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The Two Sides of Transfer in the Light of Psychotypology

Abstract: The acquisition of foreign languages poses a considerable challenge for native speakers of non-Indo-European languages; consequently, the employment of multilingual learning strategies is imperative. The prerequisites for the utilisation of these strategies are language awareness, cross-linguistic influence (CLI) and psychotypology.

The results of a questionnaire administered to students at the University of Pécs, in the context of a broader scale survey involving 300 respondents, provide evidence that the majority of respondents perceive similarities between their foreign languages and almost two-thirds of them answered positively to the question whether these similarities helped them in learning new languages. However, it is crucial to recognise the so-called similarity paradox, which can result in negative transfer (interference). The present article will concentrate on responses, with the purpose of illustrating typical mistakes attributed to the influence of previously acquired languages.

Keywords: multilingual competence, language awareness, CLI (crosslinguistic influence), transfer, similarity paradox, interference, psychotypology

1. Introduction

For non-Indo-European native speakers, acquiring proficiency in the most commonly taught foreign languages poses a significant challenge, underscoring the importance of multilingual learning strategies. The prerequisites for these strategies are linguistic awareness, crosslinguistic influence, and psychotypology. Linguistic awareness constitutes the basis for the comparison of languages (JESSNER ET AL. 2006, 2022). Crosslinguistic influence (CLI) is a complex and bidirectional phenomenon. Its most significant components are typological distance, the acquisition of additional languages, and the influence of L3 on previously learned languages (RINGBOM 2007). Psychotypology is defined as the cognitive process through which language learners perceive and comprehend the distinctions and commonalities between languages. This individual perception does not always coincide with linguistic typology (ROTHMAN 2020). Recent research suggests that psychotypology may be one of the main factors determining L3 acquisition and use, especially in the early stages.

The present study is based on the findings of questionnaire-based research, the aim of which is to explore the psychotypological aspects of language

learning. The present study used questionnaires administered to German and English majors at the University of Pécs, in the context of a broader scale survey involving 300 respondents altogether, in order to gain insight into the language learning and communication strategies employed. The author hypothesises that students whose native language does not belong to the Indo-European language family perceive similarities between the related foreign languages they are learning and therefore use comparative strategies that allow them to capitalise on their previous language knowledge (transfer). In the present study, however, the author's focus is on language awareness and the revelation of the secret of the similarity paradox based on the evaluation of the questionnaires administered.

2.1. Typology versus psychotypology, crosslinguistic influence (CLI) and (positive) transfer

The contrastive theory posits the notion that the typological characteristics of languages exert a decisive influence on the processes of language acquisition and learning. However, the long-dominant behavioural theories, coupled with the limited promotion of language comparison and comparative language learning strategies, resulted in a paucity of research in this area. The fundamental premise of the contrastive hypothesis model of second language acquisition can be outlined as follows: "The acquisition of a second language is largely determined by the structure of an earlier acquired language, albeit not necessarily the L1. The structures of a second language that coincide with corresponding structures of a first language (or of any other languages known) are assimilated with great ease as a result of positive transfer. Conversely, contrasting structures pose significant challenges and have been observed to result in errors arising from negative transfer or interference." (KLEIN 1986: 25). The fundamental principles of contrastive analysis encompass transfer and interference, concepts derived from the domain of the psychology of learning. These principles pertain to the process of transferring prior knowledge to a novel learning context. According to the original interpretation, similarities between L1 and L2 structures facilitate the learning process, induce positive transfer, while differences are detrimental, and induce negative transfer. The seminal work of Selinker: *Rediscovering Interlanguage* (SELINKER 1992) introduced the concept of an "interlanguage" in the learner's mind, which encompasses languages other than the native language, as well as so-called developmental errors. This approach constitutes one of the fundamental tenets of error analysis (see CORDER 1981), as this "weak version" of contrastive analysis no longer attributes linguistic errors in foreign language learning solely to the native language. It has been established that linguistic distance, both systemic and perceived, functions as a significant explanatory variable in the acquisition of a third language (L3). This is evident in a variety of linguistic areas, including the lexicon, morphosyntax and phonology (KELLERMAN 1983).

