

## TOWARDS A GLOBAL VIEW OF THE TRANSFER PHENOMENON

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### Abstract

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Language transfer (or cross-linguistic influence [CLI]) has long been at the base of the concept of second / foreign language (S/FL) acquisition / learning (A/L) and came to the forefront in the 1950s and 60s thanks to the hegemony experienced by both behaviorism in psychology and structuralism in linguistics. However, after the fall of these two theories, the role of transfer was minimized. It is our aim in the first part of this paper to provide an overall view of transfer and its consideration in SLA / FLL theories and research. This done, our scope will be widened and we shall enter some recently-found research fields on which transfer also exerts its influence. We will also see to what extent those principles governing traditional transfer apply to these new areas and will eventually propose a hypothesis that might explain the apparent incongruities

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### Transfer and its Consideration in SLA / FLL Research

The existence of CLI is a fact that can be seen, to a greater or lesser extent, in the output of any L2 learner. Funnily enough, in spite of all the evidence available, CLI has always been one of the most controversial points in SLA / FLL research, even though it can be quite safely stated that experts now more or less agree as far as its scope is concerned. In the most radical cases, CLI is at least considered as the direct cause of erroneous performance (Kellerman, 1995, p. 125). At all events, such controversy is quite understandable, for many aspects related to bilingualism, CLI and interlingual thought still escape our comprehension, which in turn makes even the most recent studies fairly inconclusive. (Cf. Llácer, 1996, p. 65; Argyri, 2003).  
In Sharwood Smith's words,

[t]he term 'transfer', especially as used in the 1960s and 1970s, refers to the influence of the mother tongue (L1) on the learner's performance in and/or development of a given target language. [...] In actual fact, the direction of transfer may be the reverse [...]. The meaning does [...] [indeed] cover *the influence of any 'other tongue' known to the learner on that target language*.<sup>1</sup>  
(1996, p. 13)

To be more precise, the first case (in which the speaker's dominant language influences any other) has been labeled "substratum transfer" (Odlin, 1989, p. 169) and the second (in which the dominant language is influenced by others) is commonly referred to as "borrowing transfer" (Odlin,

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard, Pouw (1995) mentions that some studies have been carried out showing that those who already speak another L2 make use of that knowledge, so that their interlanguage (IL) is far less conservative (p. 518).

1989, p. 165). Borrowing transfer is a phenomenon most of us have experienced. How many times have we had a given word on the tip of our tongue and it will only come out in our L2?<sup>2</sup>

Its highly frequent occurrences make any further explanation seem redundant. Suffice it to say that, although in normal circumstances it should not impede communication, borrowing transfer certainly exists, and this is something professional translators are well aware of.<sup>3</sup>

It should also be stated that transfer does not necessarily mean incorrect output. Thus, experts distinguish the so-called “positive transfer” and “negative transfer”, only the latter being a source of trouble for the L2 learner (Bueno González, 1992, p. 63; Jessner, 1996, p. 148). However, it would be more accurate to say that both positive and negative transfer are just the two possible sides of one and the same phenomenon (transfer), which might at times have a beneficial effect on SLA, a fact that seems to have been overlooked only too frequently (Trevise, 1993, p. 48). Thus, it should be noted that

a well-prepared and highly-motivated student of English literature can readily take advantage of the considerable similarities in vocabulary, syntax, writing systems, and so forth between English and other Germanic languages to become a competent reader of German literature in a rather short time. [...] [I]t does seem highly significant that an adult speaker of English might learn to understand rather simple texts in German [...] in a year or so –much less time than the four or so years needed by German-speaking children to understand the same texts.  
(Odlin, 1989, pp. 154-155)

This said, we can now narrow down the object of our study and refer to it as *negative substratum transfer*.<sup>4</sup> As Odlin (1989) says, “cross-linguistic influence has considerable potential to affect the course of second language acquisition both inside and outside the classroom” (p. 157). The danger it implies for L2 learners was already suspected in the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to the growth of contrastive linguistics (CL) (Sánchez, 1997, pp. 122-123), to the extent that during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century transfer was believed to be the main source of problems for the L2 learner. This idea was eventually formulated in the so-called Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) (Odlin 1989, pp. 15ff; Jessner, 1996, p. 141), which appeared in the heyday of behaviorism and regarded (second) language learning as the acquisition of a set of habits. Seen in this context, then, errors were nothing but already existing L1 habits which were transferred to the L2. Accordingly, audiolingual methods largely consisted in identifying those areas that differed the most between any two languages and subsequently practicing them by means of drills (Jessner, 1996, pp. 142-143).

