

Pragmatic transfer on expressing disagreement in a second and third language

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Abstract

This proposal explores how the first language (L1) influences second (L2) and third language (L3) proficiency in expressing disagreement among trilingual speakers proficient in Italian, Spanish, and English. Previous research suggests that L1 impacts the acquisition and use of pragmatic functions in additional languages, especially in complex acts like expressing disagreement. This study examines how L1-specific norms and strategies affect disagreement expression in L2 and L3.

Using a mixed-methods approach, the study combines quantitative analysis of written and oral discourse completion tasks (WDCTs and ODCTs) with qualitative Discourse Evaluation Tests (DETs). Participants from B1 to C2 proficiency engage in tasks designed to elicit disagreement in various social contexts, allowing for comparative analysis of linguistic and pragmatic strategies.

Data analysis identifies patterns of L1 transfer, such as direct translations, L1-based discourse markers, and adherence to L1 norms. DETs provide insights into participants' metapragmatic awareness and cross-linguistic influence perceptions. Preliminary hypotheses suggest that speakers with Romance languages (Italian and Spanish) as L1 reveal different L1 influence patterns than those with English as L1 due to closer linguistic and cultural proximity. Higher proficiency in L2 and L3 is expected to reduce L1 interference.

Findings reveal that trilingual speakers show differing patterns based on their L1, with Romance language speakers exhibiting distinct influences compared to English L1 speakers. Trilingual speakers often adopt high formality levels, reflecting cautiousness and heightened sociolinguistic sensitivity. Moreover, the results indicate high levels of pragmatic awareness among trilingual speakers, influenced by their interaction with the target language, learning context, language skills, and frequency of use. The order of language acquisition does not negatively impact pragmatic awareness, given sufficient exposure and proficiency.

This research has significant implications for language teaching and learning in multilingual contexts. Understanding the role of L1 in shaping L2 pragmatic competence can inform strategies that better address trilingual speakers' needs. By highlighting L1 influence shades in expressing disagreement, this study contributes to the broader field of second language acquisition and pragmatic development. This proposal aims to deepen the understanding of multilingual pragmatics and the complex interplay between languages in trilingual speakers, focusing on the intricate and culturally sensitive act of expressing disagreement.

Keywords: Pragmatic transfer, pragmatic competence, pragmatic awareness, disagreement

1. Introduction

The growing prevalence of multilingualism in today's globalised world has heightened the importance of understanding how speakers of multiple languages navigate communication across linguistic boundaries. In particular, pragmatic competence has become a key focus for researchers examining second and third-language acquisition. Trilingual speakers, who often operate across diverse linguistic and cultural environments, provide an especially rich field for investigating how cross-linguistic influences shape pragmatic behaviour.

This research focuses on how trilingual Italian, English, and Spanish speakers express disagreement, a highly sensitive and culturally nuanced speech act. Disagreement can present significant challenges for multilingual speakers as it requires careful management of politeness and face-saving strategies to avoid

conflict or offence. While native speakers may rely on ingrained cultural norms to guide their communication, trilingual individuals may draw on multiple languages and cultures, leading to cross-linguistic pragmatic transfer, the influence of one language's pragmatic norms on the use of another. The phenomenon of pragmatic transfer has been studied extensively, but a more detailed analysis of how multilingual individuals negotiate complex acts like disagreement is needed. This study seeks to address that gap by exploring both forward and backward transfer in expressing disagreement among trilingual speakers. By analysing how these speakers express dissent in each language and comparing their strategies to native speakers, this research aims to provide new insights into the intricate relationship between linguistic proficiency, cultural norms, and pragmatic awareness in multilingual communication.

2. Definition of disagreement

In Linguistics, the term “disagreement” has been discussed and analysed for decades. This research is based on the concept of disagreement as “an oppositional stance (verbal or non-verbal) to an antecedent verbal (or non-verbal) action” (Kakava, 1993, p. 36). Therefore, it is considered that disagreement “can be defined as the expression of a view that differs from that expressed by another speaker”, as suggested by Sifianou (2012, p. 1554). In a broader vision, Herrero (2002) underlines that it is a reactive attitude that expresses objection, discrepancy, opposition, non-acceptance, rejection, refutation, etc., of the interlocutor or one of the various components of their discourse. Bach and Harnish (1979, p. 43) include disagreement within the broader category of dissentives (differ, disagree, dissent and reject): “In uttering *e*, *S* dissents from the claim that *P* if *S* expresses: *i*. the disbelief that *P*, contrary to what was claimed by *H* (or was otherwise under discussion), and *ii*. the intention that *H* disbelieves that *P*”.

