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1 *Introduction*

When people hear a speaker with a "foreign accent," they often try to guess the speaker's background. Sometimes racial features and sometimes a style of clothing will help listeners guess correctly, but often the only reliable clue seems to be how the individual talks. In such cases, questions put to the speaker such as "Are you German?" or "Are you Spanish?" suggest an intuition about the nature of language, an awareness, however unconscious, that the native language of a speaker can somehow cause the individual to sound "foreign" in speaking another language.

The detection of foreign accents is just one example of the awareness that people may often have of *cross-linguistic influence*, which is also known as *language transfer*.[1] That awareness is also evident from time to time in opinions that people have about foreign language study. Many believe that the study of one language (e.g., Latin) will make easier the study of a closely related language (e.g., French). Similarly, people often believe that some languages are "easy" in comparison with others. For example, many English-speaking university students see European languages such as French as less difficult than Oriental languages such as Chinese. Since the similarities between English and French seem to be relatively great, French is often considered "easy."

An awareness of language transfer is also evident in the mimicking of foreigners. While the representation of foreigners in ethnic jokes is often crude in more ways than one, stereotypes of the way foreigners talk are sometimes highly developed among actors. The following passage comes from a manual to train English-speaking actors in the use of different foreign accents, in this case a Russian one:

> Oh! I very good fellow! why? because I Cossack. I very big Cossack. Yah! I captain of Royal Cossack Guard in Moscow – in old country. Oh! I got fifty – hundred – five hundred Cossack they was under me. I be big mans. And womens, they love me lots. Nastia Alexanderovna – she big ballet dancer in Czar ballet – Countess Irina Balushkovna, she love me. All womens they love

1 A more extended definition and also a justification of the term *transfer* appear in Chapter 3 (Section 3.1).

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me. And men? Ach! they be 'fraid from me. They hating me. Why? because I big Cossack. I ride big horse. Drink lots vodka. Oh! I very big mans. (Herman and Herman 1943:340)

The manual provides a pronunciation guide for this passage so that actors can make their phonetic mimicry seem plausible, but a number of grammatical features in the passage also seem to be "typically Russian," such as the absence of an article and a copula in *I very good fellow*. Another passage in the same manual provides a very different linguistic – and ethnic – stereotype. While the Irishwoman's speech in the following passage might be that of a monolingual speaker of English, it is similar to stereotypical portrayals of Irish-English bilinguals by modern Irish playwrights:

And what business is it of yours that I be awake or no? Be what right do you come snooping after me, following me like a black shadow. Are youse never going to leave me alone? Yous'd be after doing better minding your own business and letting me for to mind mine. For I have an ache in me long-suffering heart and lashin's of pain cutting through me brain like a dull knife. And me eyes is looking at a world that's not of your living. For it's a revelation I'm after having – a view into the banshee world of devils and spirits and the dear departed dead now rotting their whitened bones under the cold, black sod. Ah! sure, now, and it's the likes of you and your friends that call themselves sane, that disbelieves in what I'm after seeing and knowing. (Herman and Herman 1943:100)

Analogous to the Russian passage, some of the grammatical features in the Irishwoman's speech appear to be stereotypically Irish: for example, the syntactic pattern in *what I'm after seeing and knowing*, which in standard English would be *what I have seen and known*. While these portrayals of accents may seem exaggerated, they do typify the use of special linguistic structures to characterize the speech of bilinguals.[2]

The distinctiveness of foreign accents often seems understandable in light of cross-linguistic comparisons. For example, Russian does not have present tense copula forms such as *am* or articles such as *a*, and so omissions of the copula and indefinite article in *I very good fellow* may seem to be clearly due to a difference in the grammatical systems of Russian and English. The comparison of such differences, which is known technically as **contrastive analysis**, has long been a part of second language pedagogy, and in the twentieth century contrastive analyses have become more and more detailed.[3] Since such cross-linguistic comparisons constitute an indispensable basis for the study of transfer, the

2 The Irishwoman's speech is a more accurate characterization than what is often found in so-called Stage Irish (cf. Bliss 1978; Sullivan 1980).
3 Technical terms that appear in the glossary (see page 165) are indicated by boldface at their first occurrence.

