
CURRENT ISSUES IN LANGUAGE TRANSFER

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1. Introduction

In the past 20 years, Second Language Acquisition witnessed the resurgence of interest in language transfer. The Ann Arbor Michigan Conference on Language transfer meant a great step in the study of this phenomenon since it covered theoretical issues as well as empirical data from language learning situations. That new approach to language transfer is manifest in the works of European-based researchers appearing in Kellerman and Sharwood-Smith (1986), that include cognitive views, questions of transferability and constraints on language transfer. But, what is happening nowadays? In the 90's, from a syntactic point of view, most research on transfer is being carried out within the framework of Universal Grammar. This turn to generative approaches meant a new interest in the systems that learners create and the development of interlanguage at different stages. Regarding semantics, conceptual aspects are being analyzed. Moreover, the relationship between transfer and fossilization as well as 'transfer to somewhere' and 'transfer to nowhere' are being discussed in interlanguage.

In an attempt to summarise these perspectives, the pages that follow offer an overview on current issues in transfer research.

2. Universal Grammar studies

The greatest amount of work that has been done in recent years concerning language transfer research in syntax is based on UG. The most recent generative approaches focus on the acquisition of L2 morphosyntax. They aim at identifying the starting point of grammatical knowledge of the L2 so as to find

out the structure of subsequent stages and explain their development. Schwartz (1995) considers that the initial state of L2 acquisition is closely related to L1 grammar. This constitutes a key characteristic of studies on transfer in the 90's: "the connection between the L2 initial state and subsequent development" (Schwartz, 1995:21). Three views of the L2 initial state can be distinguished:

2.1. *Minimal Trees*

This view is supported by Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1996), who agree with the Weak Continuity, that is, what gets transferred from the L1 grammar are lexical categories and their linear orientation. Within this framework, lexical and functional projections are distinguished. What is transferred is the structure of the VP, the functional projections above VP constitute the subsequent development. This view attributes "the **minimal** amount of structure over all to the L2 initial state" (Vainikka and Young-Scholten, 1996:23)

2.2. *Full Transfer/Full Access*

This hypothesis is defended by Schwartz and Sprouse (1996) stating that the initial state of L2 acquisition is the final state of L1 acquisition. Therefore, the L1 grammar traces the starting point; the maximal amount of transfer is attributed to the L2 initial state, so the maximal amount of structure is also attributed over all to the L2 initial state. According to these authors, the morphosyntactic empirical foundations of the weak transfer hypothesis lessen the value of the approach, therefore they are invalid. As opposed to the weak transfer hypothesis, they follow the Strong Continuity, ie., UG constrains all stages of Interlanguage.

2.3. *Valueless features*

This hypothesis is represented by Eubank (1996) and it constitutes a mid-way between Minimal Trees and Full Transfer/Full Access. It is also referred to as the *weak transfer hypothesis*. From the point of view of this trend, the L2 initial state shows an intermediate amount of transfer, so it indicates an overall structure. Overt inflectional morphology does not transfer, therefore the parametric values of features defined by this morphology do not transfer either. According to this hypothesis, UG does not constrain all stages of Interlanguage.

3. Conceptual transfer

Some studies on transfer are not based on formal aspects but on conceptual issues, ie. on the conceptual system underlying the L1. Pavlenko (1998) and

Jarvis (1999) refer to it as *conceptual transfer*. According to these authors, the mental concepts which underlie the L1 constitute a source of transfer. The learner's L1 and the system the learner develops are connected by conceptual representations. This statement can be related to Kellerman's (1995) *transfer to nowhere* where the L1 way of thinking is a potential source of transfer, although the notion of conceptual transfer is much broader. Jarvis (1999) manifests that conceptual transfer can also affect grammar, this statement is based on a study he carried out with Finnish speakers, he found out that article errors such as "It's a nice weather" or "She took a bread" were not only due to the wrong application of article rules, they were also related to the fact that those speakers conceptualize the nouns 'weather' and 'bread' as "countable entities" (Jarvis, 1999: 4). Therefore conceptual transfer can affect lexical semantics but also grammatical knowledge. Regarding pedagogical implications, teachers should be aware of the fact that learners map what they learn onto their L1 world view, therefore teaching techniques should concentrate on introducing situational contexts and concepts lying behind lexis, grammar and discourse.

