

Crosslinguistic influence on Plurality Processing among L1 English L2 Mandarin and heritage English-Mandarin Speakers

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Plurality is a widely attested semantic concept across languages, yet its morphological realization varies substantially. In English, plural meaning is typically expressed through overt morphological marking on the noun, such as the addition of regular suffixes (e.g., -s) or irregular forms (e.g., *children*) (Köpcke, 1998). In contrast, Mandarin Chinese relies heavily on contextual cues—including numeral information—to convey plurality. The suffix *-men* is often analyzed as a collective marker that primarily attaches to human nouns and encodes a plural or group interpretation (Ilic, 1994). These linguistic differences in the expression of plurality may give rise to transfer effects in second language (L2) acquisition, especially when considering crosslinguistic influence among L1 English L2 Mandarin speakers.

With plurality, multiple cues encode the same semantic feature, and as such, their distribution and relative weight may influence how speakers interpret and process plurality. In addition to the plurality cues mentioned above, apparent optionality in overt plural marking can occur when there is no classifier in the sentence (Cheng & Sybesma, 1999). For example, bare nouns can situationally express plural meaning in Mandarin Chinese, on the contrary, English requires the overt realization of number features on nouns due to obligatory agreement within the nominal domain.

Given these differences, the question arises of how L1 English learners of Mandarin adjust from a system with obligatory morphological marking to one in which plurality is distributed across multiple cues. In particular, how such learners process plural meaning while they parse and weigh different cues while reading these L2 morphosyntactic structures.

To address these questions, the present study proposes to employ an acceptability judgment task to examine how speakers with different linguistic backgrounds (L1 Mandarin Chinese, L1 English L2 Mandarin Chinese, and Mandarin Chinese heritage speakers) rely on distinct cues to interpret plurality during offline processing (and test online processing with self-paced reading task for the next step). Differences are expected to emerge across the aforementioned speaker groups with L1 Mandarin Chinese speakers accepting the constructions containing the numeric classifiers and noun plural marking, regardless of grammaticality and accepting more constructions consisting of a bare plural that expresses plurality. Conversely, the L1 English speaker group is expected to have higher rates of acceptance of the constructions with the noun plural marking regardless of the appearance of classifiers, reflecting the plurality cues of their L1 English.

Although previous studies have examined plural marking in both L1 Mandarin Chinese and English (Ilic, 1994; Köpcke, 1998), relatively little work has focused on plurality processing among adult L1 English learners of Mandarin. Addressing this gap can provide new insight into crosslinguistic influence and morphosyntactic transfer in second language acquisition.

References

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