Regarding the choice of disagreement as a generic term, it takes into account what Herrero (2002, 2004) points out since the detailed analysis of more or less similar terms such as dissent, objection, opposition, rejection, refutation, etc., shows how they end up being the same, all of them express, to greater or lesser intensity (with varying degrees of illocutionary force), an attitude of disagreement (opposition, dissent, rejection) which affects different aspects of the previous intervention, and implies a taking of opposing positions between the interlocutors. From this point of view, the disagreement analysed in this research in some cases also includes the Bach and Harnish category of disputative acts, such as demur, dispute, object, protest, and question, as the expression of the belief that there is a reason not to believe that *P*. For this reason, in the present research, the generic labels of “dissenting act” and the less marked and more general term “disagreement” have been chosen to describe all these conflictive acts as synonymous.

In the current research, the data analysis is on the various grades of illocutionary force of responses. Consequentially, the taxonomy established during the current research is The present classification shows that:

2.1. Taxonomy of disagreement

In the literature, many strategies adopted to express disagreement have been proposed. The present research elaborated a taxonomy based on the data collected, including 15 strategies and divided into three main categories: assertive, directive, and expressive speech acts (see *Table 1*). It is valid for the three languages considered in the current study. The strategies mostly interested in phenomena of pragmatic transfer in the data collected were “apology + disagreement” and “disappointment”. The fourth category, *apology + disagreement*, is an effective way of mitigating disagreements by expressing regret. This technique has been widely discussed and described by Leech (1983), Kreutel (2007) and Maíz-Arévalo (2014) in the literature. For example, a person can politely express disagreement while acknowledging the other's feelings by saying, "I'm sorry I don't agree with you". The other remaining strategy, expressing *disappointment* to express disagreement, represents the novelty that arises from the current research.

Table 1 – Taxonomy of disagreement

Assertive/representative dissenting acts	<i>Explanation of own point of view/personal belief</i>
	1. Speaker expresses negative judgment on Hearer’s opinion or attitude (e.g., “I just don’t like the idea”) EXPLICIT JUDGMENT
	2. The speaker expresses the idea that Hearer does not believe/is not aware of (the consequence of) p (e.g., "You must be joking!"., "Are you sure?") DISBELIEF AND DOUBTING
Expressive dissenting acts	<i>Disappoint/disagreement/complaint/criticism</i>
	4. The speaker begins the expression of disagreement with an apology (e.g., "I'm sorry, but you are wrong"). APOLOGY + DISAGREEMENT
	5. Speaker expresses partly agreeing, appears to agree or hides disagreement (e.g., “Yes, but...”) PARTIAL AGREEMENT
	6. The speaker expresses argumentative dissent, giving personal or emotional reasons for disagreeing (e.g., "This is not a very good idea in my opinion as it would be difficult to rearrange prior existing commitments such as taking my children to school") ARGUMENTATIVE DISAGREEMENT
	7. The speaker expresses dissent in an impersonal way (e.g., "It may be easier to move from a job to a job, rather than from unemployment") IMPERSONAL DISAGREEMENT
	8. The speaker expresses objections in the form of a question or exclamation (e.g., "Do you have enough money to sustain yourself until you find a new job?") OBJECTION
	9. The speaker expresses dissent by repeating (partially or totally) p (e.g., “I understand the need for a change, but I’m not sure it’s a good idea to quit without having a new job lined up first”) DISSENT-ECHO
	10. Speaker expresses dissent by disqualifying Hearer (e.g., “Are you crazy?”) DISQUALIFICATION OF H BY S
	11. Speaker expresses sarcasm/scepticism or irony (e.g., “And, exactly, where do plan on getting food or anything else we need without making a two hour trek?”) SARCASM, SCEPTICISM, AND IRONY
	12. Speaker expresses explicit disagreement (e.g., “I don’t agree”) EXPLICIT DISAGREEMENT
	13. The speaker disapproves of an outcome, event, or situation that does not meet his expectations (e.g., "I am very disappointed that you handed the project in without checking with me first"). DISAPPOINTMENT
Directive dissenting acts	<i>Suggestion/advice/request/order</i>

