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## **ACQUISITION OF OBJECT PRONOUNS IN EFL IN GERMANY BY HERITAGE SPEAKERS OF TURKISH**

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**Summary.** L3 acquisition has begun to attract the attention of many scholars in recent years. Heritage contexts are especially fruitful areas to understand how linguistic and nonlinguistic mechanisms interact with one another. The current study focuses on L3 English acquisition of object pronouns with L1 Turkish, L2 German speakers. We seek to find out whether the speakers could produce object pronouns accurately, whether L3 English proficiency has any effects on their acquisition, and finally, whether all object pronouns are acquired in the same way. Data for this study come from a corpus consisting of written and oral productions of 167 participants, who were students in four distinct grades, namely 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders at different schools in Berlin, Germany. The results reveal that participants were highly meticulous in their object pronoun use. Also, no clear L1 effect was observed, while L2 impact is implied. Lastly, proficiency and linguistic features are noted as significant factors that have an impact on L3 acquisition.

**Keywords:** EFL; heritage speakers; multilingualism; object pronouns.

### **Introduction**

In second language acquisition research, the relation between input, age of acquisition, and individual differences (among many other intervening factors) is relatively well understood. However, the involvement of a third language brings further dynamics into these relations. Even deciding on the name that would be used to refer to such cases has yielded some confusion. More specifically, L3 ('third language'), Ln ('next/more language'), La ('additional language') have all been used to refer to the current language that is being acquired by multilingual speakers. For the sake of clarity, we will be using the term L3 based on Hammarberg's (2001) definition, in which he describes L3 as foreign language(s) that are currently acquired at schools. Current, well-established second language acquisition (henceforth SLA) theories fall short of explaining L3 acquisition patterns. Several accounts for acquisition of L3 or multilingualism in general have emerged so far. Main divergence in these theories basically has to do with the source of possible Cross-linguistic

Influence (henceforth CLI). Some accounts note only L1 as the source of transfer (Hermas, 2010; Jin, 2009; Leung, 2005), while others put more emphasis on L2 accounts (Bardel & Falk, 2007, 2012; Falk & Bardel, 2011). Additionally, there are robust findings supporting both L1 and L2 effect depending on typological similarity (Rothman, 2011, 2015) and a cumulative effect of all possible linguistic structures (Flynn, Foley, & Vinnitskaya, 2004).

Especially for countries such as Germany, where migration is an integral part of the country's recent history, multilingualism is a hotly-debated issue. A large number of the population of Germany are heritage speakers of Turkish, Russian, Arabic, Italian and many other languages (Lorenz & Siemund, 2020). Thus, especially for children who are born into a family which speaks a heritage language, linguistic interplay between the heritage language (here recognized as L1), German as early second and, after entering school, English as a foreign language is highly complex.

The acquisition of English as L3 in Germany has been scrutinized from a variety of perspectives in recent years. In particular, children's multilingualism that is tied to migration background has attracted the attention of many scholars. For instance, researchers such as Rauch, Nauman and Jude (2012) as well as Maluch and Kempert (2019), among many others focused more on the effects of being bilingual/multilingual on English reading and listening proficiency whereas others (Erlam, 2003; Dollnick & Pfaff, 2013; Hopp, 2018; Lorenz & Siemund, 2020; Sağın-Şimşek, 2006; Şahingöz, 2014; among many others) investigated a variety of linguistic phenomena in this context. Overall, the findings are divergent. Some of them (i.e., Sağın-Şimşek, 2006; Şahingöz, 2014) confirmed strong L2 effect, while others (i.e., Lorenz & Siemund, 2020) observed L1 effect.

