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Claudia Membreno

St. Cloud State University, claudia.membreno@stcloudstate.edu

Diana Lowry

St. Cloud State University, dlowry@go.stcloudstate.edu

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ADJECTIVAL COMPLEMENTS AND RESOLUTION RULE ERRORS IN THE COMPOSITION OF HISPANIC L2 LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

CLAUDIA MEMBRENO AND DIANA LOWRY

ABSTRACT¹

The syntactic distribution of adjectives in Spanish and in English is different but share some commonalities. Besides the syntactic distribution, Spanish adjectives differ from English adjectives in that they usually carry out the morphological information of gender and always agree in number with the noun they refer to. The purpose of this paper is twofold: 1) to shed light onto similarities and differences between syntactic distribution patterns of Spanish and English adjectives and 2) to differentiate the morphological transformations that Spanish adjectives undergo in order to agree in number and gender with their referent. Spanish is one of the top three non-English languages spoken in Minnesota as well as in the rest of the country. It is our intent that the information provided in this analysis inform pedagogical practices for teaching Spanish-speaking learners of English.

1.0 Introduction

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in the fall of 2015, approximately 4.9 million K-12 students in the United States were English language learners. More than three-quarters, or 77.7% of ELL students were Hispanic (de Brey, et al., 2019, p. iv). In fact, Spanish is the second most common language used in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). It will, therefore, be helpful for teachers to be aware of those aspects of Spanish that may interfere with their students' learning of English. One such topic is the use of adjectives. Adjectives exist in all languages, and they function the same way—to describe nouns and pronouns. However, “their form, their number, and their frequency vary greatly from language to language” (Koffi, 2015, p. 231). This paper aims to provide a comparison of the syntactic distribution of adjectives between Spanish and English, to analyze Spanish adjectives resolution rules, and to investigate if there is transfer of those rules to the learner's L2 English.

2.0 Syntactic Analysis

Spanish and English are Indo-European languages; however, Spanish is a Romance language, while English is from the Germanic branch. Due to this fact, syntactic differences occur. According to Sleeman and Perridon (2011), the Romance languages may have a pre- or post-nominal adjective, modifying the head noun. On the other hand, the Germanic languages are more restricted, as adjectives are normally in the prenominal position (p. 11). Consequently, the common position of English adjectives is preceding the noun, whereas Spanish allows the adjective's alternate position after the noun. In addition, Bello (1891) notes that Spanish adjectives agree in gender and in number with the nouns they modify, resulting in morphological inflections (p.12). Hence, these structural differences can be problematic for the Spanish L2 learner of English.

¹ **Authorship Responsibilities:** Author 1 and Author 2 share equally the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of this publication.

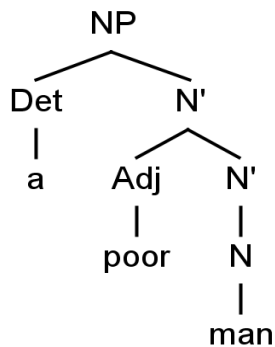
2.1 General Position of Adjectives in Noun Phrases

One of the Greek translations of adjective, “the one lying near the noun,” (Koffi, 2015, p. 231) is indicative of one of the sources of possible confusion for Spanish L2 learners of English; the adjective may appear before or after the noun. Therefore, the English Phrase Structure Rule is $NP \rightarrow (Det) (Adj) N$, and the Spanish noun phrase structure is $NP \rightarrow (Det) (Adj) N (Adj)$. The following tree diagrams show the basic differences between Spanish and English noun phrases:

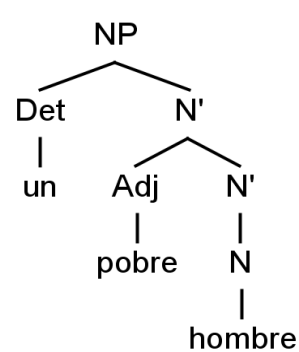


As shown in the NPs in each diagram, the adjective comes before the noun in English and after the noun in Spanish. It is important to note, though, that Spanish allows adjectives to also appear before the head noun. Let us consider the following examples:

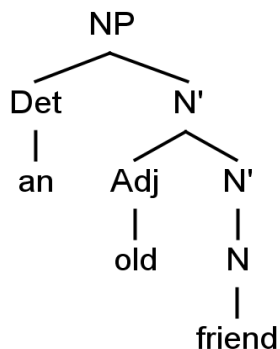
(1) English NP



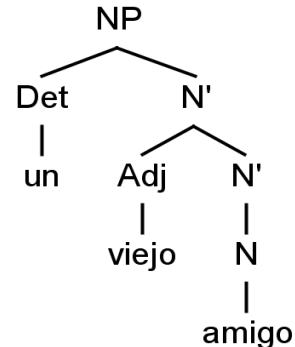
Spanish equivalent



(2) English NP



Spanish equivalent

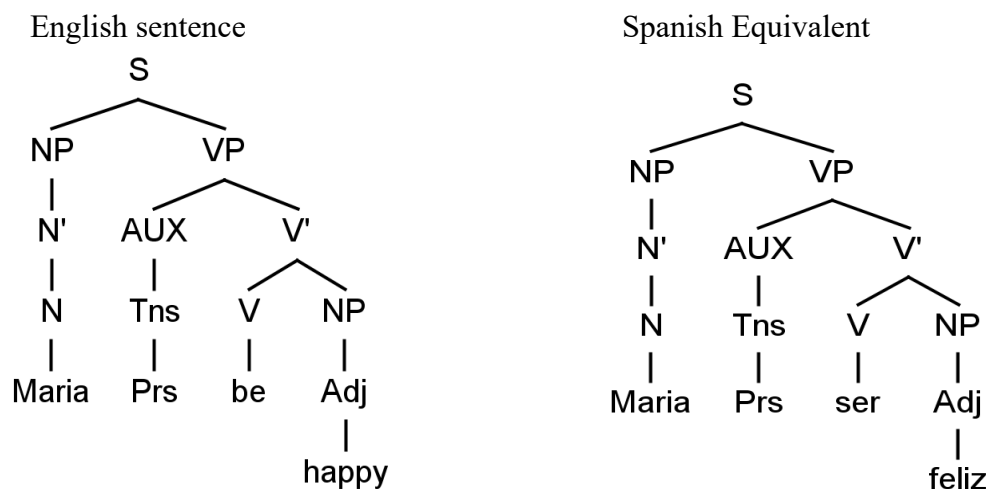


Diagrams (1) and (2) present NP structures that obey the syntactic patterns of the phrase of each language. However, the semantics of the Spanish adjective shifts when the adjective precedes the head noun. Sleeman and Perrion (2011) state that there has been great debate to answer what