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discussion of second language research in this book will frequently include contrastive observations.

In light of such everyday abilities as the recognition and mimicry of foreign accents and in light of common beliefs about cross-linguistic similarities and differences, there appears to be a widespread assumption that language transfer is an important characteristic of second language acquisition. It might seem obvious that many characteristics of a learner's linguistic behavior will closely approximate or greatly differ from the actual characteristics of the second language because of similarities and differences predicted by a contrastive analysis. In fact, however, the role of language transfer in second language acquisition has long been a very controversial topic.[4] Some scholars have indeed argued for the importance of transfer; some have gone so far as to consider it the paramount fact of second language acquisition. Yet other scholars have been very skeptical about the importance of transfer. Among linguists and language teachers today, there is still no consensus about the nature or the significance of cross-linguistic influences.

Much of the discussion in the next chapter will review the reasons for the skepticism about transfer, but a brief consideration of one of the most important reasons is appropriate now. As already noted, characteristics of the Russian language seem to explain sentences such as *I very good fellow*. A contrastive explanation, however, seems less than compelling in light of other facts. For example, speakers of Spanish, which, like English, has copula verb forms, frequently omit forms such as *am* and *is* (cf. Section 2.2). Moreover, such errors are found not only among Russian and Spanish speakers but also among speakers of other languages – and also among children learning English as their native language. Thus, while a contrastive analysis might explain a Russian speaker's omission of copula forms, a Spanish-English contrastive analysis would not explain the same error, and a contrastive analysis is irrelevant for monolingual children who make this same error as they acquire English. The pervasiveness of certain types of errors has thus been among the most significant counterarguments against the importance of transfer.

Despite the counterarguments, however, there is a large and growing

4 The terms *acquisition* and *learning* will be used interchangeably throughout this work even though much of the writing on second language acquisition (e.g., Krashen 1981) distinguishes between the two terms. I agree with Krashen and others that the outcomes of acquisition can differ depending on the awareness of language that individuals have (cf. Section 8.3). However, I strongly disagree with Krashen's analysis of transfer and with much else in his interpretation of second language acquisition (cf. Sections 2.2, 3.1). Since his characterization of *acquisition* and *learning* is questionable in several respects, I see no reason to use his terminological distinctions (cf. Gregg 1984; Odlin 1986).

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body of research that indicates that transfer is indeed a very important factor in second language acquisition. Accordingly, the primary aim of this book is to reconsider the problem of transfer in light of recent second language research. While the research to be reviewed points to the importance of transfer, it also frequently points to the importance of other significant factors in second language acquisition. Thus, even though a comprehensive review of second language research is beyond the scope of this book, there will be frequent discussion of cases in which transfer is either not a significant influence or an influence that interacts with other influences.

There are a number of reasons for language teachers and linguists to consider more closely the problem of transfer. Teaching may become more effective through a consideration of differences between languages and between cultures. An English teacher aware of Spanish-based and Korean-based transfer errors, for example, will be able to pinpoint problems of Spanish-speaking and Korean-speaking ESL students better, and in the process, communicate the very important message to students that their linguistic and cultural background *is* important to the teacher.[5] Also, consideration of the research showing similarities in errors made by learners of different backgrounds will help teachers to see better what may be difficult or easy for anyone learning the language they are teaching.

There are yet other reasons to know about research on transfer. For historical linguists, such knowledge can lead to insights about the relation between language contact and language change. Although languages change for a variety of reasons, the bilingualism that often results from language contact situations can be a major factor. For example, Hiberno-English, the dialect spoken in parts of rural Ireland, does have several of the unusual characteristics of the Irishwoman's speech cited earlier, and a number of those characteristics appear to result from the influence of Irish. Research on transfer is also important for a better understanding of the nature of language acquisition in any context and is thus of interest to anyone curious about what is common to all languages, that is, *language universals*. As Comrie (1984) has noted, second language research can provide a valuable empirical check on the merit of universalist theories, and the issue of transfer is likely to figure prominently in such research.

