenultimate vowel), do have a written accent in Portuguese:

**Brazilian Portuguese** | **Spanish**
--- | ---
Spelling | Pronunciation | Spelling | Pronunciation
Mário | [má.ɾu] | Mario | [má.ɾio]
rádio(s) | [Rá.ɾu(S)] | radio(s) | [rá.ɾio(S)]
glória | [gló.ɾa] | gloria | [gló.ɾia]

**Note-1:** The way in which this rule is stated allows for greater generalization than traditional rules. It applies, for example, to other words not usually part of this group: área, pâreo, etc. usually pronounced [á.ɾɐ], [pá.ɾu], etc.

**Note-2:** Words stressed on the penultimate vowel will not have a written accent as they do when they form a hiatus in Spanish. Note that normally the vowel “a” in Brazilian Portuguese does not become a semi-vowel (e.g. Bahía = [ba.ɾi.a] and not *[ba.ɾi]*). Similarly, in Brazilian Portuguese words ending in -io and -ia without a stress marker, contrary to Spanish, stress the -i: epidemia, fantasia, Maria, academia, seria, faria, democracia, nostalgia, etc. But, if there is a stress marker, the accent falls where the stress marker indicates: Mário, Fábio, hidrogênio, etc.

**Figure 27.1** A sample of contrastive teaching in material designed to teach Portuguese for Spanish speakers (Simões, 2009, p. 26)
Lesson 5

*Vedere: I am 20 years old!*

Identify the following languages:

- (Eu) Tenho 25 anos.
- (Yo) Tengo 23 años.
- (Jo) Tinc 21 anys.
- J’ai 22 ans.
- (Io) Ho 28 anni.  Answer key: PT, SP, CA, FR, IT, CO,
- (Eiu) Aghju 29 anni.  SC, SA, SC RO, EN.
- (Lu) Aiu 26 anni.
- (Deu) Apo 27 annos.
- (Eu) Am 25 ani.
- I am 20 (years old).

Identify the verbs used to express age. Most of the languages presented above use the “to have XX years” structure, whereas one language uses “to be XX.” Is Italian closer in structure to English or Spanish?

Answer key: Italian is closer to Spanish, both use “to have” structures.

The following three languages use the verb “to have” to express age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spagnolo</th>
<th>Francese</th>
<th>Italiano</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Yo) Tengo</td>
<td>J’ai</td>
<td>(Io) Ho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Tu) Tienes</td>
<td>Tu as</td>
<td>(Tu) Hai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(El/Ella) Tiene</td>
<td>Lui/Lei a</td>
<td>(Lui/Lei) Ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Nosotros) Tenemos</td>
<td>Nous avons</td>
<td>(Noi) Abbiamo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Vosotros) Tenéis</td>
<td>Vous avez</td>
<td>(Voi) Avele</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Ellos/Ellas) Tienen</td>
<td>Ils/Elles ont</td>
<td>(Loro) Hanno</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Does the conjugation of the verb avere in Italian remind you of a Spanish verb? Which one?

Answer key: haber

Look at the following chart. What is comparable?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spagnolo</th>
<th>Italiano</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He</td>
<td>Ho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has</td>
<td>Hai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ha</td>
<td>Ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hemos</td>
<td>Abbiamo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habeis</td>
<td>Avele</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Han</td>
<td>Hanno</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 27.2* A sample of contrastive teaching in material designed to teach Italian for Spanish speakers  (Extracted from Donato, Oliva, Romero, & Zappador-Guerra, 2013).
transfer principally from Spanish when learning Portuguese, even for properties where English influence would produce more target-like Portuguese responses (e.g., Giancaspro, Halloran, & Iverson, 2015; Montrul, Dias, & Santos, 2011; Rothman, 2010, 2011; Santos, 2013).

However, some of these studies have shown that factors other than typological similarity, such as the order and context of acquisition, can affect transfer as well. Santos (2013) found evidence of English transfer when L2 Spanish speakers accepted ungrammatical double object constructions in L3 Portuguese, but L1 Spanish and heritage Spanish did not. In addition, Giancaspro et al. (2015) reported differences between L1 Spanish and heritage Spanish bilinguals regarding their acceptance of phrases containing differential object marking in L3 Portuguese. Thus, although typology is clearly the dominant factor for Spanish speaking bilinguals in L3 Portuguese acquisition, how and when learners acquired Spanish can significantly affect transfer into an L3, although not always in predictable ways.

