

NEGATIVE LANGUAGE TRANSFER WHEN LEARNING SPANISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

NURIA CALVO CORTÉS
Universidad Complutense de Madrid

RESUMEN. Este trabajo se centra en la influencia negativa de la transferencia lingüística en el aprendizaje del español como segunda lengua. Está dividido en dos partes: una teórica y un análisis práctico. La primera incluye los distintos aspectos que se tienen que tener en cuenta a la hora de considerar la transferencia lingüística. La segunda analiza distintos ejemplos de transferencia negativa que se han extraído de textos escritos por varios estudiantes británicos que están aprendiendo español. La conclusión mostrará que el análisis de estos errores puede ayudar a predecir algunos de estos errores.

PALABRAS CLAVE. Influencia negativa, transferencia lingüística, español como segunda lengua, dos partes: una teórica y un análisis práctico, transferencia negativa, predecir errores.

ABSTRACT. This paper focuses on the negative influence of Language Transfer on the learning process Spanish as an L2. It is divided into two main parts; a theoretical one and a practical analysis. The former includes the different aspects considering language transfer, whereas the latter analyses different mistakes due to negative transfer, which have been taken from texts written by several British students when learning Spanish. The conclusion will show that the analysis of these mistakes may help predict some of these mistakes.

KEY WORDS. negative influence, language transfer, Spanish as a L2, theoretical part and practical analysis, negative transfer, predict mistakes..

1. THEORETICAL PART

1.1. SOME PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Whenever one is learning a new language, there are certain aspects that have to be considered in order to achieve a good knowledge of that new language. Among these aspects several concepts should be defined before carrying on with the analysis of this study. These concepts include the notions of:

1.1.1. Second Language versus Foreign Language

1.1.2. Language Learning versus Language Acquisition

1.1.3. Interlanguage influence versus Intralanguage influence

1.1.4. Language Distance versus Language Proximity

1.1.1. *Second Language versus Foreign Language.* On the one hand, there are places in the world where not only one, but two or even more than two languages are spoken in the same territory. The people who live in these areas experience a situation of bilingualism–trilingualism or they may even use more than three languages to communicate among them. For most of them one of those languages is their Mother Tongue (MT), whereas the other language/s will be considered Second –Third or even Fourth– Language (L2). This L2 will be learnt in an environment in which the learner will be immersed in the language and it will be a natural context to learn the language. He/She may use different languages according to the contexts he/she is in, therefore, the use of one or another language will be natural.

On the other hand, there are many other places in the world in which only one language is spoken and if another language is learnt, this will be considered a Foreign Language (FL), since it will not be a language spoken in the area, but in any other part of the world. The learner will learn the language in a very limited and unrealistic context, that is, the classroom. The language will not be learnt in a natural way, and the learner will associate that FL with the classroom rather than with a real context –this is changing nowadays due to the introduction of new teaching techniques that can make the student feel that the situation where he/she is using the language is a real one, but it is still not the same as learning the language in a place where it is spoken–.

The way of learning, as it has been pointed out, is different in both contexts, but the learner will be nevertheless influenced by his/her mother tongue in both situations, although this influence will show some differences. But both L2 and FL will be considered the Target Language (TL), since they are the target to be learnt.

These two notions are also connected to whether the language is learnt in a formal or in an informal (M^a L. CELAYA VILLANUEVA 1992, although she refers to language acquisition, which, as it will be seen below, is different from language learning) way, that is, a language will be learnt formally in the classroom – either as a first, second or foreign language –and a language will be learnt informally when learnt in the place where the language is spoken – either as a first or second language, but not usually as a foreign language, since someone learning a foreign language will only learn it in an informal way if he/she goes to a country where the language is spoken as first or second language.

1.1.2. *Language Learning versus Language Acquisition.* Most linguists agree to differentiate between these two concepts and they also point out that it is only the language considered as Mother Tongue (MT) the one that is acquired, whereas any other language apart from that one is learnt and not acquired.

However, it should be considered what has been commented before when referring to the context in which a language is learnt (or acquired). It is not the same to be in contact with two languages from the moment of being born, than to be in contact with one language first and then learn a second or foreign language. For this reason, it is believed that a young baby who is exposed to two –or more– languages will acquire both languages, since at the beginning he/she will even mix both languages unconsciously and not even notice that he/she is using more than one single language –this process is referred to as *code-switching*–, as these young learners will be switching from one language to another one (T. ODLIN 1993: 140). However, once the learner has already acquired his/her first language and after some

time he/she is in contact with another language, no matter whether he/she is in a bilingual context or not, that other language will be learnt and not acquired, and it will be influenced by his/her previous knowledge of his/her first language –or mother tongue–.