The main flaw this thesis presents is the simplistic equivalence difference = difficulty = interference = error, which even staunch believers in transfer such as Catford (1964) noticed, for “even similarities can be treacherous” (p. 147).<sup>5</sup> In actual fact, authors drew the conclusion that it was exactly the opposite (i.e. dissimilarity and not similarity) that seemed to facilitate SLA (Danesi, 1995, p. 219).

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<sup>2</sup> Just like its counterpart, borrowing transfer affects language in all its dimensions, although the L1’s phonetic and phonological features are not likely to be affected, since it is so firmly established in the speaker. However, answers like “¡Seguro!” to a request such as “¿Puedo llamar por teléfono?” are fairly common among highly proficient Spanish ESL speakers. Borrowing transfer may also be seen in bilingual first language acquisition, far less studied than FLL until at least the 1990s (see De Houwer, 1990 as a landmark in this difficult field).

<sup>3</sup> « [L]e phénomène des interférences [...] qui affaiblissent l’usage de la langue maternelle ou vernaculaire ne doit pas être ignoré » (Gémar, 1996, p. 498 ; see also Quillard, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the terms “transfer” and “CLI” will be henceforth used indistinctly to refer to negative substratum transfer.

<sup>5</sup> Such a position had already been advanced by Skaggs-Robinson in 1927 (Kellerman, 1995, p. 126).

The fact that the CAH both over- and underpredicted, together with the downfall of behaviorism –a task in which Chomskian universal grammar theory played an active role- meant that transfer was no longer considered the main source of problems in SLA (see Chomsky, 1969). And not only that: in the USA its role was minimized (Jessner, 1996, p. 143). Such a radical change in thought, however, did not take place in Europe, where –thanks to the so-called IL studies- transfer was still regarded as a factor affecting SLA (Nickel, 1995, p. 240; Alonso & González, 1996, p. 135; Sharwood Smith, 1996, pp. 36-40). But American experts, in the light of Chomsky's innatist ideas, discovered the existence of developmental processes (and errors), which seemed to suggest that L1 and L2 acquisition were equivalent processes, as defended by the so-called Creative Construction Hypothesis<sup>6</sup> (CCH). Consequently, developmental errors were automatically given precedence over transfer in most analyses (Nickel, 1995, pp. 242).

Consequently, and as Sharwood Smith notes, the major differences between the CAH, ILH and CCH can be explained along two main lines, namely (1) how they regard FLA and SLA/FLL (the ILH interprets them as substantially different phenomena whereas the other two see them as parallel); and (2) the role assigned to L1 influence in SLA/FLL (major for the CAH, partial for the ILH and minimal for the CCH) (Sharwood Smith, 1996, p. 86).

However, the CCH did not escape criticism either. Experts eventually realized that this theory gave transfer too small a role in L2 acquisition and performance (Sharwood Smith, 1996, pp. 103-104). In other words, the conclusion was drawn that “viewing transfer as the single most important reality of second language acquisition is clearly risky –though no more so than viewing transfer as a negligible factor in acquisition” (Odlin, 1989, p. 151).<sup>7</sup>

As a consequence, transfer was once again reconsidered in the 1980s: as Kellerman (1995) explains, Andersen formulated the so-called “Transfer to Somewhere” Principle in 1983, claiming that transfer does take place in SLA, especially when the two languages involved are typologically similar (pp. 126-131).<sup>8</sup> For it to appear –Andersen claims- the pattern likely to be transferred must be compatible with the learner's natural acquisitional principles and, additionally, the L2 input must lead to the generalization of some L1 principle. According to this thesis, no transfer whatsoever would ever take place when the two languages involved are utterly different. Such a statement needs further refinement but Andersen's theory was indeed an important step forward in that (1) it drew attention to transfer once more; and (2) it made transfer compatible with the so-called natural acquisitional principles. In this regard it has been suggested that

where a standard (universal/common) transitional stage (for any type of learner) in the development of a given area of IL [...] matches a standard structure in the L1 of a given learner, that learner will experience fossilization or prolonged delays in that stage. [Seen in this light], [a]lthough the route is the same, the **rate** of acquisition is different [in L1 and L2].  
(Sharwood Smith, 1996, p. 56)

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<sup>6</sup> Dulay, Burt and Krashen are amongst those who most fiercely criticized “pro-transfer” scholars. For them, SLA follows an evolution quite parallel to that of first language acquisition (FLA), so that they believe that the acquisition of grammatical structures (both in L1 and L2) proceeds in a predictable order, with the exception that in L1 learners free morphemes (copula, auxiliaries) seem to take a longer time to appear (Krashen, 1987, pp. 12-15).