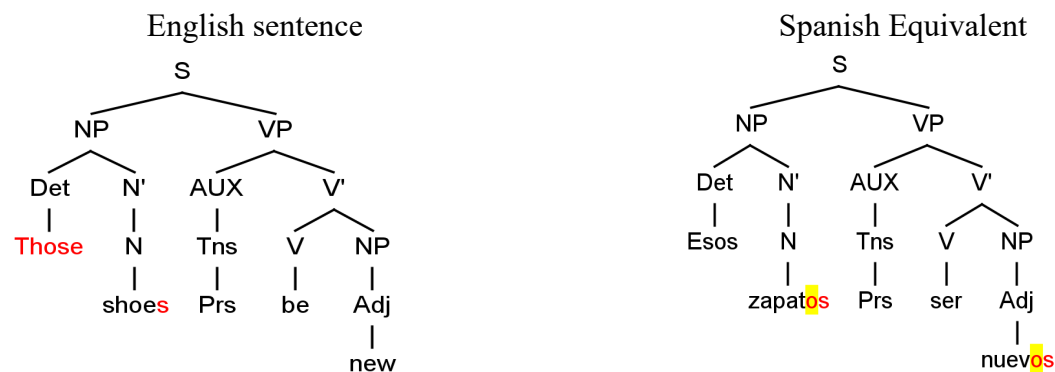
establishes the adjective position/order $NP \rightarrow N + Adj$ or $NP \rightarrow Adj + N$ in Romance languages. One explanation suggests that in French, for example, adjectives placed after the noun reflect objective properties. Adjectives placed before the noun, in contrast, include evaluative or emotional properties toward the noun (p. 11). “*A poor man*” in English and “*Un hombre pobre*” in Spanish are indicative of a man who does not have much money. Both descriptions are objective. However, in Spanish, when the adjective is moved before the noun, as in “*Un pobre hombre*,” the meaning of the phrase is changed to a more subjective description: “*A poor man*” (whom is worthy of my pity). “*An old friend*” in English and “*Un viejo amigo*” both express the idea of having a friend for a number of years. In contrast, moving the Spanish adjective after the noun, “*Un amigo viejo*,” means a friend who is old, or advanced in age.

2.2 Adjective Position as Subject Complements

When the adjective is functioning as a subject complement, the NP structure rules are common to both languages as shown in the following tree diagrams:



Both diagrams show that the position of the adjective in English and in Spanish is after the verb when it is functioning as a subject complement. As mentioned previously, it is acknowledged that Spanish adjectives require agreement with the head noun they modify in gender and number; the morpheme {-s} marks the number for determiners, nouns, and adjectives. In contrast, in English, even when the noun is plural, the adjective does not take a plural marker. We see this in the following examples:



In English, the adjective “*new*” modifies “*shoes*” which is in the plural form, but the adjective does not have any plural marker. Let us contrast this with the adjective “*nuevos*” and the noun “*zapatos*.” Because the noun “*zapatos*” is in plural, the adjective must agree with it in number. Therefore, the adjective “*nuevos*” is also in plural.

3.0 Resolution Rules

According to Koffi (2015) “a number and person agreement system known as resolution rules has been found to be universal” (p. 427). Givon (1970) introduced the term, which explains the rules of agreement between number, gender, and person (as cited in Cotner, 2018, p. 136). “By age three, Spanish-speaking children acquire the gender agreement rules in Spanish and, once acquired, they produce agreement with near 100% accuracy, like adult native speakers” (Montrul & Potowski, 2007, p. 306). Considering this, it is hypothesized that Spanish speakers may misapply the resolution rules from Spanish into their English compositions by making plural nouns to agree with adjectives. To test this hypothesis, we will consider sentences written by Spanish learners of English. We focus mostly on sentences in which the adjective functions as a subject complement.

3.1 Resolution Rules: Agreement of number and gender of Spanish adjectives

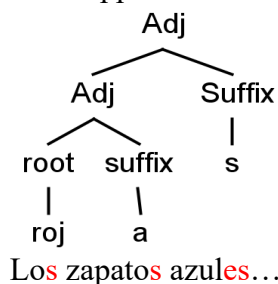
According to Montrul and Potowski (2007), “gender agreement in languages like Spanish is a syntactic feature-checking operation handled by the syntax” (p. 306). Gender is an inherent feature of nouns, whereas adjectives and articles’ gender is determined by the head noun with which they appear. The masculine gender is usually marked in nouns by the inflectional ending {-o} (perro/dog), and the feminine gender is usually marked with the morpheme {-a} (perra/dog). However, such correspondence differs at times, and therefore, some masculine Spanish nouns end with {-a} (clima/weather; idioma/language; problema/problem; mapa/map), and some feminine nouns end with {-o} (mano/hand). Moreover, some Spanish nouns have no obvious gender marking (leche/milk; nariz/nose). Let us consider the following examples:

