SOCIOLINGVISTIKA/ SOCIOLINGUISTICS

Crosslinguistic Influence as a Problem for the Language Learning Classroom

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Abstract. This paper discusses crosslinguistic influence (CLI), or the various language interaction phenomena that occur in multilingual language systems, and its effects on English language learners' classroom production. It uses the example of a group of trilingual university students to examine some of the effects of CLI that should be taken into consideration by language teachers. First, the group itself is analyzed sociolinguistically, and it is seen that ethnocultural factors such as nationality exert a strong influence on these students' language systems. Then, several examples of both written and spoken production are examined in order to show some of the most common ways that CLI manifests in the classroom. These include errors in syntax, morphology, and word order, as well as increased use of hesitations and code-switching. Students themselves, however, are often unaware of these processes, or only recognize them in extreme forms. Thus, the paper ends with some suggestions for classroom methodology designed to increase students' awareness of CLI.

Key words: crosslinguistic influence; interference; trilingualism; dynamic systems.

Introduction

Despite the best efforts of language teachers at all levels of education, it is often the case that the results (in terms of student proficiency, as determined by test scores or other evaluative measures) are uneven, no matter how homogeneous the group of learners. Language learning is influenced by various individual factors, many of which (such as age or motivation) have been studied in detail elsewhere. One more very important factor is the number of other languages already known. Multilinguals can experience crosslinguistic influence both from and to the first language: it is now known that even a developing language system has the potential to affect the already established L1 (Cook, 2003; Cenoz, Hufeisen and Jessner, 2001). In this paper, I use the example of a group of trilingual students at Vilnius University to examine some of the effects of crosslinguistic influence (CLI) that should be considered by language teachers. It is suggested that, given the particular ethnocultural/ sociolinguistic situation prevailing in the group, such CLI is unavoidable. As such, language teachers are advised to consider making their students aware of the common forms of CLI, as this has been found to have a positive effect on learner attitudes.

Background

Definitions

The following definitions of some commonly used terms will help clarify the discussion in the rest of the paper. By *transfer* is meant the use of L1 structures and/or vocabulary in the L2. Transfer can be *positive* in those cases when the L1 structure exists in the L2 as well. A common example of this sort of transfer is the fact that adjectives usually follow nouns in both French and Spanish; thus, a French speaker who continues to place adjectives after nouns when speaking Spanish is not making an error. *Negative* transfer refers to cases when the L1 structure either does not exist

or is erroneous in the L2; if the French speaker were to place adjectives after nouns when speaking English, this would normally lead to error. Thus, the term transfer refers to certain language-specific phenomena which will vary depending on the L1 and L2 in question.

Interference, on the other hand, covers certain phenomena that arise as the result of a speaker's being bilingual, regardless of the specific languages he/ she might know. Interference affects language processing, e.g. comprehension and production. For example, bilinguals generally exhibit more tip-of-the-tongue states, are slower at naming pictures, and more frequently hesitate when speaking, than monolinguals (cf. Michael and Gollan, 2005).

Finally, the term *crosslinguistic influence* (CLI), introduced by Kellerman & Sharwood Smith (1986), is a general term for all phenomena arising in bilingual language systems. It covers both transfer and interference, as well as such phenomena as code-switching and borrowing. I also use it to cover such non-predictable dynamic effects as transitional bilingualism and language attrition, avoidance and maintenance techniques (Herdina and Jessner, 2002), language mode (Grosjean, 2001, 1997), fossilization, the effects of the L2 on the L1 (cf. Cook, 2003; Kecskes and Papp, 2000), and language allegiance (Braun, in preparation).

Dynamic systems

In this paper, a language system is understood to be a *dynamic system*, defined in van Geert (1994, p.50) as "more than just a collection of variables or observables we have isolated from the rest of the world. It is a system primarily because the variables mutually interact. That is, each variable affects all the other variables contained in the system, and thus also affects itself." This description applies not only to biological or physical systems, but also to languages. Even in the case of monolinguals, for whom CLI does not apply, the single

language that they know forms a system of mutually interacting variables as described by van Geert.

