

THE PHENOMENON OF INTERFERENCE AND THE MECHANISM OF ITS INTERPRETATION

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Fenomenul de interferență lingvistică și mecanismul de manifestare a acestuia au generat mereu mari controverse în procesul de învățare a unei limbi străine. Unii cercetători ca Lily Wilson, Douglas Brown H. și Catherine Walter susțin că interferența nu este o problemă în procesul de învățare a unei limbi străine, declarând că acesta este identic cu cel al limbii materne și că nu există nicio influență din partea limbii materne. Alții, ca Michael Swan și Bernard Smith, dimpotrivă, consideră că interferența cu limba maternă generează mari dificultăți în procesul de învățare a unei limbi străine și că aceste dificultăți sunt diverse pentru vorbitorii diferitor limbi.

Language contact takes place between speakers of different languages. The English scholar Ilse Lehiste affirmed that for communication to take place, speakers must arrive at a certain degree of comprehension of the other language and must acquire a degree of facility in producing utterances that will be comprehensible [3, p.77]. This means that when two people speak to each other, it is necessary, even obligatory that they comprehend the message they receive, if not the communication becomes false and inefficient. However, it is well known that the degree of comprehension depends on the degree of correctness. As Gillian Brown and Kirsten Malmkjar affirmed, the degree of comprehension conveys the amount of comprehensible information, considered clear to the listener, whereas the degree of correctness refers to the proper usage of language rules when speaking a foreign language [1, p.154].

In recent years, there has been considerable controversy about how a learner's foreign language can be influenced by his or her mother tongue. Some linguists as Lily Wilson, Douglas Brown H., Catherine Walter and Philip Tregidro claimed that mother tongue interference is not important in interlanguage and that learners of a given foreign language tend to follow the same kind of “route” through its difficulties regardless of their first language.

Michael Swan and Bernard Smith presented another version of the problem in their book *Learner English A teacher's guide to interference and other problems*. They are plainly convinced that the learners' interlanguages are specific and distinct and they see mother tongue influence as accounting for many of the characteristic problems of different learners speaking particular mother tongues [6, p.68].

I adhere to the second opinion because I am completely convinced that a considerable part of the difficulties that learners encounter when learning a foreign language, are due to the interference with their mother tongue, but I do not reject the possibility of committing intralingual mistakes as well.

As a concept, **interference** can be defined in linguistics as *the transference of elements from one language to another at various levels including phonetic, grammatical and lexical patterns*.

The phonetic interference occurs when a bilingual perceives and reproduces the sounds of a foreign language in terms of his native language. Interference arises when the bilingual identifies a phoneme of the foreign language with a phoneme of the native language and when reproducing it, relates it to the phonetic rules of the native language.

The most obvious kind of phonetic interference is sound substitution. This phenomenon arises when certain phonemes that are identically described in two languages, have different phonetic realizations and when the pronunciation of the native language is carried over into the foreign language. This kind of interference refers to the foreign accent. For example, the phoneme /t/ is found in Romanic languages as well as in English. The difference consists in the fact that in Romanic languages /t/ is normally dental, while in English /t/ is generally alveolar.

There are situations in which the native language lacks a phoneme existing in the foreign language. There are even cases when the native language has one phoneme, while the foreign language has two phonemes, both of which bear a phonetic similarity to the phoneme present in learner's native language. Leslie M. Beebe assumed that in this case, the speaker would try to substitute that sound that seems to him to be the “closest”

sound to the one they are trying to match. For example, English has the phonemes /θ/ and /ð/, which are not found in Romanian and Russian. Both Romanian and Russian have the phonemes /s/, /z/, /t/, and /d/. Speakers of Romanian choose /s/ and /z/ as substitutes for English /θ/ and /ð/, while speakers of Russian choose /t/ and /d/. Consequently, the English words *think* and *them* would be pronounced somewhat like /sink/ and /zem/ by a Romanian speaker, but rather /tink/ and /dem/ by a Russian speaker.