This book consists of ten chapters. The next two provide an overview of the issues: Chapter 2 is a historical survey of the controversy sur-

5 Throughout this book, the term *ESL* (English as a Second Language) will be used even in cases in which *EFL* (English as a Foreign Language) might be more appropriate. While such a terminological distinction can be crucial for those developing syllabi or preparing pedagogical materials, the distinction is less important for researchers studying cross-linguistic influence.

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rounding language transfer, and Chapter 3 is a discussion of four types of problems especially important in the investigation of transfer. The next four chapters survey second language research on transfer and universals in relation to linguistic subsystems: discourse (Chapter 4); semantics – including a discussion of morphology (Chapter 5); syntax (Chapter 6); and phonetics, phonology, and writing systems (Chapter 7). Chapter 8 discusses in more detail some aspects of language transfer which structural descriptions cannot always account for, such as the effects of individual variation in second language acquisition. Chapter 9 reviews important currents in the research discussed in earlier chapters, and Chapter 10 considers some of the implications that the research may have for teaching.

Further reading

Most studies of transfer appear in a wide variety of journals, but they sometimes appear in special collections. One of the best collections is edited by Gass and Selinker (1983). A recent book-length study by Ringbom (1987) combines a review of many of the controversies about transfer with a detailed empirical study. Ellis (1985) has written a remarkably comprehensive and judicious survey of research on second language acquisition, including work on transfer. For more discussion of linguistic analyses of the literary treatment of foreign accents, a text by Traugott and Pratt (1980) is useful. Recent introductions to linguistics include texts by Bolinger and Sears (1981) and Fromkin and Rodman (1983).

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2 *Earlier thinking on transfer*

Discussions of transfer often begin with the work of American linguists in the 1940s and 1950s. Yet while the work of Charles Fries, Robert Lado, and others was clearly a major catalyst for subsequent research, serious thinking about cross-linguistic influences dates back to a controversy in historical linguistics in the nineteenth century. Accordingly, this chapter begins with a discussion of that controversy among scholars whose primary interests were not second language acquisition or language teaching but rather language classification and language change. The controversy promoted work on language contact that overlaps considerably with more recent studies of second language acquisition. Because the thinking of Fries, Lado, and others prompted much of the growth of research in second language acquisition, their views receive considerable attention, as do the views of some who have been very critical of their work. While this chapter can give only a suggestion of the historical context of the polemics on transfer, it provides important background for some fundamental issues discussed in subsequent chapters.

2.1 Languages (and dialects) in contact

Historical change and language mixing

Language contact situations arise whenever there is a meeting of speakers who do not all share the same language and who need to communicate.[1] When the communicative needs of people go beyond what gestures and other paralinguistic signals can achieve, some use of a second language becomes necessary. The languages learned in contact situations may or may not show some kind of **language mixing**, that is, the merging of characteristics of two or more languages in any verbal communication.

1 There are other kinds of language contact besides those discussed in this chapter, as, for example, when a French scholar deciphers a text in ancient Egyptian. Such cases, though, are exceptional in a number of ways.

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If mixing does occur, native language influence is only one of the possible forms it can take. Another kind of mixing is in the form of *borrowings* from a second language into the native language (e.g., the use by English speakers of the loanword *croissant* from French to describe a certain kind of pastry), and still another kind is **code-switching**, in which there is a systematic interchange of words, phrases, and sentences of two or more languages (cf. Sections 8.2, 8.3).

