Effects of the Second Language on the First

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SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION 3
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Edited by
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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Effects of the Second Language on the First/Edited by Vivian Cook.
Second Language Acquisition: 3
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Language and languages–Study and teaching–Psychological aspects.
I. Cook, V.J. (Vivian James). II. Second language acquisition
P53.7 .E37 2003
418–dc21 2002015681

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 1-85359-633-7 (hbk)
ISBN 1-85359-632-9 (pbk)

Multilingual Matters Ltd
UK: Frankfurt Lodge, Clevedon Hall, Victoria Road, Clevedon BS21 7HH.
USA: UTP, 2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, NY 14150, USA.
Canada: UTP, 5201 Dufferin Street, North York, Ontario M3H 5T8, Canada.
Australia: Footprint Books, PO Box 418, Church Point, NSW 2103, Australia.

Typeset by Wordworks Ltd.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by the Cromwell Press Ltd.

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the contributors who gave their time and support, first to the workshop out of which this volume arose, then to the preparation and writing of their chapters. I would like to thank the following who helped me by looking at various parts of the book: Panos Athanasopoulos, Jean-Marc Dewaele, Roger Hawkins, Batia Laufer and Andrew Radford. And finally no book of mine would get written if not for the music of people such as Wayne Shorter, Django Bates and Max Roach.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: The Changing L1 in the L2 User's Mind

VIVIAN COOK

In 1953 Ulrich Weinreich talked about interference as 'those instances of deviation from the norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language' (Weinreich, 1953: 1). This fits with everybody's common-sense belief that your first language (L1) has an effect on your second language (L2). The foreign accents we hear confirm this every day; an English speaker can tell whether someone is French or Japanese after a few words of English. In the fifty years since Weinreich's book, there has been extensive research into how the learning and use of a second language is affected by the first language, whether conceived as Contrastive Analysis, transfer, cross-linguistic influence, resetting of parameters or in many other ways.

Yet few people seemed to notice that Weinreich's definition concerned deviation from *either* language. As well as the first language influencing the second, the second language influences the first. Perhaps this effect is less detectable in our everyday experience: only complex instrumental analysis of a Spanish speaker's accent in Spanish will reveal whether the speaker also knows English. It becomes blatant only when the first language starts to disappear, for instance when a speaker brings more and more L2 words into his or her first language.

This volume is perhaps the first book to be devoted only to the effects of the second language on the first, sometimes called 'reverse' or 'backward' transfer. It arose out of an invitational workshop held in Wivenhoe House in 2001, at which all the papers included in this volume were delivered, apart from two (Porte, Chapter 6; Cook *et al*., Chapter 10). By using a variety of perspectives, methodologies and languages, the research reported here shows that the first language of people who know other languages differs from that of their monolingual peers in diverse ways, with consequences for second language acquisition research, linguistics and language teaching. The range of contributions shows the extent to which this question

impinges not only on all the areas of language from vocabulary to pragmatics, but also on a variety of contemporary approaches currently being developed by second language acquisition (SLA) researchers.

The book is intended for researchers in second language acquisition research and bilingualism, students and teachers around the world. The breadth of the contributions in terms of countries, languages, aspects of language and theories means that it relates to most SLA courses at some point, whether at undergraduate or postgraduate level.

This introduction provides some background to the different contributions in this volume. It tries not to steal their thunder by anticipating their arguments and conclusions, but provides a more personal overview, with which of course not all of the writers will be in complete accord. It relies in part on a summary overview of issues provided to the writers by Batia Laufer after the conference. It does not attempt to deal with the vast areas of language transfer from L1 to L2 or with the field of language attrition, covered in such classic texts as Odlin (1989) or Weltens *et al*. (1986).

Multi-competence

For me, and for many of the contributors, the question of L2 effects on the L1 arose out of the notion of multi-competence. Initially the term was used almost as a convenience. While 'interlanguage' had become the standard term for the speaker's knowledge of a second language, no word existed that encompassed their knowledge of *both* the second language *and* their first: on the one hand the L1, on the other the interlanguage, but nothing that included both. Hence 'multi-competence' was introduced to mean 'knowledge of two or more languages in one mind' (Cook, 1991). For convenience we will mostly talk about 'second language' and bilingualism here, but this does not preclude multiple languages and multilingualism.

Since the first language and the other language or languages are in the same mind, they must form a language super-system at some level rather than be completely isolated systems. Multi-competence then raised questions about the relationship between the different languages in use. How do people code-switch fluently from one language to another? How do they 'gate out' one language while using the other (Lambert, 1990)? How do they manage more than one pragmatic and phonological system? Multi-competence also raised questions about cognition. Does an L2 user have a single set of ideas in the mind, more than one set of ideas, a merged set from different languages, or a new set of ideas unlike the sum of its parts? And multi-competence also led inevitably to questions about acquisition. What roles do the first language and the other language or

languages play in the creation of knowledge of the second or later languages?

