

Somali Speakers of Italian and Language Transfer

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A great deal of the debate in the field of second and foreign language acquisition research, has focused on the description of the language-learner language, generally known as interlanguage, and of the principles governing learners' output.

Although there is a general recognition of the fact that elements of the native language are transferred into the learners' interlanguage, the nature of the phenomenon is far from easy to explain.

The purpose of this paper is to shed some light into the nature of the strategy of transfer of Somali speakers when attempting to communicate in Italian.

This paper is divided in two sections. First a survey of the concept of transfer is given and then this phenomenon is observed and analyzed in the production of Somali interlanguage speakers of Italian.

In this study I found that language transfer interacts with similarities existing among languages, known as language universals. Although not explicitly discussed here, pedagogical implications of this empirical study are manifold and will be the topic of a further research.

On the Concept of Transfer

The introduction of the notion of transfer in applied linguistics is closely linked with the publication of Lado's *Linguistics Across Cultures* in 1957. Elaborating on Fries' earlier work (1945), Lado maintained that interference was the linguistic phenomenon resulting from negative effect of previous language learning. Divergence between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL), was seen as the origin of learners' difficulties.

In this view, the notion of hierarchy of *difficulty* is related to the degree of *distance* between the SL and the TL. The fundamental assumption of the Contrastive Analysis (CA) hypothesis advocated by Lado and others, is that:

«Individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture — both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture, and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practiced by natives». (1957:2).

The theory of CA and its assumed validity for predicting difficulty in foreign language learning has been discredited on many grounds.

In particular, the fundamental assumption cited above, which entails neutralization of habits and of preexisting knowledge, was never supported with data proving the relevance for foreign language learning of the psychological theory on which it was based. Nevertheless, Lado was aware of the distinction between the linguistic phenomenon of interference and the underlying psychological process, transfer. Such an important distinction appears to be underemphasised in the Interlanguage studies of the early seventies, especially by Nemser and Slama-Cazacu (1970) who, in a partial review of the literature on transfer, describe its relation to the concept of interference as controversial.

Burt and Dulay (1972) also attack Lado on sociolinguistic grounds and restrict the role of interference from SL. Many errors of children acquiring a language different from their mother tongue, generally ascribed to negative transfer, are, according to the authors, similar to those of native children and should be considered as «developmental».

Research findings of this period, both on the process and the product, focus on similarities in the acquisition of the two systems. Studies on language universals and on the morpheme order of acquisition, especially in L2 children, focus on common underlying principles. The tendency is to rely on a clear-cut distinction between formal and efficient causes and to interpret learners' errors in terms of either interlinguistic or intralinguistic factors. Selinker (1972), in his famous paper on Interlanguage, includes transfer as one of the five processes but does not clarify whether he interprets it to be an aspect of a wider strategy of simplification by means of which the learner falls back on SL, or if it operates within the TL.

To define IL, he refers to the concept of an underlying system, but never states too clearly whether interference operates between SL and TL or if is an intralinguistic process. Adjemian (1976) also implicitly tackles the problem of transfer when he states that IL, unlike all other natural systems, are permeable to intrusion of SL rules which operate a destabilising factor in IL.

In more recent years, the process of transfer has been increasingly associated with the notion of strategy on the definition of which there has been a great deal of dispute among researchers. If we agree on the assumption that a strategy is a plan or a set of coordinated actions to solve a problem, it follows that transfer cannot be conceived as a mechanical process as it was thought in the past. In recent years, an increasing number of studies deal with the process of transfer which is not conceived as a mechanical trasference of SL structures, as it was generally done in the past, but as a set of cognitive strategies underlying TL acquisition. The German scholar Wode (1977) claims that a certain similarity between SL and TL is necessary before transfer can take place. Kellerman (1979, 1983), considers transfer to be an active strategy dependent on the learner's notion of *distance* between SL and TL and on the degree of *markedness* of the SL element. Zobl (1980) makes a suggestive analogy between a change in the history of the TL from one order type to another with development in the learner's IL, while Corder (1981) draws an important distinction between structural transfer and borrowing. From the evolution of the studies on transfer, it may be concluded that research has departed from the structural view, too strongly associated with behaviourism, which relates difference to difficulty. In addition to a change in ap-

proach in the interpretation of the influence or crosslinguistic influence, researchers are looking into language typology and different language types, making the way to a new form of CA.

