Noun phrase complexity in a contrastive perspective: German and Spanish L3

Since Biber et al. (2011) showed complexity in noun phrase modification to be essential in the development of academic writing skills, NP modification has been explored mainly in university level writing, and mainly with holistic measures. Exceptions are detailed qualitative analyses of secondary level learner English by Rørvik (2022) and German by Gamper (2022). Still, we need more knowledge about the development of noun phrase complexity in the writing of L3 learners of languages other than English at levels below tertiary education, and about how learners of different languages handle the same linguistic phenomena (Hasselgård & Ebeling, 2018).

Spanish and German are frequent options for L3 instruction in Norwegian secondary school. The curriculum is the same for all foreign languages (*FSP01-03*, Ministry of Education and Research, 2023). Most research on noun phrases in early German L3 writing has focused on morphology: gender, definiteness, number, and case marking (e.g. Hopp, 2011; 2013; Repshus, 2008). What this project aims to investigate are syntactic measures: size and internal structure of noun phrases.

The research questions asked are:

1. To what extent do Norwegian learners of Spanish and German L3 use augmentation (pre- and postmodification) of noun phrases in their writing?
2. Is there a difference between the learners of German and Spanish, and if so, does this correspond to a difference in input from textbooks?

This study compares NP modification in 39 German and 58 Spanish narrative(-like) texts about a holiday or leisure activities, written by students in their third year of L3 studies and culled from the 10th grade subset of the MULTIWRITE project corpus. The NPs are also compared to examples from textbooks for 10th grade Spanish and German, providing authentic examples of the kind of input the students receive in their studies.

The results show differences in NP complexity in L3 Spanish and German. In Spanish, all students use postmodification with preposition *de*, and most students also use attributive adjectives and postmodification with other prepositions. The most common modifications in addition to these are finite relative clauses and appositions. Other modification types listed in Rørvik (2022) occur sporadically.

The simplest student texts in German contain only simple noun phrases. Many texts contain only a few complex phrases, in which the most frequent modifiers are attributive adjectives, prepositional postmodifiers, and appositions. Finite relative clauses and more advanced modifiers are rare in the material.

The textbooks may have contributed to the difference in development. In the German textbooks, the texts contain more simple NPs, and fewer attributive adjectives. Prepositional postmodifiers are common in both languages, but the most common preposition in Spanish (*de*) is five times as frequent as the most frequent German preposition (*in*). Finite relative clauses occur 4 times as often in Spanish as in German textbooks. Elements from the most advanced levels 4 and 5 (Biber et al. 2011; Parkinson & Musgrave, 2014; Rørvik, 2022) are found in 8 of 9 Spanish textbook texts; in German in only 6 of 14.

The investigation thus shows that there are differences in the NP modification used by the students of L3 Spanish and German, and that these differences correspond to differences in the textbooks.

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