<sup>7</sup> In this regard, Nickel (1995) criticizes the little importance that is normally given to the role of the NL [native language] and, ultimately, CLI in SLA research, when abundant empirical evidence suggests that previous knowledge invariably affects new learning in *all* fields, not only in language (p. 239).

<sup>8</sup> Both positive and negative transfer may appear when the languages involved are typologically similar. As stated above, although similarity can indeed create problems, it can also convey significant advantages, thus shortening the amount of time students will require to become proficient in a language (Odlin, 1989, p. 153; Pouw, 1995, p. 518).

Thus, it could be argued that both transfer and creative construction affect SLA (Danesi, 1995, p. 219). This brings us back to the question of the extent to which we can say that FLA and SLA are parallel or different processes. As seen above, transfer implies the use of old knowledge in new situations, something that –psychologists agree– happens not just in language learning but in all learning. Assuming –as Danesi (1995) does– that adult L2 learners “do indeed manifest many of the same kinds of learning strategies that children acquiring their NL do” (pp. 220-221), it would follow that the FLA = SLA/FLL hypothesis is, at least, partially true, in the sense that it might be reasonable to assume that we use the same part of the brain in both L1 and L2 acquisition (Bueno González, 1992, p. 42). That is, the same paths are followed. However, there is something that cannot be obviated: “adult L2 learning in a classroom setting will be shaped by ‘the only system in previous experience upon which the learner can draw’”, i.e. his/her L1<sup>9</sup> (Danesi, 1995, pp. 220-221). In Odlin’s words, L1 and L2 acquisition may be seen as parallel processes except that

[t]here are fundamental differences in the *knowledge base* available to first and second language learners. The knowledge base in monolingual contexts (including child language acquisition) is much smaller than the knowledge base available in bilingual contexts simply because bilinguals can draw on not one but *two* languages.  
(1989, p. 154)

This, in turn, could explain why L2 learners may be able to communicate in that L2 much sooner than they were when acquiring their L1: Sharwood Smith (1996) suggests that due to crosslinguistic influence, the L2 learning process does not start from scratch but is quite firmly based on abstract, generally unconscious, specially syntactic and semantic concepts which will be resorted to, thus allowing beginners to use rather complex structures even when their mental L2 lexicon only contains a limited number of entries (p. 46).

Now that transfer has been quite widely accepted as one among other factors influencing IL, there still remains one question to be solved: is transfer a learning strategy (thus affecting “competence”) or a communicative strategy (then affecting “performance”)?<sup>10</sup> Advocates of the CCH reduced it to a mere performance phenomenon, arguing that the L2 learner only resorts to transfer “in moments of crisis, i.e. when L2 resources fail to meet the demands being placed on it” (Sharwood Smith, 1996, p. 56). However, authors now tend to include it in both competence and performance (Pouw, 1995, p. 518) and even state that such a clear-cut difference between both categories should not be established, for learning and communication are related to each other. Thus, transfer may be regarded as a communication strategy when the learner’s IL lacks the means s/he needs in order to convey a given message. However, if the message is conveyed successfully, the element/pattern that has just been transferred may be automatically incorporated into his/her IL (competence). Similar views are shared by Corder and other authors, as Alonso & González (1996, pp. 136-137) point out.

On the whole, then, transfer is now generally considered to be one of various possible factors affecting IL, although it is certainly not the only one. Thus, a large number of errors are not due to CLI even when the influence of the L1 on the learner’s IL is not negligible at all (Danesi, 1995, pp. 219-220; Jessner, 1996, p. 146); in actual fact, transfer can potentially affect all linguistic

<sup>9</sup> Or any other language s/he already knows.

<sup>10</sup> This question might be somehow connected with the question of its being a conscious or unconscious phenomenon. Thus, some authors distinguish “transfer” (involuntary) and “literal translation” (voluntary) (Bueno González, 1992, p. 65). The former seems to fall naturally within the domain of competence, whereas the latter should intuitively be part of the speaker’s performance.