People often show some awareness of language mixing, even though they are usually not familiar with terms such as *code-switching* and *transfer* (cf. Chapter 1 and Section 8.3). Among Indians in the Vaupés region of the Amazon rain forest, for example, there is a keen awareness of the mixing that arises in their multilingual villages (Sorenson 1967; Jackson 1974). Such awareness probably reflects a consciousness going far back into prehistory. Whether in the rain forest or elsewhere, humans have often seen themselves as belonging to different social groups, and they have often considered language to be an important distinguisher of their own group from others; it is no accident that the names of languages frequently designate ethnic groups (e.g., *Chinese*, *Navajo*, and *English*). Accordingly, any introduction of loanwords or other kinds of language mixing may be viewed either as a kind of linguistic intrusion or as a "foreign import," sometimes welcome, sometimes not (cf. Le Page and Tabouret Keller 1985). It is significant that the Indians of the Vaupés do not look upon language mixing favorably; although that attitude is probably not universal, people in many communities do have similarly unfavorable attitudes toward various kinds of mixing. For example, English loanwords in French and other languages have frequently been a target of language purists (cf. Section 8.3).

From antiquity onwards there is a historical record of people associating language contact and mixing with "contamination" (Silvestri 1977; Thomason 1981). Typical of such associations were scholarly discussions in Renaissance Europe about the link between Latin and the vernacular languages related to it. With regard to the origins of French, for example, scholars speculated about how speakers of other languages may have "corrupted" the language brought to Gaul by the Romans (Silvestri 1977). Although some scholarly work before the nineteenth century did make specific claims, most of the discussion about language contact and mixing was rather nebulous. Apart from occasional remarks about loanwords, few discussions included either detailed characterizations of the nature of cross-linguistic influences or specific examples of such influences (Silvestri 1977).

In the nineteenth century, debate about the importance of language contact and mixing intensified. The question of mixing had major implications for two interrelated problems that interested many nineteenth-century linguists: language classification and language change. The

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steady accumulation of grammars of languages in every part of the world made ever clearer the diversity of human languages and the scientific challenge of classifying them (Robins 1979). Many scholars came to believe that grammar was the soundest basis on which to construct classifications. Aware that lexical borrowings (i.e., loanwords) could often make classification decisions difficult, scholars often expected to find in grammar a linguistic subsystem unaffected by language contact and thus a key to distinguish any language. Müller (1861/1965:75), for example, was well aware of the large number of loanwords from Latin, French, and other languages in English, but considered English grammar to be immune from cross-linguistic influences:

> The grammar, the blood and soul of the language, is as pure and unmixed in English as spoken in the British Isles, as it was when spoken on the shores of the German ocean by the Angles, Saxons, and Juts [sic] of the continent.[2]

The beliefs of Müller and others about the uniqueness of grammar were usually related to assumptions about the **tree model** of language change in which languages are viewed as parts of a "family tree." In that model, Latin, for example, is characterized as the "parent" language and French, Spanish, Rumanian, and other Romance tongues as the "daughter" languages.[3] The pattern of change in the tree model is primarily one of *internal development*, in which characteristics of the parent language undergo changes that are systematically manifested in the daughter languages. For example, in French, Spanish, and Rumanian, noun phrases commonly have definite articles, as in the following translations of "the mountain":

French: *le mont*
Spanish: *el monte*
Rumanian: *munte-le*

In Latin there were no articles, but in virtually all of the daughter languages there are definite and indefinite articles. The development of such an innovation in each of the daughter languages suggests the existence of what Whitney (in a slightly different connection) called "forces which are slowly and almost insensibly determining the growth of a language" (1881:25). Like Müller, Whitney took a dim view of the notion of mixing, and their attitude was shared by other scholars aware of the massive evidence of internal change not only in morphology and syntax but also in phonetics and phonology (e.g., Meillet 1948). If internal

2 Despite the racist connotations of this passage, Müller was an outstanding advocate of racial understanding in the nineteenth century.
3 As Robins (1979) observes, such characterizations of historical relationships are metaphoric and only partially revealing. Nevertheless, the family tree metaphor had an enormous impact on thinking about language change.

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development could explain so much about language change, were explanations involving language mixture really necessary?

