COMMUNICATION BETWEEN LANGUAGES – THE POSITIVE TRANSFER. A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to find evidence for the existence of the positive transfer, encouraged by the proximity between Romance languages, in the French language productions, written by Romanian subjects who study Italian or Spanish in addition to French. The hypothesis of the study is that, in learners' linguistic knowledge of target language, certain elements were learnt at some point, yet appering as inactive in their spirit at the time of production, and possibly activated by means of the resemblances with other Romance languages.

Keywords: *Romance languages, proximity, interlanguage, positive transfer*

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, knowing two languages is no longer an advantage, as being multilingual is already much better. People are more and more willing to learn foreign languages and, in this context, didactics, although used to be wary of the kinship between languages (because transfers may result), proposes today techniques of awakening to language and learning methods which grant credit to intercomprehension between languages and to proximity.

To attain this, to learn a foreign language means to explore, more or less consciously, the proximity space between the target language and other languages. This proximity encourages transfers between language systems, which acquire a positive or negative value inside learner's language, or in the transitional linguistic system he has at a certain point in time. In literature, the transitional system is called *interlanguage* and is seen as a third linguistic system developed by the learner of a foreign language, different from his mother tongue and the target language in question. In this article, stress is laid on the influence of proximity languages may have, in Romanian subjects with a B1 level of French, on their written productions in French.

Subjects' level of language has been a challenge for us. As, usually, the positive transfer is slightly observable mainly in the early stages of the learning process, when the learner knows nothing of the target language, and he sees it through the mother tongue, looking for similarities. If, for example, he does not know the meaning of a word, but the spelling of this word is similar to that of its equivalent in the mother tongue, the subject shall formulate the hypothesis that the word may have the same meaning as the word he knows in his language (if the hypothesis is validated, then the positive transfer was produced). However, for the subjects with a B1 level of French, the positive transfer is difficult to observe, as they are familiar with a part of the lexicon of the foreign language.

In order to obtain information about how proximity influences language learning, we developed a case study on Romanian subjects (11 pupils form the "Garabet Ibraileanu" High School in Iasi, studying Italian or Spanish in addition to French).

We organized three linguistic investigations along one year. Analysis of the obtained data provided answers to the following questions: Is there still observable a positive transfer to the subjects with a A2-B1 level? Is it possible to make the difference, in the productions of the subjects, between the knowledge already acquired in the target language and the results of the immediate positive transfer, in the production stage, under the influence of the proposed triggers? Do the elements learnt at some point, but inactive in subjects' mind at the time of production, really

exist in the linguistic knowledge of the subjects in the target language, and could they be activated by means of the resemblances with other Romance languages?

2. CASE STUDY

To obtain evidence for the existence of a positive transfer, we built a Romanian text containing target words which the subjects will have to translate into French, assuming that, in the first stage, they will not manage to translate everything. What stays without translation becomes material for the second stage, by generating the context within which the positive influence could show itself.

During the second stage, the subjects receive the same text which, this time, contains triggers for a positive influence, like Spanish and/or Italian equivalents. Given that these Spanish and/or Italian words look like their French correspondents, we suppose that they will manage to translate what they did not succeed during the first stage. Then, we shall concentrate only on the contexts in which the translation is absent or wrong in the first stage, so we can decide whether the positive transfer was produced in these contexts.

A priori, this method is rather opaque as to its results. We know what we want to obtain, but the context seems to hide the elements of surprise which might intervene or not. Indeed, as the source language of the subjects is Romanian (they had learnt French through the Romanian language), it is rather likely that they will do a good translation either from the first try, or never. In such a case, the positive transfer will remain unknown. We would like to verify if, among the linguistic knowledge of the subjects in target language, certain elements were learnt at some point, but inactive in their spirit at the time of the production and can be activated by means of the resemblances with the other Romance languages. Here are the target words and triggers used in the second investigation. The Romanian words to be translated appear in the columns highlighted in grey.