It was posited that three principal factors interact in language learners' use of transfer: their knowledge of L1, their perception of the distance between L1 and L2, and their knowledge of L2. When considered within the framework of L3 acquisition, the connections perceived between the additional languages of multilinguals are indicative of their psychotypology. Ringbom (2007) observes that perceived similarity is conceptually congruent with genetic relatedness, and that the determination of the former is more challenging to ascertain based on objective linguistic criteria. He continues by explaining that the constant nature of language typology is attributable to its determination by specific linguistic elements. In contrast, psychotypology is susceptible to change because of a given learner's varying exposure, proficiency, and linguistic experience. Furthermore, typological distance is symmetrical, i.e., the difference between languages A and B would be the same regardless of whether the perspective is that of speakers of A or B. In the case of psychotypology, however, this relationship may be asymmetrical. De Angelis (2007) states that formal similarity may offer a more efficacious explanation for certain types of transfer, while perceived linguistic distance is a more effective predictor of multilinguals' reliance on one (or more) of their languages. In his Typological Primacy Model (ROTHMAN 2020), Rothman establishes a hierarchical structure that determines structural similarity. This model enables learners to determine which of the languages they have previously learned is structurally closer to L3.

The concept of crosslinguistic influence (CLI) was initially introduced by Sharwood-Smith and Kellerman in 1986. This seminal study marked a significant shift in the focus of researchers towards trilingualism and multilingualism. Within this framework, they explored the role of L1 and L2 in the acquisition or learning of L3, L4 and Ln. The principal components of CLI encompass typological distance, L2 status, language proficiency, the sequence of language acquisition, the acquisition of additional languages (L4, Ln), and the impact of L3 on L2 and L1. In the context of the present study, the role of learning related languages (as indicated by typological distance or similarity) is of particular importance. A number of studies have examined the role of knowledge of a related language (i.e. intercomprehension) when learners encounter a completely unfamiliar language. In a study by Gibson and Hufeisen (2003), subjects with a range of native languages and levels of knowledge of English and/or German were asked to translate a Swedish text with the assistance of a picture. This study demonstrated that English, and largely German, had proven to be advantageous first languages for the comprehension of Swedish. In contrast, Hungarian, Portuguese and Slavic languages had not been as beneficial in this regard. The relevant literature corroborates the prevailing consensus that, in the process of interpreting unfamiliar texts, learners seek out and utilise similarities between languages wherever possible, employing positive transfer and comparative strategies. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that a language that is related to the

target language provides significantly more concrete assistance than an unrelated language, even in cases where the latter is the mother tongue of the students.

2.2. The similarity paradox and interference

As previously outlined, psychotypology does not necessarily coincide with typology. Consequently, for language learners, similarities between languages can be a hindrance or a distracting factor, as Juhász (1970) aptly described with the concept of homogeneous inhibition. It is evident that multitudes of factors influence the process of language acquisition. Among these factors, attitude and motivation play a pivotal role. It is evident that learning difficulty and learnability are also psychological issues closely related to the learner's language learning and transfer behaviour. C. James (1980) posits that there exists a correlation between language distance and learning difficulty in the context of student perception. However, the so-called "similarity paradox" (see homogene Hemmung by JUHÁSZ, 1970) emerges in human learning, indicating that structures and phenomena that are both too distant and too similar may prove challenging. The similarity paradox, as discussed in research by Singleton (1999), suggests that while linguistic similarity typically facilitates L2 acquisition by creating positive transfer from the L1, it can also lead to negative interference where learners struggle to differentiate between languages, especially if their early languages are very close. This paradox underscores the multifaceted nature of linguistic similarity, which can be advantageous in certain domains of learning but may also present challenges in other areas, thereby impeding the development of a distinct mental lexicon for each language. In the event of two languages exhibiting a high degree of similarity, it is possible for a learner to transfer knowledge and rules from their L1 to their L2. This process can facilitate and expedite the initial stages of learning. This phenomenon is particularly evident in vocabulary and syntax. The paradox arises when, due to this similarity, learners confuse the two languages, leading to errors in both production and comprehension. This phenomenon is referred to as "interference" or "negative transfer".