Transfer Strategies of Somali Speakers

The informants were three Somali university students in Rome to take a degree in their chosen field. At the time of the interview which was recorded with the interviewees approval, they had been living in Italy for approximately 15 months. One of them had attended an intensive language course for a month upon his arrival, while the other two had a few years of primary school in Italian back in Somalia.

In spite of their various language backgrounds, and slightly different accuracy in communication, they were all quite fluent and showed to adopt quite similar strategies when confronted with a difficulty in communicating in Italian with the interviewer.

The analysis of the data clearly evidences that an adequate description of language transfer from Somali cannot be given without a consideration of their interplay with Italian and language universals.

Among the most evident phenomena at the phonological level, there is that caused by the plosive bilabial phoneme of Somali interfering when attempting to produce the voiceless counterpart in Italian; $b < p$ accounts for typical interlanguage forms of Somali speakers in Italian such as *brima* < *prima* = before; *combiuter* < *computer*. In the substitution of $p > b$ is a typical effect of transfer, other phenomena which involve the phonological and morphological levels are accounted for in terms of more universal principles or strategies. Prosthesis as in *ischerzo* < *scherzo* = joke, *istoria* < *storia* = story, and epenthesis as in *borofessore* < *professore* = professor are the result of the strategies shared by learners of other native languages as well and their adoption is likely to be due to different reasons from transfer of Somali. Prosthesis is a common strategy adopted by Spanish speakers of Italian, for example.

At the morphological level, one of the distinctive features of my informants is the interchange between 3rd and 1st person or viceversa from 1st to 3rd person. For example I found many instances of *abitava*-(he) lived, *veniva*-(he) came, *andava* = (he) went, < *abitavo*, *venivo* and *andavo* or, *lui lo so* = he (I) don't know < *lui non conosce*. If for the inversion of first and third person verb ending, the negative influence of Somali, in which the two forms coincide, seems to be very strong, for other phenomena found at the level of morphology other causes are at stake.

Gender agreement with irregular nouns and selection of auxiliary for active forms of present perfect especially with verbs of being and of motion, are crucial areas not only for Somali speakers of Italian but are common to many learners, Italians included. Forms such as *la problema* = the problem; *i mani* = the hands or *io sono superato l'esame* = I am passed the exam in place of *ho* which is required, and *ho andato a Torino* = I have gone to Turin, in place of *sono*, are universal for many learners regardless of their native language.

At the syntactic level, only two areas were examined: word order and pronominalization especially when clitic forms are required. As for word order, the ten-

dency is to postpone the verb at the end as in *scuola c'è*=school there is, *niente c'è*=nothing there is, *Somali troppo sono orgogliosi*=Somali too are proud. When answering to questions requiring clitics as in:

Q.1. *Le hai viste?*=them have (you) seen?

Q.2. *L'hai portato?*=it have (you) brought?

Q.3. *Quando l'ha preso?*=when it has he taken?

The strategy seems to be that of avoiding the use of the unstressed pronoun:

A.1. *Sì, ho visto*=yes, (I) have seen

A.2. *No, non ho portato*=no, (I) not have brought

A.3. *ha preso ieri*=(he) has taken yesterday.

There are many areas of difficulties, however, such as the use of relative pronouns and prepositions which result from inner complexities of Italian and not from transfer. Forms such as *una zona che abitava mia madre prima*=an area which my mother lived before, *una ragazza che ho parlato*=a girl that I spoke, are common to many speakers, including Italians.

Transfer from Somali, clearly interacts with other universal principles and strategies. Many were the instances of topic and semantic avoidance where the informants changed topic or gave no verbal response during the interview. Phonological, morphological and syntactic «difficulties» were often overcome by the informants, very good at adapting their means to their ends and at making appeal to the authority. Often they asked me for the correct form, used circumlocutions, paraphrases, or switched to Somali in their attempt to communicate, which should be analyzed in detail.

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