These issues are developed in de Bot, Lowie & Verspoor (2007), who show that: a) dynamic systems exhibit complete interconnectedness; b) there are systems within systems in a nested sense, and every system both contains smaller sub-systems and is itself a sub-system of a larger system; c) systems settle into *attractor states*, often called fossilization, which are by definition temporary but often stable over time; d) dynamic systems develop unpredictably and are sensitive to initial conditions. Initial conditions are, of course, impossible to establish for university students; for this reason, I conducted a sociolinguistic survey designed to provide a description of the current state of their language systems. This survey will now be briefly described.

Group description

The goal of the survey, described in detail in Braun (2009), was to establish a picture of the linguistic background of the students studied in my dissertation research, leading towards the development of hypotheses concerning the types of CLI that could be expected within the group. The questionnaire was returned by 51 undergraduate university students of the English and Russian Languages study program at Vilnius University, Kaunas Faculty of Humanities.

According to Statistics Lithuania (2008), the population of Lithuania as of 1 December 2005 was 3.4 million, of which 2.4 million were multilingual. Lithuanian and Russian are by far the most common languages in the environment, a situation determined by Lithuania's status as a former Soviet republic (for details, see Hogan-Brun and Ramonienė, 2004, 2005). Moreover, Lithuanian is a prestige language, spoken for all official business, while Russian is used only informally. Speakers of Lithuanian with a Russian accent can receive negative feedback from Lithuanian native speakers, especially in Kaunas, where this survey was conducted; Kaunas is known as a rather patriotic Lithuanian city and is ethnically homogeneous (nearly 93% Lithuanian; Čubajevaitė, 2008). Lithuania as a whole is similarly homogeneous, as can be seen in Table 1. The table compares the general population with that of the AnRK group I surveyed; as can be seen, the ethnocultural microclimate within the group is very different from that within Lithuania as a whole. It is my contention that this situation impacts the students' cultural attitudes and, possibly, language learning success.

I was interested not only in the students' demographic backgrounds, but also in their patterns of ethic distribution (see Table 1), language use and their attitudes towards the languages they study. Thus, one question on the survey asked students to list which language(s) they use most frequently in different social (non-academic) situations, e.g. with friends and relatives, on the Internet, and even when thinking and dreaming. Rather predictably, they use Lithuanian and Russian in nearly all of these situations, except perhaps on the Internet. The answers show that, while English and Russian both receive an equal amount of instruction within the study program, Russian is much more commonly practiced away from the university.

Another question asked students to list some stereotypical adjectives to describe members of Lithuanian, Russian, and English-speaking cultures. The results were surprising, for they revealed that the Lithuanian students are highly self-critical while, at the same time, being very favorable towards Russians. A total of 291 answers to this question yielded 115 different adjectives or adjective-like phrases (e.g., *I like them*, a phrase comparable to the adjective *likeable*). These were arranged according to their *polarity*, a technique common in *subjectivity and sentiment analysis* (see, for example, Wiebe, 2007; Wilson, Wiebe, and Hoffmann, 2005), in order to determine what students' stereotypical descriptions revealed about their subjective attitudes towards the cultures in question. It immediately became apparent that, while Russians and English speakers are characterized by a variety of positive adjectives, only two (*friendly* and *funny*) are used with any regularity to describe Lithuanians. At the same time, Lithuanians are characterized by a wide range of negative adjectives, which are extremely infrequent when describing Russians and/ or English speakers. For Lithuanians, 60% of all the adjectives used are negative, with another 10% neutral, leaving only 30% positive adjectives. For Russians, on the other hand, a full 72% of all adjectives are positive, with 9% neutral and only 19% negative. The results for English speakers are even more upbeat, with 81% positive adjectives, 7% neutral, and 12% negative. A full list of all 291 adjectives can be found in Braun (in preparation).

Table 1. Ethnic distribution in Lithuania as a whole and in the AnRK group

Lithuania		AnRK	
Lithuanian	83.45%	Lithuanian	53%
Polish	6.74%	Polish	10%
Russian	6.31%	Russian	31%
Other	3.5%	Other	6%

I believe that two main factors influence these results: the unique ethnic composition of the group, and the status within the study program of the Russian language. As members of the prestige culture and native speakers of the prestige language, Lithuanian students can be expected to enter the group feeling confident and sure of their social position. Russian students, on the other hand, even if they grow up in Russian-dominated enclaves, have spent their lives with the knowledge of their difference from the majority culture. However, once the study program begins, the Russian minority becomes significantly more populous. Moreover, the Russian language (unlike Lithuanian) is one of the two major languages of study. In a sense, Russian is the prestige language within this group of students. As Russian is their own native language, some aspects of Russian linguistics (e.g. grammar, lexis) should be easier for the Russian than for the Lithuanian-native contingent. Lithuanians find that they must now learn a great deal about the Russian language and culture. Their lower fluency in Russian and non-native familiarity with the culture may also put them at an academic disadvantage when compared to the Russian natives. All of this could have the unintended consequence of causing Lithuanians to feel socially inhibited or marginalized within the group, despite their still-dominant numbers.

