

Linguistic relativity in L2 acquisition: Chinese-English

bilinguals' reading of Chinese counterfactual statements

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Proponents of the Linguistic Relativity Principle has maintained that the language we use modulates our thinking and that our thinking also shapes or determines how the language is parsed and understood. Existing research has provided compelling evidence for the above relativistic view in monolingual speakers. Recently, a growing number of studies have also started to investigate the relativistic view on language and thought in L2 learners. These L2 studies have yielded evidence regarding the cognitive constraint of an early-learned language (e.g. L1) on the later-learned language (e.g. L2). Despite this vigorous research effort, much remains unknown about whether the cognitive development in the later-learned language would modulate how the early-learned language is parsed (lower-level processing) and understood (higher-level processing). To fill the gap, this study drew on the self-paced reading experimental paradigm to study linguistic relativity effects on advanced L2 learners' reading of L1 (Chinese) counterfactual statements—a concept encoded differently in these learners' L1 and L2. The participants' online response time and offline accuracy data were both the foci of the analyses; while the analyses of the response time data were suggestive of the participants' initial lower-level parsing of the L1 counterfactual statements, the analyses of the accuracy data shed light on how the concept of counterfactuality is represented and understood in the L1. Throughout these analyses, this study intends to address the following questions: Does L2 acquisition impose any cognitive constraint on bilinguals' lower-level L1 parsing and/or on their higher-level L1 processing? If so, in what way and to what extent? Furthermore, the study also intends to empirically establish whether the cognitive constraint as stipulated by the Linguistic Relativity Principle would be modulated by different onset age of learning the L2 (early vs. late). Findings of this study are discussed vis-à-vis the Linguistic Relativity Principle, L2 processing mechanism, and L2 literacy instruction.

Keywords: L2 acquisition, linguistic relativity, counterfactuality