One of such linguistic phenomena is the acquisition of pronouns in English as L3. For multilingual contexts like Germany, pronoun acquisition is particularly interesting, due to diverse pronoun properties of Turkish, German and English. Turkish is a head final language (Göksel & Kerlake, 2005; Kornfilt, 1997) with a highly flexible word order. It allows scrambling, and this results in object pronouns to be able to move in a sentence fairly freely. On the other hand, German displays word order asymmetry between finite and subordinate clauses, which results in two alternatives for object pronouns to

appear. Falk and Bardell put it as follows: "in German we assume that the verb is base generated to the right, a position in which it stays in subordinate clauses, whereas it proceeds higher up in the structure in a declarative main clause" (2011, p. 64). Thus, in a declarative main clause, the finite verb is in the second position of the clause, while non-finite verbal elements remain in the right. Object pronouns may either precede the verb or come after it, but only immediately following verb-second. Lastly, English is a head initial language with a strict SVO word order. Object pronouns are preceded by the verb in all cases since verbs do not raise to a higher position than I or AgrP (Pollock, 1989). In brief, heritage speakers of Turkish with a highly flexible word order acquire German object pronouns with few alternative positions in a sentence and end up with pronouns in English with a highly rigid position.

Fark and Bardell (2011) investigate a constellation, which has some resemblance with this. In their study, 22 L1 speakers of French with L2 English and 22 L1 speakers of English with L2 French who were all intermediate L3 German speakers were tested via a grammaticality judgement test to see how they differ with respect to object placement in L3 German. The results signalled a strong L2 effect overriding L1 constraints in L3 German grammatical and ungrammatical object placements. More specifically, the authors claim that L2 has a more significant role in L3 acquisition. Thus, it might be either facilitative or non-facilitative depending on linguistic proximity of languages (Falk & Bardell, 2011, p. 67).

Similarly, Stutter-Garcia (2019) compared and contrasted intermediate La German speakers with L1 English and L2 Spanish and with L1 Spanish and L2 English via two online tasks on the placement of object pronouns and agreement. The results were divergent with respect to the directionality of transfer. While the L1 effect was observed on L3 under time pressure, the L2 effect was evident in L3 acquisition when L2 and L3 features were similar. Furthermore, an increase in L2 proficiency triggered "an enhanced sensitivity to La constraint" (Stutter-Garcia, 2019, p. 269).

The author concludes that there are three factors that determine the directionality of transfer in L3, namely i) the similarity between L1/L2 and La constraints, ii) L2 proficiency range iii) lexical facilitation (i.e., German-English lexical similarities) (Stutter-Garcia, 2019, p. 269).

In brief, although L3 acquisition of object pronouns across distinct L1, L2 and L3s has been studied, results have been far from conclusive. In this research, we focus our study on the L3 acquisition of English object pronouns with a data set that was part of the MultiLit Project (Schellhardt & Schroeder, 2015). We use as a starting point the study of Jähnert (2012), who investigated the use and omission of pronouns and articles in L2 German and L3 English by 15 heritage Turkish students across three age groups (i.e. 7<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders). Her analyses revealed that even though the students were highly accurate in subject pronoun use in L3 English, their object pronoun use was indecisive. Briefly, while the students easily adopted to the strict SOV order in English by accommodating their flexible SOV in L1 Turkish and special SVO and V2 properties in L2 German for subject pronoun use, this did not seem to be the case for object pronouns in L3 English.

In this study, we take Jähnert (2012) as a starting point but take a much broader data set in order to achieve more conclusive results. Our research questions for the current study are as follows:

- Do all L1 Turkish-L2 German participants (167 in total) use object pronouns in L3 English accurately (comparing and contrasting object pronoun accurate uses and norm deviations)?
  - If no, what might be possible reasons?
  - Does the length of exposure to English, reflected in the form of four grades, correlate with the frequency of norm deviations (among group comparisons)?
    - If yes, what might be some possible reasons for such a correlation?
    - Are there any differences among English object personal pronouns (i.e. *me, you, her, him, it, us, them* comparing and contrasting object personal pronouns)?
  - If yes, what might be possible reasons for such a distinction?

## **Method**

As stated earlier, the data analyzed in this study comes from the MultiLit Project (Schellhardt & Schroeder, 2015). The corpus which was compiled by the project

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consists of a total of 1826 texts in three languages, L1 Turkish, L2 German and L3 English. Only L3 English data from the corpus were utilized in this study.

