

FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF LANGUAGE CONTACT

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Abstract

When it comes to foreign language teaching, what is inevitable, apart from the plethora of methods, is language contact. In my opinion, awareness of language contact on the part of the teacher is without doubt necessary irrespective of learners' level and needs. This modest paper adduces examples as a result of language contact on different linguistic levels, offers reasons as to why such examples have occurred and aims at proposing how such examples could be used by teachers to increase the effectiveness of foreign language teaching.

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Introduction

In the preface to one of the reprints of Weinreich's classic *Languages in contact*, André Martinet (1968, p. vii) writes that "... a linguistic community is *never* homogenous and hardly ever self-contained." (emphasis in original). He (1968, p. vii) continues by claiming that "... linguistic diversity begins next door, nay, at home and within one and the same man." No doubt, these are true words. Thus, foreign language teaching can be seen as an environment which lacks homogeneity and is suitable for studying language contact.

This paper is organised around examples that I have observed while teaching English. An attempt is made to focus on instances that seem to me to have received little or no attention but the analysis of which I believe could contribute to increasing the quality of foreign language teaching. The examples are not classified based on their frequency of occurrence (in my own teaching experience); rather, the primary criterion is the scholarly attention, or lack thereof, previously paid to them. The second criterion is introduced for the sake of convenience: the examples are grouped into different linguistic levels: phonetics, morphology, and syntax and intonation.

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The examples discussed are not confined to the interference between Bulgarian and English alone. Whenever deemed appropriate, other languages, which I believe have participated in the process of interference, are included.

It follows from the reasoning above that this is a practical paper in the sense that it is based on my teaching experience. The idea, however, is not to argue against any theoretical framework in the fields of language acquisition or contact linguistics. Rather, theoretical approaches are used to account as conclusively as possible for the examples discussed. In other words, the starting point is what practice has shown, and not what theory has prescribed. Theoretical models, though, are used whenever found necessary for the analysis of the material.

The analysis of the examples serves as support for the main line of argument, namely that awareness of such – and similar – contact-induced examples on the part of the teacher could result in a higher quality of foreign language teaching. The paper suggests how the teacher could possibly use such instances of interference.

Grouping of linguistic levels

For the purposes of this paper, the linguistic levels are grouped on the basis of a traditional approach: phonetics, morphology, and syntax and intonation. The list is not exhaustive; it is intended to help organise the examples. Phonetics and intonation are treated separately. The pronunciation of individual words is discussed in the subsection on phonetics. The level of grammar is divided into morphology and syntax, the latter given a separate subsection together with intonation. Putting syntax and intonation together is not a novel approach and is justifiable due to the examples discussed, which show a close relation between the two. Theoretically, a lot of studies have adopted a syntactic approach to intonation, for example Halliday (1967), Penchev (Пенчев, 1980). A recent study on the place of intonation in the level organisation of language, more specifically syntax, is Phillipov (2019).

Phonetics

Usually, little attention is paid to pronunciation. One of the reasons is perhaps that there is no meaning associated with individual sounds or syllables. Meaning is associated with the level of grammar. As Halliday (2014, p. 22) has it, “Grammar is the central processing unit of language, the powerhouse where meanings are created;”

As for transcription, the International Phonetic Alphabet is used. The abstract phonological level is indicated by slants. Phonetic detail, though kept to a minimum, is unavoidable, and is indicated by square brackets. The triangular

colon – “:” – is used to mark length. The examples in (1) represent, in my opinion, a category that is definitely worthy of discussion:

(1) go [gɔ:], spoke [spɔ:k], drove [drɔ:v], hope [hɔ:p], came [kɛ:m], name [nɛ:m]

These are examples that I have heard from two adult learners who have produced these forms more than once and independently of each other. Both have Bulgarian as their mother tongue, and one of them also speaks Turkish. These forms clearly illustrate a situation of language contact between Bulgarian and English. Since diphthongs are not the most frequent vowels in Bulgarian, these learners replace the second element of the diphthong – /ʊ/ or /ɪ/, respectively – by lengthening the first element, which is an example of compensatory lengthening. To me, the intriguing part is that these learners seem to know on some abstract level that the vowels in these monosyllabic words require two slots (technically X-positions or moras) and behave accordingly by producing a long or lengthened vowel. Two X-positions are assigned to long vowels or diphthongs (see, for example, Trubetzkoy, 1939; Giegerich, 1992).

It is difficult, however, to generalise. The only reasonable generalisation is that all words are monosyllabic and all syllable positions are filled: the onset, the peak, and the coda. But there are a lot of counterexamples, which outnumber the compensatory lengthening cases: cake, make, take, save, to name just a few; and they are always pronounced with a diphthong. Despite the disproportionate number of counterexamples, I have observed that both sets of words have been fairly stable over time for both learners.

The examples in (2) illustrate interference at the sublevel of phonotactics. In all three examples, learners have pronounced a voiceless velar fricative [x] due to contact with Bulgarian.

(2) technology [tex'nɒlədʒi], chronology [xrə'nɒlədʒi], yacht [jaxt]

The Bulgarian counterparts do have a voiceless velar fricative. That is, in Bulgarian the voiceless velar fricative is permissible in the coda of the syllable (technology, yacht) and in the syllable onset even if followed by another consonant (chronology). However, Present-Day English has no such sound. Instead, English has a glottal fricative /h/ found in syllable onsets only and not accompanied by other sounds in the onset position. The glottal fricative is not found in Bulgarian, which is the reason why it is replaced by other phonetically similar fricatives such as the voiceless palatal one [ç] or the voiceless velar one [x].

The next set of examples shows voicing which leads to ease of articulation. The voiceless fricative /s/ is pronounced as voiced [z].