(i.e. phonetic, phonological, lexical, semantic, syntactic, morphological...) levels, although in a different degree (cf Cenoz *et al.*, 2001 for a summary of the latest studies). Traditionally, the effects of transfer on syntax have been those most frequently studied, although enormous importance is now being given to phonetic / phonological transfer, which is in proportion to the way it seems to influence the learner's IL<sup>11</sup> (Odlin, 1989, p. 111).

Second to phonology seems to be the lexical level. As for morphology, bound morphemes seem to be quite reluctant to be transferred, although there are instances of it (Catford, 1964, pp. 142-145; Odlin, 1989, p. 152; Jessner, 1996, p. 146).<sup>12</sup>

Age seems to be quite an important factor to be taken into account as regards transfer since – albeit detectable in both children and adults- it causes greater problems among the latter (Odlin, 1989, p. 152; Bueno González, 1992, p. 64; Jessner, 1996, p. 146). All this follows directly from what has been stated above, namely that adults have a wider knowledge base for them to resort to.

Another relevant variable –experts agree- is the learner's proficiency level: transfer is said to appear far more extensively in the lower levels, even though the characteristic growing difficulties of the upper levels also make learners resort to transfer (Bueno González, 1992, p. 64; Jessner, 1996, p. 146).<sup>13</sup>

It has also been suggested above that transfer is more likely to take place when the two languages involved are similar. More specifically, it has been said that it is more frequent when the L1 influence involves typologically common patterns.<sup>14</sup> However, it is worth pointing out that transfer seems to be far more complex than experts originally thought, since it sometimes involves clearly uncommon structures such as the typically English preposition stranding “(e.g., *un chalet qu'on va aller à* –A cottage that we're gonna go to)”, as Odlin notes (1989, p. 153).

On the whole, it is generally thought that for transfer to appear, at least some of the following criteria must be met (Alonso & González, 1996, p. 137):

- linguistic criteria: not only typological similarities are required between L1 and L2; linguistic universals and markedness also seem to play a role.
- psycholinguistic criteria: the extent to which the learner is conscious of both the distance between L1 and L2 and the degree of markedness of a given element/pattern.<sup>15</sup>
- sociolinguistic criteria: language contact encourages transfer.

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<sup>11</sup> However, transfer does exist and can be appreciated in different areas within syntax.

<sup>12</sup> A modular conception of language could certainly account for the different degrees of proficiency that can be reached in the various linguistic areas, as well as for the different degree of influence that transfer seems to have on them (see Sharwood Smith, 1996, p. 141).

<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to mention that Carrera (1996) studies transfer at a lexical level and her conclusions are much in keeping with what has just been said: beginners are far more dependent on their L1 whereas advanced students are highly independent. In her study, transfer errors decrease whereas another kind of error gains importance: the confusion between two L2 words which learners regard as formally or semantically related –of the kind “cost/coast”, for example (pp. 233-234).

<sup>14</sup> Some of the latest theories also suggest that transfer is directly related to markedness in that only unmarked elements and patterns are likely to be transferred (“unmarked” are all those features in language that are intrinsically easy for the human being to process, articulate, produce..., which arguably explains their generally widespread presence among the different languages). However, this is a highly controversial statement since innatists do not seem to agree on how much of the Universal Grammar can be reached once the L1 has already been internalized –cf. the “fossilized UG view” and the “Recreative view” –or “Back to UG” position- in Danesi (1995, pp. 219-220); Pouw (1995, pp. 519-520) & Sharwood Smith (1996, pp. 154-156).

<sup>15</sup> This explains why learners are mostly reluctant to transfer what they intuitively regard as language-specific, such as idioms, for example.

Lastly, it is important to mention that even when there are individual differences –which seem to depend on variables such as linguistic proficiency and literacy- Odlin (1989) suggests that – contrary to what was commonly thought in previous years- “[n]egative transfer may be less likely in focused contexts, i.e. those situations which foster a considerable awareness of language” (p. 152). One of such contexts is the L2 classroom (pp. 146-147), which is good news for the foreign language teacher, since it implies that there are reasons to believe that formal instruction can indeed help students reduce their instinctive dependence on their L1.

