

Interlingual Morpho-Syntactic L_1 -Interference and L_2 -Syntax Errors: Experiences, Observations and Deductions

Tobias Gross

Azteca University, Mexico

Corresponding author: info@tobeygross.de

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ABSTRACT

In order to determine interlingual morpho-syntactic L_1 -interference among 9 adult German native speaking subjects who attempted to learn the English language, long-term classes of an average timespan of 18 months were observed and tracked in regard of their most common errors in L_2 -syntax. During that period, it became obvious, that a majority of syntax errors occurred due to interference with familiar structures of the subjects' L_1 , which they had falsely mapped onto L_2 -structures. This paper describes the methodology of assessments of the most error-prone syntax structures in the featured pair of languages, the quality of subjectively-felt difficulties in syntactic switching as well as the specific associated fields of morpho-syntactic interference. Furthermore, it opens a follow-up discussion about whether root-similarities between L_1 and L_2 in general, in spite of their numerous advantages for learners, can also have negative impact on L_2 -acquisition in terms of syntax-errors due to the likelihood of ill-fitting mapping-attempts which might be brought forth by the faulty preassumption of identicalness, built upon the various similarities among L_1 and L_2 .

Keywords: Interlingual Interference, L_2 -acquisition, L_2 -errors, morpho- syntactic-errors

Interlingual interference, also known as cross-linguistic influence or language transfer, refers to the influence that one language (here: L_1) has on the acquisition and use of another language (here: L_2). Regularly, the phenomenon is observed in native language / foreign language or first language / second language pairs. This influence can occur in various forms, such as morpho-syntactic errors, lexical transfer, or phonological transfer (Gass & Selinker, 2002). One specific area of interest in the field of interlingual interference is morpho-syntactic interference errors, which occur when the grammar and word order of L_1 transfer to L_2 , commonly resulting in errors in verb tense, subject-verb agreement, or word order (Jamieson & Singleton, 1990). These word order errors are frequent

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when the learners' native language is mapped onto the differing concepts of the L_2 . The concept of interlingual interference has been studied for a long time, with the first concept of inter-language proposed by Selinker in 1972 (Selinker, 1972). This concept refers to the linguistic system that emerges when a learner is in the process of acquiring their second language, which is influenced by L_1 . The standard model of second language acquisition (SLA) also takes into account the role of interlingual interference and language transfer in the acquisition process (Larsen-Freeman, 2002). Past research has unveiled, that root similarities in languages can contribute to the false transfer of L_1 knowledge to L_2 , leading to errors in L_2 syntax. This is because learners may falsely map their L_1 knowledge onto the yet-to-be-acquired L_2 due to partly similar structural concepts in both languages and the tendency to stick with familiar L_1 syntax (Singleton, 2009). This phenomenon is known as "cross-linguistic structural transfer" (Flege, 1995). In particular, the lack of comprehension about the L_2 shows in the fact, that similarities do not mean that any of the grammarly structures of the L_2 depend on any of those of the L_1 of the learner and should merely be perceived as coincidental (even if they are not a particular *coincidence*), rather than be used "randomly" for a mapping acquisition. Although Alderson *et al.* understandably argue, that similarities in the morphological structure of L_1 and L_2 can enhance L_2 acquisition, hence learners may transfer their knowledge of the morphological structure of L_1 to L_2 , which can aid in the acquisition of L_2 morphology (Alderson *et al.* 1984), this automatic or at least semi-automatic process can lead to several traps once the L_2 structure differs from familiar structures.

While lecturing German native speakers and teaching them English grammar, I could well observe the above mentioned tendencies and especially in regard of syntax, the "traps" are numerous. In spite of them both stemming from the Germanic language families (König *et al.* 2011) and sharing manifold similarities in syntactic development (Holmberg, 2006), English syntax can be described as more rigid than German and many syntactic compositions of German can not be transferred in to English, yet those faulty transfers happen frequently with German learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In general, past research found, that root-similarities among L_1 and L_2 can be favorable for learners in various regards, for those similarities enable students to better comprehend and apply structures of L_2 based upon their already existing experience with the familiar syntactic composition of their L_1 . Gagné (2009) found, that English-German bilingual subjects showed a high degree of transfer between their language pair, especially in regard of syntax. Similar word formation, and therewith vocabulary acquisition, and inflectional morphology were found to be transferred well from L_1 to L_2 , given a high degree of syntactic similarity among the pairs (Wirth, Kroll, 2009; Danziger, 2010).

