

# PROBLEMS IN THE LEARNING OF A SECOND LANGUAGE

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This paper deals with the problems involved in the learning of a second language, with special reference to Tswana speakers leaning English. The term 'target language', in this context, is more appropriate than 'second language' because English is not a second language for most Tswana speakers; the second language for most Tswana speakers, as is the case for most black South Africans, is either another black language or Afrikaans.

Selinker (1972) distinguishes five main causes of problems related to the learning of a target language (TL in future):

1. Native Language Transfer (or Interlingual Transfer);
2. False Analogy (also known as Intralingual Transfer) or False Generalization);
3. Strategies of Learning;
4. Strategies of Communication;
5. Transfer of Training, i.e. teaching procedures.

## 1. NATIVE LANGUAGE TRANSFER (NL TRANSFER)

Some linguists have placed great emphasis on NL Transfer in the learning of TL (Sajavaara 1981. Esser 1980 and Filipovic 1971, and in Africa, Lyle 1983 and Bokamba 1983); others regard it as a negligible factor (Dulay and Burt 1974, Ravem 1974 and Morrissey 1983).

Kroes (1979 : 181 - 184), in the context of blacks learning Afrikaans, states that teacher trainees begin training without sufficient command of TL. He blames the schools, especially the English medium schools, for neglecting contrastive analysis and other related fields in applied linguistics, viz. error analysis, cultural differences and motivation and attitudes.

Lado (1961) and Fries (1945), the early protagonists of NL Transfer, claim that the main obstacle to effective TL learning is the negative transfer of NL patterns to TL. Similarities, on the other hand, led to positive transfer.

Rivers believes that if the differences between NL and TL are not explicitly taught, the 'teacher may not have occasion to discover that the distinction has never occurred to the student, who may have accepted the negative transfer as positive transfer' (Rivers: 1964). According to Rivers, the learner, if not told otherwise, takes it for granted that the patterns of TL are no different from NL, and thereby transfers NL patterns across to TL.

Corder questions the significance of NL Transfer. He proposes that interferences 'are best not regarded as the persistence of old habits, but rather as signs that the learner is investigating the systems of the new language' (1981b:12). Corder's hypothesis of Transitional Competence (ibid: 10) echoes the sibling hypotheses of Selinker's Interlanguage (1972) and Nemser's Approximate System (1971).

The proponents of Interlanguage and its related hypotheses reject the claim that the correctness or incorrectness of utterances in TL depends largely on the structure of NL. Corder (1981a: 33) gives the following example of how factors other than NL Transfer can affect the learning of L2:

1A QUESTION: **Whose car are we going in?**

2A ANSWER: **\*John if he gets here on time.** (An asterisk indicates a deviant form.)

The NL Transfer protagonist would interpret the error in the following way (Tswana and English are used to illustrate all the examples):

NL does not have the English equivalent of the Possessive **John's**; hence the form **\*John**. In Tswana **John's car** would be **Mmotorokara (koloi) wa (ya) ga John, The car of John**. The learner is thinking **The car of John** and therefore writes the form **John**.

Corder does not believe that NL Transfer is an adequate explanation for 2A (1981a:33). The problem is not solved when the differences between NL and TL are discovered. Therefore, replacing **\*John** with the form **John's** is not enough. One would also have to consider other possible causes like False Analogy. For example, some Possessive forms in English do reflect the Tswana Possessive pattern, e.g.

3A **The tower of London**

4A **The bells of St. Peter's**

If a Tswana speaker's answer to 1A was 2A, a more useful procedure for analysis would be to consider, not only NL Transfer, but False Analogy as well. A knowledge of NL would enable the analyst to distinguish between NL Transfer and False Analogy. An error analysis based on NL Transfer alone could lead to misinterpretation.

## 2. FALSE ANALOGY (OR INTRALINGUAL TRANSFER)

Analogy is one of the principal processes in language learning and functions by means of generalizations based on previous knowledge. Here is an example:

From:

5A **He rounded the Cape, we get**

6A **He founded the Cape.**

False Analogy refers to false generalizations based on the similarities between present and previous knowledge.

For example, from 5A we get:

7A **\*He founded the sweet under the table.**

To confuse matters even more, **founded** is a legitimate item in the following:

8A **The institute was founded in 1983.**

Most examples of False Analogy contain either a grammatical or a lexical confusion.

Consider the following two pairs of utterances:

- 9A He peeled the orange.
- 10A \*He feeled the rough stone.

10A is a false grammatical generalization.

- 11A He broke into the tin.
- 12A \*He broke into the wild horse.

12A is a false lexical generalization.

Sometimes it is difficult to decide which elements are present in False Analogy. For instance, the term **broke** can also refer to being without money.

Consider the following error:

- 13A \*It is broke.

The error in 13A could be due to a confusion with the verb **broke** as in:

- 14A He broke the stick.

or as in:

- 15A He is broke.

It seems more likely that the cause of error would be False Analogy with 14A rather than with 15A, because the verb form in 14A would be more familiar to the learner than the adjective in 15A.

In TL learning it is often not easy to distinguish between NL Transfer and False Analogy.

For example:

- 16A \*He saw a garage with an opened door.

16A could be either the result of a False Analogy based on an utterance such as:

- 17A He saw a garage with a locked door.

or the result of NL Transfer, e.g.

18A O bonye karatshe ka fensetere e e butsweng

where **butsweng** is the Passive Perfect Tense form of **go bula**, to open. **Butswe** is equivalent to the English Perfect Tense form **opened**. It is also possible that in 16A NL Transfer and False Analogy work together.