(3) inclusive [m'klu:zɪv], exclusive [ɪk'sklu:zɪv], increasing [ɪn'kri:zɪŋg]

The reasons why these words have /s/ are historical and do not concern us here. The explanation as to why most Bulgarian learners whom I have taught English pronounce [z] is in my opinion twofold. First, these learners maybe believe that the letter <s> is pronounced voiced when between two vowel letters. And there are numerous examples that support such a belief (season, reason, cousin, etc.). Second, less articulatory effort is necessary when pronouncing [z] between two vowels, i.e. in a voiced environment. Vocal fold vibration is not interrupted because the fricative is voiced. But if learners had the voiceless counterpart, this means that the vocal folds cease to vibrate during the pronunciation of [s], which makes the pronunciation of the words more difficult.

As can be expected, ease of articulation can be combined with influence from another language. In (4), the examples show various factors at play.

(4) Old English geseon (to see) [je'zeon], houses ['haʊsɪz], rising ['raɪsɪŋ], Old English gewald (control, c.f. wield) [je'vald]

In the case of geseon, ease of articulation, as discussed above, is combined with German influence. In German, the letter <s> represents a voiced fricative in intervocalic contexts. I have taught History of the English language on a part-time basis and when reading or transcribing, students who have studied German (which is structurally very similar to Old English) have pronounced a voiced fricative for <s> between vowels. The next two words, houses and rising, represent a process, though a rare one, opposite to ease of articulation. I believe that the [s] in houses is due to the singular form which has the voiceless fricative. I have heard rising with [s] by a Danish colleague and other speakers whose mother tongue is Danish. Again, this the opposite of ease of articulation, but there is a good reason for the use of the [s]: there is no phoneme /z/ in Danish (see, for example, Basbøll, 2005). So speakers of the language find it difficult to pronounce it. In gewald, /w/ is pronounced or transcribed as [z] by most students of Old English, due to how the letter is pronounced in German.

Morphology

This subsection discusses one example of German-English interference and also pays attention to a situation where no signs of interference are observable.

(5) Yesterday have I done it.

In this case, students transfer the usage of the German Perfekt (structurally similar to the English Present Perfect) and use it for expressing definite time reference. Such a usage is typical of the German construction but at variance with the English counterpart. I have observed this example, and similar ones, most often when students have German as their first foreign language and when their German is better than their English.

The sentence in (5) presupposes intense contact in the speakers' minds. I think it corresponds roughly to *more intense contact* according to the borrowing scale offered by Thomason and Kaufman (1988). I refer to a borrowing scale and intensity of contact here because borrowing, so to speak, the position of the definite article could be given around the same amount of intensity. In English and German, the definite article is preposed, i.e. it precedes the word it makes definite. In Bulgarian, the definite article follows the word and is attached to the word in question. Nowhere have I found, say, a sentence, or an utterance, in which *the* follows the word. This observation seems unnecessary to deal with because the opposite is hard to imagine. But it is also hard to imagine that the Present Perfect, under the influence of the German Perfekt, is used for definite reference in the past.

Syntax and intonation

There are cases in which the foreign language exercises influence on the mother tongue. One of the two speakers who have independently of each other pronounced the words in (1) has insisted on her belief that *имам закуска* is natural Bulgarian. Again, I would say that *more intense contact*, or at least so, is the reason for this example.

Example (5) also shows verb-second word order, yet another example of negative transfer. In German main clauses, the verb occupies second position, and this is incorrectly used by some learners of English who in most cases have German as their first foreign language.

As for intonation, I will try to touch upon very specific examples. If in the sentence *He teaches English* we place an accent on the final word, this means that the sentence can be an answer to: *What does he do?* or *What does he teach?* In the case of the first question, both *teaches* and *English* are informative and could be accented. However, an accent on *teaches* is optional: the accent on *English* also makes *teaches* informative. This is known as focus projection. In English, in subject-verb-object sentences projection is possible and experimentally proven (see Gussenhoven, 1983, among others). As for Bulgarian, projection is less studied. Following the design of Gussenhoven's (1983) experiments, Dimitrov (2020)

arrives at results according to which the Bulgarians that participated in the experiment made use of focus projection when reading the English sentences only when the distance between the potential accent on the verb and the accent on the object is either zero or one syllable. This could be under the influence of Bulgarian where the same informants resorted to projection in the same circumstances: zero or one syllable between the accents. Thus, projection could be related to fluency in a foreign language teaching context.

Conclusion

All interference examples that were discussed can be summarised by a general principle which Thomason (2003, p. 691) presents thus: "... if people who are not fluent speakers of A introduce features into A from another language, B, the first interference features (and usually the most common ones overall) will not be lexical, but rather phonological and syntactic. Morphological features may also be introduced under this condition;"

It is clear that all the examples apart from the intonation ones have been produced by learners who are far from fluent. The projection examples presuppose fluency. If the verb is not accented, then an accent on the object suffices to mark both constituents as informative. This in turn means that the verb and the object form one phrase and there is a very short pause between the two, which is a sign of fluency. If the learners are not advanced, they will perhaps have a longer pause between the verb and the object, thus two phrases, with both verb and object accented.

What can the teacher do with such examples of interference? The first thing is that the teacher should be able to recognise interference. Then, if the learners are adults, and all examples above are by adults, he/she can try to explain why the learners have produced a particular form or structure. Explanations should be as learner-friendly as possible. This piece of advice appears of little value but I have noticed that most of the examples cited above are very persistent and it is difficult for learners to correct themselves. When I have tried explaining, it has worked most, not all, of the time. This does not mean that having explained why something is incorrect, I can expect consistent corrections on the part of the learners. Changing habits like these interference-based examples requires time and effort but I believe it is worth trying.

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