The grammatical interference is similar to the phonetic interference. Douglas Brown H. explains that it takes place when elements of a foreign language enter the learner's mother tongue and gradually are integrated or when a speaker starting to speak a foreign language, transfers native language elements into the foreign language system [2, p.43].

As a rule, **morphological interference** is likely to take place when two languages have different grammatical categories. In morphological integration, for example, a word borrowed from the foreign language into the native language, must be given grammatical categories that are characteristic of native language. In order to understand better, one can analyze the grammatical category of gender associated with nouns. For example, in a contact situation involving English on the one hand and German on the other hand, English nouns incorporated into German, must be given grammatical gender, since gender is an obligatory category in both these languages. English lacks the grammatical gender, although it possesses natural gender, as it makes a distinction among masculine, feminine and neuter in personal pronouns.

Syntactic interference appears when patterns from the native language are carried over into the foreign language or when patterns of the foreign language are interpreted in terms of patterns of the native language [3, p.38]. In 1971, Ilse Lehiste making an experimental study of syntactic interference, made an effort to establish the possible differences between native and non-native speakers with respect to grammatical variability. Using a current popular method of teaching elementary syntactic theory, he involved contrastive presentation of "grammatical" and "non-grammatical" sentences. A concrete problem aroused in teaching a syntax course to a group of students including both native and non-native speakers of the language from which the examples are drawn. The problem consisted in the fact that non-native speakers frequently fail to see the rationale for a particular decision concerning whether a sentence is or is not grammatical or there are such cases when the underlining principle consists of a demand to the native speaker's intuition.

The lexical interference may result from contact between vocabularies of two languages. The vocabulary of one language can interfere with the vocabulary of another language in various ways. The introduction of a new word to designate a new concept enlarges the vocabulary and frequently affects the functions occupied by the existing words in the broader semantic field to which the new word contributes.

An extreme common form of lexical interference is the *loan translation* or *calque*. Examples can be found in practically every language: English word "kindergarten" has been translated in Russian as *detskii sad*, Latin word "paeninsula" has become French *presqu'île*, etc. Sometimes the model is borrowed and not the exact morpheme. For example, the English word "skyscraper" gave way to Romanian "zgârâie nori", which would literally translate a non-existing English word "*cloudscratcher*".

It was demonstrated that loanwords undergo phonological and grammatical (morphological) integration and at the same time, they are gradually integrated into the lexicon, insisting on the fact that a new word may simply be added to the vocabulary, especially when it designates a new item or concept. More frequently, however, the lexicon already contains another word with a more or less closely related meaning. It seems that for a while, both words may be used side by side until the old word is rejected or there are even cases when the two words become specialized. Old words may, of course, be dropped from the lexicon without language contact, sometime without any apparent reason, but at other times because of cultural change. For example, it is well known that all Romance languages inherited from Latin the word "bellum" = *war*; French has substituted it with the word *guerre*, which is of Frankish origin. Thus, no semantic change is involved, the original word being simply unnecessary. When the old word continues to exist side by side with the new one, the lexicon is frequently restructured and the old word may become specialized.

Douglas Brown H. suggested to stress the role of interference in the foreign language learning and teaching processes and to analyze the interfering effects of the native language on the foreign language. He explained that this process has been singled out because of the fact that the native language interference the most immediately noticeable source of error among foreign language learners [2, p.88].

It is already clear from the learning theory that a person will use whatever previous experience he or she has had with language for facilitating the second language learning process. The native language becomes in

this way an obvious set of previous experience. There are however, cases when the native language is negatively transferred and this is the point when interference occurs. For example, a French native speaker might say in English

I am in New York since January.

At the first sight, it seems to be a perfect logical transfer of the comparable French sentence “Je suis a New York depuis janvier.”

But because of the negative transfer of the French verb form to English, the French system interfered, in this case, with the learner’s production of a correct English form.

Nevertheless, it is extremely important to keep in mind, however, that the native language of a foreign language learner can be often positively transferred. In this case, the learner benefits from the facilitating effects of the first language. In the above given sentence, for example, the correct one-to-one word-order correspondence, the personal pronoun and the preposition have been positively transferred from French to English. Thus, it is possible to affirm that people often fail to notice by mistake the facilitating effects of the native language. This happens because of their predilection for analyzing errors in the foreign language and because of the overstressing the interfering effects of the first language.