	<p>14. The speaker expresses an alternative position, respecting <i>p</i>, giving advice/suggestion (e.g., “I think you should have a new job before you leave this one”). ADVICE AND SUGGESTION</p>
	<p>15. The speaker aims to persuade Hearer to change his opinion or attitude by expressing rejection of it by a request or an order (e.g., "Can you do the cleaning up first and then go for a walk?", "Do it now...") REQUEST AND ORDER</p>

3. Pragmatic transfer: forward and backward transfer

As defined by Odlin (1989, p. 27), the concept of transfer refers to the influence that similarities and differences between the target language and previously acquired languages may have. In other words, transfer is the use in one language (usually a foreign language) of elements of another language (usually L1). In learning an L2 or L3, the individual attempts to relate the new information to their prior knowledge, thus facilitating acquisition. Transfer processes may occur by drawing on knowledge of the L1 (and other languages as part of one's linguistic repertoire). This knowledge of the world and linguistic knowledge constitutes a learning and communication strategy for which specific L2 (or L3) limitations are compensated.

Language transfer studies in adult second/foreign language learning have long focused on the effects of the learners' first languages on their acquisition or use of the L2 (i.e., *forward transfer*). In most cases, learners' native languages have been found to interfere with their acquisition of subsequent languages. However, in recent years, some academics have begun to wonder whether language interference also occurs in the opposite direction; that is, language learners' knowledge of an L2 influences their usage of an L1 (i.e., *backward transfer*) (Su, 2010).

When speaking an L2 or L3, transfer (from other languages of own repertoire) is a common and occasionally inevitable phenomenon. Different degrees of transfer can take place, including pragmatic meaning (such as speech acts, indirect meaning, or social norms of politeness), words (vocabulary), sounds (phonetics/phonology), meanings (semantics), word morphemes (morphology), phrase or sentence structures (syntax), and morphemes (words) (*Félix-Brasdefer, 2018*). Concerning pragmatics, the definition of pragmatic transfer given by Kasper (1992) is adopted in the present study: “pragmatic transfer in interlanguage pragmatics shall refer to the influence exerted by learners' pragmatic knowledge of languages and cultures other than L2 on their comprehension, production and learning of L2 pragmatic information” (p. 207). The phenomenon of pragmatic transfer can be the cause of a pragmatic failure (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984, p. 196).

Regarding backward transfer, Kecskes & Papp (2003, p. 251) argue that:

“In our understanding, transfer is any kind of movement and/or influence of concepts, knowledge, skills or linguistic elements (structures, forms), in either direction, between the L1 and the subsequent language(s). In the language development of a bilingual or multilingual person, transfer is always present, and keeps changing all the time. It is more or less intensive, either positive or negative, its direction changes from L1 to L2 or vice versa, and it either occurs between the language channels or affects conceptual fields”.

Furthermore, Su (2010) shows that bi-directional transfer can take place at the pragmatic level in foreign language learners, the term “bi-directional transfer” being understood as a back-and-forth transfer from L1 to L2 (or L3). Su's research shows that Chinese EFL Learners adopted requesting behaviour dissimilar to Chinese native speakers:

“Both intermediate and advanced EFL learners adopted conventional indirectives to a greater extent than CNSs in the situations in which the requestee was of lower social status than the requestor [...], and that the advanced learners also employed considerably more indirect strategies than did CNSs”.

when they addressed people who were close or familiar to them [...]. This is an indication of backward transfer (transfer from the L2 to L1)". (2010, p. 96).

Similarly, Valdes and Pino (1981) – in a study of complimenting behaviour among adult Mexican-American bilinguals living in the United States – discovered that bilinguals merged the complementing repertoires of English and Spanish. Thus, their complimenting behaviour in each language differed from that of monolinguals. According to the findings of research on the L2 effect on L1, cross-linguistic influence can occur concurrently in both directions, from L1 to L2 and from L2 to L1, and L2 users' competencies (multi-competence) in both L1 and L2 may be different from that of monolinguals (see 6.1).

