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L1 transfer in the acquisition of gemination in L2 Italian

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Our study investigates whether L1-Swedish speakers have an advantage over L1-German speakers when acquiring consonantal quantity distinctions in L2-Italian due to L1 transfer.

German, Swedish and Italian all have quantity distinctions in stressed syllables, but they play out differently. In Italian, the contrast between consonant singletons and geminates is signaled by single vs. double spelling of consonants and realized by differences in consonant duration, e.g. *galli* [gal:i]. vs., *ali* [a:li]. In German, differences in orthography signal a contrast in duration of the preceding vowel, e.g., *Ralley* [rali] vs. *Alibi* [a:libi]. Standard Swedish shows complementary length, i.e., double consonants in spelling are associated with long consonants preceded by relatively short vowels, while single consonants in spelling are mainly associated with short consonants preceded by long vowels, e.g. *rally* [ral:i] vs. *alibi* [ɑ:lɪbɪ]. The examples show similarities in spelling across these languages but differences in pronunciation. This may be particularly challenging for learners who acquire foreign languages primarily through written texts.

We compare the production of geminate vs. singleton consonants in 30 intermediate-level L2-Italian learners (L1 Swedish or L1 German). By means of a production task, we elicit words with similar VCV-patterns and spelling in the learners' L1 and L2. Consonant length and vowel length are measured, and the groups are compared based on the consonant/vowel ratios of the elicited VC-dyad. As expected, preliminary results show that the Swedish learners produce a larger contrast between Italian geminates and singletons than the German learners, supposedly because consonant length is phonologically distinctive in Swedish.

We discuss various explanations for our findings.