Transfer studies, therefore, far from dead, are in constant evolution, in keeping with the growing complexity most scholars see in SLA. Transfer, for example, has been proved to result not only in error but also in phenomena not quite so easily detectable. Thus, CLI may cause the learner to overproduce certain patterns s/he is comfortable with since s/he has checked they are indeed transferable. On the other hand, underproduction is also a possibility: the learner is generally reluctant to establish links between the languages s/he knows when s/he feels that such connections are unlikely –whether that is actually the case or not- (Sharwood Smith, 1996, p. 13; Jessner, 1996, p. 148).

Consequently, transfer studies are now trying to join all the aspects mentioned hitherto in order to establish the possible relationships existing between transfer, natural order of acquisition, language universals, markedness, underproduction and overproduction (Alonso & González, 1996).

### **The World Beyond. New Fields to Explore**

However, the new purposes being served by transfer studies do not end here. CL did not escape the new trends followed by general linguistics so that pragmatics is now being studied from a crosslinguistic perspective, resulting in the coinage of a new –and quite widely accepted- term: pragmatic transfer. Indeed, non-native speaker pragmatic usage has been compared to native-speaker norms and found to be eligible for transfer (Siegal, 1996, p. 357). There is tremendous ground for expansion in this field. Experts such as Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, Gumperz and others are already focussing on it and have clearly helped to position pragmatics at the forefront of transfer studies, as Argyri (2003) shows.

It must be said at this point that most of these pragmatic transfer studies focus on speech acts. It is quite common, for instance, to come across studies on how transfer affects L2 students in their response to compliments (Saito & Beecken, 1997) or when apologizing (Jessner, 1996). Transfer does indeed seem to have a role to play in such cases (Sharwood Smith, 1996, pp. 46-48), even though authors draw the conclusion that the principles governing it are somewhat different. In this regard, even though transfer of training and the learner’s familiarity with the situation<sup>16</sup> are – predictably enough- important, it is quite shocking to remark that it is not similarities but differences between L1 and L2 that seem to encourage pragmatic transfer. Moreover, the higher the learner’s proficiency level, the more frequently pragmatic transfer seems to appear (Saito & Beecken, 1997, pp. 364-365).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> An illustrative example might clarify this point. For example, it is a fact that many Western students of Japanese (J), having heard so much about the stereotypical oriental humility, very frequently turn down a compliment in a JSL context, since they feel this is what a Japanese would do (Saito & Beecken, 1997, p. 370). These same authors also suggest that when the learner is not familiar with a given situation in the L2 context, s/he will be more likely to transfer the strategy s/he would use in his /her L1 context.

<sup>17</sup> Blum-Kulka (1996: 171-172) draws the same conclusion, adding that pragmatic errors fall dramatically once the learner has spent a considerable period of time in the target community. In any case, she stresses how different the pragmatic learning process is from lexis and grammar learning in an L2 (174).

Although further research must be made on this point, we may attempt to provide what –in our view- could be a possible hypothesis explaining such apparently shocking facts. But, first of all, let us enlarge the term “pragmatic transfer”. For some strange reason, when we talk about pragmatic competence it is speech acts that automatically come to our mind. But it should be remembered that as the concept of communicative competence evolved, the field covered by pragmatics –the study of language as actually used in context- was also widened (Cenoz, 1996, pp. 106-111). This was so because the very concept of context widened too and was understood to include, *inter alia*, the actual linguistic environment surrounding a given utterance, the speaker/writer’s knowledge of his/her role and status (and that of his/her interlocutor, we might add), the spatial and temporal location where communication is actually taking place, knowledge of the circumstances determining such aspects as register, medium, subject matter... (Levinson, 1989, p. 23; Alcaraz, 1990, pp. 132-133). In short, what could be generally referred to as *culture* functions as the general context for communication (Tricàs, 1982, p. 45). In any case, what must be emphasized is the great importance of the relationship between context (understood in any of its possible dimensions), meaning and –ultimately- language use. Accordingly, we might come back to the concept of pragmatics and define it as the effects that culture has on language conventions. Pragmatic aspects are, therefore, language (and culture-) particular and should not be forgotten in the L2 classroom. In the light of all this, the term “pragmatic transfer” should be enlarged so that it may include not only the L1’s influence on speech acts but also on such important aspects as discourse and language use.

But culture, linked as it is to language, still has some other effects with linguistic consequences. It is quite widely accepted that language/culture can be seen as a filter, a kind of sieve filtering our experience of the world (Seleskovitch, 1973; Martinet, 1993, pp. 243-245; Cordonnier, 1995, p. 13; Kellerman, 1995, pp. 138-139). This will ultimately affect our conceptual vision of the world, which is –by definition- culturally-determined.