Multi-competence led me in particular to a re-valuing of the concept of the native speaker (Cook, 1999). While the concept of interlanguage had seemed to establish the second language as an independent language system, in effect SLA research still treated the L2 system in an L2 user as an approximation to an L1 system in someone else (i.e. a monolingual L1 user). SLA research methods compared knowledge of L2 syntax against the knowledge of native speakers (Cook, 1997). Whether L2 learners had access to Universal Grammar (UG) was seen as a matter of whether they learnt the same grammars as monolingual native speakers – 'slightly over half of the non-native speakers typically exhibit the correct UG-based judgements on any given UG effect' (Bley-Vroman *et al*., 1988: 24). Whether age affected L2 learning was seen in terms of how close people came to monolingual native speakers – 'whether the very best learners actually have native-like competence' (Long, 1990: 281). Whether they had an accent was a matter of how native-like they were – 'the ultimate goal – perhaps unattainable for some – is, nonetheless, to "sound like a native speaker" in all aspects of the language' (González-Nueno, 1997: 261). The independence of interlanguage was largely illusory, since the norm against which the L2 user was compared was almost universally the native speaker, whether overtly or covertly.

The arguments against the native-speaker standard have been mounting over the past ten years. Let us first define the native speaker as 'a monolingual person who still speaks the language they learnt in childhood' (Cook, 1999). This combines the priority of the language in the development of the individual and the continuity of use by the individual with the usual simplifying assumption in linguistics that native speakers are monolingual. It does not preclude the possibility of a person being a native speaker of more than one language, if he or she acquired them simultaneously while a child. By this definition, however, it is impossible for an L2 user to become a native speaker – one reason why so many L2 users think of themselves as 'failures' and so many SLA researchers treat them in the same way: 'learner's language is deficient by definition' (Kasper & Kellerman, 1997: 5).

The main arguments against the use of native speakers as the norm against which L2 users should be measured are as follows:

The rights of L2 users

One group of human beings should not judge other people as failures for not belonging to their group, whether in terms of race, class, sex or

language. People should be measured by their success at being L2 users, not by their failure to speak like native speakers. The object of acquiring a second language should be to become an L2 user, not to pass for a native speaker. SLA research has to do justice to its constituency – people who know two languages – not subordinate them to people who know only one language. The L2 user is a person in his or her own right (Cook, 1997; Grosjean, 1989), not an imitation of someone else.

The numbers of L2 users

It is hard to arrive at precise figures about the numbers of monolingual native speakers in the world. It is slightly easier in reverse to find some numbers for people who are learning or using second languages. Taking English as an example, the British Council (1999) claims that a billion people are studying English in the world, including all children over 12 in Japan. English is used everywhere for certain purposes (such as academic journals and the Internet); many people communicate with each other through English who have never met a native speaker (for example business people doing international deals). Some countries where English is hardly spoken at all natively (such as Singapore) deliberately use it as a 'first language'; others (such as Nigeria, Cameroon, India and Pakistan) employ it as an official language. Turning away from English, most people in, say, Cape Town, Islamabad or Brussels switch from one language to one or more other languages in their daily lives. Monolingual native speakers are far from typical of human beings and are increasingly hard to find in the world (as we shall see in some of the contributions here), even in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. While it may be hard to prove that L2 users actually make up the majority of human beings, they at least form a very substantial group.

The usual resort in SLA and bilingualism research is to see the L2 standard in terms of the balanced bilingual or 'ambilingual'. Toribio (2001: 215), for instance, defines a balanced bilingual as 'a speaker who has native-like ability in two languages' and sees the standard against which an L2 user is measured as being 'an idealised bilingual's native speaker competence'. While the construct of native-speaker competence may be appropriate in first language acquisition as all human beings attain it, the concept of idealised bilingual competence can be extremely misleading since so few L2 users attain it. How many people have native-like skills in both languages in a reasonable range of their contexts of language use? They are the exception rather than the norm among L2 users, defined by their ability to function like native speakers in two languages not by their whole language ability to use two languages. The use of a native-speaker measure

that is virtually impossible to achieve, even when disguised as the double-monolingual native speaker of the balanced bilingual, will blind us in the future (as it has done in the past) to the overwhelming majority of L2 users who are far from native-like across two languages. First language acquisition research is about what most people achieve, not about the abilities of monolingual Shakespeares. Second language acquisition research should equally be about what typical L2 users achieve, not about bilingual Nabokovs. Hence I now try to avoid the word 'bilingual' in discussing people who know two languages, not only because of the plethora of confusing definitions, but also because they usually invoke a Platonic ideal of the perfect bilingual rather than the reality of the average person who uses a second language for the needs of his or her everyday life.