Kecskes & Papp (2003, p. 248) underline that “two interacting factors play a decisive role in shaping the L2→L1 influence: (1) level of proficiency and the development of a Common Underlying Conceptual Base; (2) nature of transfer”. Regarding the first factor, Kecskes & Papp specify that:

“The level of proficiency in the L2 is one obvious factor. [...] We claimed [...] that intensive exposure to and regular use of the foreign or/and second language may lead to the emergence of a Common Underlying Conceptual Base (CUCB) that is responsible for the operation of the two or more languages. However, the development of the CUCB is dependent on proficiency in the L2, which has to reach a certain hypothetical threshold. [...] We conceptualise the CUCB as the basis and originator of all bilingual or multilingual linguistic actions, a ‘container’ that includes everything but the language system itself (rules plus lexicon). [...] It is in the CUCB that thoughts originate, and then are mapped onto linguistic signs to reach the surface through either of the language channels. Thanks to the CUCB, information processing skills and educational attainment may be developed through two languages as well as through one language. [...] In contrast to a one-language-governed conceptual base and one language channel of monolinguals, bilinguals/multilinguals have a CUCB that is a common knowledge base for both languages”. (p. 249)

Concerning the nature of transfer, Kecskes & Papp (p. 252) distinguish between two types of transfer:

“(1) Transfer as a linguistic systems phenomenon: when the interaction of the two or more language systems and the L1-dominated Conceptual Base results in the transfer of a sound pattern, lexical item or structure from one language system to another.

(2) Transfer as a CUCB phenomenon: when knowledge or skills acquired through one language system become ready to be used through the other language channel(s).

Selinker (1969) analyses the phenomenon of language transfer, “no matter what linguistic level is identified and isolated.” (p. 89), identifying three kinds of transfer: positive, negative and neutral (p. 91).

“POSITIVE LANGUAGE TRANSFER is identified as occurs whenever there is a statistically significant predominance in a process in which the native language of one of two alternative linguistic entities, which is then paralleled by such predominance in an analysis of the attempted production of a foreign language, the predominant entity being a nonerror since it concurs with an experimentally established norm of that foreign language.

NEGATIVE LANGUAGE TRANSFER is identified as a process that occurs whenever there is a statistically significant predominance in the native language of one of two alternative linguistic entities. Such predominance is then paralleled by such predominance in an analysis of the attempted production of a foreign language, the predominant entity being an error since it deviates from an experimentally established norm of that foreign language.

NEUTRAL LANGUAGE TRANSFER is identified as a process which occurs whenever there is no statistically significant predominance in the native language of either of two alternative linguistic entities, which is then paralleled by a lack of predominance in an analysis of the attempted production of a foreign language, one alternative linguistic entity being a nonerror since it concurs with an experimentally established norm of that foreign language and the other being an error since it deviates from that norm”.

Kasper (1992) proposes that a revised version of Selinker's operational definition of language transfer would be a good tool for detecting pragmatic transfer in interlanguage production.

"The original definition [...] is inadequate for ascertaining pragmatic transfer because it presupposes a binary choice between realisation alternatives [...]. Since in pragmatics, [...] multiple rather than binary choices are usually available for speakers to express communicative intent, parallel trends towards one option in a binary choice schema can rarely be established. A simpler and more adequate method is determining whether the differences between the interlanguage and the learner's native language on a particular pragmatic feature are statistically significant and how these differences relate to the target language. Thus, there is a lack of statistically significant differences in the frequencies of a pragmatic feature in L1, L2, and IL¹ can be operationally defined as a positive transfer. Statistically significant differences in the frequencies of a pragmatic feature between IL-L2 and L1-L2 and lack of statistically significant differences between IL and L1 can be operationally defined as negative transfer" (p. 223 – 224).

3.1. Pragmatic transfer and disagreement

The lack of pragmatic appropriateness causes cross-cultural communication breakdown and, in general, misunderstanding and miscommunication. Thomas (1983) lists three possible sources of miscommunication: grammar error (about the knowledge of grammar), pragmatic failure (about the language in use), and social error (about the understanding of the world). She divides pragmatic failure into two fields: pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure.

Pragmalinguistic failure may be the result of a pragmalinguistic transfer:

The inappropriate transfer of speech act strategies from one language to another, or the transferring from the mother tongue to the target language of utterances which are semantic/syntactically equivalent but which, because of different 'interpretive bias', tend to convey a diverse pragmatic force in the target language (Thomas, 1983, p. 101).

For example, in Italian, disagreement can be expressed more directly, and being assertive in a conversation is generally seen as part of dynamic communication. A trilingual speaker with Italian as their L1 (*t27*²) used expressions like:

t27 – S3: Penso che ti sbagli, preferisco consegnare un buon lavoro, anche se in ritardo, piuttosto che un lavoro tirato via.