2.3. Pluralistic, comparative teaching methods

In the following section, the author will introduce a range of pluralistic language teaching methods. The objective of these methods is twofold: firstly, to raise language awareness and, secondly, to promote intercomprehension.

Pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures (language awareness, integrated didactic approaches, intercomprehension, intercultural approaches) are predicated on activities that shape the specific concept of multilingual and multicultural competence promoted by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). With the exception of Finnish, Estonian, Hungarian, and Maltese, all official languages in the European Union belong to the Indo-European language family and therefore share common structures and

vocabulary. It is evident that receptive multilingualism, otherwise known as intercomprehension, constitutes an effective language learning method. This is founded on an individual's ability to draw on their prior knowledge of another language, especially one belonging to the same language family. Multilingual teaching methods, and in particular the role of related foreign languages and thus transfer strategies, are of particular importance for learners whose mother tongue does not belong to the Indo-European language family. While learners in Germanic or Neo-Latin language regions encounter similarities early on due to their common roots, as previously mentioned, native speakers of Finnish or Hungarian often find no direct parallels with widely used and learned second languages such as English or German.

The author highlights the studies of Ringbom (2007) and Hammarberg (2014) because of the linguistic affinity between Finnish and Hungarian, where L1 was Finnish, L2 was Swedish, and L3 was English. This linguistic paradigm can be compared to the author's research, where L1 was Hungarian, L2 was German, and L3 was English. In the Hungarian context, a number of projects have been undertaken that are related to the present study. The primary objective of the research endeavour of T. Balla (2013) was to scrutinise the third language learning processes of Hungarian high school students who are learning English as a second language (L2) and German as a third language (L3). The objective was to ascertain the extent to which Hungarian students depend on their L1 and L2 linguistic competencies, and the learning strategies they employed in their pursuit of L2 proficiency. Jessner, Horváth (2023) implemented a multilingual, language awareness-raising project in Hungary, with L1 Hungarian, L2 English and L3 German. Andrea Burai (2024) applied a methodology that encouraged students to make active comparisons between English (L2) and French (L3), thus enabling them to identify both the similarities and the differences between the two languages.

3. Some aspects of the results of evaluation of the questionnaires

In 2022 and 2023, 77 Hungarian students enrolled in English and German at the University of Pécs completed the CLI (crosslinguistic influence) questionnaires (Figure 1). The present study aims to address the issues of language awareness, the similarity paradox and the other side of transfer, interference, by evaluating the responses to the pertinent questions of the questionnaire. As stated in the introduction, the author administered a total of 300 questionnaires, encompassing secondary school students from various educational institutions in Pécs, in addition to the university students who were the subject of the present study. The results of the other questionnaires will be analysed in the context of further research and studies.

3.1. Methodological considerations

The decision to employ questionnaires as the means of data collection was supported by the prevailing academic consensus that such methods are widely

utilised in educational and linguistic research (FÓRIS 2008; DÖRNYEI, TAGUCHI 2009; CODÓ 2008; KONTRA 2011; COHEN, MANION, MORRISON 2016). This approach was deemed particularly suitable for the collection of psychotypology-related data. According to Dörnyei, Taguchi (2009:14):

« *One of the most common methods of data collection in second language (L2) research is to use questionnaires of various kinds. The popularity of questionnaires is due to the fact that they are easy to construct, extremely versatile, and uniquely capable of gathering a large amount of information quickly in a form that is readily processable. Indeed, the frequency of use of self-completed questionnaires as a research tool in the L2 field is surpassed only by that of language proficiency tests* ».