This study concentrates on language learning rather than on language acquisition, since the mistakes shown will be the result of students learning Spanish as a foreign language and not acquiring Spanish language from the very moment of birth or in a bilingual context.

1.1.3 *Interlanguage Influence versus Intralanguage Influence.* There is enough evidence from many different grammarians devoted to studying cross-linguistic language influence to believe that there should be a distinction between the influence that our mother tongue has on acquiring different structures of this same language and the influence that our mother tongue has on the learning of a new language. The former is referred to as intralanguage influence, since the influence takes place within the same language itself; whereas the latter is called interlanguage influence, since it refers to the influence that one language has on another one.

When talking about intralanguage influence –e.g. using *freido* instead of *frito* in Spanish– it should be pointed out that most of this influence is experienced by children, whereas adults do not usually make mistakes due to this influence, however, there is not a clear relationship between age and learning a language, and even though when talking about intralanguage influence the focus is on the mother tongue, there may be situations in which an adult can make mistakes in his/her own language due to the influence of rules or structures already existing in his/her language¹.

As it will be analysed below, interlanguage influence –e.g. *responsible* (in Spanish) instead of *responsable* (which would be the correct Spanish word)– is also referred to as language transfer and this is where this project is mainly focused, rather than on intralanguage influence, since interlanguage influence will be the one helping or causing trouble to learn Spanish –in this particular context, but it could be applied to any other language– as a foreign language.

1.1.4. *Language Distance and Language Proximity.* Languages can be related, that is, have a common origin or they may not have a similar origin at all. Depending on such a distance or proximity of languages both the learning and the interlanguage influence will be different. Knowing those details about the languages will help teachers of foreign languages predict possible mistakes made by their students due to the interlanguage influence.

Both the English and Spanish languages share a common origin, since they belong to the group of the so called Indo-European languages and even though within these Indo-European languages several subgroups of languages are distinguished, English being included in the Germanic languages, whereas Spanish belongs to the Romance languages, they share some similarities mainly in lexicon.

Because of all these reasons it is relatively easy to find interlanguage influences between the two languages in this study. Due to this proximity between the English and Spanish languages both positive and negative transfer will occur.

¹ Such is the mistake called *leísmo* made in some areas of Spain and involving the use of the pronoun *le* –traditional marker of indirect objects– both in direct and in indirect objects when referring to people; this is an overgeneralization that does not only affect children, but adults as well.

1.2. WHAT IS LANGUAGE TRANSFER?

1.2.1. *Definition*

Language Transfer can be defined as «the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired» (T. ODLIN 1993:27).

This concept is therefore connected to that of interlanguage influence. This transfer can be either positive or negative. Positive Transfer occurs when those similarities in the mother tongue and the target language can facilitate the learning. Negative Transfer, however, refers to the negative influence that the knowledge of the first language has in the learning of the target language due to the differences existing between both languages.

It should not be thought that all similarities facilitate the learning and end up in positive transfer, since there are occasions on which some of those similarities could be misleading. This occurs for example with cognates, that is, words that are very similar in several languages but they are used in different contexts or with different meanings –what are colloquially called *false friends*–.

However, on most occasions similarities, especially when talking about syntactic, phonological and morphological subsystems, will help the learner achieve a better knowledge of the language. Such is the case of the morphological rule of forming plural forms both in English and Spanish. Without taking into account the exceptions and irregular plural forms, both languages tend to form plural forms by adding either *-s* or *-es* to the singular form; this will make it easier for students of both languages to internalise such a rule.

This study will not concentrate on this positive transfer discussed so far, but on the negative one, since this project will show that by analysing the most frequent mistakes learners make due to this transfer, the learner will both understand why he/she makes such a mistake and he/she will also be able to predict the mistake in following situations.

The mistakes shown will refer both to semantic mistakes and syntactic errors. According to some linguists, for example T. TAKAHASHI (1984: 52) semantic mistakes are more persistent than syntactic ones and this is very noticeable in translation work, in which students try to translate literally and this often results in errors in semantics due to transferring from one language into another. However, T. ODLIN (1993: 13) points out that according to S. THOMASON (1981) «substratum transfer² will be more evident in pronunciation (and also in syntax) than in lexicon» since it «is the most difficult aspect of a second language to master and the influence of native language phonetics and phonology will be more pervasive than that of other language subsystems». T. ODLIN (1993: 23) states that «transfer can occur in all linguistic subsystems, including the morphological and syntactic one; and other influences besides transfer can affect all subsystems». As the examples have been taken from written text it will be very difficult to analyse phonological aspects, although as it will be pointed out, some mistakes may have some connection with phonological influence.