Table 1. Target words and triggers

The same Etymology - different Evolution			
Romanian	Spanish	Italian	French
Discuție	discusion	discussione	discussion
Înger	angel	angelo	ange
(a) descoperi	descubrir	-	découvrir
Different etymology Ro/ Sp, It, Fr			
Romanian	Spanish	Italian	French
(a) înlocui	reemplazar	rimpiazzare	remplacer
Război	guerra	guerra	guerre
(a) părăsi	quitar	-	quitter
răbdare	paciencia	pazienza	patience
Tăcere	silencio	silenzio	silence
Urmă	-	Traccia	trace
Oboseală	fatiga	Fatica	fatigue
(a) număra	contar	contare	compter
Străin	extrangero	-	étranger
(a) pluti	flotar	fluitare	flotter
(a) zbura	volar	Volare	voler
(a) păstra	guardar	-	garder
Proaspăt	fresco	Fresco	frais

Romanian synonyms of other origin than Latin looking like their French, Italian and Spanish equivalent				
Romanian word with Latin etymology	Romanian synonym with other origin	Spanish	Italian	French
surâs	zâmbet	Sonrisa	sorriso	sourire
(a) promite	(a) făgădui	Prometer	-	promettre
voce	glas	Voz	voce	voix

According to this methodology, the gradient of similarity is used for obtaining the positive transfer – that is, the opposite of the interference (negative transfer). We saw that stimuli, showing variable degrees of generalization with regard to a given standard stimulus, represent a gradient of similarity and create the context within which the tendency to be generalized is very powerful. This generalizing tendency usually finishes by interference, when we do not know the correct answer. We want to produce an inverse reaction, betting on the fact that the subject knows the answer, but that it is in an inactive state in his spirit and that the creation of a context with an intense generalization tendency will help in the reactivation of the good answer. Our methodology proposes a system of equations with an unknown:

$$\text{Similarity} \begin{cases} \text{Stimulus}_{\text{Italian}} = \text{Answer}_{\text{Italian}} \\ \text{Stimulus}_{\text{Spanish}} = \text{Answer}_{\text{Spanish}} \\ \text{Stimulus}_{\text{French}} = x \end{cases}$$

We know the stimuli (the contexts of use of the language), which form the gradient of similarity (see the closeness of Romance languages) and the adequate answers represented in our method by the proposed triggers. The subjects will have to find the good answer to the stimulus-context of use in French, resting on the other answers.

3. METHODOLOGY OF THE POSITIVE TRANSFER ANALYSIS

The preliminary stage essential for analysis is digitalization of the corpus. The specific objective of this stage consists in highlighting the convenient frames for obtaining the positive transfer. To this end, we extracted the target words from the corpus, organized them into tables and then moved to to the next stage. Further on, each of the cases assumed to induce the positive transfer will be estimated according to the hypothesis formulated in the beginning of the activity. At this level, the objective is to indicate the production of the positive transfer. The evaluators are: *translated*, V (positive transfer produced) and X (positive transfer not produced). Let us take an example and try to explain how we define these evaluators. The hypothesis of the investigation is the following: in the linguistic knowledge of subjects in the target language, certain elements were learnt at some point, but remained inactive in their spirit at the time of the production, being possibly activated by means of the resemblances with other Romance languages. Consequently, if the subject translates the target word before seeing the triggers, this case is estimated as *translated*. If, on the other hand, he proposes the correct translation only after having seen the triggers, the case is estimated as *positive transfer produced* (V). Finally, if he proposes an inadequate form or if he proposes nothing, the case is considered as *positive transfer not produced* (X). Only the cases estimated as *positive transfer produced* confirm our hypothesis.

Sample – Subject 1

Hypothesis: in the linguistic knowledge of the subjects in the target language, certain elements were learnt at some point, but remained inactive in their spirit at the time of the production, being possibly activated by means of the resemblances with other Romance languages.

