Errors committed by L3 learners – what are they like and what do they tell us?
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Since multilingualism has become a common world phenomenon, there has been a growing interest in the processes which take place during third (and further) language acquisition and during language use within a multilingual mind. Researchers have particularly focused on cross-linguistic influence taking place during multiple language acquisition and use, since it can provide interesting insights into such processes (cf. the articles in Hufeisen and Lindemann 1998; Dentler, Hufeisen and Lindemann 2000; Cenoz and Jessner 2000; Cenoz, Hufeisen and Jessner 2001; Tokuhama-Espinosa 2003; Hufeisen and Marx 2004; Hufeisen and Fouser 2005). The term covers all the positive and negative, intentional or non-intentional effects of the learner’s (more or less advanced) knowledge of two, three or more languages which may be observed in his/her linguistic production and reception in any of his/her languages, as well as in his/her language learning achievements. Although cross-linguistic influence may take place between all (inter)languages and in all directions, there is some evidence that the so-called ‘last language effect’ is often the strongest (Dewaele 1998; Chlopek 1994; Williams and Hammarberg 1998; Hammarberg 2001; Ecke and Hall 2000, qtd. in Ecke 2001:105). There are, however, several factors which shape cross-linguistic influence and determine its intensity, e.g., the typological distance between acquired languages – perceived (psychotypology) and actual, length and amount of exposure to each of them, proficiency in each language, recency of language activation, the native vs. foreign language status of each language, the degree of metalinguistic awareness or (formal vs. informal) mode of language acquisition and use. These variables must be taken into account before any theories are created on the basis of conducted research.

In my research study I have investigated one type of cross-linguistic influence, i.e. negative interlingual transfer in written production.

The subjects were students from the German Department of Wroclaw University, where I teach English. These students’ native language is Polish, their L2 is German, which they know at an advanced level (C1), and their L3 is English (here, the proficiency level ranges from A1 to B1). Most of them have learnt German in the classroom and all of them have learnt English in the classroom. They use German nearly every day; their exposure to English is much lower. Both German and English have a foreign language status for them. Most of them show a high level of metalinguistic awareness and they often perceive English and German as similar.

The experiment consisted in the analysis of errors of linguistic and pragmatic competences found in the students’ written test responses (involving translation of phrases or whole sentences from L1 to L3 and sentence- or text completion) and free compositions (essays, book/film reports, learner journals and written projects). The first step was to classify each error into one of four groups: lexical, syntactic, punctuation and pragmatic, and to recognize its language source (L1, L2, L3 or some combination of them). Next, the types of operations underlying the lexical and syntactic interlingual transfer errors were recognized. Within the area of lexis, these were code switching, nonce borrowing, semantic extension (accompanied by a cognate relationship or not), false friends, loan translation, article transfer (a specific type of LT) and framing transfer (also a kind of LT), morphological transfer (caused by a cognate relationship or not) and orthographical transfer (caused by a cognate relationship or not). At the level of syntax, the operations included: loan translation, word order transfer (a specific type of loan translation), semantic extension and loan translation combined with semantic extension.

It was hypothesized that:
1) the L2→L3 transfer would be stronger than L1→L3 transfer (rational: last language effect, close typological distance between German and English);
2) most form-based operations would take place between German and English (because of the similarities resulting from typological relatedness);
3) most meaning-based operations would take place between Polish and English (on the grounds that native-language concepts are built early in life and are often attached to the languages acquired later in life, if these are learnt via formal instruction);
4) L2 would be the basis for code switches and nonce borrowings (students rarely place native language items in their foreign language utterances, a possible reason being language status).

The total number of errors amounted to 1942. Among these, lexical errors comprised the largest group (1320); the students also made 427 syntactic errors, 88 punctuation errors and 107 pragmatic errors.

Hypothesis one turned out to be true of lexical transfer errors only. In the case of syntactic and pragmatic errors it was the students’ L1 that seemed to have the strongest influence and in the case of punctuation errors – both L1 and L2. This means that the role of L1 in L3 acquisition must not be underestimated.

Hypothesis two proved to be true. In the areas of both lexis and syntax, form-based errors were cases of L2→L3 transfer.

Hypothesis three has been disproved for lexical errors. The possible reasons may be the perception by the students of German and English as being closely...
related (psychotopylogy) and also their FL status. On the other hand, in the case of syntactic errors, the answer to the third hypothesis is a cautious yes. The students’ L1 exerted a strong influence in cases of (meaning-based) semantic extension and (partially meaning-based) loan translation. Only where loan translation combined with semantic extension did the students’ L2 play a prominent role. Conceptual L1→L3 transfer was also observed among pragmatic errors.

The answer to hypothesis four is yes, though there were not many instances of code switching and nonce borrowing (the numbers would probably have been higher in the case of spoken production). Even though such errors are very vivid and thus easily noticed by teachers, probably their importance should not be overestimated.

Additionally, the following observations have been made: (1) Students produced a lot of instances of loan translation within the area of lexis (nearly a half of all interlingual lexical errors). This implies that teachers should pay special attention to this kind of error. It seems that the importance of form-based operations like false friends is often overestimated; such errors may be easily noticed, but constitute a minority among my student’s errors. (2) Among the syntactic errors, word order transfer and semantic extension were the dominating operations. The former is basically automatic and thus difficult to control; the latter is caused by the fact that syntactic meanings are often more difficult to grasp than lexical meanings. (3) As for the punctuation errors, the vast majority were interlingually induced. Here, L2/L1→L3 transfer was the strongest (this double influence is caused by the fact that the Polish and German punctuation rules are often similar). (4) Among the pragmatic errors, the native language played a crucial role. This is not surprising, since native language pragmatic norms are acquired in childhood along with other aspects of culture-specific knowledge. However, a large number of the students’ pragmatic errors were caused by some intralingual confusion; a very obvious conclusion is that a precondition of communicative success is an adequate level of foreign language competence. (5) The number of intralingual errors was very high (41.3% of all errors); most of them were found among the lexical and pragmatic errors. This means that in the process of building their L3 competence, learners make both inter- and intralingual connections. Thus, cross-linguistic influence, though an important phenomenon, must not be overestimated in the teaching-learning process.