² *Substratum transfer* to the influence of a source language on the acquisition of a target language, whereas *borrowing transfer* refers to the influence a second language has on a previously acquired language (T. ODLIN 1993: 13). As T.ODLIN (1993: 13) also points out, borrowing transfer is more susceptible to appear at the lexical level (S. THOMASON & T. KAUFMAN 1988).

1.2.2. *Transfer and Age*. There does not seem to be a very clear and definite relation between transfer and the learner's age. However, adults seem to be more susceptible to transfer than children, since children sometimes are not even conscious of using different languages, and if they are they do not always translate from one language into another and on some occasions they can even learn to think in two different languages, whereas an adult learner will always have his/her first language structures internalised and he/she will try to apply them whenever there is a lack of knowledge in the target language.

Nevertheless, the connection between these two aspects is still far from clear and this study will not focus on this because all the examples have been taken from teenagers and/or adults and therefore, it will not be possible to conclude if transfer is more frequent in adults or children. Although there seems to be a close relationship between the way different subsystems are learnt and/or acquired and the learner's age. According to M^a L. CELAYA VILLANUEVA (1992) adults tend to learn both the syntactical and morphological subsystems faster than children, whereas children are faster at mastering the phonological subsystem.

1.2.3. *Consequences of Negative Transfer*. T. ODLIN (1993) indicates four different consequences due to this negative transfer:

- Underproduction
- Overproduction
- Production Errors
- Misinterpretation

Underproduction appears when the learner notices that particular structures in the target language are very different from those in his/her first language, and therefore, he/she will avoid using such structures.

Due to the fact that some common structures are avoided because of such *underproduction*, other structures that are not so frequent in the target language are used more regularly by the learner because he/she feels more confident using them and therefore, *overproduction* will arise.

Within the *production errors* two different types can be distinguished, *substitutions* and *calques*. *Substitutions* refer to the use of native language forms in the target language –e.g. *possible* instead of *posible*, see mistake (65) in the practical analysis–, while *calques* are errors that reflect a very closely related native language structure –such as Spanish *he tenido mi pelo cortado*, see mistake (71) in the practical analysis–.

Finally, as regards *misinterpretation*, some structures in the mother tongue can influence the interpretation of target language messages and this may lead learners to infer something different from the message the speaker wanted to convey.

1.3. CONCLUSION

When considering Language Transfer many different aspects have to be taken into account, such as the type of languages, the relationship between them, the context in which the learning process is taking place as well as the age of the learners.

It seems that both negative and positive transfer tends to occur when the mother tongue and the target language share more similarities between them, and in most of these occasions this is due to a common origin. However, there does not seem to be a clear agreement when

referring to which learning contexts are more likely to induce to this language transfer, as well as whether there is a connection between language transfer and age or not.

Although not all transfer situations involve influence due to differences among languages, this project will only focus on this kind of cross-linguistic influence because it is precisely in those structures that are different in both languages –English and Spanish– where students will find more difficulties and therefore, this study will only concentrate on negative transfer.

2. PRACTICAL ANALYSIS³

In this project I will only focus on the concept of negative transfer and how it is reflected in practical examples in two different contexts. Therefore this paper is divided in two parts. The first part includes the explanation of the mistakes made by a British woman in her early thirties whose first contact with Spanish language was when she came to Spain seven years ago and she is learning the language in a Spanish environment.

The second part encloses the mistakes made by a group of 6 British students in their late teens who started learning Spanish four years ago as one of their GCSE –General Certificate of Secondary Education– subjects and are doing Spanish as one of their A level similar to Spanish *Bachillerato* studies and *Selectividad* exam–subjects. They are studying at a college in north-west England and these mistakes were present in different informal letters that they have written.

The difference between the two parts does not only lie in the kind of texts analysed –in Part 1 the mistakes were taken from compositions, written on purpose for a Spanish lesson as a student of Spanish, and in Part 2 from informal letters– but also in the environment the different students are immersed –in Part 1 the student is learning the target language in a country where such a language is the mother tongue language, whereas in Part 2 the students are learning the language in a country where the mother tongue is different from the target one–. These differences will influence on the kind of mistakes made. Also, the number of years the students have been learning the language is different and this has to be taken into account as well since language transfer is more likely to be present in the first stages of the learning process.

Most mistakes are connected to semantics, syntax, morphology and spelling. As mentioned above, since these mistakes have been taken from written texts it is not possible to analyse phonological transfer, although when some of such errors are thought to result from a phonological influence it will also be pointed out.