In Italy, direct expressions of disagreement are often accepted in conversations, especially in lively debates. This doesn't necessarily come across as rude or confrontational, as Italian culture can see direct exchanges as part of everyday interaction. The same trilingual participant (*t27*) transferred their way to disagree from Italian directly into English by saying:

t27 – S3: I think you're wrong, I'd rather hand in a good job, even if later, rather than handing in a bad one.

While this utterance is syntactically and semantically correct in English, its pragmatic force is much stronger than what is typically appropriate in many English-speaking cultures. In English, especially in more formal or polite conversations, these expressions can be blunt or confrontational, potentially offending the listener or making the speaker seem aggressive. In English, there is often a preference for softening disagreement to maintain politeness and avoid confrontation. For example, a native English speaker participant replied:

n195 – S3: Well Matthew, I'm not sure that was your call to make. Surely we both have a say in something this important. And probably nothing is ever perfect in any case, so a good job would have been far better than an unfinished one.

¹ IL stands for interlanguage.

² Any examples are taken from data collected during PhD research at the University of Huddersfield.

Sociopragmatic failure can be caused by “the size of imposition, cost/benefit, social distance, and relative rights and obligations” (Thomas, 1983, p.104). Sociopragmatic failure in expressing disagreement can occur when different cultures have varying norms about directness, politeness, or how to manage face-saving in conversation. For example, considering the case proposed in a WDCT scenario:

“Your new boss, Ms Raw, suggests that every employee come back to work at the office, 5 days per week. She explains that: “We have thought about this new proposal to recreate the team spirit that there was before the pandemic”. She calls you to ask your opinion about it. You disagree with her idea. What do you say to her?”

In many English-speaking cultures, disagreement, especially in formal or professional settings, tends to be expressed more indirectly to avoid confrontation and maintain politeness (n175).

n175 – S10: I understand your motivation, and to a certain extent I agree, but after nearly two years of remote working, I think we’ve all demonstrated that we can get the work done effectively from home. What’s more, after two years, all of our lives and schedules have changed because of COVID. Family dynamics have changed, and it would be incredibly disruptive to change back to five days in the office when we’re able to get the work done at home. Surely there can be a compromise, if the prime motive is office camaraderie.

In n175, the disagreement is softened with phrases like "I understand your motivation" or "to a certain extent I agree", allowing the speaker to disagree while acknowledging the other person's perspective and minimising the face-threatening act. In contrast, in Italian culture, expressing disagreement can be more direct. Italian conversational norms often favour a lively exchange of ideas where strong disagreement is not seen as rude but as a sign of engagement and sincerity. Italians may not feel the same need to soften disagreements, even in formal settings; therefore, they can transfer their conversational habits from their L1 to their L2 or L3 as in t38:

t38 – S10: I’m absolutely not happy with the proposal, because the situation now is totally new; you should not reply the old one.

This response is a direct disagreement without any softening strategies. In Italian, directness in disagreement can be interpreted as being straightforward and efficient, with less concern about imposing on the other's opinion. It reflects the speaker's right to express their point of view clearly and openly, even if it challenges the superior's idea. The directness of the Italian colleague's disagreement might be perceived as rude or confrontational. From the English speaker's perspective, the lack of softening strategies could make the Italian speaker seem aggressive, disrespectful, or dismissive, especially given the power difference between a manager and a colleague. The English speaker may expect more hedging or face-saving techniques, and the Italian colleague might have interpreted this as indecisive or lacking confidence. In Italian, not expressing apparent disagreement could be seen as insincere or unhelpful, and the Italian speaker may feel the English speaker is not fully engaging in the discussion. Understanding the cultural norms surrounding disagreement, especially regarding directness and face-saving strategies, is essential to avoiding miscommunication in cross-cultural settings.

4. Methodology

The current research opted for combined and correlated data collection instruments. Indeed, through the combination of different types of data, it was possible to understand pragmatic strategies, linguistic features, directness and indirectness adopted in other languages and different contexts (Grainger & Mills, 2016, p. 29) and assess the pragmatic awareness of trilingual speakers of Italian, English and Spanish. Therefore, this research used three methods: WDCT, ODCT and DET. The first and second instruments – aimed at assessing pragmatic competence – were preliminary and constituted the basis for constructing the third tool (DET) to evaluate pragmatic awareness. Indeed, the expression of disagreement that participants had to judge came from samples extracted from WDCTs and ODCTs.

