Language Transfer

Cross-linguistic influence in language learning

Terence Odlin

CAMBRIDGE
Applied Linguistics

Series Editors: Michael H. Long and Jack C. Richards

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The Ohio State University

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In memory of Walter Odlin
1908–1985

Series editors' preface

Language transfer has been a central issue in applied linguistics, second language acquisition, and language teaching for at least a century. Within the last few decades, however, its importance in second language learning has been reassessed several times. In the 1950s it was often deemed the most important factor to consider in theories of second language learning as well as in approaches to second language teaching. In the 1960s its importance waned as learners' errors were seen not as evidence of language transfer but rather of "the creative construction process." Some researchers virtually denied the existence of language transfer in their enthusiasm for universalist explanations. In recent years, however, a more balanced perspective has emerged in which the role of transfer is acknowledged and in which transfer is seen to interact with a host of other factors in ways not yet fully understood.

This reassessment of the significance of language transfer is lucidly demonstrated in this new addition to the Cambridge Applied Linguistics Series. In this timely book, Terry Odlin presents a comprehensive and original account of the nature of language transfer and its role in second language acquisition. Dr. Odlin documents the historical development of the concept of language transfer, explores the role of transfer in discourse, semantics, syntax, phonology, and writing systems, and examines the way language transfer interacts with linguistic as well as cultural, social, and personal factors in second language learning and use. In the process, he surveys a large body of literature and examines data from many different languages.

Dr. Odlin's analysis challenges simplistic notions of language transfer and offers instead a convincing account of the process as a phenomenon that is fundamental to research in second language acquisition and applied linguistics. This book will hence be invaluable to students entering the field of second language acquisition, researchers, language teachers, and anyone interested in the fundamental question of how language systems interact during the process of second language acquisition. We are therefore delighted to be able to make Dr. Odlin's research available to a wider audience through the Cambridge Applied Linguistics Series.

Michael H. Long
Jack C. Richards

Preface

The significance of cross-linguistic influences has long been a controversial topic. As this book indicates, the controversy has had a long life not only among second language teachers and researchers, but also among linguists interested in questions of language contact and language change. Although it would be too much to hope that this book will cause such a long-standing controversy to die, the discussion of transfer here may help to set to rest some dubious claims and to point the way toward more productive thinking about cross-linguistic influences. While I have tried hard to avoid the sweeping claims that unfortunately have been frequent in discussions of transfer, I make no secret of my belief that transfer is an extremely important factor in second language acquisition. The available evidence, I feel, warrants that belief. Thus, the focus of this book is on empirical investigations of learners' behavior in many contexts. There is some discussion of the pedagogical implications of certain investigations, but it seems to me that relatively little is known about the best ways to make use of transfer research in the classroom – hopefully, more teachers and teacher trainers will begin to think about what those ways are. There is also some discussion of theoretical work in other areas of linguistics, but I have made efforts to limit that discussion, which could go on interminably, and to limit the jargon that usually accompanies such discussion. Readers familiar with *Government and Binding*, *Schema Theory*, and *Sprachbund* will not find those terms, though they will note allusions to research using those terms. Some background in linguistics will be helpful in reading certain chapters (especially Chapter 7), but the glossary provided should help with some of the terminology that seemed impossible to avoid.

While this book has just one author, there are many people who have helped bring about whatever may be praiseworthy in it. In my graduate work I had the good fortune to take courses with Diana Natalicio, who recognized the seriousness of challenges to contrastive analysis in the 1960s and 1970s but who also recognized that the most extreme – albeit fashionable – criticisms of work on transfer were themselves open to challenges. Some of the more novel ideas in this book owe a great deal to work by Jacquelyn Schachter, Sarah Grey Thomason, and Eric Kellerman, all of whom also provided valuable feedback on a number of my ideas. As this work took shape, Jack Richards provided much encouragement and support – without his interest, this book might never have been finished. Ellen Shaw and Linda Grossman of Cambridge University Press helped in many ways to see the manuscript through the final stages. I would also like to thank several people who made my search for studies of transfer easier by sending me some of their work: Christian Adjemian, David Birdsong, Susan Gass, Lynn Eubank, Marku Filppula, John Hinds, Richard Schmidt, David Singleton, and Lydia White. Many thanks are also due to Lisa Kiser, Alan Brown, and other members of the Department of English at Ohio State who provided valuable comments on earlier drafts of the manuscript. Moreover, I received many forms of assistance from friends and colleagues in the Department of English, the Department of Linguistics, the programs in English as a Second Language, and also from members of the Linguistics Institute of Ireland. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the generous support provided by other units at Ohio State, including the College of Humanities, the Office of Research and Graduate Studies, and the Instructional and Research Computation Center. Finally, I would like to thank my family for their encouragement not only with this project but with much else besides.