The distinctive characteristics of L2 users

If L2 users are different kinds of people, the interest of SLA research lies in discovering their characteristics, not their deficiencies compared with native speakers. In Cook (2002a: 4–8) the characteristics of L2 users are stated as four propositions:

(1) the L2 user has other uses for language than the monolingual;
(2) the L2 user's knowledge of the second language is typically not identical to that of a native speaker;
(3) the L2 user's knowledge of his or her first language is in some respects not the same as that of a monolingual;
(4) L2 users have different minds from those of monolinguals.

This book is thus primarily an expansion and justification of proposition (3) that L2 users differ from monolingual native speakers in their knowledge of their first languages. Inevitably it simultaneously provides further information about the distinctive nature of the L2 users' uses for language, their knowledge of their second language, and their minds.

Multi-competence led to seeing the L2 user as a person in his or her own right, not as an approximation to a monolingual native speaker. This is why I prefer the term 'L2 user' to 'L2 learner' in recognition of the person's ability to use the language rather than remaining a learner in perpetuity, always recognising that the same person may be both 'learner' and 'user' in different aspects of his or her language identity.

The belief in the native-speaker standard is one reason why the effects of the L2 on the L1 were so little studied. If the L1 of the L2 user were different from that of monolingual native speakers, SLA research that used the native speaker as the target would be based on shifting sand. As argued in Cook (2002a), a comparison of the L2 user with the native speaker may be

legitimate provided any difference that is discovered is not treated as a matter of deficiency. Persistent use of this comparison prevents any unique features of the L2 user's language being observed, since only those that occur in natives will be searched for. For many years this led, for example, to a view that code-switching in adults or children was to be deplored rather than commended; Genesee (2002), for instance discusses how young children's code-switching was interpreted as a sign of confusion rather than as skilful L2 use.

While this argument has been couched in terms of multi-competence, this is not the only approach for dealing with the effects of the L2 on the L1. In this volume we find general models such as the dynamic model of multilingualism of Jessner (Chapter 12), the Common Underlying Conceptual Base (CUCB) of Kesckes and Papp (Chapter 13), Karmiloff-Smith's Representational Redescription Model, and Bialystok's Analysis/Control Model (Murphy and Pine, Chapter 8), and variants on the Chomskyan Minimalist Program used by Balcom (Chapter 9) and Satterfield (Chapter 11). Most of these share the assumption that at some level the L2 user's mind is a whole that balances elements of the first and second language within it. Furthermore, as Satterfield argues, this is essentially the normal state that all human beings can reach, and so must form the basis for *any* account of human language. If monolingualism is taken as the normal condition of humanity, L2 users can be treated as footnotes to the linguistics of monolingualism. With most people in the world learners or users of second languages, however, monolinguals can be considered the exception, not only statistically but also in terms of human potential.

The Relationship of the First and Second Languages in the Mind: The Integration Continuum

What could the logical relationships actually be between the two or more languages in the mind? One possibility is that the languages are in watertight compartments, seen in the separation model in Figure 1.1, akin to the idea of coordinate bilingualism associated with Weinreich (1953); the L2 user speaks either one language or the other, with no connection between the different languages in the mind. The early SLA research controversies about the natural order of acquisition asserted a separation model in which the L2 interlanguage developed without drawing on the L1 to any great extent (e.g. Dulay & Burt, 1980). The separation model forms the basis for much language teaching methodology that teaches without reference to the first language and discourages its use in the classroom, hoping that the students will build up a new language system with no links

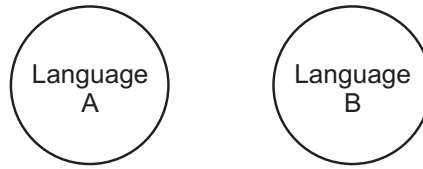

Figure 1.1 Separation model

to the first. This model sees no point to discussing the effects of the L2 on the L1, as they do not exist. Separation does not, by the way, imply anything one way or the other about universals of language whether language design (Hockett, 1960) or innate properties of the mind (Chomsky, 2000). Both separate languages might be similar because they are governed by the same constraints and potentials as any other language acquired by a human being.

The opposite possibility is that the languages form a single system, shown in the integration model in Figure 1.2. In the area of vocabulary some people have claimed that, rather than two separate mental lexicons, the L2 user has a single lexicon where words from one language are stored alongside words from the other (Caramazza & Brones, 1980). In terms of phonology some have found that L2 users have a single merged system for producing speech, neither L1 nor L2 (Williams, 1977). Integration does not say that L2 users are unable to control what they do; they can still choose which language to use in a given context, just as a monolingual can choose which style or register to adopt in a particular situation. In this model, the discussion is not about the influence of L2 on L1, but about the balance between elements of a single language system. Indeed there is little point to counting 'languages' in a single mind – L1, L2, L3, L*n* – as they form a single system.

Clearly neither of these two models can be absolutely true: total separation is impossible since both languages are in the same mind; total integration is impossible since L2 users can keep the languages apart. These

Figure 1.2 Integration model