Participants were 167 pupils from three different school types (i.e., two primary schools, a grammar school and a comprehensive secondary school) in Berlin. Written consents were obtained from participants and their legal guardians. DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft), which is a research council providing financial support, did not require any ethics approval for this study.<sup>1</sup> Fifty-two students from fifth grade, 40 from seventh grade, 27 from tenth grade, and 48 from twelfth grade took part in the study. The aim was to allow a “pseudo-longitudinal interpretation of data” (Schellhardt & Schroeder, 2015, p. 5). This corpus design allows us to focus on the cross-sectional representation of L3 English proficiency in line with the increase in English teaching hours at schools.

Our data collection tool was an elicitation technique that was developed by Berman and Verhoeven (2002). Participants were shown a silent video that reflects common school problems such as cheating, bullying etc., and they were then asked to write a text in two genres, expository and narrative. As for the narrative tasks, students were asked to narrate and write a similar event that they had witnessed, while for the expository texts, they were asked to discuss and evaluate the narrated event. The order of modes stayed the same for all participants, i.e. it started with oral and ended with the written production.

## Results

Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were carried out for L3 English data of all four groups within the MultiLit corpus. Three-hundred and sixty-two total cases of object pronoun-based communication units were identified. All cases were categorized in accordance with the following classification:

Accurate cases (AC): *He sees him.*

Incorrect pronoun with right placement (IP-RP): *\*He sees he.*

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<sup>1</sup> Written consents were obtained from participants and their legal guardians.

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Correct pronoun with wrong placement (CP-WP): \**He him sees.*  
Omission (OM): \**He sees.*

The table below indicates the distribution of accurate and divergent uses of object pronouns across four grades.

**Table 1**

*Accurate and divergent productions*

<b>Grade</b>	<b>AC</b>	<b>IP-RP</b>	<b>CP-WP</b>	<b>OM</b>	<b>Percentages*</b>
5 <sup>th</sup>	10	-	1	1	16.6
7 <sup>th</sup>	32	-	-	2	5.8
10 <sup>th</sup>	122	1	-	2	2.4
12 <sup>th</sup>	187	3	1	-	2.1
<b>TOT=362</b>	<b>351</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3.1</b>
<b>Percentages</b>	<b>96.96</b>	<b>1.1</b>	<b>0.55</b>	<b>1.38</b>	

\*These percentages reflect the ratio of inaccurate uses to accurate uses.

The most significant finding revealed by the table is that the participants are highly accurate in their object pronoun placements across all grades. In line with Jähnert's (2012) findings on subject pronoun use in L3 English within the same corpus, we can say that the high flexibility of the participants' L1 Turkish in terms of pronoun placement does not seem to interfere with the highly rigid L3 English object pronoun placement. Although the number of the communication units involving object pronoun use is limited when compared to subject pronouns, they are employed meticulously. As the table shows, the object pronoun use increased in accordance with the grade. Similarly, although it is statistically not significant, the number of the divergent uses such as IP-RP, CP-WP, and OM among grades reinforces this parallelism. That is, as participants get proficient in their L3 English and produce more text in their L3, they are less likely to produce divergent forms. For instance, while

the ratio of divergent uses to accurate uses for 5<sup>th</sup> graders is 16.6 it is 2.1 for 12<sup>th</sup> graders. Hence, the most proficient group (i.e., 12<sup>th</sup> graders) has the lowest divergent and the highest accurate use rates.