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1 *Introduction*

When people hear a speaker with a "foreign accent," they often try to guess the speaker's background. Sometimes racial features and sometimes a style of clothing will help listeners guess correctly, but often the only reliable clue seems to be how the individual talks. In such cases, questions put to the speaker such as "Are you German?" or "Are you Spanish?" suggest an intuition about the nature of language, an awareness, however unconscious, that the native language of a speaker can somehow cause the individual to sound "foreign" in speaking another language.

The detection of foreign accents is just one example of the awareness that people may often have of *cross-linguistic influence*, which is also known as *language transfer*.[1] That awareness is also evident from time to time in opinions that people have about foreign language study. Many believe that the study of one language (e.g., Latin) will make easier the study of a closely related language (e.g., French). Similarly, people often believe that some languages are "easy" in comparison with others. For example, many English-speaking university students see European languages such as French as less difficult than Oriental languages such as Chinese. Since the similarities between English and French seem to be relatively great, French is often considered "easy."

An awareness of language transfer is also evident in the mimicking of foreigners. While the representation of foreigners in ethnic jokes is often crude in more ways than one, stereotypes of the way foreigners talk are sometimes highly developed among actors. The following passage comes from a manual to train English-speaking actors in the use of different foreign accents, in this case a Russian one:

> Oh! I very good fellow! why? because I Cossack. I very big Cossack. Yah! I captain of Royal Cossack Guard in Moscow – in old country. Oh! I got fifty – hundred – five hundred Cossack they was under me. I be big mans. And womens, they love me lots. Nastia Alexanderovna – she big ballet dancer in Czar ballet – Countess Irina Balushkovna, she love me. All womens they love

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[1] A more extended definition and also a justification of the term *transfer* appear in Chapter 3 (Section 3.1).

> me. And men? Ach! they be 'fraid from me. They hating me. Why? because I big Cossack. I ride big horse. Drink lots vodka. Oh! I very big mans. (Herman and Herman 1943:340)

The manual provides a pronunciation guide for this passage so that actors can make their phonetic mimicry seem plausible, but a number of grammatical features in the passage also seem to be "typically Russian," such as the absence of an article and a copula in *I very good fellow*. Another passage in the same manual provides a very different linguistic – and ethnic – stereotype. While the Irishwoman's speech in the following passage might be that of a monolingual speaker of English, it is similar to stereotypical portrayals of Irish-English bilinguals by modern Irish playwrights:

> And what business is it of yours that I be awake or no? Be what right do you come snooping after me, following me like a black shadow. Are youse never going to leave me alone? Yous'd be after doing better minding your own business and letting me for to mind mine. For I have an ache in me long-suffering heart and lashin's of pain cutting through me brain like a dull knife. And me eyes is looking at a world that's not of your living. For it's a revelation I'm after having – a view into the banshee world of devils and spirits and the dear departed dead now rotting their whitened bones under the cold, black sod. Ah! sure, now, and it's the likes of you and your friends that call themselves sane, that disbelieves in what I'm after seeing and knowing. (Herman and Herman 1943:100)

Analogous to the Russian passage, some of the grammatical features in the Irishwoman's speech appear to be stereotypically Irish: for example, the syntactic pattern in *what I'm after seeing and knowing*, which in standard English would be *what I have seen and known*. While these portrayals of accents may seem exaggerated, they do typify the use of special linguistic structures to characterize the speech of bilinguals.[2]

The distinctiveness of foreign accents often seems understandable in light of cross-linguistic comparisons. For example, Russian does not have present tense copula forms such as *am* or articles such as *a*, and so omissions of the copula and indefinite article in *I very good fellow* may seem to be clearly due to a difference in the grammatical systems of Russian and English. The comparison of such differences, which is known technically as **contrastive analysis**, has long been a part of second language pedagogy, and in the twentieth century contrastive analyses have become more and more detailed.[3] Since such cross-linguistic comparisons constitute an indispensable basis for the study of transfer, the discussion of second language research in this book will frequently include contrastive observations.

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[2] The Irishwoman's speech is a more accurate characterization than what is often found in so-called Stage Irish (cf. Bliss 1978; Sullivan 1980).

[3] Technical terms that appear in the glossary (see page 165) are indicated by boldface at their first occurrence.

In light of such everyday abilities as the recognition and mimicry of foreign accents and in light of common beliefs about cross-linguistic similarities and differences, there appears to be a widespread assumption that language transfer is an important characteristic of second language acquisition. It might seem obvious that many characteristics of a learner's linguistic behavior will closely approximate or greatly differ from the actual characteristics of the second language because of similarities and differences predicted by a contrastive analysis. In fact, however, the role of language transfer in second language acquisition has long been a very controversial topic.[4] Some scholars have indeed argued for the importance of transfer; some have gone so far as to consider it the paramount fact of second language acquisition. Yet other scholars have been very skeptical about the importance of transfer. Among linguists and language teachers today, there is still no consensus about the nature or the significance of cross-linguistic influences.