In essence, the utilisation of questionnaires has been demonstrated to yield factual, behavioural, emotional and attitudinal data (DÖRNYEI, TAGUCHI 2009; KONTRA 2011). In the field of research, two distinct types are distinguished: the first type consists of closed (structured) questions, while the second type comprises open (unstructured) questions (FÓRIS 2008: 125–126; COHEN, MANION, MORRISON 2016: 317–346). The questionnaire administered by the author (Figure 1) employs a combination of both types of questions and branching questions, thereby ensuring the collection of a broad spectrum of objective and subjective data. The closed questions pertain to data regarding the nature and quantity of languages learned or acquired, whereas the open-ended questions are particularly instrumental in elucidating language awareness and in conducting a comprehensive analysis of the respondents' receptive and productive strategies.

Figure 1: Part II of CLI questionnaire

Part II.

Questions about the relationships/similarities between the languages you have learned:

1. *How aware are or were you of the connections/similarities between the languages you have learned?*
2. *Do/did the similarities make it easier for you to learn the language you learned later?*

If yes, why, and in what way?

If not, why not?

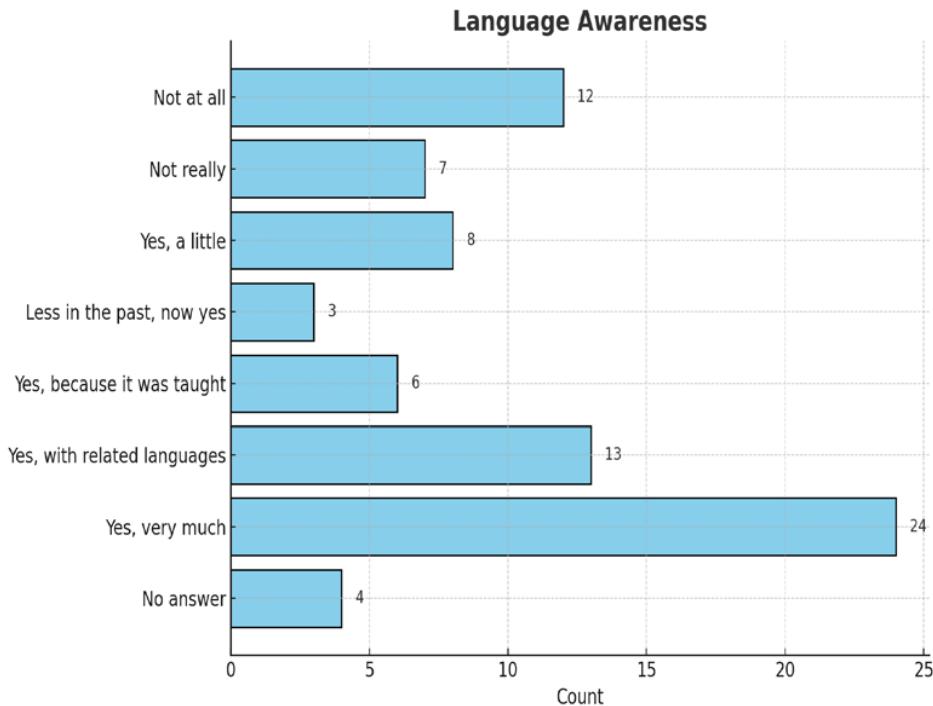
Can you describe some typical mistakes that a previously learned language may have caused in the language learned later (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation)?

The present study employs a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the responses to the first (awareness) and second (the role of similarity in learning a new language) questions in Part II of the questionnaire. The study focuses especially on the similarity paradox, confusion, interference and avoidance.