In 2016, Gómez-González *et al.* found lexical similarities to be advantageous for L_2 -acquisition through easier transferability. Apart from the apparent advantageousness, past research has also investigated the scope of L_1 -influence overall and has tried to approach the question if transfer actually happens regularly. In "Cross-linguistic Influence in Language and Cognition" by Howard and Smith (2011), the authors found that knowledge in L_1 can have a major influence on L_2 acquisition by cross- transfer of syntax from L_1 to L_2 . Their work describes, how L_1 knowledge can accept L_2 acquisition, and how it can result in the development of L_2 structures that reflect L_1 influence, such as by providing a cognitive framework for the understanding of L_2 structures, or by influencing the attributes of L_2 -processing and -comprehension. Accordingly, it is neither a solely positive nor negative effect and is highly dependant on the context,

as for itself, it is a neutral observation. Though, Heycock and Meisel (1996) found, that an interference of L₁ can turn out to produce incorrect syntax in L₂, when they investigated learners of French and they could observe, that when subjects mapped their L₁ syntactic framework onto French, errors occurred. In a study about code-switching between English and Arabic, Benmamoun (2008) was able to observe, that the switches between both languages created syntactic errors, and stated that error rates substantially increased in syntactic patterns that the target language didn't have in common with the default language. According to König (2011), root similarities among German and English specifically include SVO-word order, verb and adjective placement, inflectional morphology, relative clauses, expressions through modal auxiliaries and noun inflection. Some of the most common interlingual morpho-syntactic errors include word order, agreement errors and case errors. According to Schmid (2010), German learners of English have particular difficulties with the SVO word order in English syntax while they often tend to stick with the German SOV. In my findings, the SVO / SOV differences will be further evaluated.

The examination of existing research about interlingual morpho- syntactic interference shows that it appears to be a double-edged sword, as root-similarities may enable students to process syntactic frameworks from their L₁ onto their L₂, which can have favorable effects in terms of comprehension of syntactic structures in L₂ and accelerate the process of L2-acquisition. However, a high level of awareness is required for the learner in order to distinguish between structures that can be mapped and others that cannot. It appears, that the influence of L₁ does only have positive effects on L₂-acquisition, as long as syntactic structures align, whereas where they differ, L₂ syntax tends to be especially error-prone, hence it can also show an adverse effect. This leads to the assumption, that it depends on the particular learner as well as the context, whether or not L₁-interference is an advantageous phenomenon and thus, whether it supports or inhibits correct syntax-acquisition in L₂.

Methodology and Design

In order to understand the motivation for this research design to be qualitative instead of quantitative and best understand the thoughts behind the methodology, I want to mention a number of considerations and preassumptions. The study aims to focus on the in-depth subjective experiences of difficulties among learners of an L₂. Quantitative research would not cover the individual subjective thought process behind interlingual morpho-syntactic interference, especially in the scope of two root-familiar languages. Apart from that, a smaller sample size, which allows for the deeper investigation of subjective experiences and perspectives, is not suitable for a quantitative approach due to the little representation of larger numbers of participants and therewith larger-scale quantitative results. Vice versa, the key features of the idea behind this particular study would have come short of the sheer number that would have been needed in order to approach the topic quantitatively. Lastly, the study seeks to understand the specific context(s) in which the phenomenon of interference occurs, which is best done through qualitative research as it is the most suitable method for examinations of individual purpose and comprehension. Those considerations align with ideas found in Denzin, Lincoln (2011), Silverman (2018), Creswell (2014).