Much of the discussion in the next chapter will review the reasons for the skepticism about transfer, but a brief consideration of one of the most important reasons is appropriate now. As already noted, characteristics of the Russian language seem to explain sentences such as *I very good fellow.* A contrastive explanation, however, seems less than compelling in light of other facts. For example, speakers of Spanish, which, like English, has copula verb forms, frequently omit forms such as *am* and *is* (cf. Section 2.2). Moreover, such errors are found not only among Russian and Spanish speakers but also among speakers of other languages – and also among children learning English as their native language. Thus, while a contrastive analysis might explain a Russian speaker's omission of copula forms, a Spanish-English contrastive analysis would not explain the same error, and a contrastive analysis is irrelevant for monolingual children who make this same error as they acquire English. The pervasiveness of certain types of errors has thus been among the most significant counterarguments against the importance of transfer.

Despite the counterarguments, however, there is a large and growing body of research that indicates that transfer is indeed a very important factor in second language acquisition. Accordingly, the primary aim of this book is to reconsider the problem of transfer in light of recent second language research. While the research to be reviewed points to the importance of transfer, it also frequently points to the importance of other significant factors in second language acquisition. Thus, even though a comprehensive review of second language research is beyond the scope of this book, there will be frequent discussion of cases in which transfer is either not a significant influence or an influence that interacts with other influences.

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[4] The terms *acquisition* and *learning* will be used interchangeably throughout this work even though much of the writing on second language acquisition (e.g., Krashen 1981) distinguishes between the two terms. I agree with Krashen and others that the outcomes of acquisition can differ depending on the awareness of language that individuals have (cf. Section 8.3). However, I strongly disagree with Krashen's analysis of transfer and with much else in his interpretation of second language acquisition (cf. Sections 2.2, 3.1). Since his characterization of *acquisition* and *learning* is questionable in several respects, I see no reason to use his terminological distinctions (cf. Gregg 1984; Odlin 1986).

There are a number of reasons for language teachers and linguists to consider more closely the problem of transfer. Teaching may become more effective through a consideration of differences between languages and between cultures. An English teacher aware of Spanish-based and Korean-based transfer errors, for example, will be able to pinpoint problems of Spanish-speaking and Korean-speaking ESL students better, and in the process, communicate the very important message to students that their linguistic and cultural background *is* important to the teacher.[5] Also, consideration of the research showing similarities in errors made by learners of different backgrounds will help teachers to see better what may be difficult or easy for anyone learning the language they are teaching.

There are yet other reasons to know about research on transfer. For historical linguists, such knowledge can lead to insights about the relation between language contact and language change. Although languages change for a variety of reasons, the bilingualism that often results from language contact situations can be a major factor. For example, Hiberno-English, the dialect spoken in parts of rural Ireland, does have several of the unusual characteristics of the Irishwoman's speech cited earlier, and a number of those characteristics appear to result from the influence of Irish. Research on transfer is also important for a better understanding of the nature of language acquisition in any context and is thus of interest to anyone curious about what is common to all languages, that is, *language universals*. As Comrie (1984) has noted, second language research can provide a valuable empirical check on the merit of universalist theories, and the issue of transfer is likely to figure prominently in such research.

This book consists of ten chapters. The next two provide an overview of the issues: Chapter 2 is a historical survey of the controversy surrounding language transfer, and Chapter 3 is a discussion of four types of problems especially important in the investigation of transfer. The next four chapters survey second language research on transfer and universals in relation to linguistic subsystems: discourse (Chapter 4); semantics – including a discussion of morphology (Chapter 5); syntax (Chapter 6); and phonetics, phonology, and writing systems (Chapter 7). Chapter 8 discusses in more detail some aspects of language transfer which structural descriptions cannot always account for, such as the effects of individual variation in second language acquisition. Chapter 9 reviews important currents in the research discussed in earlier chapters, and Chapter 10 considers some of the implications that the research may have for teaching.

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[5] Throughout this book, the term *ESL* (English as a Second Language) will be used even in cases in which *EFL* (English as a Foreign Language) might be more appropriate. While such a terminological distinction can be crucial for those developing syllabi or preparing pedagogical materials, the distinction is less important for researchers studying cross-linguistic influence.

Further reading

Most studies of transfer appear in a wide variety of journals, but they sometimes appear in special collections. One of the best collections is edited by Gass and Selinker (1983). A recent book-length study by Ringbom (1987) combines a review of many of the controversies about transfer with a detailed empirical study. Ellis (1985) has written a remarkably comprehensive and judicious survey of research on second language acquisition, including work on transfer. For more discussion of linguistic analyses of the literary treatment of foreign accents, a text by Traugott and Pratt (1980) is useful. Recent introductions to linguistics include texts by Bolinger and Sears (1981) and Fromkin and Rodman (1983).

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