Research specific to the acquisition of Portuguese by Spanish speakers has shed additional light on cognate language acquisition by these different groups of Spanish speakers, especially heritage Spanish speakers. In the first place, although there is evidence that all Spanish-speakers perceive Spanish as the typologically most obvious source for transfer to Portuguese (e.g., Child, 2013; Santos, 2013), it is clear that they do not all view the role of Spanish in Portuguese language acquisition in the same way. In fact, Child (2013) has shown that L2 Spanish speakers view Spanish as being much more facilitative for the acquisition of L3 Portuguese grammar than do both L1 Spanish and heritage Spanish speakers. In Child’s study, L2 Spanish speakers even spoke of grammar in different terms; they frequently made mention of how knowing Spanish helps with “verb conjugations” in Portuguese whereas L1 Spanish speakers never mentioned this term when asked about the role of Spanish for Portuguese learning. Then again, both L2 Spanish speakers and heritage Spanish speakers feel that the explicit comparison of Spanish and Portuguese in a classroom setting is highly beneficial for Portuguese learning; L1 Spanish speakers, on the other hand, expressed neutral feelings regarding this practice. Clearly, language learning perceptions can be affected by the context of acquisition as well as by prior linguistic experience.

There is incipient evidence that these three groups of Spanish speaking bilinguals also employ different learning and transfer strategies when acquiring L3 Portuguese in formal learning environments. As might be expected, L2 Spanish speakers, who have learned Spanish as adults in formal (classroom) environments, do not seem to have the same difficulties as native and heritage speakers of Spanish when learning additional languages in the classroom. For example, L1 Spanish and heritage Spanish bilinguals tend to rely on more intuitive, less rule-based strategies (e.g., analogies, generalizations, and even explicit avoidance), whereas conversely, L2 Spanish bilinguals favor rule-based, explicit strategies (Carvalho & da Silva, 2006; Child, 2017). Correspondingly, L2 Spanish bilinguals have been shown to be better with explicit instruction and feedback while L1 Spanish bilinguals favor implicit instruction techniques. Perhaps most importantly (and troublingly) is the fact that some heritage Spanish bilinguals struggle with both types of instruction in formal learning environments, although it is unclear exactly why (Koike & Gualda, 2008).

These differences in perceptions and learning strategies are also reflected in their transfer/acquisition of the lexicon, morphosyntax, and pragmatics of L3 Portuguese. For example, Johnson (2004) found that L1 Spanish and heritage Spanish bilinguals committed specific errors on writing exercises, included orthographic and vocabulary errors, that none of the L2 Spanish learners committed (but not vice versa). In addition, and most importantly for the teaching of cognate languages to heritage speakers, is that although all Spanish speakers show evidence of morphosyntactic transfer from Spanish to L3 Portuguese (e.g., Giancaspro et al., 2015;
Montrul et al., 2011; Rothman 2010, 2011; Santos, 2013), evidence exists that the three
groups transfer their knowledge of morphosyntax in unique and significant ways with dif-
fering results (e.g., Santos, 2013). For example, Child (submitted) shows evidence that L2
Spanish speakers may apply their knowledge of present tense mood distinctions in Spanish
more completely when learning these same distinctions in L3 Portuguese than L1 Spanish and
heritage Spanish speakers do. Specifically, he reports on results indicating that although L2
Spanish speakers score lower than both L1 Spanish and heritage Spanish speakers on multiple
measures of Spanish proficiency, they perform equally well in both Spanish and Portuguese
on tasks measuring their knowledge of the present subjunctive in obligatory contexts. In other
words, their knowledge of mood distinctions is comparable in both Spanish and Portuguese.
In contrast, L1 Spanish and heritage Spanish bilinguals score significantly higher on Spanish
tasks than on Portuguese tasks after receiving the same instruction as the L2 Spanish speakers.
This could reflect a greater ability on the part of L2 Spanish speakers to transfer their linguistic
knowledge in subsequent language acquisition. On the other hand, it may indicate that these
L2 Spanish speakers have both more metalinguistic knowledge and more training in formal
language learning environments than the other two groups, thus allowing them to perform
better on explicit, formal measures of linguistic competence, namely sentence completion and
modified grammaticality judgment tasks. Regardless, these results seem to suggest that the
methods currently employed in teaching and assessing Portuguese may better fit the needs of
L2 Spanish speakers learning a cognate L3 than either L1 Spanish or heritage Spanish speakers.