Interference is almost as frequent as overgeneralization — a process that occurs in the foreign language learner acts within the target language consisting in the generalization of a particular rule or item in the second language. Teachers of English have already observed that at the initial stage, people that learn English as a foreign language overgeneralize regular past-tense endings as applicable to all past-tense forms until they recognize a subset of verbs that belong in an “irregular” category. Many have been led to believe that interference and overgeneralization are the same process. In this respect, Douglas Brown H. comes with a clear elucidation concerning the difference between these two concepts explaining that *interference of the first language in the second language is simply a form of generalizing the previous first language experience and applies them incorrectly*, but *overgeneralization is the incorrect application of previous learned second language material to a present second language context* [2, p.87].

Stephen D. Krashen and Tracy D Terrell present another view of the term interference, but the most important fact is that it implies a very different cure for interference errors. Their view is based on the idea that the first language does not interfere at all when people try to use a second language, insisting on the fact that errors that show the influence of the first language are simply the consequence of “falling back” on the first language when people lack a rule in their foreign language. The cure for interference is simply *acquisition*, as pedagogy does not need to help the acquirer fight of the effects of the first language but it need to only help the learner acquire the foreign language [5, p.38].

Confirmed more properly, a learner will substitute a rule from his native language for a rule of the second language having not acquired it yet. The native language rule may be quite similar to the foreign language rule, but may also differ in a certain way. In the case they are different; the resulting error is often referred to the phenomenon called by others interference. In Stephen D. Krashen and Tracy D Terrell’ opinion, this phenomenon is not interference at all because it is not the result of the native language interfering with the foreign language, but it is the result of ignorance, as there is a lack of acquisition of a foreign language rule that is needed in performance. According to their opinion, *first language interference* occurs when the foreign language performers have to talk “too early”, before having had the time and the necessary input to build sufficient competence to use the acquired knowledge.

In this respect, Brown G. considers that adults’ foreign language learning process is more vulnerable to the effects of the first language on the second. It does not matter if they learn the foreign language in classroom or individually, anyway, they attempt to formulate linguistic rules based on whatever linguistic information is available for them. Adults operate from the solid foundation of the first language and thus manifest more interference. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to consider interference the essential factor in adults’ foreign language acquisition because researchers proved that they manifest some of the same types of errors found in children learning their native language. Sometimes, the native language may be used by adults in foreign language learning in order “to fulfil the gaps” that they cannot fill by generalization within the foreign language. In this case, it is necessary to keep in mind that the native language can be a facilitating factor and not just an interfering one.

In conclusion, it is possible to say that interference is indeed a phenomenon involved in the foreign and second language learning. It is viewed and interpreted in two ways by researchers. Some scientists as Michael

Swan and Bernard Smith consider it a phenomenon that greatly influences the foreign or second language learning process; they say that it accounts for many of the characteristic difficulties of different learners speaking particular mother tongues. Thus, they came to the conclusion that learners speaking different languages have different difficulties, as in their opinion, they depend on learners' mother tongues. Other scientists as Catherine Walter, Lily Wilson and Douglas Brown H. consider that the phenomenon of interference is irrelevant in the process of foreign or second language learning. They are sure that learners' difficulties do not depend on their native languages, insisting on the fact that a foreign language is learnt in the same way as the native one.

Consequently, it is possible to say that the explanation of interference phenomenon requires linguistic consideration. Analyzing it from a cognitive perspective, one can notice that interference occurs because the learner has incorrectly activated a mechanical routine based on his or her native language. This happens because of the fact that learners lack the information they need at that moment in the foreign language they learn.

Finally, I would like to say that becoming bilingual is a way of life. Our whole person is affected as we struggle to reach beyond the boundaries of our first language into a new language. The learning of a foreign language is a complex process that involves an infinite number of variables. A total involvement, a total physical, intellectual and emotional response is necessary to send and receive successfully messages in a foreign language.

References:

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