Grammatical gender processing in a late acquired language

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Numerous models of second language (L2) acquisition have been proposed, from either a linguistic (Clahsen & Felser, 2005; Herschenson, 2000; Schwartz, 1998;) or neurolinguistic perspective (McLaughlin et al., 2010; Osterhout et al., 2008; Steinhauer, White & Drury, 2009; Ullman, 2001). These models propose contrasting views as concerns the role of the native language (L1) in adult second language (L2) acquisition, the ultimate level of attainment that can be achieved, whether distinct neurophysiological responses are indicative of distinct stages of L2 processing capacity, and, indeed, whether the cortical areas involved in L2 processing are the same as in native language processing. In the present talk, I will present an overview of these models and their predictions as concerns online syntactic processing. Data from various ERP and eye-movement experiments run in my laboratory will be presented which, overall, question the idea of any strict series of neurophysiological responses linked to levels of L2 competence, highlight the importance of using complementary methods to capture processing capacity, and pinpoint protracted areas of processing difficulty and how they relate to the convergence of grammatical features across the L1 and L2. More specifically, I will present the data from a series of ERP and eye-movement experiments looking at the processing of grammatical gender by adult L2 learners from various linguistic backgrounds. The comparison of these groups, which do or do not overlap in linguistic features as concerns the L1 and L2 provide a clear test of the models outlined above.