The data collection embraced three stages: pilot testing of Written Discourse Completion Tests (WDCT) and Oral Discourse Completion Tests (ODCT) for native English/Spanish/Italian speakers; WDCT and ODCT for native English/Spanish/Italian speakers and WDCT and ODCT for non-native speakers (trilingual); evaluation of samples from WDCTs and ODCTs by trilingual speakers through Discourse Evaluation Tests (DET). The data were gathered online, leading to a heterogeneous linguistic and ethnic or cultural background of native and trilingual speakers.

Table 2 - Summary of Data Elicitation Instruments and Procedures

Instrument	WDCT	ODCT	DET
Purpose to investigate	Pragmatic competence in written production	Pragmatic competence in oral production	Pragmatic awareness (for trilingual DET)/Pragmatic evaluation (for native speakers DET)
Scenarios	12 written scenarios	6 oral scenarios	3 oral scenarios & 3 written scenarios
Type of response	Written response	Oral response	Multichoice responses

4.1. Participants

The study participants³ were recruited through various online channels, such as language and linguistic groups in social networks, forums of language teachers, associations of linguists, and Departments of Modern Languages worldwide. The recruitment was made possible with the help of lecturers and teachers and through the collaboration of institutions such as the Istituto Dante Alighieri, the British Council, and the Instituto Cervantes.

The data reveals that most trilingual speakers hail from Italy, accounting for 59.76% of the participants. Latin Americans form the second-largest group, comprising 17.07% of the participants. Spaniards follow behind, representing 10.98% of the participants. US citizens constitute 7.32% of the participants, while British participants constitute 4.88% of the total population. Regarding the origin of the native participants, more nationalities are involved than trilingual speakers. The largest group is the Italian group, accounting for 41.91% of the participants. However, it's worth noting that there is also a small group of Italian Swiss (less than 1%) among the Italian speakers. English speakers come from five different countries: the United Kingdom (14,85%), the United States of America (10,89%), Canada (1,32%), Ireland and Australia (less than 1%). Latin Americans represent the second largest group (18,15%) and include participants from 12 countries⁴. The other group of Spanish speakers comprises Spaniards (10,56%).

The analysis focuses on the distribution of L2 and L3 for each L1 in trilingual participants and the level of competence in L2 and L3 by each L1 (English, Spanish, and Italian), as shown in *Table 3*.

Based on the observations, it is possible to conclude that English is a widely spoken second language among the groups, while Spanish is more commonly spoken as a third language. Moreover, there is a tendency to suggest higher proficiency levels in a second language than a third language, which is typical due to the additional exposure and practice that often comes with learning a second language. The proficiency levels vary, with some groups showing high proficiency in their second language at the

³ The answers of 467 respondents have been considered in the current research.

⁴ The distribution of Latin Americans is as follows: Chileans constitute 3.63%, Peruvians account for 2.64%, Argentinians and Colombians are 2.31%, Mexicans form 1.98%, Bolivians and Ecuadorians account for 1.32%, while Cubans, Uruguayans and Nicaraguans are less than 1%. Puerto Ricans and Venezuelans constitute less than 0.50%.

C1 and C2 levels. Italian speakers show moderate to high competence in both English and Spanish, particularly in English as a third language.

Table 3 - Linguistic distribution of trilingual speakers

L1	L2	L3	Percentage
Spanish	English	Italian	22%
Spanish	Italian	English	7%
Italian	Spanish	English	21%
Italian	English	Spanish	35%
English	Italian	Spanish	8%
English	Spanish	Italian	7%

5. Results

The phenomena of forward and backward transfer stand out in the data collected. They appeared in the phase of analysis of expression of disagreement and the phase of evaluation of disagreement. The current research underlines that the influence of L1 or L2/L3 affects pragmatic competence and awareness. These linguistic transfers, in both directions, profoundly impact pragmatic competence – the ability to use language appropriately in specific communicative contexts – and pragmatic awareness, which involves reflecting on the correct use of communicative conventions and social norms in language.

The current research highlights that pragmatic competence is not solely tied to structural linguistic proficiency (e.g., grammar and vocabulary) but is deeply influenced by intercultural competence and an understanding of the social norms inherent to each language. Transfer in this context becomes a critical factor that can either facilitate or hinder communication, depending on how the bilingual or multilingual individual manages the linguistic influences that come into play when producing or interpreting disagreement.