What does all this lead to? Given that pragmatic and conceptual aspects of language are culture-specific and that each culture –precisely because it is unconsciously learnt- tends to regard its world view as universal (Cordonnier, 1995, p. 13), both pragmatic and conceptual aspects must be regarded by the L2 learner as intrinsically transferable. This might be why what we call “pragmatic” and “conceptual” transfer behave differently if compared to general CLI as presented hitherto.

The different domains that are affected by culture and –therefore- susceptible of being transferred are represented in the following diagram:

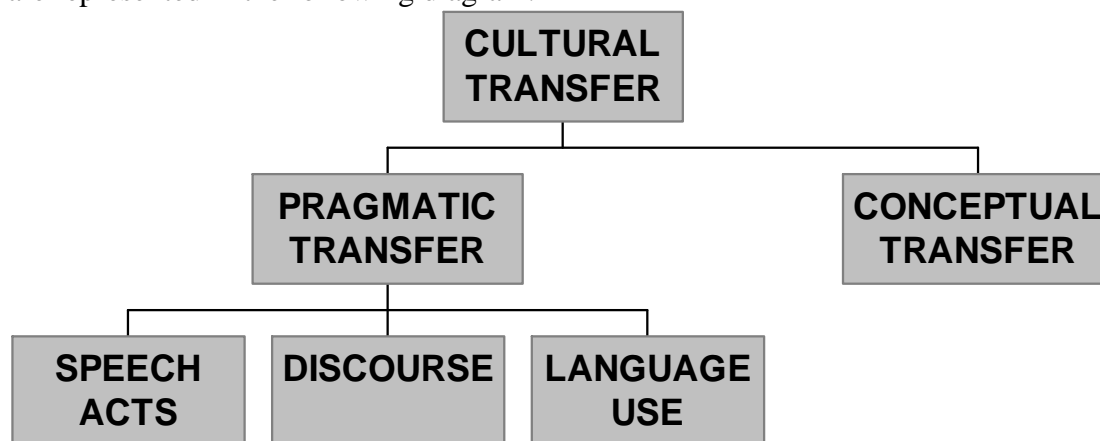


Fig 1: Transferable culture-related areas

This said, we will now deal with the two remaining aspects, that is discourse and conceptual transfer.<sup>18</sup>

Although studies in –specially written- discourse are badly needed (Atkinson, 1991, p. 57), experts generally admit that discourse transfer cannot be obviated (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1996, pp. 397-400), since written discourse conventions are **socially** ratified solutions “to a past or present co-ordination problem of written communication” (Atkinson, 1991, p. 61) and, therefore, when it comes to cross-cultural communication, such conventions are very frequently unknown by the L2 speaker, thus affecting communication.

Discourse features –which range from cohesion and distribution of information to register or level of usage- are important because –as Atkinson (1991) points out- they have three main functions: cognitive (the reader immediately makes up what kind of text s/he is in front of; moreover, these conventions make it easier for him/her to process the information), social (these are conventions of social behavior, sometimes established by true institutions, in order to facilitate communication between its members and to exclude strangers) and textual (which condition coherence) (p. 63-68).

Needless to say, discourse convention variation depends on the distance existing between the two cultures involved. As an example, it could be argued that, in general, the discourse features of English –as presented for example in Kobayashi & Rinnert (1996)- do not differ much from those of Spanish, which is only to be expected, since English or British culture is far closer to a Spaniard than, say, that of India. However, we are still talking about two different cultures; consequently, there must be some differences between them. In this regard, it can be quite safely stated that, generally speaking, English is more dependent on implicit connectors than Spanish is. Some other aspect that is worth mentioning here is that English prefers syntactic simplicity, generally avoiding subordination and long paragraphs. Most frequently, this is not noticed by the L2 learner, who –when writing in his/her L2 or even translating- does not generally change the sentence boundaries in the target text even when this may result in artificial L2 output (Schweda Nicholson, 1995, p. 45).

