Transfer in third language acquisition:
A study of L2 Japanese influence on the L3 acquisition of Korean postpositions

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This study analyzes the role of second language transfer in third language acquisition in order to evaluate the claims of current models of both the initial stages and the subsequent developmental trajectory of L3 acquisition. The participants were L1 English students of two typologically similar languages, Japanese and Korean. They studied Korean as an L2 \(n = 23\) or, if their L2 was Japanese, as an L3 \(n = 22\). The study focuses on the acquisition of Korean particles, which are particularly challenging for L1 English learners. The target Korean postpositions are \(-ey\), \(-eyse\), and \(-(u)lo\), which correspond to the Japanese postpositions \(-ni\), \(-de\), and \(-e\). Beginning, intermediate, and advanced L2 Korean and L3 Korean groups completed two types of tests (multiple choice and fill-in-the-blanks) in two particle use conditions (same and different, i.e., in Japanese and Korean). The test score data were analyzed using logistic mixed effects models to investigate the effects and interactions of a number of predictor variables: (i) Korean Proficiency (beginning vs. intermediate vs. advanced), (ii) Particle Type (same particle use condition vs. different particle use condition), (iii) Participant Type (L3 group vs. L2 group), and (iv) Test Type (fill-in-the-blanks vs. multiple choice). The results show that both L2 and L3 groups performed significantly better in the same particle use condition than in the different particle use condition, indicating the influence of factors other than transfer. However, the two groups’ performance across proficiency levels in the different particle use condition suggests different developmental trajectories: As proficiency increases, L3 learners perform better than L2 learners when particle use differs between Japanese and Korean. This finding implies that non-facilitative transfer can positively influence ultimate attainment.