In a group such as this, CLI is unavoidable. As the results of this survey indicate, the greatest amount of CLI will be felt whenever these students attempt to speak or write in English. Students have little practice using English productively and maintain a trilingual language mode even in English language classrooms. They can thus be expected to rely heavily on their more resonant language(s) for conceptualizing and formulating utterances, which must then be translated from Lithuanian or Russian to English.

Crosslinguistic influence

In this section I present a few examples of the types of CLI exhibited by these students when writing or speaking English. The written data are analyzed in more detail in Braun (submitted; in preparation). They were collected from 45 of the students surveyed above. Students were given written, marked assignments, and did not know that their work would be used for this purpose. Some of the assignments were produced during lessons, though in such cases students were given ample time to complete them; no quizzes with short time limits were used in the analysis. More commonly, however, these writing tasks were assigned as homework, and students had up to a week to prepare them. The spoken data were collected from 36 students and, when transcribed, amounted to approximately 25,000 words. Students were given topics and asked to speak about them with no preparation; these impromptu speeches were followed by a question-and-answer period in which the speakers fielded comments from the audience. Thus, the written data represent unpressured, offline processing, while the spoken data represent highly pressured, online processing.

As an example of negative transfer, consider example (1), which comes from the written sample:

> (1) *Of course about spiritual or moral things I even will not write...*

This example contains two errors, both caused by the influence of Lithuanian on English. First there is the OSV word order, an acceptable pattern in Lithuanian (which is nonconfigurational and marks grammatical relations with case) but atypical[1] in English. Secondly, there is the unusual structure *I even will not write*. This, too, reflects the transfer of Lithuanian structure, in this case of morphemes. In Lithuanian, the phrase would be expressed as (2):

> (2) *net   ne-rašy-s-iu*
>   *even   NEG-write-FUT-1SG*
>   *"I won't even write"*

Clearly, it would be impossible to insert *even* in between the negative/ future morphemes and the main verb in Lithuanian, because the verb itself comes between them. Thus, in English the student similarly keeps the verb-related morphemes *will not write* together and prefaces them with *even*.

Consider also example (3), a common error produced by students at all levels and resulting from Lithuanian-English CLI:

> (3) *We with our team....*

> (4) *mes   su   komanda*
>   *we.NOM   with   team.INST*
>   *"the team and I"*

While it is true that a nearly word-for-word equivalent is correct in Lithuanian, as can be seen in (4), I believe that students who make this error are doing so not because they do not know the correct English expression *The team and I*. Rather, they effectively choose to follow the incorrect Lithuanian pattern because they do not identify with the English equivalent at a cultural level. In Lithuanian, it would be unnatural and strangely self-effacing to place *I* at the end of the phrase; the English version may thus be foreign-sounding to Lithuanian ears, and therefore avoided.

It was mentioned in Part 2 that interference can result in an increased amount of hesitations when speaking. This is especially evident when looking at the spoken data. Example (5) shows a 32-second extract from one student's speech:

> (5) *I um- for me it was uh too hard to understand how people uh can uh live uh with uh ancie- uh with uh ancient condi- uh conditions uh how they uh uh what they uh eat how they uh what they what what they m how they mind or what they do*

As can be seen, hesitation markers such as *uh*, repeated words, and false starts form the bulk of the passage. Example (6) shows the same passage with the hesitations removed:

> (6) *for me it was too hard to understand how people can live with ancient conditions what they eat how they mind or what they do*

Example (6) is less than half the length of (5), which means that hesitations in this student's production more than double the amount of all words produced. Furthermore, although (6) is significantly easier to read than (5), it is still marred by serious errors of syntax, grammar, lexis, and even pronunciation (e.g., the word *ancient*, pronounced /ænsənt/). All of this indicates that for this student, at least, the effort of producing English speech on-line is nearly insurmountable and comes at a serious cognitive cost.