Over the research period, several measures were employed in order to find out, which syntactic structures appeared to be most error-prone and accordingly, to what extent they appeared to have happened on account of interlingual interference. Subsequently, the similarities and differences

in the specific syntactic scopes were analyzed and tracked. For validation of those assumptions, students were interviewed about their particular lines of thought and reasons for their initial choice. Field notes were taken accordingly. This strategy was chosen in order to ensure, that the origin of frequently occurring errors was indeed triggered by falsely mapped L_1 structures and not otherwise. In a comparative manner, student portfolios, which were always kept by the instructor and never altered, were analyzed meticulously to find intersections in those errors and determine the most common misconceptions. In terms of a methodical search after the errors| origins, students were interviewed about their understanding regularly and frequently, especially directly after contrastive intervention by the instructor. Depending on where errors occurred and what their nature was, an appropriate targeting method was chosen and further developed during the period of investigation, especially in terms of derivative explanatory approaches, development of examples and permanent enhancement of terminology and strategic placement within instructional sessions. Once an approach proved successful, it was adopted and tested with other subjects and assessed through direct feedback. The main part of the investigations consisted of open-ended interviewing methods that allowed for in-depth explorations of the subjective lines of thought and individual hardships in comprehension:

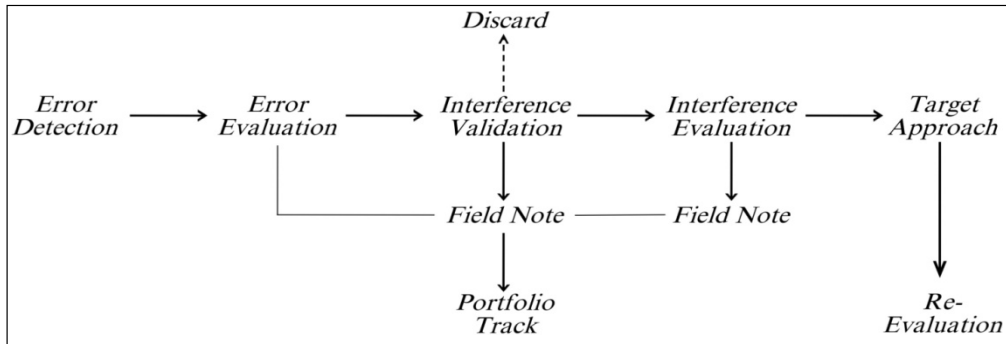


Fig. 1: Evaluation and validation scheme

Findings

The findings presented in this chapter give a comprehensive overview of the ranking of errors that occurred most frequently throughout the research period. The following table chart provides the ranking in descending order. Although there were a considerable number of other error-prone syntactic topics, these proved to be the most common and apparently most difficult to resolve in the specific regard of interlingual morpho-syntactic interference.

Table 1: Error Distribution Ranking

Rank	Error Type
1	Perfect Tense Constructions
2	C_{II} Condition-Result Mismatch
3	$S \rightarrow V \rightarrow O$ Word Order
4	Pronouns Application
5	Progressive-Simple Contrasting

The table 2 provides error specifications for each field, with their affiliated syntactic interference.

Table 2: Interference Analysis

Rank	Specifics	L ₁ -syntax Interference
1	Incorrect <i>PTS</i> comprehension, leading to errors in application of constructions / incoherent association of auxiliaries with tenses	Colloquial establishment of frequent replacement of <i>preterite</i> with <i>perfect</i> and common acceptance of interchangeability in L ₁ lead to misconceptions about report-wise equality of constructions in L ₂
2	Incorrect replacement of conditional verbs, unallowed application of <i>would</i> within the condition: incorrect comprehension of past agent and false attribution of a tense-switch	Frequent colloquial <i>double-would</i> constructions in L ₁ with neglect of correct CII / false interpretation as tense-switch signal in L ₂ -C _{II} -condition due to L ₁ -specific flexion inexistent in L ₂
3	Incorrect and incoherent placement of $S \rightarrow V \rightarrow O$	Rigid $S \rightarrow V \rightarrow O_i \rightarrow O_d$ in L ₂ , opposed by non-rigid $S \rightarrow V \rightarrow V \rightarrow S / S \rightarrow O_d \rightarrow \bar{V} / V \rightarrow S \rightarrow O_i \rightarrow O_d / V \rightarrow S \rightarrow O_d \rightarrow O_i$
4	False application of subject and object pronouns	Major L ₁ -interference in the pronominal equivalents of <i>Sie - sie</i> in subjects and objects / misconceptions about gender-affiliations with neutral subjects and objects in L ₂ due to false L ₁ -transfer, misinterpretations and lack of comprehension of unallowed interlingual transfer
5	Gerund misconceptions, incorrect placement of progressive constructions	Misconception about <i>-ing</i> -constructions indicating tense-association instead of auxiliaries / lack in L ₂ -gerund comprehension and gerund-progressive-distinction with gerund as noun- replacement due to L ₁ -infinitive with article-placement / frequent appearance of random choices between simple and progressive constructions