In particular, during interactions, the influence of L1 or L2/L3 can lead to variations in the expression of formality, the choice of discursive strategies, and the assessment of the severity of the disagreement. This aspect underscores the importance of considering formal linguistic abilities and the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic abilities activated in complex communicative situations, such as those requiring the expression and negotiation of disagreement.

5.1. *Forward phenomena*

The study highlights several key findings regarding pragmatic transfer from L1 to L2/L3. One notable phenomenon is the transfer of **formality** in communication. The data collected showed that a particular group of participants, trilingual Spanish speakers, adopted a similar formality attitude to Italian native speakers when they expressed disagreement in Italian.

For example, in WDCT's scenario 6⁵, Italian ns in 75,95% and Spanish trilingual speakers in 66,67%. Comparing the answers of a trilingual Spanish L1 speaker (t12) and an Italian native speaker (n61), it is possible to notice a similar formal approach:

n61 – S6: Sicuramente signora, ma l'aria cani è più in là e, per quanto il suo cane possa essere bravo, ci possono essere bambini che ne hanno paura o allergici.

[Certainly ma'am, but the dog air is further on and no matter how good your dog may be, there may be children who are afraid of them or allergic to them.]

t12 – S6: Mi dispiace signora ma non è permesso, tenga conto che ci possono essere bambini allergici o bimbi che hanno paura dei cani.

[I'm sorry ma'am but it's not allowed, take into account that there may be allergic children or children who are afraid of dogs.]

Trilingual Spanish L1 speakers, although not predominantly having Italian as their L2, could transfer their pragmatic competencies from the Spanish context to the Italian one, similarly adopting formal registers. This phenomenon suggests that pragmatic competence in one language can positively influence using another culturally related language (with a low language distance), even without advanced linguistic proficiency. This phenomenon aligns with the notion that when languages share cultural and linguistic similarities, such as Spanish and Italian (both Romance languages), pragmatic knowledge in one can positively impact (positive transfer) the use of another, even if the linguistic proficiency is not highly developed. Cultural norms embedded in L1 significantly affect how formality is perceived and enacted in L2/L3. Trilingual Italian L1 speakers, for example, maintain high formality in disagreement, even when speaking another language perceived as similar, such as Spanish.

Another role of transfer is found in the pragmatic awareness of trilingual speakers. The data collected showed that **linguistic proximity** plays a significant role in pragmatic awareness. The relatively small linguistic distance between the participants' L1 and the target language aligns with the concept of positive pragmatic transfer. When the linguistic distance is small, learners may find it easier to transfer pragmatic norms from their L1 to the target language, facilitating quicker and more effective acquisition of pragmatic competence. Studies on cross-linguistic influence have shown that learners are more likely to successfully transfer pragmatic knowledge from their L1 to an L2 or L3 when the languages share similar structures and cultural norms. Therefore, learners of closely related languages may have an advantage in transferring L1 pragmatic knowledge to L2 or L3, explaining why participants with less language distance to the target language replied more in line with native speakers.

The study's data further reinforces this with statistical evidence, showing that 58.18% of participants who demonstrated high levels of pragmatic awareness had a relatively small linguistic distance between their L1 and the target language. This distance was rated at 16.1 out of 100, indicating that closely related languages offer a significant advantage in efficiently transferring pragmatic knowledge. The smaller the linguistic distance, the more likely learners can apply their L1 pragmatic competence effectively in L2 or L3 contexts, facilitating a smoother transition in acquiring pragmatic norms and communication strategies. Furthermore, it should be emphasised that speakers of close languages did not necessarily have the target language as their second language. 25% had their closest language as their second language, while 75% had it as their third language. With regard to linguistic competence, it is emphasised that participants with greater pragmatic awareness need not necessarily have an advanced C1 or C2 level 56%, with 44% of participants having an intermediate level in the target language.

These findings underscore the importance of linguistic proximity in pragmatic transfer and suggest that learners of languages with a close cultural and structural relationship may have an inherent advantage in pragmatic competence acquisition and pragmatic awareness.

⁵ Text of the scenario: "You are in a public park, in a space that is only for kids and families. A woman arrives and claims that she can enter there with her dog: "It's just a small dog, it doesn't hurt anyone, and additionally it loves children". You disagree with her. What do you say to her?"