1. **La** gata blanca y **el** gato negro...
The/fem cat/fem white/fem and the/ masc cat/masc black/masc
2. **El** gato blanco y **la** gata negra...
The/masc cat/masc white/masc and the/ fem cat/fem black/fem
3. **La** niña está **feliz**.
The/fem girl/fem is happy/fem
4. **El** niño está **feliz**.
The/masc boy/masc is happy/masc
5. **La** mano es **pequeña**.
The/fem hand/fem is small/fem
6. **El** mapa es **pequeño**.
The/masc map/masc is small/masc

Noun phrases 1 and 2 provide examples of a singular feminine noun with the inflectional ending /a/ as in “*gata*” and a singular masculine noun with the inflectional ending /-o/, as in “*gato*.” As it can be seen in both examples, the inflectional ending of the adjectives corresponds to the inflectional ending of the head noun, and the definite article also agrees in gender with the noun. It is “*el*” for masculine singular nouns, and “*la*” for feminine singular nouns. Sentences 3 and 4 provide an example of an adjective such as “*feliz*” (happy) that does not take a gender marking. Included in this category are adjectives such as “*paciente*” (patient), “*triste*” (sad), “*inteligente*” (intelligent), “*facil*” (easy), etc. Sentences 5 and 6 illustrate a feminine noun with the inflectional ending /o/ “*mano*” and a masculine noun with the inflectional ending /a/ “*mapa*.” Even if an adjective modifies a feminine noun that ends with /o/ such as “*mano*,” the adjective still takes an /a/ ending, as in the phrase “*mano pequeña*,” (small hand). Similarly, when a masculine noun ends in /a/ as is the case of “*mapa*,” the adjective still takes /o/ as in “*mapa pequeño*” (small map). For plural number agreement, the marker is in most cases the morpheme /s/ but changes to /es/ in some cases, as shown in the examples below:

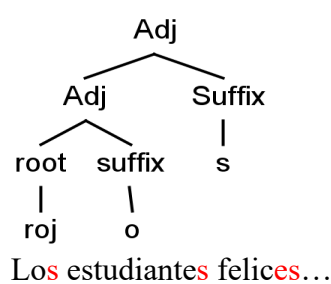
Las manzanas rojas

The Pl apple Pl red Pl



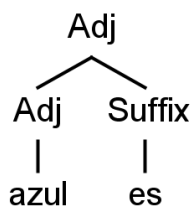
Los zapatos rojos

The Pl shoe Pl red Pl

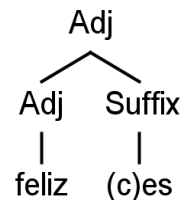


We see that the plus definite article for masculine nouns is “*los*,” as in the phrases “*los zapatos*,” and “*los estudiantes*.” If the definite article is feminine, then we see “*las*” as in “*las manzanas*” (the apples). The adjectives “*rojo*” agrees with noun in gender and number. Since “*manzanas*” (apples) is feminine, the plural adjective would be “*rojas*.” The same goes for plural masculine nouns such as “*zapatos*.” The modifying adjective becomes “*rojos*.”

The Pl shoe Pl blue Pl



The Pl student Pl happy Pl



Now, adjectives such as “*azul*” and “*feliz*” that end in a consonant make their plural in /es/. This explains why we have “*Los zapatos azules*” or “*Los estudiantes felices*.”