3.2. The question of language awareness

With regard to the issue of language awareness, a key finding from the responses was that this is not a permanent competence or skill. The responses given were not limited to a binary 'yes' or 'no' choice, but instead exhibited a range of transitions (*yes with related languages, less in the past, now yes*). This indicates that awareness undergoes changes during the process of language acquisition and that these changes can vary among individuals. The responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale, with the exception of the "no response" category. The mean awareness score of the sample is close to the upper third of the scale (mean 4.39), indicating that the majority of students perceive similarities between English and German. The high standard deviation (2.49) indicates significant variation in the assessments made by the group members. Some individuals appear to be fully aware of these similarities, while others appear to be entirely unaware of them. The results are illustrated in Table 1, presented as a bar chart. This finding is consistent with psycholinguistic research that suggests that language learners' linguistic awareness plays a significant role in language input processing and interlingual transfer (ODLIN 1989; RINGBOM 2007). The recognition of related languages is of particular importance, as their structural and lexical similarities facilitate positive transfer (intercomprehension), as evidenced by the "*yes for related languages*" response. The "*less so in the past, but now yes*" responses are indicative of the development of metalinguistic awareness, which develops in parallel with learning experiences. This finding serves to corroborate the hypothesis proposed by the dynamic language learning model, which asserts that language awareness is not a static but a developing ability (ELLIS, 2005). The "*yes, because I was taught*" responses highlight the pivotal role of education in the development of language awareness. The employment of explicit language comparisons, contrastive linguistic approaches, and metalinguistic reflections has been demonstrated to facilitate the development of learners' capacity to discern relationships between languages. The "*yes, a little*" responses and the medium awareness categories suggest that language awareness develops gradually and along individual differences. This supports the claim made by psycholinguistic models according to which language awareness is influenced not only by cognitive but also by affective and educational factors (SCHMIDT 1990).

Table 1: Language awareness



3.3. The role of similarities between languages (transfer)

The objective of the inquiry was to ascertain the extent to which prior foreign language acquisition (L2) facilitated university students majoring in English and German in their learning of additional foreign languages (L3, Ln). The data indicates that almost two-thirds of respondents (67.5% combining "yes" and "yes, very much") experienced a clearly positive transfer effect. This phenomenon aligns with the theory of positive transfer, which claims that structural and lexical similarities between languages can facilitate the acquisition of a new language. The "yes for related languages" response lends support to the finding that typology and psychotypology can indeed overlap (RINGBOM 2007), and thus the typological proximity between Germanic languages – English and German – is particularly conducive to lexical recognition and the transfer of certain syntactic patterns.

Responses indicating a negative or weak effect refer to the phenomenon of negative transfer, whereby patterns established in L2 are incorrectly transferred to L3, causing interference. In the subsequent section, this alternative aspect of transfer will be examined, drawing upon the responses given. These responses elucidate the reasons why perceived similarities between languages were regarded as a hindrance, leading to confusion and interference.

3.3.1. Why do similarities between languages not help in learning a new language? (similarity paradox)

36,4 % of the 77 English and German majors reported experiencing negative transfer from L2 (English/German) to L3 (English/German). Conversely, the remaining respondents, constituting nearly two-thirds of the sample, indicated that L2 had facilitated L3 learning, as illustrated in the above data. Table 2 reveals that the most prevalent reason underlying negative-transfer pertained to word confusion (28.6%), followed by the assertion that a specific Ln belongs to a different (unrelated) language family (21.4%) and that learning German is more challenging after English (21.4%). These results underscore the central role of psychotypological perception in crosslinguistic influence. The learner's judgments of similarity and typological distance have been shown to significantly influence transfer patterns.

Table 2: Why did the similarities between languages not help?