Areal linguistics

In the judgment of many scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the answer to this question is affirmative, despite the cogent arguments by Whitney and others. Even while the evidence supporting the tree model of change is strong, there is good evidence supporting a very different model, the **wave model** (cf. Bloomfield 1933; Bailey 1973; Bynon 1977; Zobl 1984). First developed in the nineteenth century, the wave model has long been recognized as a useful complement to the tree model, especially for an understanding of *dialect change*. While characterizations of the wave model have changed over the years, the model still posits that linguistic patterns in one dialect can affect another dialect considerably, especially if the dialects are spoken in adjoining regions. For example, the English spoken in Chicago and that spoken in nearby towns in northern Illinois are similar, but recent changes in pronunciation that have appeared in Chicago make that variety different from other Illinois dialects. The changes seem to be slowly spreading from Chicago into other Illinois towns, largely through contacts between Chicagoans and people in the larger towns (cf. Callary 1975; Chambers and Trudgill 1980).

There is now a considerable body of scholarship pointing to the importance of dialect mixture (e.g., Trudgill 1986). Yet the significance of the wave model is not limited to dialect contact. As most linguists acknowledge, the difference between languages and dialects is often fuzzy, as the linguistic situation in parts of Spanish-speaking Uruguay and Portuguese-speaking Brazil shows. While Spanish and Portuguese are distinct in many ways, they might well be considered two Romance dialects instead of two languages were it not for political facts. On the border between Brazil and Uruguay there have been frequent contacts between people of both nations, and, not surprisingly, the similarity of Spanish and Portuguese has encouraged a great deal of mixing which one might call either dialect mixing or language mixing (Rona 1965).

Even when the differences between two languages are greater than is the case with Spanish and Portuguese, there is a possibility of language mixing. For example, Rumanian and Bulgarian have somewhat different "genetic" classifications (the former is a Romance language and the latter a Slavic language), but centuries of contact between speakers of Rumanian, Bulgarian, and other languages in the Balkans have led to many *areal* (i.e., regional) similarities not due to internal changes (Sandfeld 1930; Joseph 1983a). The definite article, for instance, follows the noun

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in Rumanian, Bulgarian, and Albanian, as in the following translation equivalents of "the village":

Rumanian: *sat-ul*
Bulgarian: *selo-to*
Albanian: *fshat-i*

As noted earlier, French, Spanish, and Rumanian all have definite articles, but in the Romance languages of Western Europe the definite article precedes the noun, whereas in Rumanian the definite article follows the noun. This divergence of Rumanian from the general Romance pattern can be best explained in terms of areal contact: The position of the article appears to reflect centuries of bilingualism in the border regions between Rumania and Bulgaria.[4]

Pidgins and creoles

The areal similarity of languages in the Balkans is among the best known examples of the long-term effects of language contact, but there is also a great deal of evidence for the importance of language contact in historical change in other areas, such as India (Gumperz and Wilson 1971; Emeneau 1980) and Ethiopia (Leslau 1945, 1952). Not all contact will lead to transfer, however. The importance not only of transfer but of other explanations for contact phenomena became clear as the study of **pidgin** and **creole** languages intensified toward the end of the nineteenth century. In that period Hugo Schuchardt, a German linguist who had noted the likely effects of transfer in certain contact situations in Europe, became interested in the so-called trade languages spawned in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere from encounters between the local inhabitants and Europeans. In some encounters, as in the case of the dealings between European and Chinese merchants on the coast of China, contacts were limited and the trade jargons used had only the status of "marginal languages," which are usually called *pidgins*. In other contact situations, however, the trade languages became more extensively used and often became languages acquired by young children; those languages are usually considered *creoles*.[5] Initially, Schuchardt thought that transfer was

4 Explanations about the development of the Rumanian article do not agree in all details, yet whatever the correct explanation is, language contact is probably involved (cf. Joseph 1983a).
5 Todd (1983), Mühlhäusler (1986), and others have argued that it is an oversimplification to equate pidgins with the language of one generation of adults and creoles with the language of children of the subsequent generation. Singler (1988) suggests that the distinction should refer to whether a group has adopted a language as the language of ethnic identification, in which case it is a creole and not a pidgin. If Singler's view is correct, the adoption of a pidgin by children may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for terming the new language a creole.

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