These differing patterns of transfer between native Spanish and heritage Spanish speakers on
the one hand, and L2 Spanish speakers on the other, are also evident with regards to subjunctive
usage in non-obligatory contexts (Child, 2017). L2 Spanish bilinguals’ results suggest that they
use a strictly rule-based approach to the usage of the subjunctive that does not take into account
the variation inherent in non-obligatory contexts. In contrast, L1 Spanish and heritage Spanish
bilinguals show evidence of a more nuanced understanding of the subjunctive in both Spanish
and Portuguese, which we interpret as a result of their implicit knowledge of mood distinctions
in Spanish, and their ability to intuitively transfer it to Portuguese.

Finally, heritage speakers seem to be able to transfer cultural and pragmatic aspects better
than L2 Spanish speakers when acquiring Portuguese. In other words, certain cultural and
pragmatic uses of the language are more similar between Spanish and Portuguese, although
this is rarely, if ever, tested in a classroom setting (c.f., Júdice, 1995; Koike & Flanzer, 2004;
Silva, 2008). For example, Koike and Flanzer (2004) report how heritage speakers make use of
more Brazilian-like ways of requesting and apologizing than their L2 Spanish-speaking peers.
Again, we see evidence that if what is assessed is implicit knowledge that was acquired through
language socialization in Spanish, both groups, L1 Spanish and heritage Spanish speakers, seem
to surpass L2 Spanish speakers. By the same token, if what is assessed is explicit knowledge and
metalinguistic awareness, L2 Spanish speakers seem to perform better than the other groups.

In summary, it is clear that Spanish plays a strong role among all Spanish-speaking bilinguals
learning Portuguese, and we would expect to find the same trends in the acquisition of French
and Italian by the same groups of learners. In fact, results from all of the studies mentioned
provide evidence for a strong typological effect of Spanish in L3 Portuguese acquisition. More
importantly, we have reviewed evidence, albeit incipient, that transfer patterns will differ
according to the manner in which Spanish was acquired. More specifically, L2 Spanish speakers
perform better in tests where their metalinguistic awareness is activated than L1 and heritage
Spanish speakers, whose implicit knowledge of Spanish helps with tasks that call for intui-
tion, such as the ones that assess their knowledge and ability to transfer pragmatics and vari-
ation. In order to interpret such patterns, we draw from the concept of “transfer of training”
We suggest that on many of the formal measures of Spanish and Portuguese, used both during instruction and by researchers attempting to capture speakers’ linguistic skills, L2 Spanish speakers are transferring not only their linguistic knowledge, but also their training in formal language learning. The knowledge that order and context of acquisition (formal vs. naturalistic, etc.) can be correlated with differences in learning strategies and transfer patterns is essential information in choosing the type of instruction that best benefits speakers of Spanish as a heritage language and has direct implications on the teaching of cognate languages to Spanish heritage speakers in the US.

