

Chapter 1

Bilinguals' Semantic Transfer Across Languages

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ABSTRACT

The present research study investigates the influence of first language transfer through semantically ill-formed sentences when speakers of multiple languages process their linguistic knowledge across different languages. The focus is on cases, where a polysemous word or an idiomatic expression in the first language is expressed by a semantically ill-formed lexicon or phrase transfer in the target language. The data, collected from multilingual participants of various first language origins, are explored to find out how and in what contexts cross-language transfer occurs among advanced language learners. Effective strategies to overcome the challenges of the negative cross-language transfer due to incorrect meaning interpretations are explored and discussed. The findings of this research study suggest that the language in which multilinguals mastered the ideas or concepts for the first time determines the way they unconsciously code-switch and borrow concepts and ideas through cross-language transfer during the meaning-making process.

INTRODUCTION

Language shapes the way we think and determines what we can think about. – Benjamin Lee Whorf

Bilinguals experience different stages of linguistic developments during their language acquisition process. The developmental stages and what interferences bilinguals experience during this process provide crucial clues to educators for effectively and strategically adjusting their teaching strategies to accommodate the unique needs of bilingual learners (Tsai, 2015). These developmental stages are closely related to their background knowledge regarding both environmental and motivational factors. Since these variables provide the opportunity to compare and contrast language learners on the basis of their linguistic aptitude, the focus is on the background knowledge of the language learners within the

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8985-4.ch001

context of this particular study. Comparing the linguistic backgrounds of language learners provides the opportunity to be able to examine how semantic transfer takes place in the language learner's mind (Matsumoto, 2009).

The process that takes place in the language learner's mind when they attempt to translate a phrase that doesn't exist in the target language can point out the challenges bilinguals could experience regardless of their proficiency level in the target language. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to specifically investigate how cross-language semantic transfer takes place through cognitive processing. For this purpose, this research study focuses on detecting semantically ill-formed linguistic structures that derive their source from bilinguals' primary languages. It is therefore important to answer the following research questions to explore the process stages of bilinguals' cross-language transfer:

- What sort of linguistic strategies do bilinguals apply when they attempt to translate a phrase that does not exist in the target language?
- What kind of challenges do bilinguals experience when they need to transfer phrases from their first language into the target language?
- What strategies do bilinguals use when they experience cross-language semantic difficulties?
- Are there any special occasions that cause difficulty when bilinguals attempt to transfer semantically well-constructed sentences into the target language?

Given a richer understanding of the first language interference, bilingual speakers tend to experience cross-language transfer regardless of their English proficiency levels (Chung et al., 2019; Pham et al., 2018). Equally important, the question of why and under what circumstances bilinguals make meaning across languages within the same communication context is worthwhile to investigate. First, the different stages of acquiring the first versus the second language will be discussed to internalize whether learning languages at certain ages and phases could be of help in explaining the cognitive development of language learners. Second, the use of both polysemous vocabulary and idiomatic expressions will be considered by means of variables that reflect bilinguals' cognitive processing across languages. The common use of structural and grammatical linguistic transfers will be explored in order to investigate how cross-language transfer occurs when bilinguals fail to find the meaning interpretation during the same communication context across languages.

CRITICAL AGE HYPOTHESIS

The Critical Age Hypothesis refers to a biological period in which a language can be fully acquired (DeKeyser, 2018). During this period, language can be learned relatively easily with the higher possibility of achieving native-like fluency. This hypothesis derives its roots from the nativist theory, which suggests the fact that a certain stimulus has to be activated for learners to develop any normal social behavior (Piper, 1998). According to this theory, the language acquisition process is an innate and genetic capacity that provides a systematic and internalized perception of languages until reaching a certain biological age period (Ellis, 1986; Birdsong, 2017). This is even true for the animal kingdom for certain species. For instance, white-crowned sparrows can only learn their bird songs, if they are exposed to these songs during a critical biological period (Marler, 1970).

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