Target words	Stage 1	Stage 2	Validated / invalidated hypothesis	Notes
(a) înlocui	-	remplace	✓	
încredere	-		✓	
război	bataille	guerre	✓	
(a) părăsi		(il a) quité	✓	Even if one *t* is missing, the positive transfer is obvious.
discuție	discution	discussion	✓	
răbdare	-	pacience	✓	Even if the shape contains a graphic error due to the interference with the Spanish or Italian equivalent, we think that a positive transfer was produced.
înger	angel	ange	✓	
tăcere	silence	silance	translated	
proaspăt	-	freche	x	Too far from the standard form of the target language.
urmă	-	traces	✓	
Oboseală	-	fatigue	✓	
(a) număra	numerôte	conter	x	The form proposed during the second stage is close to the correct word but, as in French, the verb *conter* also exists with quite a different meaning, we consider that no positive transfer occurred.
(a) descoperi	-	decouvre	✓	
zâmbet	raison	sonrit	x	Too far from the standard form of the target language.
străin	-	étranger		
glas	glas	voce	x	The subject made rather a negative transfer (from Italian *voce*, or from the Romanian *voce*).
(a) făgădui		(j e) promets	✓	
(a) pluti		fluitare	x	The proposed form is the result of a negative transfer (from Italian *fluitare*).
(a) zbura	flir	(il) volais	✓	Even if the conjugation is erroneous, a positive transfer undoubtlessly occurred.
(a) păstra	-	(j'ai) gardé	✓	

Sample – Subject 2

Hypothesis: in the linguistic knowledge of the subjects in the target language, certain elements were learnt at some point, but remain inactive in their spirit at the time of the production, being possibly activated by means of the resemblances with other Romance languages.

T a r g e t words	Stage 1	Stage 2	Validated / invalidated hypothesis	Notes
(a) înlocui	-	remplace	✓	
încredere	confiance	confiance	translated	
război	guerre	guerre	translated	
(a) părăsi	(il a) laissé	(il a) quitté	✓	
discuție	discution	discution	x	The form seems to be rather the result of a negative transfer from the Romanian *discuție*.
răbdare	concentration	pacience	✓	Even if the word contains a graphic error due to the interference with the Spanish or Italian equivalent, we think that a positive transfer was produced.
înger	angel	angel	x	Negative transfer from the Spanish *ángel*.
tăcere	silence	silence	translated	
proaspăt	pure	-	x	
urmă	urmes	tracions	x	Too far from the standard French word.
oboseală	-	fatigue	✓	
(a) număra	numerer	conter	x	The form proposed during the second stage is close to the correct word but, as in French the verb *conter* also exists with quite a different meaning, we consider that the positive transfer did not occur.
(a) descoperi	(elle voulait) decouvre	(elle a voulu) découvrir	✓	
zâmbet	sourise	souris	x	The proposed word is rather the result of a negative transfer of the Romanian *surâs*.
străin	-	extraniant	x	Too far from the standard.
glas	glase	voix	✓	
(a) făgădui	(je lui) dire	prometé	✓	Beyond the bad conjugation, we notice that by means of the Spanish equivalent, the subject used the adequate verb.
(a) pluti	-	(il) flotait	✓	Even if one *t* is missing, the positive transfer is obvious.
(a) zbura	-	(il) volait	✓	
(a) păstra	(j') avais	(j'ai) gardé	✓	

Sample - Subject 3

Hypothesis: in the linguistic knowledge of the subjects in the target language, certain elements were learnt at some point, remained however inactive in their spirit at the time of the production, being possibly activated by means of the resemblances with other Romance languages.

Target words	Stage 1	Stage 2	Validated / invalidated hypothesis	Notes
(a) înlocui	(il) change	(il) remplace	✓	
încredere	-	confiance	✓	
război	guerre	gurre	translated	
(a) părăsi	-	(il a) quitté	✓	
discuție	discution	discution	x	The proposed form is rather the result of a negative transfer of the Romanian *discuție*.
răbdare	-	patience	✓	
înger	-	angellé	x	Too far from the standard French word.
tăcere	-	silance	✓	Even if the word contains a graphic error, we think that a positive transfer produced.
proaspăt	fresh	fresh	x	
urmă	-	-	x	
oboseală	-	fatigante	✓	The form proposed during the second stage is not a noun, but it fills the space of the first stage. We thus consider that a positive transfer was made.
(a) număra	nombre	contaire	x	The word is too far away from the standard French word.
(a) descoperi	(il veut) decouvrisse	decouvrire	✓	Beyond the superfluous letter *e*, we consider that a positive transfer occurred.
zâmbet	souri	souri	x	Too far from the standard.
străin	étrangere	étrangére	translated	
glas	glace (voice)	voice	x	Even if this word could be understood by a native, we consider that the negative influence of English is obvious from the first stage.
(a) făgădui	(j'ai) dite	(je) permetté	✓	We consider that, apart from the error of conjugation, a positive transfer was made.
(a) pluti	-	(il) floté	✓	Even if one *t* is missing and the conjugation is incorrect, we consider that a positive transfer was produced as, in our opinion, the form can be understood by a native.
(a) zbura	-	(il) volé	✓	
(a) păstra	-	(je) guardé	✓	In spite of the wrongly added *u*, we consider that a positive transfer occurred.

4. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Although, in the tables, particular observations have been already made for most part of the cases, certain general comments, which concern more than a subject, will be made in the following.

1. Even if, in our learners, it is difficult to make the difference between what they already know in the target language and the results of the immediate positive transfer, in the production stage, under the influence of the proposed triggers, we managed to overcome this difficulty by the techniques of investigation applied.

We demonstrated the presence of inactive elements in the linguistic knowledge in a foreign language (to our subjects), which can be activated by means of the resemblances with other Romance languages, and which demonstrates the existence of the positive transfer.

2. We noticed that, by making translations, the subjects sometimes conjugated the verbs (in a correct or incorrect way), and other times put them to the infinitive form. The adequacy of the verbal ending did not influence us in the analysis of the positive transfer, because our purpose is not to verify the grammar.

3. One and the same word was sometimes estimated in different ways. For example, in different contexts, the word *silance received both evaluator X (positive transfer not produced), and V (positive transfer produced). We considered the positive transfer produced when, in the first stage, the subject proposed no form, whereas in the second stage, he proposed *silance. Even if the form also contains a negative intralingual transfer, the subject fills a previous space and would be understood by a native. On the other hand, where the form *silance is proposed both in the first and in the second stage, we consider that the positive transfer did not occur, given that triggers (proposed in the second stage) suggested the correct shape (Sp: silencio, It: silenzio).
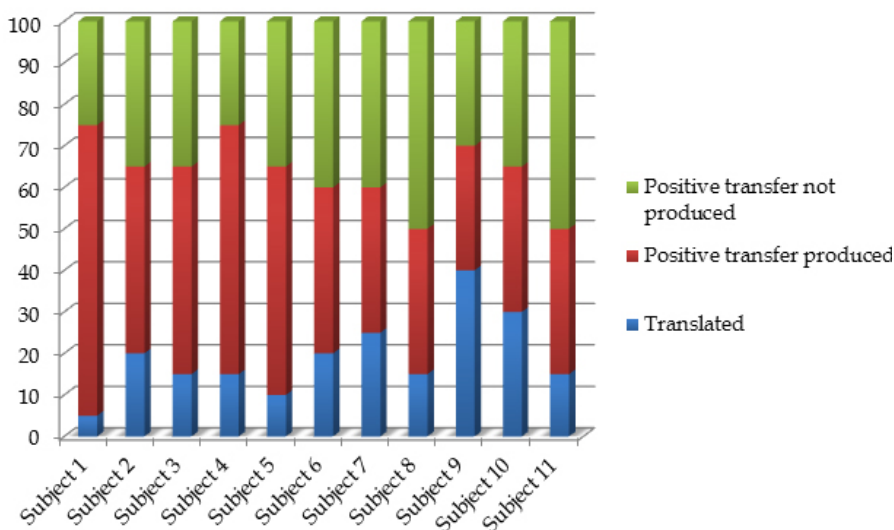

Fig.1. Percentage of positive transfer / total production

5. CONCLUSIONS

As already mentioned it in the methodology, the positive transfer is observable, most easily, with beginners. Consequently, in A2-B1 level learners, it is difficult to make the difference between what they already know in the target language and the elements which they transfer in their interlanguage, at the time of the production, and which appear as agreeing with the standard.

To exceed this opacity of the interlanguage with regard to the positive transfer, we developed methods which can serve our purpose. In this way, we managed to seize the production of the positive transfer. Synchronic intra-interlangue analyses allowed us to assert that, in the linguistic knowledge of our subjects in the target language,

we find elements learnt at some point, but which remain inactive in their spirit at the time of the production. We demonstrated that these elements can be activated by means of the resemblances with other Romance languages, which demonstrates the existence of a positive transfer.

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