3.2 Is there transfer of resolution rules from the L1 to the L2?

One of the greatest challenges for Spanish speakers of English is mastering the agreement system. Koffi (2015) notes that “ESL/EFL teachers can expect negative transfer in the person and number agreement system from their students, especially where agreement is not controlled by the same hierarchy patterns” (p. 427). We collected and analyzed data from 41 Salvadoran English learners; all were college monolingual Spanish speakers, enrolled in a Basic English class.² They were given 14 sentences in Spanish to translate into English. The adjectives in all 14 sentences functioned as subject complements following the copular verb “*be*”. Each student received a score based on transfer occurrence from L1 to L2 for both, gender and number, and a general score for resolution rules transfer. The general average for resolution rules transfer was 10.8% and the standard deviation was 12.6. Individual transfer scores of gender and number differed greatly from these results. As it can be noted in Table 1, none of the participants transferred gender agreement rules from L1 to L2. Nevertheless, scores for transfer of number agreement rules reached up to 79% at the individual level. The average for number agreement rule transfer was 16% and the standard deviation was 17.7 (see Appendix B). The following are sample sentences taken from the students’ translations:

1. Mis amigos son diferentes
My friends are different**s**.
2. Estos zapatos son nuevos
These shoes are new**s**.
3. Los dos hombres son ignorantes
The two men are ignorant**s**.
4. Los niños están cansados
The boys are **tired**.
5. Mis amigos son honestos
My friends are **honest**.

These examples demonstrate that gender agreement transfer was not present in the students’ translations. It is noteworthy that in examples 1-3 resolution rules for number agreement were applied to the adjectives, yet they were not applied to adjectives in examples 4 and 5. We can only speculate as to why there is transfer in some sentences but not in others. We opine that perhaps some English words such as ‘*tired*’ and ‘*honest*’ are familiar to most L1 learners. ‘*Ignorant*’ and ‘*Intelligent*’ do not appear in the first two thousand high frequency word lists. Instead, they are found in the Academic Word List (AWL). The question of familiarity with the words themselves is a valid issue. We also speculate that gender resolution was not transferred because of the morphological structure of English adjectives. They are not easily amenable to the Spanish inflectional suffixes /a/ or /o/. We further speculate that /s/ was added to the adjective “*new*” and “*ignorant*” because it performs the same function in the morphology of both languages. Even though the percentage of resolution rules transfer is small, and the transfer behavior is inconsistent, no one can deny that it happens.

² We are grateful to colleagues in El Salvador who made the data available to us for analysis.

Table 1 provides additional examples for the transfer of number agreement on adjectives.

| N0 | Spanish | English | Transfer occurrences | Transfer Percentage | Translation |
|-----|--------------|---------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|--|
| 1. | diferentes | different | 25 times | 61.0% | differents |
| 2. | nuevos | new | 15 times | 36.6% | News |
| 3. | ignorantes | ignorant | 11 times | 26.8% | Ignorants |
| 4. | importantes | important | 8 times | 19.5% | important |
| 5. | bonitas | pretty/ beautiful/cute | 7 times | 17.1% | 4 pretties; 1 pretyes/ 2 beautifuls (cute 0 times) |
| 6. | ausentes | absent | 6 times | 14.6% | Absents |
| 7. | iguales | equal | 6 times | 14.6% | Equals |
| 8. | inteligentes | inteligent/ smart | 6 times | 14.6% | 5 intelligents/ 1 smart |
| 9. | viejas | old | 3 times | 7.3% | Olds |
| 10. | pequenos | small/short/little | 2 times | 4.9% | shorts/ smalls (little 0 times) |
| 11. | baratos | cheap | 2 times | 4.9% | Cheaps |
| 12. | caros | expensive | 2 times | 4.9% | expensives |
| 13. | cansados | tired | 0 times | 0.0% | |
| 14. | honestos | honest | 0 times | 0.0% | |

