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The 'One-Sided' Applied Linguistic Studies

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Abstract

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Despite the fact that Applied Linguistics has achieved invaluable results in many areas of language — as in the areas of language change, language acquisition, and language universals — , its research studies still neglect the question of whether foreign language learning (L2) has any influences on the mother tongue (L1) or not.

In this paper, the author reviews some Studies to shed light on the problem of transfer, and to show that most of them are merely concerned with the study of the influence of the L1 on L2 , and do not have any attempts to see whether the L2 also has its impact on the L1. Hence, the author prefers to indicate to these studies as 'one-sided' 'one-eyed' Studies. The author hopes to pave the road for those researchers who still have the interest in discovering whether L2-learning has any influences on the L1

Introduction

It is undeniable that the role of the L1 in L2 – Learning, i.e. the influence of the mother tongue on foreign language learning is of great importance for Applied Linguistics. Transfer is the technical term used in applied linguistics to indicate the learner's reliance on his L1 in L2 – learning.

In what follows, the author hopes to make clear that transfer Studies still until today are only interested in making the learning process of foreign languages easier than traditional linguists did. This is done through considerations of errors made by foreign language learners ascribed to the background knowledge of their native languages.

A Historical View of Transfer Studies

In the first half of the twentieth century transfer studies were conducted by the Behaviorist Theory and its supporters to show

to what extent previous learning affects new learning tasks. In the second half of the same century —from the 1950s onward — applied linguists, especially in the United States, tried to minimize the role of transfer in L2-learning. For the applied linguists Sherwood-Smith (1981) and Kellerman (1979), transfer is no more the term that covers all issues of the L1 influence on L2 – learning. They suggested another term, namely the term of “cross-linguist influence.” For them, the new term is broad enough to include such phenomena as “transfer,” “interference,” “avoidance,” “borrowing,” and L2-related aspects of language loss. Today, applied linguists are no more concerned with whether transfer exists, but with in what circumstances foreign language learners transfer what. To answer this question, applied linguists (cf. Hammarberg, 1979) have suggested that learners with different mother tongues learning the same foreign language should be investigated. For the Validity of such

comparative studies, the learners must be homogeneous in respect to their culture and education. Foreign language proficiency, as Hammarberg put it, is inextricably bound together with these background factors; and if comparative studies are conducted on different learners, linguistic differences, then, cannot be easily sorted out from background differences in culture and education.

Underlying processes of Foreign Language Learning

According to Faerch and Kasper (1980), the study of the processes underlying foreign language learning needs to take into account the basic ideas in the Learning Theory, in particular the fact that the learner learns a foreign language in an easy way, if he relates new tasks to previous linguistic knowledge. Such knowledge not only consists of what he knows about his mother tongue, but also about the target and possibly other languages. Linguistic differences and similarities between different languages often seem understandable in light of cross-linguistic comparisons. For example, the Arabic language does not have present tense copula forms, such as 'am' or articles, such as 'a', and so omissions of the copula and the indefinite article may seem to be clearly due to a difference in the grammatical systems of Arabic and English. Such cross-linguistic comparisons constitute an indispensable basis for the Study of transfer. 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.

From Lado (1957) onwards, research has tended to analyze differences rather than similarities. Even though linguists, such as Wode (1978) and James (1980), have emphasized that similarities are important in illuminating the process of learning, there are not much investigations of how linguistic similarity actually affects language learning. Psychologically, similarity is perceived before difference, and, as James put it, it is only against a background of sameness that differences are significant.

The Role of Similarity in the process of L2-Learning

According to Wode (1978) and James (1980), investigating the role of similarity as a variable in the process of L2-learning is a work fraught with problems, and studying it deeply means that at least the following interrelated variables would have to be taken into account:

- a) Cross-linguistic and intra-linguistic similarity.
- b) Similarity in comprehension and similarity in production.
- c) Similarity in lexis, similarity in grammar, similarity in phonology, similarity in discourse, and similarity in pragmatics.
- d) Similarity as it relates to different types of learning.
- e) Similarity in relation to individual learner differences.
- f) Similarity perceived by the learner vs. Similarity analyzed by the linguist.

Of all these relations and how they interact with each other, lexis is the area where similarity has been most dealt with.

Cross- Linguistic Influence

Authors of classic works on foreign language teaching emphasized the role of the L1 in L2-learning. For example, Henny Sweet (1964, original work 1899) outlines the relation of the L1 to L2 as follows: "We are naturally inclined to assume that the nearer the foreign language is to our own, the easier it is... In learning a remote, unconnected language the difficulties are reversed. The beginning is much more difficult, and, of course, it takes a much longer time to understand the language. But when the initial difficulties have been once overcome, it is easier to get a minutely accurate knowledge

of the language, because the learner is less disturbed by cross-associations”.

Sweet's analysis of the relation of the L1 to the L2 is still valid today. Even though Sweet was a forerunner of Structuralism, language teaching methods connected with it did not show much interest in the role of the L1 in L2-learning. On the contrary, for structuralists the L1 was seen merely as a hindrance, not as a help to L2; therefore, linguists did not contribute but very little to transfer or related topics.

Unlike in the United States, in Europe the contrastive analysis proved to be successful in many cases, in particular in comparing and contrasting English with several other languages at many different levels. Because of criticism of the methods of traditional contrastive analysis, the main objective of making contrastive analyses the bases for improving foreign language teaching was also abandoned in Europe (cf. Nemser, 1971). The idea that the differences between L1 and L2 lead to learning difficulties which could then be predicted on the basis of contrastive comparisons and contrasts was generally regarded as wholly unrealistic and impracticable (cf. Wardhaugh, 1970). According to Wardhaugh, the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) does not predict difficulty; it “requires of the linguist only that he uses the best linguistic knowledge available to him in order to account for observed difficulties in second language learning”.

The CAH does not differ much from the approach adopted in Error Analysis. In practice, error analysis frequently took a greatly oversimplified view of transfer. It was realized that all errors in learner language could not be explained as being due to transfer and errors were therefore frequently divided into “transfer errors” and “over-generalization errors.” The failure of contrastive linguistics to meet the ambitious aim set for it by applied linguists, together with the fall from favors of the behaviorist School of Psychology, with which transfer had been associated, provided the background for the morpheme Studies in the United States in the early 1970s. (cf. Dually & Burt, 1973). Dually and Burt did not

acknowledge the importance of L1, and their Studies have been criticized for the reflect of transfer as an important Variable in L2-learning. What now seems to be accepted everywhere is that cross-linguistic influence is a very important factor in L2-learning. Kellerman's Studies are the most important research of cross-linguistic influence (see Kellerman's studies in 1979 and 1984).

Conclusion

To conclude this paper, the author wants to recommend the following:

- Linguists should not limit their Studies to the role of the L1 in L2 – learning, but also try to focus on whether foreign language learning reshapes L1 linguistically and psychologically.
- Teaching foreign languages must go side by side with teaching the cultures of the languages in question.
- Students are not advised to depend on the knowledge of their mother tongue in learning foreign languages but on what they know of the foreign language they are learning.
- It would be of great help to involve bilinguals in the process of foreign language teaching.

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