2.1. PART 1

As it has already been mentioned, the examples shown in this first part of the study include those made by a British woman –in 55 compositions written in Spanish on all kinds

³ When the examples of the mistakes are shown, it is important to note that the words students have used wrongly are underlined (e.g. *Para*). On the other hand, the words and letters students have not written (or have omitted) but they should have used in Spanish, are between parentheses (e.g. *Negra(s)*, *antes (de)*).

of topics– whose first contact with the English language was in Spain and she is immersed in a Spanish language atmosphere she has been living in Spain for seven years now. Therefore, the learning process of the language is different compared to those students who study the second language in a different environment, surrounded by speakers of their one language and not the target language –as it will be explained in part 2–.

It could be observed that most mistakes were made in prepositions following certain verbs and in some prepositional structures, as well as in articles, which is one of the grammatical aspects where both Spanish and English show some significant differences.

2.1.1. *Prepositions and Prepositional objects*

- (1) Mataron (a) una profesora → *They killed a teacher.*
- (2) He oído (a) gente decir → *I have heard people say.*
- (3) Es más difícil a demostrar → *It is more difficult to demonstrate.*
- (4) Depende mucho *en* → *It depends a lot on.*
- (5) Recordarnos *de* este problema → *Remind us of this problem.*
- (6) Ellos intentan *a* vender / intento *a* ignorar → *They try to sell / I try to ignore.*
- (7) Entro (en) un supermercado → *I enter a supermarket.*
- (8) Llegamos *en* Santillana del Mar → *We arrived in Santillana del Mar.*
- (9) Enamorado *con* ella → *In love with her.*
- (10) Situa (a) la gente fuera de la sociedad → *It places people out of society.*
- (11) Informan (a) los medios de comunicación → *They inform the media.*
- (12) Adorar (a) el Niño Jesús → *Adore the Infant Jesús.*
- (13) Siguió *en* manteniendo contacto → *He / she kept on having contact.*
- (14) Buscan *por* sus intereses → *They look for their interest.*

2.1.2. *Agreement*

- (15) Cosas que antes eran imposible(s) → *Things that before were impossible.*
- (16) Habían vistas preciosas / no habían coches → *There were beautiful views / there were no cars.*

2.1.3. *Articles and Pronouns*

- (17) Es una fiesta en (la) que participa todo el mundo → *It is a festival in which everybody takes part.*
- (18) Como todo (lo) que significa social → *As everything that means social.*
- (19) Por *la* primera vez → *For the first time.*
- (20) El significado de (la) Navidad → *The meaning of Christmas.*
- (21) En el futuro (la) gente preguntará → *In the future people will ask.*
- (22) En *el* medio del invierno → *In the middle of winter.*

2.1.4. *Spelling and Vocabulary*

- (23) *Inhabitantes* → *Inhabitants*.
- (24) *Crimen* (*when meaning delito*) → *crime*.
- (25) *Responsable* → *Responsible*.
- (26) *Leprosia* → *Leprosy*.

2.1.5. *Other mistakes*

- (27) *En vez de apoyando* → *Instead of supporting*.
- (28) *(No) tienen absolutamente nada* → *They do not have absolutely anything*.
- (29) *Pero puedes (instead of se puede) ver la situación* → *You can see the situation*.

2.2. PART 2

This second part includes the mistakes made –in different 44 informal letters– by 6 British students, 2 male and 4 female, in their late teens who are studying Spanish in a college, as one of their A level subjects. Most of them have been studying the language for about four or five years and they are immersed in a British environment, therefore, the context in which they are learning the language is completely different from the context of the student in Part 1.

In this case there are many more mistakes due to transfer than in Part 1 of this paper. Besides, there appeared mistakes connected to tenses as well as to whole grammatical structures that the students have transferred literally from English –the so called *calques*, as explained above–. Nevertheless, as there are a lot of mistakes some of them are similar to those present in Part 1.

2.2.1. *Prepositions and Prepositional Objects*

- (30) *Gracias para tu ayuda/tu carta* → *Thanks for your help/your letter*.
- (31) *Encontré (a) un otro chico* → *I met another lad*.
- (32) *Tengo dolor en mi cabeza* → *I have a pain in my head*.
- (33) *No he escrito para mucho tiempo* → *I have not written for a long time*.
- (34) *Antes (de) mi cumpleaños* → *Before my birthday*.
- (35) *(A) que universidad quiero ir* → *Which university I want to go to*.
- (36) *Pensar de nada / estamos pensando de las vacaciones* → *Think of nothing / we are thinking of the holidays*.
- (37) *Es un nombre popular con los ingleses* → *It is a popular name with the English*.
- (38) *Esperar para el autobús* → *Wait for the bus*.
- (39) *Solicitar por un puesto de trabajo* → *Apply for a job*.
- (40) *Sólo un amigo con él* → *Only a friend with him*.