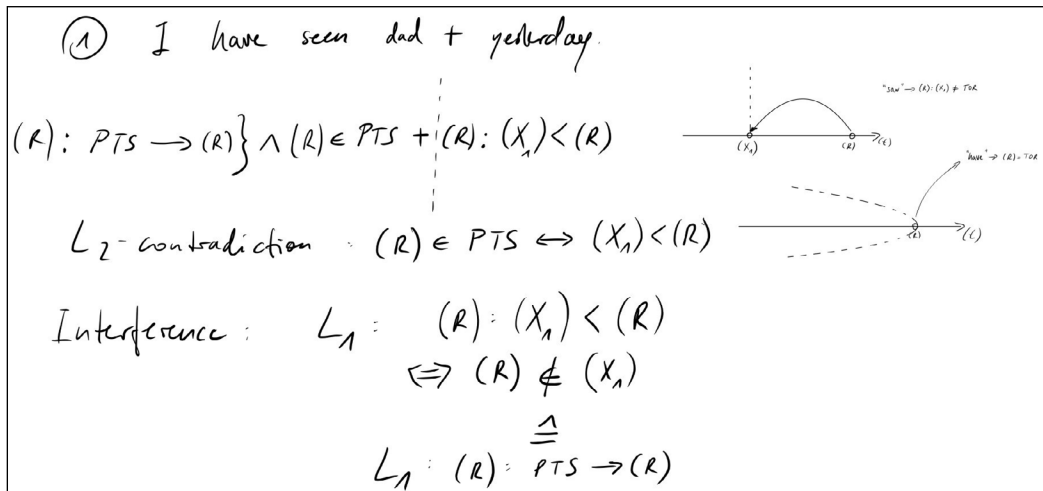


Fig. 2: PTS error

L₁ equivalent use of preterite and perfect leads to major syntax-error in L₂.

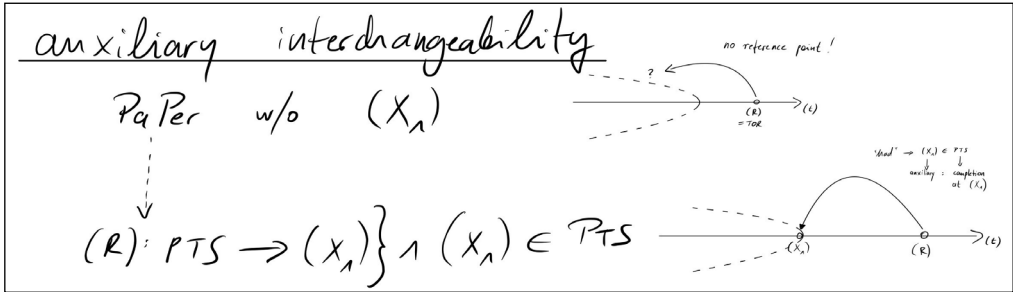


Fig. 3: Lacking reference point in a sole PaPer construction

L_1 neglect of tense-affiliation in auxiliaries leads to major syntax-error in L_2

