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EFFECTS OF GRAMMATICAL GENDER ON DEVELOPING LEXICAL REPRESENTATIONS IN A SECOND LANGUAGE

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Mentor: Joe Barcroft

Grammatical gender is cited as support for the Sapir-Whorff Hypothesis (a 1929 hypothesis that postulates that languages affect the way the world is perceived) through demonstrations of how gendered objects and animals impacts the lexical representations of such items for both first language speakers and second language learners. While multiple studies have supported the grammatical gender impacts on conceptual representations for second language learners, the time course of the development of cognitive changes is still not well understood. Although the 2002 study of Phillips and Boroditsky suggests a continuous development of lexical changes during second language acquisition, the 2009 study by Kuriniski and Sera suggests that conceptual changes occur during the first year of acquisition and remain constant with increasing proficiency. Our study used participants from an immediate and advanced level Spanish classroom in a task where participants were asked to rank the similarity between different object/animal—person pairs (some of consistent gender and some of inconsistent gender) on a scale from 1-9 (1 = very dissimilar, 9 = very similar) in order to evaluate whether grammatical gender differentially impacted conceptual representations for different levels of Spanish proficiency. Results indicated that the difference in grammatical gender impacts on conceptual representations were insignificant between the immediate and advanced levels; however, the discovery of methodological issues associated with the task served as a calling to evaluate previous research with caution and highlighted the need to clarify the variable findings in this field with future research that carefully addresses methodological issues highlighted in our study.