Finally, the spoken data reveal that these students are always in a bi- or even trilingual language mode. Although some students, like the speaker of (5), attempt to maintain English monolingual production despite the obvious drawbacks, others are quite happy to code-switch, as the discussion in (7) shows:

> (7) A: *...it is not uh uh good uh for uh our santykiai,*
>   B: *Relationships?*
>   C: *M-hm.*
>   A: *Yes. Because uh I think uh uh if you want to have uh a- a roommate, eh you must uh to- paskirstyti.*
>   C: *Divide.*
>   A: *Uh to divide uh all works...*

Student A, rather than struggling with her own incomplete English lexicon, is perfectly willing to rely on her classmates' knowledge to save time and cognitive effort. This, of course, would be impossible in written production. Nonetheless, it is one of the many ways in which CLI affects trilingual students.

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[1] Such word order in English is stylistically marked, but it is unlikely that the student in this case was purposely choosing to use a marked style; it is much more likely an error.

Consequences and suggestions

CLI cannot be avoided in language learning classrooms. The very nature of languages as dynamic systems ensures that a large variety of language interaction phenomena such as those described in Part 4 will occur as soon as students begin learning a foreign language. In this final section, I will describe some ways to make students aware of CLI, and to help them deal with it.

First of all, I believe that corpora-based activities are invaluable for language classrooms, especially when the language being learned is not spoken in the environment outside the classroom. Key word in context (or KWIC) concordances, for example, can teach students much more than simple vocabulary lists. It is worth remembering that students who only learn translations, which is what lists encourage, learn nothing of the language-specific usages of those words; they thus have almost no option but to use such words in ways that would be appropriate in the L1, rather than in the L2. A concordance, on the other hand, provides a wealth of information about how individual words or phrases are used, with which verbs they collocate, whether they are more commonly active or passive, etc. This information is much more useful to students than translations alone.

However, I have also found, in working with the students described in this paper, that translation itself is a useful tool. Since these trilingual students tend to think in a language other than English, all English production for them is, in a sense, translation (cf. Braun, in preparation). Thus, any practice in translating into English is useful and, in my experience, appreciated. A parallel corpus, should one be available for the languages in question, can be a particularly valuable starting place. There, students can see examples of translated sentences for themselves; these sentences can be used to stimulate discussion about the choices the translators made, alternative phrasings, etc. Short translation activities can also be used for the same purpose, though this works best in groups where the students know each other and aren't afraid to show each other their errors.

Although the extent to which any individual student will be affected by CLI is impossible to predict, it is the case that all students will experience CLI to a greater or lesser extent. As I have found, students react positively when told about CLI, and soberly recognize its effects in themselves. This is a useful first step towards reducing such effects.

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Tarpkalbinės įtakos problema mokantis užsienio kalbos

Santrauka

Šis straipsnis aptaria tarpkalbinę įtaką, t. y. įvairius kalbinio bendravimo reiškinius daugiakalbėse kalbos sistemose, ir jos poveikį besimokančiųjų mokymosi aplinkoje. Straipsnyje pateikiami rezultatai yra pagrįsti trikalbių universiteto studentų grupės tyrimu. Juo remiantis aptariama tarpkalbinė įtaka mokantis užsienio kalbos, į kurią turėtų atsižvelgti kalbos mokytojai. Pirmiausiai straipsnyje pateikiama tiriamosios studentų grupės sociolingvistinė analizė, kuri atskleidžia, jog tokie entokultūriniai veiksniai kaip tautybė smarkiai veikia studentų kalbos sistemas. Taip pat straipsnyje aptariami studentų sakytinės ir rašytinės kalbos pavyzdžiai, kuriuose atsiskleidžia, kaip tarpkalbinė įtaka pasireiškia klasėje. Kaip rodo tyrimo rezultatai, tarpkalbinė įtaka lemia tam tikras sintaksės ir žodžių tvarkos klaidas, taip pat dažnesnę abejonės raišką bei kodų kaitą. Įdomu, jog patys studentai dažnai nepastebi šių procesų arba juos atpažįsta tik ypatingais atvejais. Straipsnio pabaigoje pateikiami metodologiniai pasiūlymai, kaip studentams padėti įsisąmoninti tarpkalbinės įtakos poveikį kalbos mokymosi procesui. Reikšminiai žodžiai: tarpkalbinė įtaka, interferencija, trikalbystė, dinaminės sistemos.

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