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Einfeldt, Marieke; Kupisch, Tanja ; Tronnier, Mechtild

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

The acquisition of Italian geminates by L1 German and Swedish speakers in production and perception

Marieke Einfeldt¹, Tanja Kupisch,^{1,2} Mechtild Tronnier²

¹University of Konstanz, ²The Arctic University of Norway, ³University of Lund
marieke.einfeldt@uni-konstanz.de, tanja.kupisch@uni-konstanz.de,
mechtild.tronnier@ling.lu.se

Our study deals with L1 transfer into L2-Italian on the segmental level. Specifically, we investigate whether L1-Swedish speakers have an advantage over L1-German speakers when acquiring consonantal quantity distinctions in L2-Italian due to positive transfer from Swedish. All three languages, German, Swedish and Italian, have quantity distinctions in stressed syllables, but they play out differently. Italian distinguishes singletons from geminates in spelling and production, e.g., *pala* [pala] vs. *palla* [pal:a] (Schmid, 1999). A secondary cue to gemination is the preceding vowel. A vowel followed by a geminate is shorter than a vowel followed by a singleton (Pickett, Blumstein, & Burton, 1999). In German, gemination does not exist but vowel duration is distinctive. Vowels preceding single written consonants are longer than those preceding double written consonants, e.g., *rote* [ro:tə] vs. *Rotte* [rɔtə] (Truckenbrodt, 2014). Swedish shows complementary length, i.e., double written consonants are associated with longer consonants preceded by short vowels, while single written consonants are associated with shorter consonants preceded by long vowels, e.g., *rally* [ral:i] vs. *alibi* [a:li:bi] (Bruce, 2012). Unlike Italian speakers, speakers of Swedish are more inclined to rely on vowel length than on the length of the following consonant in the same (stressed) syllable when identifying words. In summary, the three languages show similarities in spelling but differences in pronunciation – a particular challenge for learners with formal instruction and exposure to written texts. However, the L1-Swedish speakers might have an advantage over the L1-German speakers in perceiving and producing Italian geminates because long consonants exist in their L1. We compare the production and perception of the geminate-singleton contrast in 20 intermediate-level L2-Italian speakers (10 L1-Swedish, 10 L1-German) as well as L1-Italian controls. The production task elicits words with similar VCV-patterns and spelling in the learners' L1s and L2s. Consonant and vowel length are measured. To test perception, a picture-based minimal-pair-decision task was carried out. The test items were five versions of words with intervocalic consonants, whose length was varied stepwise from singleton to geminate. Results show that L1-Swedish learners produce and perceive singleton-geminate contrasts in a more target-like way than L1-Germans, supporting positive L1-transfer.

Keywords: germination; structural similarity; Swedish; German; perception

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