As for conceptual transfer, we had better start by recalling our conception of language as a sieve through which our experience of the world is filtered. Kellerman (1995, pp. 139-141) points out that there are authors who claim that behind language and structural differences there exist cognitive differences. On the other hand, others add that, since this underlying cognitive system is largely unconscious, it is transferred when the speaker learns an L2 (Kellerman, 1995, p. 139-141). This kind of transfer –which we insist on calling “conceptual” - is now quite widely accepted (Nickel, 1995, p. 243; Ramiro *et al.*, 1996, pp. 102ff).<sup>19</sup> Kellerman (1995) saw that it does not seem to be governed by the same principles governing general CLI, which made him propose what he called the “Transfer to Nowhere” Principle<sup>20</sup> as a complement to Andersen’s “Transfer to

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<sup>18</sup> We will briefly deal with the third component, i.e. what we have referred to as “language use”, a generic term by which we mean how a given language imposes certain combinations, a certain word order... on certain occasions for no apparent reason. Other possibilities are apparently grammatical but no native speaker would ever use them. Collocations, for example, would perfectly fit into this definition of language use. So would expressions of the kind “black and white” (why not “white and black”?), “tea or coffee”, “bacon and eggs”...

<sup>19</sup> It must be said that the different authors mentioned above are not consistent as regards the terminology they use. Thus, some refer to “cultural” transfer, whereas others talk about “conceptual transfer”, although in a far more restricted sense than ours. In any event, we will keep our distribution and terminology for we consider that it provides a clearer insight into the multiple aspects upon which culture exerts its influence.

<sup>20</sup> “[T]his principle does not so much refer to differences in grammatical form as to differences in the way languages predispose their speakers to conceptualize experience” (Kellerman, 1995, p. 137).



Somewhere” Principle (137). However, we have already argued that such peculiarities are not exclusive to conceptual transfer but characteristic of cultural transfer in general.

Conceptual transfer can materialize in many different ways. Kellerman (1995) focuses on how languages encode motion events (pp. 138-139). Thus, he claims that Spanish, for example, lacking the large number of locative particles existing in, say, English and German, tends to favor more extended analyses of motion events, a tendency which will be easily noticed in the L2 output produced by a Spanish speaker. He also mentions the problems arising when a given language lacks a word to explain a given concept. Königs & Kaufmann (1996) go further and mention that sometimes a given concept is non-existent in another culture (e.g. Sp. “chorizo”; Eng. “marmite”) (p. 18). We could also include here those cases in which terms from different languages refer to the same reality even when their scope is different -e.g. the well-known case of the various names the Inuit people have to refer to different types of what we generally know as “snow” (Mott, 1993, p. 31).

Authors such as Danesi (1995) claim that conceptual transfer, specially in the field of what he terms “metaphorical competence”, through which native speakers frequently encode utterances of the type “I don’t quite get the point of your idea”, according to which the abstract concept “idea” is presented as if it were a geometrical object, may be the ultimate reason why L2 learners, proficient though they may be, might never reach native-speaker standards (pp. 222-223). Although the convenience of maintaining such an extreme position is certainly doubtful, the obvious importance of conceptual transfer must be unambiguously stressed.

### **Concluding Remarks**

As we have seen, transfer or CLI applies to all areas of language, including those which have only very recently been first proved eligible for it. As regards the latter, we have adopted the label “cultural transfer” in an attempt to achieve a higher degree of generalization and to account for some apparent irregularities. Cultural aspects are by default wrongly perceived as universally applicable and this explains the high number of occurrences of what we have called cultural transfer when such high numbers clearly do not follow from the same principles that seem to govern other types of transfer in that (1) proficiency in purely linguistic aspects does not seem to diminish cultural transfer; and (2) cultural transfer seems to be independent of how close or distant the two cultural systems involved are.

It follows from above that transfer studies still have much to say. It is true that transfer can no longer be seen as the only cause of error affecting the L2 learner’s output. Nonetheless, CLI plays a substantial role in this output, a fact that has to be duly acknowledged.

Consequently, transfer studies are far from dead. Some areas for further research include transfer involving non-European languages and the relationship of transfer and comprehension, not forgetting the role played by transfer in child bilingualism (Odlin, 1989, p. 156; Argyri, 2003).

Some contrastive and error analysis, therefore, can still be of much use in the difficult task of trying to shed some new light on the complex phenomena that surround SLA (Beacco, 1993, pp. 60-61; Nickel, 1995, pp. 242-243). The creation of computerized learner corpora has undoubtedly been a step forward in this matter, since it is a great help in detecting and systematically classifying errors, appreciating both over- and underuse and measuring more accurately the extent to which the learner’s IL results from the controversial though certainly existing, unavoidable CLI.



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