Category	Percentage of “negative transfer group” (n=28)	Psychotypological interpretation
Not much help	10,7%	Learners perceived similarity as minimal, reducing expectations of transfer benefits.
Word confusion	28,6%	Lexical interference due to overlapping forms or false friends; high salience of similarity-triggered errors.
Different language family	21,4%	Perceived typological distance outweighed actual Germanic link, limiting transfer and possibly also due to the L1 Hungarian (non-Indo-European language)

Category	Percentage of “negative transfer group” (n=28)	Psychotypological interpretation
Mistakes in German due to English or the other way round	17.9%	Strong L2 dominance caused cross-linguistic intrusion into L3 production.
German was harder after English	21.4%	Sequential learning effect: entrenched L2 patterns hindered adaptation to L3 structures.

3.3.2. What typical mistakes can be attributed to previously learned languages?

Across the entire sample (N = 77), students reported a variety of cross-linguistic errors attributable to previously acquired languages. The most prevalent errors were those pertaining to pronunciation (14.3%), German word order in English (10.4%), and false friends (9.1%). Table 3 presents a selection of illustrative examples provided by the students. In essence, the crosslinguistic errors documented among Hungarian university students manifest conventional patterns of language transfer, exhibiting phonological, lexical and syntactic influences from previously acquired languages. Psychotypological proximity, Psychotypological proximity—such as structural similarities between German and English or lexical overlap between Spanish and English, has been identified as a pivotal factor in the occurrence of these errors. The data suggest that learners are particularly vulnerable to interference in areas where languages share surface similarities but differ in deeper grammatical or semantic structures (e.g. false friends).

Table 3: What typical mistakes did you make because of previously learned languages?

Error Type	Percentage	Example	Psychotypological interpretation
German word order in English	10.39%	<i>I said 'Yesterday have I seen him.'</i>	Structural transfer from typologically close German.
Lexical adaptation / hybrid borrowing (e.g. English word with Spanish ending)	7.79%	<i>I used 'computadora' instead of 'ordenador' because of English 'computer'.</i>	Lexical (hybrid) borrowing influenced by language proximity.
Pronunciation errors	14.29%	<i>I pronounced 'v' as 'w' in English because of German.</i>	Phonological interference from previously learned language.
Grammatical gender	5.19%	<i>I said 'la mano' in Italian because of Spanish gender rules.</i>	Morphosyntactic transfer due to gender system overlap.
Spelling	5.19%	<i>I wrote 'adress' instead of 'address' due to Hungarian spelling habits.</i>	Orthographic habits influenced by L or L2.
False friends	9.09%	<i>I thought 'actual' in English meant 'current' like in Spanish.</i>	Semantic confusion due to similar forms across languages (false friends).

Error Type	Percentage	Example	Psychotypological interpretation
Lack of inflection in English vs. Italian	2.6%	<i>I forgot to conjugate verbs properly in Italian.</i>	Morphological simplification from English to Italian.
Different alphabet (Russian–Croatian)	1.3%	<i>I confused Cyrillic letters with Latin ones.</i>	Script interference due to different writing systems.

4. Conclusions

The responses given by the students in the survey regarding their awareness of language provide a basis for optimism, as the majority of students perceive similarities between English and German (as well as other languages they have studied). However, the high standard deviation (2.49) indicates that there are significant differences within the group and that there is still potential for enhancement with regard to awareness. The development of a methodological guide for practising language teachers and the incorporation of a "plurilingual language teaching module" into the training programme for prospective language teachers would be valuable. This would encompass language awareness raising and the assimilation of both general and comparative language learning strategies. It is possible to build on the similarities between L2 and L3 (Ln) (JESSNER, HORVÁTH 2023), while at the same time specifically addressing typical sources of interference. This could greatly facilitate the acquisition of a subsequent language, especially in the case of native Hungarian language learners, who could thus be brought closer to the most frequently taught foreign languages. This would make multilingual competence and a plurilingual repertoire more accessible to everyone. The findings of this study are very encouraging, as they demonstrate that almost two-thirds of the students evaluated the similarities between languages positively when learning L3 (Ln) and applied language learning and communication strategies related to positive transfer, such as lexical transfer (borrowing).

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