5.2. *Backward phenomena*

When examining how trilingual speakers of Italian, English, and Spanish express disagreement in Spanish, English and Italian compared to native speakers (NSs), several notable differences, alongside some similarities, emerge in their use of specific strategies. These differences shed light on the varying approaches to communication and disagreement among these groups, illustrating the influence of multilingualism and cross-linguistic factors. One key finding is the difference in the two expressive dissenting acts adopted by trilingual participants to express disagreement: *apologising and then disagreeing* and *showing disappointment*. The “apology + disagreement” strategy expresses disagreement in Spanish compared to Spanish native speakers (NSs). Spanish native speakers used the strategy “apology + disagreement” scarcely, with less than 5% of them employing it. On the other hand, trilingual speakers with Spanish as their first language (L1) utilised this strategy significantly more, at a rate of 14.9%. This finding suggests that Spanish trilingual speakers were more inclined to soften their disagreement with an apology, potentially to maintain politeness or mitigate conflict. A possible reason could be the influence of their L2 or L3 on the L1 (*backward transfer*), considering that 80% of them are living or have lived in at least one foreign country, suggesting an openness to adopting pragmatic norms from other languages of their linguistic repertoire (L2 or L3).

Another notable discovery concerns the “disappointment” strategy, which was significantly more prevalent among English trilingual speakers (8.6%) than other groups. In contrast, English native speakers used it the least (5.2%), suggesting a potential divergence in expressing dissatisfaction between native and trilingual English speakers, possibly influenced by their second or third language. Notably, 70% of English trilingual speakers have lived in or currently reside in non-English speaking countries, which may have shaped their tendency to express disagreement differently from native English speakers. These findings suggest that the multilingual background of trilingual speakers leads to a **cross-linguistic influence** in their pragmatic strategies, shaping how they manage politeness, soften disagreement, and express dissatisfaction across languages.

There is abundant room for further progress in determining how cross-linguistic influences, such as forward and backward transfer, affect pragmatic strategies in multilingual individuals and how linguistic proximity between languages facilitates or complicates this transfer. A deeper understanding of these processes could shed light on the conditions under which speakers are more likely to transfer pragmatic norms from one language to another, particularly in scenarios where languages share cultural or structural similarities. Further research could explore the specific mechanisms that drive speakers to adopt certain politeness strategies or disagreement tactics—such as the “apology + disagreement” and “disappointment” strategies—based on their exposure to multiple linguistic environments.

Moreover, investigating how language proficiency levels interact with transfer phenomena could reveal more about the extent to which pragmatic competence in one language compensates for limited linguistic skills in another. This analysis would offer insights into how multilingual speakers negotiate communication in real-world contexts, particularly when navigating socially sensitive acts like expressing disagreement or dissatisfaction. In addition, examining the role of sociocultural factors, such as speakers' experiences living in foreign countries, would provide a more nuanced view of how multicultural exposure influences pragmatic awareness and cross-linguistic pragmatic transfer. These inquiries help clarify the interplay between linguistic knowledge, cultural context, and social norms, ultimately enriching our understanding of pragmatic competence in multilingual settings.

The findings of this study reveal new pathways for investigating the determinants of disagreement strategies, encompassing individual personality traits, specific cultural environments, and the influence of multilingualism on communication. This research has significant implications for language teaching and learning in multilingual contexts. Understanding the role of L1 in shaping L2 pragmatic competence can inform strategies that better address trilingual speakers' needs. By highlighting L1 influence shades in expressing disagreement, this study contributes to the broader field of second language acquisition and pragmatic development. This proposal aims to deepen the understanding of multilingual pragmatics and the complex interplay between languages in trilingual speakers, focusing on the intricate and culturally sensitive act of expressing disagreement.

6. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that L1 plays a significant role in shaping disagreement strategies in L2 and L3. The linguistic and pragmatic norms transferred from L1 affect pragmatic competence and awareness. These insights highlight the need for more attention to pragmatic transfer in language education, particularly for learners navigating multilingual environments.

This study has provided significant insights into how trilingual speakers of Italian, English, and Spanish navigate the complex act of expressing disagreement, shedding light on the influence of cross-linguistic pragmatic transfer in multilingual communication. By analysing both forward and backward transfer phenomena, the research demonstrates that trilingual individuals often adopt pragmatic strategies from one language to another, influenced by their exposure to different linguistic and cultural environments. These findings emphasise the importance of linguistic proximity, showing that languages with closer cultural and structural ties facilitate a smoother transfer of pragmatic norms.

Lastly, the research illustrates how studying bidirectional transfer can offer valuable insights for language teaching, promoting a greater awareness of the multidimensional nature of communicative competence in individuals who master multiple languages.

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