2.2.2. Agreement

- (41) Son *difícil* → *They are difficult.*
- (42) He comprado *algunas nuevas gafas* → *I've bought some new glasses.*
- (43) Son muy *cara(s)* → *They are very expensive.*
- (44) *Es (las) nueve y media* → *It is half past nine.*
- (45) Son *negra(s)* → *They are black.*

2.2.3. Connectors and Conjunctions

- (46) No solo..., *pero* también → *Not only..., but also.*
- (47) No iré este año, *pero* un año más tarde → *I won't go this year, but a year later.*
- (48) Ciento y dos libras → *A hundred and two pounds.*

2.2.4. Articles and Pronouns

- (49) Compraron *mi* muchos regalos → *They bought me a lot of presents.*
- (50) Un año y *un* medio → *A year and a half.*
- (51) La ayuda *desde tú* → *The help from you.*
- (52) No (me) puedo concentrar → *I cannot concentrate.*
- (53) Ir a (la) universidad → *Go to university.*
- (54) Mi abuela está en (el) hospital → *My grandma is in hospital.*
- (55) Tengo mucho trabajo para (el) colegio → *I have got a lot of work for school.*

2.2.5. Tenses

- (56) Ellas *están visitando* en febrero → *They are visiting in February.*
- (57) Ahora *estoy conduciendo* el coche al colegio → *Now I am driving the car to school.*
- (58) Cuando voy a Mallorca → *When I go to Mallorca.*

2.2.6. Spelling and Vocabulary

- (59) Exámenes *fingidos* (*instead of de prueba*) → *Mock exams.*
- (60) La *sujeta* (*instead of la asignatura*) → *The subject.*
- (61) Mayo/Junio/Julio → *May/June/July.*
- (62) *Jacketa* → *Jacket.*
- (63) *Theología* → *Theology.*
- (64) Possible → *Possible.*
- (65) *Serioso* → *Serious.*

2.2.7. Other mistakes

- (66) Dos noches *pasadas* → *Two nights ago/before.*
- (67) Desde el punto de vista de *pasando* el tiempo → *From the point of view of spending time.*
- (68) ¿Sabes que vas a hacer este verano *todavía*? → *Do you know what you are going to do this summer yet?*
- (69) No puedo esperar *para mis exámenes a termina*r → *I cannot wait for my exams to finish.*
- (70) Las mujeres son horrible(s) *a mí para no razón realidad* → *The women are horrible to me for no reason really.*
- (71) He tenido mi pelo cortado → *I have had my hair cut.*

3. FINAL CONCLUSION

Language transfer can have a negative influence in the process of foreign language learning as it has been shown in the mistakes made by different British students of Spanish language in different contexts. These mistakes are present in most subsystems of the language, although in this paper only semantic, syntactic, morphological, spelling and vocabulary mistakes have been taken into account, as phonological errors are very difficult to identify in written texts.

Depending on the number of years the language has been studied, as well as the contact with the language in a more realistic situation or not, the influence of the mother tongue when learning a second language varies. The learner who has studied the language for a longer time as well as in an environment in which his/her second language is being learnt is the mother tongue has a better command of that second language and therefore, does not make so many mistakes due to negative language transfer.

Unless students realise –or are told– they are making mistakes because of the influence of their own language they will keep coming to their mother tongue whenever they do not know the grammatical rule or word of the second language they are trying to think of. Despite all the difficulties the first thing students should realise is that languages are not just a set of words, but concepts and therefore, words, expressions and grammatical rules vary in all languages and that is the reason why literal translation does not work in most cases. Reality is seen from many different points of view and our minds structure ideas in different ways, thus it is very important to be familiarised with the structures of target language and understand that your mother tongue works in a different way.

This paper confirms what most linguists have already mentioned on negative transfer. Further research in other subsystems, such as the phonological one as well as discourse –this is the objective of another study I am currently doing in relation to Spanish students learning English– should be carried out in order to give a wider view on this matter. Besides, this paper only focuses on the learning process of British students leaning Spanish, which means that the rest of English native speakers and/or speakers of any other languages who are learning Spanish have not been taken into account and I leave this for future research as

well. Finally, Spanish students learning English and the influence of negative transfer in their learning process is also part of another survey I am presently doing.

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