Another noteworthy finding that is highlighted with Table 1 are the types of these divergent uses. Even though none of these were high in number, the most frequent type that was produced within the same group is IP-RP. Interestingly, the majority of these uses was produced by the most proficient/experienced L3 English participants. These units are listed here:

- \*I make something with she.*
- \*He want to help he.*
- \*I asked she.*

Additionally, OM being the most frequently preferred variant pinpoints a pattern. All OM uses across all groups except for 12<sup>th</sup> graders are very similar to one another and seem to be frozen chunks. They are listed here:

- \*I don't like. (5<sup>th</sup> Grader)*
- \*I don't like. (7<sup>th</sup> Grader)*
- \*You can't learn. (7<sup>th</sup> Grader)*
- \*You don't like. (10<sup>th</sup> Grader)*
- \*I want. (10<sup>th</sup> Grader)*

The last research question of our study taps the distinction among object pronouns. The table below indicates the variation.

**Table 2**

*Object pronoun-based results: accurate cases only*

	5 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup>	TOT	%
<b>me</b>	1	9	22	40	72	20.5
<b>you</b>	1	4	3	31	39	11.1
<b>him</b>	-	14	5	17	36	10.2
<b>her</b>	-	-	6	12	18	5.1

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	5 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup>	TOT	%
<b>it</b>	8	4	75	52	139	39.6
<b>us</b>	-	-	4	9	13	3.7
<b>them</b>	-	1	7	26	34	9.6
<b>TOT</b>	10	32	122	187	351	
<b>%</b>	<b>2.84</b>	<b>9.11</b>	<b>34.75</b>	<b>53.27</b>		

In line with the answer for the first research question, as L3 English participants get more proficient, both the number and the variety in their object pronoun use increases. Fifth graders didn't produce *him*, *her*, *us* and *them*, while both 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders used all object pronouns in their productions. The most frequently employed pronoun is *it*, while the least frequently produced pronoun is *us*. In English, third person singular for neutral and second person pronouns are homophonous for both subject and object uses. This makes up 50.7 of the total object pronoun uses. If we exclude them from the analysis, it turns out that the most accurately used object pronoun which is non-homophonous is *me*.

In sum, the analyses of object pronouns across four groups revealed some significant findings. First of all, contrary to "L1 only" accounts, flexible word order of L1 Turkish does not interfere with the acquisition of object pronouns in L3 English. On the contrary, participants are highly accurate although the number of object pronoun uses is restricted, and seem to accommodate their prior linguistic repertoire. Secondly, as argued by many researchers such as Stutter-Garcia (2019), proficiency in subsequently acquired languages may have an effect on L3 acquisition. Lastly, the linguistic property that is being acquired might have a noteworthy impact on the L3 acquisition process. More specifically, the findings indicate that not all object pronouns are equally difficult to be acquired.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The current study investigated the object pronoun acquisition in L3 English by



L1 Turkish-L2 German speakers across four grades. There were three research questions: whether all participants use them correctly, whether L3 English proficiency which was reflected in the form of four distinct classes affect the acquisition of pronouns, and lastly, whether there were any differences among object pronouns in terms of accurate and divergent uses.

To begin with, in line with Jähnert's (2012) findings revealing highly accurate uses of subject pronouns in L3 English, we found that all participants are also highly accurate in their object pronoun use. Despite the highly flexible nature of L1 Turkish and relatively limited options of L2 German pronoun uses, learners of L3 English in this specific context produced the majority of object pronouns correctly. Then, since there are highly limited cases which violate post-verbal placement of object pronouns (i.e. CP-WP), it is possible to argue that L1 Turkish has neither non-facilitative nor facilitative effect. In terms of L2 German interference, even though there are cases which might be related to V2 property of German, these are limited. This phenomenon calls for further investigation in an isolated context.

Based on the analyses, it might be concluded that L3 English acquisition of object pronouns in this specific context was not affected by L1 Turkish (which allows to place object pronouns freely), but might have been affected by L2 German (which provides two options for them to occur in a sentence). This finding is congruent with Falk and Bardell (2011), who asserted that L2 has a more robust effect on L3 acquisition than L1.

