

# The L2 Impact on Acquiring Dutch as a L3: the L2 Distance Effect

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## Abstract

The role of the mother tongue (L1) in successive language acquisition is an early and widely recognized constraint on cross-linguistic transfer. We investigate the unclear role of the L1 versus additional language background (L2) in acquiring Dutch as a L3, questioning the interrelatedness between the L1 and L2.

Our previous results suggested that measures of linguistic distance from the mother tongue (L1) to Dutch can explain a substantial proportion of variance in L3 proficiency scores across languages, taking into account effects of daily education, educational quality, age, exposure, and gender. A L1 distance effect seems to play a crucial role in successive language acquisition. We aim to extend this model by testing if the pattern in proficiency across L2's can also be explained by a distance effect, in addition to the pattern observed across L1's. Evidence for an independent L2 distance effect is contrasted here to a joint account of L1 and L2 impact together in order to empirically test the claim that a joint effect better explains differences in transfer than addition of independent L1 and L2 distance effects.

We use a state database that contains speaking proficiency scores of over 50,000 adult second language learners speaking over 70 different mother tongues and additional languages. Multilevel models enabled us to decompose variance in proficiency scores across learners into partially crossed random effects for the L1, L2, and the country of birth. This way of structuring our data enables estimations of separate as well as combinatorial random effects.

Our results suggest that particular interactions between the L1 and L2 exist, but that models incorporating two additive L1 and L2 distance effects fit better to the data than models incorporating L1 and L2 jointly. The results give new insights in how linguistic factors play a role in successive language acquisition.