### 3. STRATEGIES OF LEARNING

Tutored NL and TL learners learn rules at some stage in their learning. These rules refer to the formal properties of language and not to how languages are learnt. The processes involved in language learning continue to elude research. The terms 'Built-in syllabus' (Corder 1981b:1), 'Language Acquisition Device' (Chomsky 1965) and 'Latent Psychological Structure' (Selinker 1972) refer to an entity which is innate and impervious to definition.

Most learning strategies are unconscious (Corder 1981b:6; see also Kirby 1984:67). There are nevertheless certain learning strategies which may enter consciousness and be partially observed. One of these is the avoidance by the learner of Negative Transfer. The problem arises when he becomes too careful and develops a negative attitude towards Positive Transfer (Richards 1970/71). He takes care not to transfer NL patterns to TL. He becomes conscious of rules. He thinks about the language. The behaviourists would argue that he should do less thinking about the language and get on with using it. This argument is sterile. The solution is not to reject cognitive approaches but rather to learn more about and more of the TL.

### 4. STRATEGIES OF COMMUNICATION

When learning TL, there always exists a tension between what the learner wants to say and how he is expected to say it. Learners of TL soon discover that correct grammar is not needed to communicate effectively. The learner endeavours to reduce and simplify the TL forms (see Widdowson 1979 and Schumann 1982). Overgeneralizations often result in fossilized forms which in turn lead to an optimal point in the learning of TL.

Unfortunately, the errors of TL learner are not often tolerated to the same degree as those of a foreign lan-

guage learner. The TL learner is expected to achieve an acceptable standard in both grammar and lexis, as well as in accuracy and fluency. Selig Johansson comments:

An important problem is whether a beginner who is used to the primary goal of communication can readjust to the higher goal of conformity. There might be a certain danger in leaving the goal of conformity out of sight at the beginning stage. (1973)

Johansson believes that TL learners regard 'conformity' as the 'higher' goal. If Johansson means that the TL speaker takes communication for granted, this would not be a correct judgment, because there are many TL speakers who struggle continually with 'communication'. It is possible that the language teacher becomes so occupied with accuracy that he ignores the relative value of communication. As long as the higher goal is conformity, learners of TL will have to readjust their priorities to fit in with a world where the medium is more important than the message.

## 5. THE TRANSFER OF TRAINING

Prospective Tswana-speaking teachers of English have often inherited erroneous patterns from their secondary education and perhaps, in some cases, even from their tertiary education. The system is often not queried. The argument put forward here is that the teacher may also be a cause of error. If the learner is the 'internal' source of error, the teacher may be described as the 'external' source. The learner is by definition someone who makes errors (Morrissey 1983, Corder 1981:1), while a teacher is by definition someone who imparts knowledge. If a learner makes an error he is not regarded as a bad learner, nor is he, in most circumstances, discouraged from learning. The term 'bad' when applied to a teacher implies that he is inadequate and should not be teaching.

Now, False Analogy and NL Transfer should not be put on the same level as the Transfer of Training. For example, Transfer of Training does not describe a psycholinguistic operation but a didactic encounter. False analogy and NL transfer on the one hand, and Transfer of Training on the other, produce error on different levels. The latter is imposed from outside, whereas the former two originate from within the learner. Nevertheless, psycholinguistic processes and teaching proce-

dures are intertwined. This does not mean that learning and teaching are not distinct activities, but rather that the former is bathed in the matrix of the latter, where an adult who knows tries to impart knowledge to a non-adult who does not know.

With these qualifications in mind, it can be appreciated how False Analogy or NL Transfer as a 'direct' or 'internal' cause of error, may, in turn, have the Transfer of Training as its 'indirect' or 'external' cause. The corollary to this hypothesis would be that False Analogy and NL Transfer might not occur in some situations where Transfer of Training is inoperative.

So, in a sense, False Analogy or NL transfer, when initiated by the teacher, becomes an effect and not a cause, for without the interference of the teacher, the former two processes might not occur.

Here is an example of how Transfer of Training on the one hand, and False Analogy and/or NL Transfer on the other, work together to produce error. The following is a paragraph taken from an essay of a pupil in Mmabatho. (The items in brackets are the teacher's corrections.)

When I am waking up, I am feeling happy, I think of school I think of I am going to Welkom after school. I am thinking what are we going to write at school, what I am going to eat in the morning (?), what clothes I am (am I) going to wear and shoes (?).

According to the teacher, the pupil intended to use direct speech; that is why teacher added the question marks. If the teacher's interpretation is correct, she should firstly have corrected the sequence SP (Subject Predicator) to P(S), i.e. **what I am going to eat to what am I going to eat?**, and secondly, added the relevant quotation marks. It seems more likely that the pupil omitted the inverted commas of direct speech because he had no intention of using the interrogative. His error in the one sentence was probably to write 'I am thinking what are we going to write at school' instead of 'I am thinking (about) what we are going to write at school.' The omission of the preposition about could have misled the teacher. All the pupil's other sentences are in the sequence of reported speech. The teacher has isolated one utterance and based her interpretation of the whole passage on it. This example

shows the care that must be taken in the analysis of erroneous utterances.

In this paper I have attempted to situate the subject of NL Transfer within the wider field of second language learning problems. In a future paper, I shall elaborate on the role of NL Transfer in Tswana speakers' English, using the Noun as the focus of enquiry.

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