Table 1: Transfer behavior for number agreement

Students were given 14 Spanish adjectives, but their word choices for the translation varied for some. A total of 19 different adjectives appeared in the translations. Transfer of the number marking occurred in 80% of the translations (14 pluralized adjectives out of a total of 19). The data offers some insights on number resolution transfer. In the case of the adjectives “*different*,” “*absent*,” “*important*,” “*intelligent*,” and “*ignorant*,” we see that they end in /-nt/. If students transfer the /s/ to the end of these words to satisfy the plural requirement of the head nouns, phonologically, the sounds of “*differents*,” “*absents*,” “*important*,” “*intelligents*,” and “*ignorants*,” the derived adjectives, sound correct. They sound just like the nominal form of the adjectives, namely: “*difference*,” “*absence*,” “*importance*,” “*intelligence*,” and “*ignorance*.” This may explain why students pluralized these adjectives. They draw from their L1 knowledge of gender agreement between adjectives and their nouns. The vowel at the end of ‘*new*’ and ‘*pretty*’ may also explain why students added a plural /s/ to them in English. Many adjectives in Spanish end in vowel sounds: /a/ for feminine and /o/ for masculine. Perhaps the presence of a vowel sound at the end of English adjectives such as ‘*new*’ and ‘*pretty*’ facilitates inflectional plural transfer from Spanish to English. Finally, because of coda cluster simplification, some learners produce the word ‘*honest*’ as “**honest*.” Thus, adding another /s/ is redundant. This explains why none of the learners made a mistake. Now, let’s assume that some of the learners did not delete the final /t/ in the coda. If it is kept, then the resulting spelling would be “**honest*.” The students may have avoided this spelling because the coda cluster /sts/ does not exist in Spanish.

4.0 Pedagogical Implications

The previous analyses have shed some light on the morphosyntactic differences and similarities between Spanish adjectives and English adjectives. In so doing, we draw teachers’ attention to possible challenges that Spanish learners may face when using adjectives in English. Erroneous though these transfers may be, they are not unmotivated. They occur for a variety of reasons. As we have seen throughout this paper, some of the reasons are morphosyntactic, others

appear to be phonological. Adjectives ending in /nt/ and those ending in a vowel are more likely to undergo number resolution rules than those that end in coda clusters that do not exist in Spanish. Our findings suggest that if teachers are aware of these factors, they can provide explicit instructions to help their students avoid these negative transfers. Teachers can also highlight the differences between number and gender resolution rules between Spanish and English. Telling Spanish learners that English adjectives do not agree in number and gender with the head noun is a good starting point.

5.0 Conclusion

Since acquiring a second language is a difficult undertaking, teachers must consider aspects of the native languages of their students. For Spanish speakers, adjectives used as subject complements is challenging because of some similarities but also important phonological and resolution rules between their L1 and English. This issue has not been widely written about in the L2 composition literature. However, our data and findings indicate that these mistakes are found in learners' compositions. The reasons behind these negative transfers are still not fully understood because there are inconsistent behaviors among learners. This issue should be investigated further. An in-depth phonological analysis may shed some light as to why the transfer occurs in some cases but not in others.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Claudia Membreno is a graduate student in the MA TESL/Applied Linguistics program. She has spent most of her life in El Salvador. She earned a BA degree in English from Universidad Tecnológica de El Salvador (UTEC). She has taught English as a Foreign Language for seven years at the elementary level in El Salvador. In addition, she has taught advanced English courses at the college level, including English Phonology and English Grammar. She can be reached at: clmembreno@stcloudstate.edu.

Diana Lowry is a graduate student in the TESL/Applied Linguistics program. She has spent most of her life in Missouri. She earned a BSE in English and an MA in English from Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri. She also has an MA in counseling from Stephen College in Columbia, Missouri. She has taught English Language Arts for grades 7 through 12 and English composition at the college level for twenty-two years. She can be reached at: dllowry@go.stcloudstate.edu.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire: ¿Cómo dirías en inglés?

Mis amigos son diferentes.

Estos zapatos son nuevos.

Mis amigas están ausentes (absent).

Las clases son importantes.

Esas casas son viejas.

Los niños son pequeños.

Las dos niñas son iguales (equal).

Los zapatos son baratos.

Los carros son caros.

Los niños están cansados.

Mis hermanos son inteligentes.

Las mujeres son bonitas.

Mis amigos son honestos.