For our context, there might be some possible reasons that would account for such a variation between L1 and L2. First of all, although Turkish is participants' home language, L2 German is the predominant language of schooling. Even though participants' schools have distinct policies with respect to heritage languages, their L2 German input is more intensive and organized. Hence, the obscured L1 effect might stem from the difference between L1 and L2 input quantity as well as quality. Thus, L2 German as the language of the schooling may override the effect of heritage languages.

As for L3 English proficiency, the results highlight a distinction among four grade levels. In line with Lago et al. (2018), this finding is also further support for overall language proficiency as being one of the most prevailing factors in L3 acquisition.

Finally, we looked at the differences between distinct linguistic features. In particular, *it* and *you* were the most frequently used object pronouns while *us* was the least frequent. There might be several other reasons for such a difference. First of all, it is significant to note that participants were instructed to produce texts as expository and narrative, thus, these specific genres/contexts may force them to produce some object pronouns more frequently than others. Secondly, and not surprisingly, homophonous nature of the formers might cause them to be acquired earlier than others. Thirdly, the prototypical object pronoun is *it*, which might make it easier to be acquired. In brief, it might be concluded that not every single unit of the same linguistic phenomenon is acquired in the same way. It might take more time for less recurrent linguistic features to be restructured and accommodated into learners' interlanguages.

Overall, the current study has closely scrutinized the use of object pronouns in L3 English of 167 L1 Turkish L2 German participants. The results signalled high accuracy despite the possible interference from highly flexible L1 Turkish. Also, a very slight impact of L2 German was observed, which is however very difficult to trace due to the free nature of language production. Thus, it needs to be investigated in isolation via elicitation techniques or grammaticality judgments.

All in all, this study is not without its limitations. To trace L1 and L2 transfer, it could have been far better to have a group which would consist of L1 German, L2 Turkish participants residing in Turkey. Similar to Falk and Bardell's (2011) design, their L3 English comparison would reveal the source language for transfer. However, if not impossible, it is very difficult to find such a group. On the other hand, all other factors claimed to affect language learning, such as individual differences, motivation, type and amount of instruction (Cenoz, 2000) and which were not controlled for the current study, can be investigated in further studies.

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**UŽSIENIO KALBOS (ANGLŲ) ASMENINIŲ ĮVARDŽIŲ  
OBJEKTINĖS FORMOS ĮSISAVINIMAS VOKIETIJOJE  
TARP PAVELDĖTOS TURKŲ KALBOS VARTOTOJŲ**

**Santrauka.** Pastaraisiais metais L3 įsisavinimas ėmė traukti daugelio mokslininkų dėmesį. Ypač paveldo kontekste tai yra produktyvi sritis, kurią tyrinėjant galima suprasti, kaip tarpusavyje sąveikauja lingvistiniai ir nelingvistiniai mechanizmai. Šiame tyrime daugiausiai dėmesio skiriama L3 anglų kalbos asmeninių įvardžių objektinės formos įsisavinimui tarp L1 turkų L2 vokiečių kalbos vartotojų. Klausiamo, ar kalbėtojai galėjo tiksliai vartoti asmeninių įvardžių objektines formas, ar L3 anglų kalbos žinios turi įtakos joms įsisavinti ir, galiausiai, ar visos asmeninių įvardžių objektinės formos išmokstamos vienodai. Šio tyrimo duomenys gauti iš tekstyno, kurį sudaro iš 167 dalyvių surinkta rašytinė ir žodinė medžiaga. Medžiaga buvo surinkta iš keturių skirtingų Berlyno (Vokietijos) mokyklų 5, 7, 10 ir 12 klasių mokinių. Rezultatai parodė, kad dalyviai labai atidžiai vartojo asmeninių įvardžių objektines formas. Taip pat nepastebėta aiškaus L1 poveikio, o L2 įtaka buvo numanoma. Galiausiai, kaip svarbūs veiksniai, darantys įtaką L3 kalbai įsisavinti, yra nurodomi kalbos mokėjimas ir kalbos ypatybės.

**Pagrindinės sąvokos:** užsienio kalba (anglų); daugiakalbystė; asmeninių įvardžių objektinė forma.