On the Complexity of Transfer in Multilingualism

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Transfer phenomena has mainly been approached from the generative and psycholinguistic perspectives.

Theoretical proposals on transfer imply specific assumptions regarding the nature of language’s— and interlanguage’s—mental representation, as well as regarding the nature of the acquisition process.
On transfer

Role of previously acquired languages

Nature of interlanguage

Motivation for transfer

Directionality of transfer
It will be discussed:

Transfer viewed from:

- Müller (1998)
- Füller (1999)
- Pavlenko & Jarvis (2002)
Generative perspective

- Both UG and L1 grammar are determining influences on the form and functioning of the interlanguage grammar.
Generative

• Full Transfer-Full Access (Schwartz&Sprouse 1986): L1 representation is fully implicated in the interlanguage lexicon; lexical entries can be restructured on the basis of L2 input.

• Minimal Trees Hypothesis (Vainikka and Young-Scholten 1994): Initial grammars contain lexical categories, but lack of functional categories. They would subsequently emerge.

• Valueless Features Hypothesis (Eubank 1996): L1’s features strength do not transfer. They are ‘inert’.
Müller (1998)

- Reviews longitudinal studies on the acquisition of word order in German subordinate clauses.

- Children encounter great amount of variability in adult German word order in subordinate clauses that accept verb-final and non-verb-final order as well.
Müller (1998)

- The children who produce word order errors have two separate grammatical systems.
- Errors made in bilingual language development are due to transfer of features from the other language.
Transfer emerges as a relief strategy in bilinguals who face ambiguous input.

The learner, due to economy principles, develops a new generalization which outranks the old generalization - the parameter.

This new ‘subroutine’ occurs based on positive evidence the child may have of grammatical analysis in the recipient language (not ‘blind transfer’).
Müller (1998)

  1. This ‘relief strategy’ not only takes the form of transfer, or involves ‘subparameters’.
  2. Term ‘crosslinguistic influence’ instead of ‘transfer’.
- Schlyter (1998)
  Possibility of bidirectional transfer.
Psycholinguistic perspectives

- Social-psychological factors influence the production of languages
Füller (1999)

- MLF model on L2 acquisition.

- Bilingual interlanguage is comparable to codeswitching, where lexical structure may be split and recombined to construct interlanguage.
Füller (1999)

- Case study based on telephonic conversations between a young female L1 English, and L2s Spanish and German, and her grandmother L1s Spanish and German, and L2 English.

- German-English-Spanish codeswitching
Füller (1999)

- The speaker creates a composite ML with bilingual interlanguage.
- Transferred knowledge from previously learned languages will provide the speaker with the lexical complexity required in communication.
- Language structures are not assumed to be hierarchical, but evenly linked according to structural convergence.
Pavlenko & Jarvis (2002)

Study framed within multicompentence framework:

Individuals who know more than one language have a distinct compound state of mind that is not equivalent to two monolingual states (Cook 1991)
Narratives collected in Russian and English, by Russian individuals who had lived in English speaking environments between 3 and 8 years.

Transfer can be bidirectional, with influence in both L1 and L2.

Transfer can be simultaneous or synchronic
Pavlenko & Jarvis (2002)

- Syntagmatic and paradigmatic transfer extends beyond semantic representations to areas of formal linguistic competence that were thought to be part of an adult speaker’s ‘steady state’.
- These findings open the possibility of exploration on bidirectional transfer, transfer between more than two languages, and attrition of one or more of the languages involved under the influence of another language.
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- Pavlenko & Jarvis (2002)

- Relief strategy for ambiguous input
- Bilingual interlanguage Comparable to codeswitching
- Bidirectional transfer