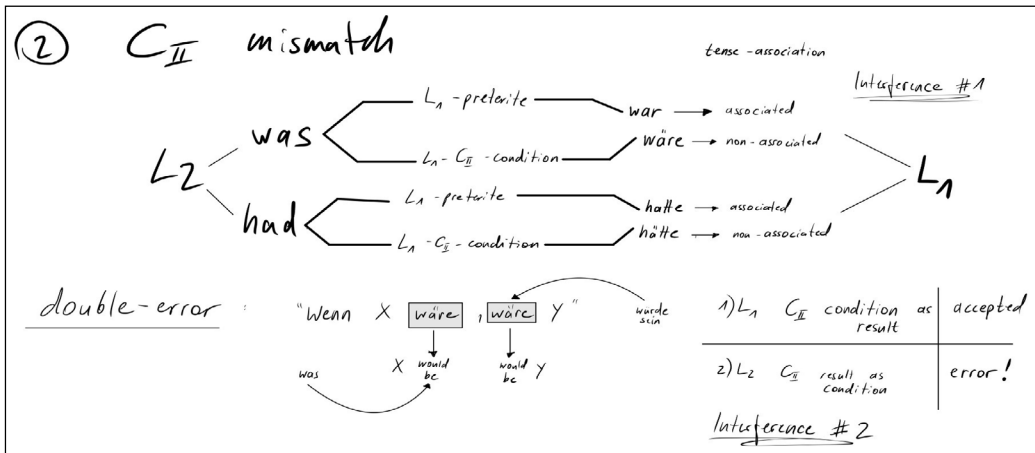


Fig. 4: C_{II} error scheme

widely accepted altering in L_1 constructions and additional misconception about L_2 condition (which lacks flexion) lead to major syntax-errors in L_2 .

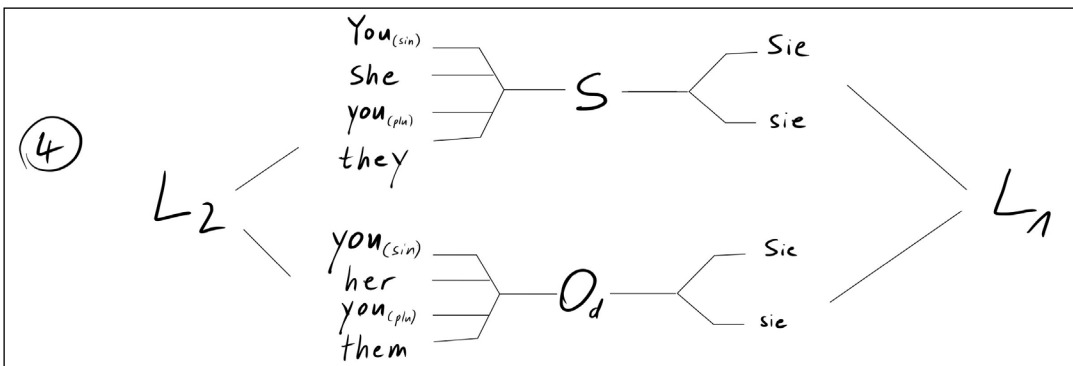


Fig. 5: S and O_d errors

Variety of pronouns in L_2 shows much greater distinction, thus L_1 re-translation is highly error-prone

