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0521378095 - Language Transfer: Cross-Linguistic Influence in Language Learning -

Terence Odlin

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# Language Transfer

Cross-linguistic influence in  
language learning

*Terence Odlin*

The Ohio State University



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In memory of Walter Odlin  
1908–1985

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## *Series editors' preface*

Language transfer has been a central issue in applied linguistics, second language acquisition, and language teaching for at least a century. Within the last few decades, however, its importance in second language learning has been reassessed several times. In the 1950s it was often deemed the most important factor to consider in theories of second language learning as well as in approaches to second language teaching. In the 1960s its importance waned as learners' errors were seen not as evidence of language transfer but rather of "the creative construction process." Some researchers virtually denied the existence of language transfer in their enthusiasm for universalist explanations. In recent years, however, a more balanced perspective has emerged in which the role of transfer is acknowledged and in which transfer is seen to interact with a host of other factors in ways not yet fully understood.

This reassessment of the significance of language transfer is lucidly demonstrated in this new addition to the Cambridge Applied Linguistics Series. In this timely book, Terry Odlin presents a comprehensive and original account of the nature of language transfer and its role in second language acquisition. Dr. Odlin documents the historical development of the concept of language transfer, explores the role of transfer in discourse, semantics, syntax, phonology, and writing systems, and examines the way language transfer interacts with linguistic as well as cultural, social, and personal factors in second language learning and use. In the process, he surveys a large body of literature and examines data from many different languages.

Dr. Odlin's analysis challenges simplistic notions of language transfer and offers instead a convincing account of the process as a phenomenon that is fundamental to research in second language acquisition and applied linguistics. This book will hence be invaluable to students entering the field of second language acquisition, researchers, language teachers, and anyone interested in the fundamental question of how language systems interact during the process of sec-



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ond language acquisition. We are therefore delighted to be able to make Dr. Odlin's research available to a wider audience through the Cambridge Applied Linguistics Series.

Michael H. Long  
Jack C. Richards

## Preface

The significance of cross-linguistic influences has long been a controversial topic. As this book indicates, the controversy has had a long life not only among second language teachers and researchers, but also among linguists interested in questions of language contact and language change. Although it would be too much to hope that this book will cause such a long-standing controversy to die, the discussion of transfer here may help to set to rest some dubious claims and to point the way toward more productive thinking about cross-linguistic influences. While I have tried hard to avoid the sweeping claims that unfortunately have been frequent in discussions of transfer, I make no secret of my belief that transfer is an extremely important factor in second language acquisition. The available evidence, I feel, warrants that belief. Thus, the focus of this book is on empirical investigations of learners' behavior in many contexts. There is some discussion of the pedagogical implications of certain investigations, but it seems to me that relatively little is known about the best ways to make use of transfer research in the classroom – hopefully, more teachers and teacher trainers will begin to think about what those ways are. There is also some discussion of theoretical work in other areas of linguistics, but I have made efforts to limit that discussion, which could go on interminably, and to limit the jargon that usually accompanies such discussion. Readers familiar with *Government and Binding*, *Schema Theory*, and *Sprachbund* will not find those terms, though they will note allusions to research using those terms. Some background in linguistics will be helpful in reading certain chapters (especially Chapter 7), but the glossary provided should help with some of the terminology that seemed impossible to avoid.

While this book has just one author, there are many people who have helped bring about whatever may be praiseworthy in it. In my graduate work I had the good fortune to take courses with Diana Natalicio, who recognized the seriousness of challenges to contrastive analysis in the 1960s and 1970s but who also recognized that the most extreme – albeit fashionable – criticisms of work on transfer were themselves open to challenges. Some of the more novel ideas in this book owe a great deal

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to work by Jacquelyn Schachter, Sarah Grey Thomason, and Eric Kellerman, all of whom also provided valuable feedback on a number of my ideas. As this work took shape, Jack Richards provided much encouragement and support – without his interest, this book might never have been finished. Ellen Shaw and Linda Grossman of Cambridge University Press helped in many ways to see the manuscript through the final stages. I would also like to thank several people who made my search for studies of transfer easier by sending me some of their work: Christian Adjemian, David Birdsong, Susan Gass, Lynn Eubank, Markku Filppula, John Hinds, Richard Schmidt, David Singleton, and Lydia White. Many thanks are also due to Lisa Kiser, Alan Brown, and other members of the Department of English at Ohio State who provided valuable comments on earlier drafts of the manuscript. Moreover, I received many forms of assistance from friends and colleagues in the Department of English, the Department of Linguistics, the programs in English as a Second Language, and also from members of the Linguistics Institute of Ireland. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the generous support provided by other units at Ohio State, including the College of Humanities, the Office of Research and Graduate Studies, and the Instructional and Research Computation Center. Finally, I would like to thank my family for their encouragement not only with this project but with much else besides.