4. Fossilization and transfer

A study carried out by Han (1998) acknowledges that transfer operates from the very beginning of L2 learning. The learner's ability to get rid of transfer decides the amount of fossilization the learner's IL will show. The idea that transfer working simultaneously with other processes leads to stabilization is in fact present in the multiple effects principle, as it was stated by Selinker:

It is a general law in SLA that when two processes work in tandem, there is greater chance for stabilization of forms leading to possible fossilization (Selinker, 1992: 262)

Han's study sheds light on the relationship between transfer and fossilization, indicating that L1 knowledge is a primary source of fossilization and that there is a correlation between the degree of fossilization and the degree of L1 influence. One of her primary findings states that in typological distant languages, L1 transfer is implicit and it is characterized by "transfer to nowhere".

5. Transfer to somewhere vs. transfer to nowhere

The *transfer to somewhere* (Andersen, 1983) principle states that transfer occurs if the L1 element shows compatibility with "natural acquisitional prin-

ciples” (Andersen, 1983:182) and the L2 input somehow leads to generalization from the L1. The learner’s developing knowledge of the L2, ie., earlier interlanguage stages, has to be considered a source of language transfer. For example, in a study on the German produced by foreign workers in Germany it was noticed that at first they omit the definite article, using simplification, then when they begin to supply the article they use “die”, which is the most unmarked form. Lack of articles in the L1 leads those learners to continue to omit articles. As Andersen states, they transfer from “zero” articles in L1 to “zero” articles in early interlanguage due to simplification. The occurrence of articles in the native language agreeing with German articles makes a shorter period happen where they omit articles and then they easily acquire the article “die”, which is a general one, and they forget about gender, number and case.

Transfer to nowhere was suggested by Kellerman (1995) with the purpose of complementing Andersen’s *transfer to somewhere*. The *transfer to nowhere* principle states that

there can be transfer which is not licensed by similarity to the L2 and where the way the L2 works may very largely go unheeded (Kellerman, 1995: 137)

Big differences between languages can lead to learning difficulties, especially in the way learners conceptualize experience because they assume that there is no variation across languages in the way experience is expressed. The “thinking for speaking” notion is crucial to this principle, ie. the thinking that takes place while the person is speaking and which predisposes the learner to use the L1 to conceptualize experience; it is also mentioned by Slobin (1996) who bases it on the Whorf-Sapir determinism. Whorf maintained, (apud Slobin 1996: 71)

Every language is a vast pattern system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyzes nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness.

However, Slobin considers that language works as a “filter”, therefore it does not give form to our thoughts.

Transfer to somewhere and *transfer to nowhere* indicate that transfer can be the result of similarity or difference respectively. According to Kellerman (1995), the former refers to acquiring the means of linguistic expression while the latter is related to the conceptualization leading to the discovery of those means.

6. Conclusion

The decade of the 80's meant the acknowledgement of transfer as a cognitive process underlying SLA. In the past few years, proposals on transfer relating to generative approaches in second language acquisition are concerned with finding out whether universal grammar principles constrain L2 acquisition. Moreover, explanations for the starting point in acquiring the L2 and its development are looked for.

From a semantic viewpoint, the concepts underlying the L1 constitute a source of transfer, an idea which is also shared by the 'transfer to nowhere' principle. The interactive character of transfer is also pinpointed since it acts together with other IL processes, such as fossilization, determining the degree of fossilized structures.

If we consider previous research and current studies, we come to realise that more than 40 years have elapsed since the early days of Contrastive Analysis; great advancements have been made in the study of transfer, yet the role of any prior linguistic knowledge remains one of the most problematic discussed issues in the literature and its continuous discovery keeps opening new pages to a better understanding of the second language learning process.

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