Los Dos hombres son ignorantes.

Appendix B

| Student | Resolution Rules Transfer Score | Gender Transfer Score | Number Transfer Score |
|----------------|--|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 | 23% | 0 | 36% |
| 2 | 9% | 0 | 14% |
| 3 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 4 | 5% | 0 | 7% |
| 5 | 18% | 0 | 29% |
| 6 | 18% | 0 | 29% |
| 7 | 32% | 0 | 50% |
| 8 | 23% | 0 | 36% |
| 9 | 32% | 0 | 50% |
| 10 | 14% | 0 | 21% |
| 11 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 12 | 9% | 0 | 14% |
| 13 | 14% | 0 | 21% |
| 14 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 15 | 23% | 0 | 36% |
| 16 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 17 | 9% | 0 | 14% |
| 18 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 19 | 9% | 0 | 14% |
| 20 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 21 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 22 | 14% | 0 | 21% |
| 23 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 24 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 25 | 5% | 0 | 7% |
| 26 | 5% | 0 | 7% |
| 27 | 14% | 0 | 21% |
| 28 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 29 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 30 | 5% | 0 | 7% |
| 31 | 64% | 0 | 79% |
| 32 | 5% | 0 | 7% |
| 33 | 9% | 0 | 14% |
| 34 | 9% | 0 | 14% |
| 35 | 18% | 0 | 29% |
| 36 | 27% | 0 | 43% |
| 37 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 38 | 14% | 0 | 21% |
| 39 | 5% | 0 | 7% |

| | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------|---|--------------|
| 40 | 5% | 0 | 7% |
| 41 | 5% | 0 | 7% |
| Average | 10.8% | | 16.0% |
| Standard Deviation | 12.6 | | 17.7 |

Table 2: Resolution rules transfer from L1 to L2 scores



Diagram 1: Scores distribution of resolution rules (gender and number)

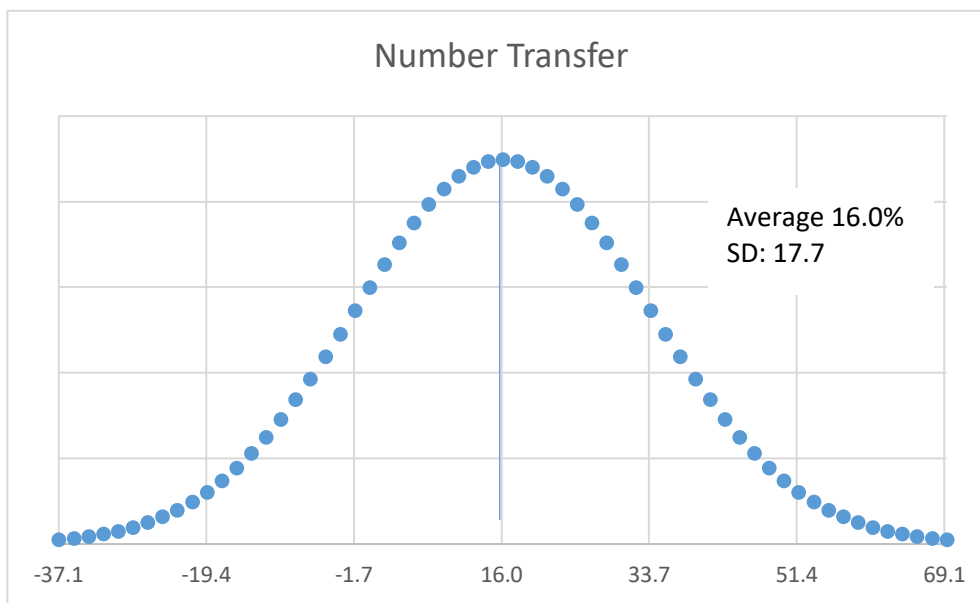


Diagram 2: Score distribution of transfer of number resolution rules