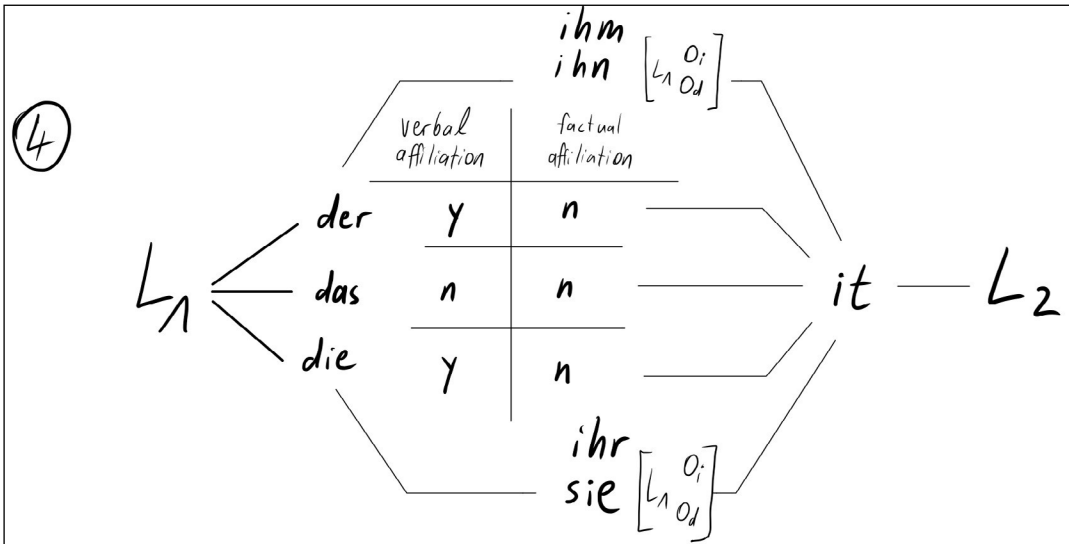


Fig. 6: Verbal vs. factual gender-affiliation

faulty affiliation of gender in L₂ to factually non-gendered S , O_i and O_d . Reflexive Pronouns not featured, but apply accordingly.

DISCUSSION

As in any scientific study, a number of limitations must be considered prior to the interpretation of the results. It is mostly the effect of differences among the investigated individuals that determines the extent to which morpho-syntactic interference occurs, thus it can differ greatly, depending on overall language proficiency, educational background and learning strategies (Gass, Selinker, 2008). Thus, generalization of difficulties is rather hard. Furthermore, as DeKeyser (2000) states, making an observation at a particular time has a limited amount of representation of the scope because language acquisition is evolving constantly. Even more so due to the increasing use of new technologies, I want to add at this point. To which extent new technologies could (or do) have a positive or negative impact on the investigated topic might be a future investigation topic of its own. Lastly, another recurrent hardship in investigations of morpho-syntactic interference is the fact that a ground isolation of L₁ contribution to L₂-syntax faultiness is especially hard to determine. The fact, that besides a highly certain L1 influence, there are a number of other factors to be considered - and once again, they are individually different - does always relativize the findings, because as in any qualitative research, individual contributing factors will most certainly remain uncovered and thus should be factored in accordingly when interpreting research results. This conclusion has also been mentioned within interference investigations in the past (Schmid, 2010). Nevertheless, throughout the relatively long period of investigation and the high number of lessons and instructional supervision, and the interventions therewith, the most common pitfalls for the observed subjects could be clearly unveiled. As each of them was meticulously examined and through tracking methods and interviews proved upon their origin to be found in L₁-interference, specific methods of targeting could be derived and later adopted into regular lectures. Quantitative assessment of enhancement rates is yet to be done, however, so far, precisely targeted interventions appear to have a promising effect.

Upon interpretation of the qualitative results, it is clearly comprehensible, how and why the structural differences in the features language pairs contribute to frequent syntax-errors in L_2 . Through acknowledgement of previous research results, my findings align with those of peer researchers that have determined the numerous effects of interlingual morpho-syntactic interference, especially in spotlight of the aforementioned features in the examined L_1 - L_2 combination in this work. Thus, the results of this research add to the foundation of so-far beliefs about function and dysfunction in language transfer.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of my qualitative assessment, it is evident, that interlingual morpho-syntactic interference played a significant role in the errors committed by the subjects. My findings align with past research, which has shown that interlingual interference is a common phenomenon in second language acquisition. This appears to be, because learners tend to stick to the structures and patterns that are familiar to them from their L_1 , leading to errors in L_2 , when its structures differ from those in L_1 . My investigation aimed to answer several questions, including the most common errors in the language pair under study, the origin of these errors, and the role of interlingual interference in their occurrence. The results clearly indicate that interlingual interference was indeed the source of the majority of the observed errors. Furthermore, I found that the particular presence of similar structures in both languages can lead to confusion in specific fields where structures differ, due to the high mapping-tendency that subjects show in general. In conclusion, findings indicate that interlingual morpho- syntactic interference can have both positive and negative effects on L_2 - acquisition. Additionally, my study highlights the importance of considering the pitfall that arises when some structures in two languages are identical, but others are not. Overall, this work supports the view that within the most error-prone structures, interlingual interference was a disadvantageous factor that was responsible for the high error-proneness. It appears to make a lot of sense to develop and adopt precise targeting methodology into interventional supervision.

ABBREVIATIONS

L_1	first language
L_2	second language
S	subject
O	object
V	verb
Oi	object (indirect)
Od	object (direct)
CII	second conditional
PTS	perfect time span
PaPer	perfect construction with past auxiliary
sin	singular
plu	plural

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