L2 English genitive choices of L1 Spanish speakers

James Algie
University of Cambridge

Previous studies have shown evidence of cross-linguistic transfer in early L2 acquisition of the Saxon genitive amongst L1 Spanish speakers, including an erroneous or non-native-like overuse of the prepositional genitive in its place. Little research exists on how long these difficulties persist and whether the advanced L2 English speaker still struggles with the necessary distinctions between Saxon genitive and prepositional genitive constructions.

This study uses judgement data tasks to elicit responses from a group of L1 Spanish speakers with an advanced level of L2 English regarding the acceptability of Saxon genitive and prepositional constructions, using a control group of L1 English speakers. Both groups responded first with acceptability judgements of sentences containing either Saxon or prepositional genitive constructions. The groups were then given sentence pairs that differed only in their choice of genitive construction and asked to assess which sentence was more acceptable.

The results revealed that native language did indeed influence participants’ genitive choices. The L1 Spanish participants judged the prepositional genitive constructions more harshly than the L1 English speakers did, while there was no significant difference in their respective judgements of the Saxon genitive constructions. Further, the L1 Spanish speakers were more discerning in their judgements of the sentence pairs, assessing only one of the two genitive constructions acceptable in their given contexts more frequently than the L1 English speakers did, while the L1 English speakers were more likely to find both forms acceptable.

Overall, the study provides evidence for cross-linguistic transfer persisting into the latter stages of L2 acquisition, while suggesting that the L1 Spanish speakers’ non-native use of genitive constructions may develop into overuse of the Saxon genitive and underuse of the prepositional genitive construction.
**Relevant graphs**

*Experiment 1:* Mean acceptability ratings of both native English (L1 Eng) and native Spanish speakers (L1 Spa).

*Experiment 2:* Chart of ‘decisiveness’ of native English speakers (L1 Eng) versus native Spanish speakers (L1 Spa).