The recent upturn in formal approaches to third language (L3) acquisition is due in great part to an increase in recognition of how this line of research can inform theories of multilingualism and language acquisition more generally. The primary focus has been on the phenomenon of selective transfer at the L3 initial stages and the mechanisms that drive the transfer of one system over another when the learner has multiple systems (i.e., the L1 and L2) available. However, initial progressive (L1/L2 → L3) transfer is just one phenomenon that we can investigate to better understand the dynamic nature of multilingualism. Another question of interest regards what happens in L3 development after initial non-facilitative transfer, and specifically what the roles of the L1 and L2 are in development. Additionally, examination of L3 influence on the L1 compared with the L2 can inform longstanding debates regarding differences between early-acquired versus late-acquired systems.

In this talk, I address L3 transfer as a bidirectional developmental phenomenon via the investigation of L1 English/L2 Spanish and L1 Spanish/L2 English bilinguals that are learners of L3 Brazilian Portuguese (BP). First, I present morphosyntactic data in support of L3 initial stages transfer driven by structural similarity. Second, I compare the persistence of non-facilitative transfer between the two groups. Third, I review findings from a study on the (in)stability of L1 vs. L2 Spanish morphosyntactic and phonological systems, followed by a discussion of how these developmental pieces can be put together.