Recommendations for practice

Based on previous studies, it is possible to claim that while explicit teaching of a cognate language that emphasizes metalinguistic awareness is appropriate to the learning styles of L2 Spanish speakers, heritage Spanish speakers may benefit from activities that capitalize on their implicit linguistic knowledge. In other words, L1 Spanish and heritage Spanish speakers may be more adept at transferring their greater implicit knowledge of Spanish than L2 Spanish speakers who, accordingly, may show greater metalinguistic awareness and explicit knowledge of Spanish grammar rules when performing explicit linguistic tasks. This should not come as a surprise, given that Correa (2011) showed that most heritage language learners in her study could not produce grammatical terminology and simple grammatical analysis due to the naturalistic manner in which they acquired Spanish and their lack of formal L2 instruction. Bowles’ (2011) study brings further evidence to Child’s suggestion (2017) that Spanish L2 speakers, when given metalinguistic tasks, have an advantage compared to Spanish L1 and HL speakers, given that the former group in Bowles’ study also scored highest overall on the tests that were designed to measure explicit knowledge, both the metalinguistic knowledge test and the grammaticality judgment test. Spanish HL speakers, on the other hand, surpassed the L2 speakers by far during the tests that involved oral narrations, due to their superior implicit knowledge of Spanish. Thus, based on evidence derived from both the field of heritage language acquisition and Portuguese L3 acquisition that points to the abilities of heritage speakers to intuitively acquire the grammar through implicit knowledge of the language (as opposed to L2 speakers who are known to ‘use the grammar to get to the language’), we suggest that the teaching of cognate languages refrain from over relying on metalinguistic instruction and explicit knowledge-based assessment. This implies that educators should use a variety of tasks and task types to teach and assess Spanish-speaking learners of cognate languages. Of course, this also implies that teaching and assessment should focus on all aspects of language use, including not only “the four skills” of speaking, listening, reading, writing, but also pragmatic knowledge, language variation, and dialect and register awareness, to name a few.

Accordingly, we propose that implicit linguistic knowledge can be capitalized on in the initial stages of the teaching of cognate languages for heritage speakers. For example, reading and listening activities that make use of authentic texts should serve as an important pedagogical component, a point already made in Carvalho, Freire, and Silva (2010). Because highly congruent lexical and grammatical inventories make cognate languages highly comprehended by heritage language learners’ implicit linguistic repertoire (see, for example, Jensen, 1989; Júdice, 2000), a curriculum tailored to the needs of heritage speakers should capitalize on the meaning transparency of the target language input. Instead of relying purely on explicit noticing and learning of similar and divergent language structures, perhaps a more appropriate approach to heritage speakers would be to develop activities that focus on form in Long’s term (1991), in
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which awareness of grammar is achieved through the understanding of meaning, and not the opposite. We believe that this approach, one that gives precedence to meaning while at the same time targeting grammatical accuracy through task-based language teaching and assessment, may better cater to the heritage language learners’ population in their path to the acquisition of a multilingual repertoire.

Future directions

Future studies on the acquisition of cognate languages by Spanish speakers need to take into account the context of participants’ Spanish acquisition by utilizing a broad range of tests and tasks, including elicited oral and conversational data, along with more formal linguistic measures that have been used to date (e.g., grammaticality judgment tasks, sentence completion tasks, etc.). Geeslin (2010), among others, has pointed out that the combination of more-guided and less-guided tasks can yield both converging and diverging results, which in addition to revealing biases that may be related to specific tests and tasks, can shed more light on the effect of implicit and explicit knowledge in language transfer and its interface with the context of acquisition of the background languages.

On a side note, the high linguistic permeability that allows for rapid language acquisition and calls for specific methods for the teaching of cognate languages should also have repercussions on the opposite phenomenon, namely that of language attrition. Pavlenko and Jarvis (2002) call our attention to the little consideration that has been placed by scholars on bidirectional transfer, or the notion that cross-linguistic influence can work both ways. Communities where cognate languages are in contact offer a good context for bidirectional transfer, and, most recently, research on language attrition among cognate language pair bilinguals has shown rapid erosion as well (Calvo Capilla, 2007; Iverson, 2012). Looking at a cognate L2 or L3 effect on one’s L1 or heritage language would shed additional light on the transfer process and the role of typology on transfer patterns as well, and as such inform the field of acquisition of additional cognate languages.

In summary, research on cognate language acquisition by Spanish speakers has the potential to reveal acute differences between heritage Spanish, L1 Spanish, and L2 Spanish speakers regarding not only the underlying representation of their linguistic knowledge, but also of the ways in which their acquisitional process may be influenced by the different contexts in which Spanish was previously acquired. In particular, it highlights the many issues involved in heritage language acquisition that apply not only to their use of their native languages but also to subsequent languages acquired as adults.

Further reading


This edited volume is a good introduction to the field of L3 acquisition studies and the importance of L3 acquisition studies to our understanding of language acquisition in general.


This article provides the most up-to-date formulation of Rothman’s Typological Primacy Model (TPM) theory of L3 language acquisition, a theory central to L3 acquisition of Portuguese by heritage Spanish speakers.
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