Cross-linguistic Similarity in Foreign Language Learning

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Håkan Ringbom

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Learning, including language learning, is based on prior knowledge. When you learn something new, such as a foreign language, you try to connect the new elements to whatever linguistic and other knowledge you may have. Both intralinguistic and cross-linguistic knowledge are relevant to the learner of another language. The relevance of intralinguistic TL (target language) knowledge largely depends on the stage of learning: it increases as learning progresses. How relevant prior cross-linguistic knowledge is primarily depends on the relationships that can be established between the TL and L1 (first language). If you learn a language closely related to your L1, prior knowledge will be consistently useful, but if the languages are very distant, not much prior knowledge is relevant. What matters to the language learner is language proximity, i.e. similarities, not its negative counterpart, language distance, i.e. differences. Presence or absence of cross-linguistic similarities accounts for the differences in effort and time existing between learning a language close to the L1 and learning a totally unrelated language.

While language learners are primarily concerned with what similarities they can establish between TL and L1 or any other language they already know, linguists have tended to focus on analysing differences between languages and uses of language. Variability is a key concept in various linguistic contexts, as de Saussure already noted in his statement '*Dans la langue il n'y a que des differences*'. It is certainly true that 'the study of SLA requires an understanding of variation and the nature of the constraints on variable systems over time' (Romaine, 2003: 431). When research has focused upon similarities across languages, the idea has more often than not been to pave the way for a totally different area of theoretical linguistic studies, that of language universals. But the learner's point of view differs from that of the researcher. Learners, consciously or not, do not look for differences, they look for similarities wherever they can find them. In their search for ways of facilitating their learning task they make use of intra-lingual similarities, which are perceived from what they have already learned of the TL. At early stages of learning, when the TL knowledge is insignificant, L1 is the main source for perceiving linguistic similarities, but languages other than the L1 may also play an important part. Many

previous studies, especially of Asian or African learners learning English or French, have shown that learners rely on their knowledge of an L2 (second language) related to the TL much more than on their unrelated L1. Perceiving and making use of cross-linguistic similarities to existing linguistic knowledge is important in the learner's striving to facilitate the learning task. L1 and other languages known to the learner clearly provide an essential aid, not a troublesome obstacle for learning a new language. As, for example, Hall says (2002: 81), we often underestimate how much learners bring to the learning task. Ausubel's motto for his 1968 book is worth quoting: 'If I had to reduce all of educational psychology to just one principle, I would say this: The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly'. Neuner (1992: 158) makes the same point: 'It is a general and basic law of any kind of learning that we associate new elements, items and structures with elements, items and structures already stored in our memory'.

The use of cross-linguistic similarities, i.e. transfer, is an integral part of how people learn languages. It can be manifested in various ways, and we need to study these in depth. There is a fair amount of literature on transfer, but the scope of transfer studies needs to be widened. Transfer has mostly been discussed in connection with Error Analysis, where learners' L1-based deviations (especially syntactic ones) from the norm of the TL have been easy to spot, while the ways in which L1-knowledge has facilitated learning are much more difficult to notice. Material so far provided mainly by errors should, however, be used for assessing the underlying processes in different circumstances, taking into account how the perception of similarities affect learning. In SLA (second language acquisition) research, the process of learning has been almost wholly seen as learning for production.

One of the aims of this book is to argue that the concept of second/foreign language learning should be split up into two distinct types of learning: learning for comprehension and learning for production. If comprehension has been discussed at all in SLA research, the three concepts of comprehension, learning and production have rarely been kept sufficiently distinct. There are obvious differences between comprehension and production. We may have learnt to understand a language reasonably well, yet cannot speak or write it. The retrieval mechanisms are simply different. It is not enough to say that we merely need practice to convert our receptive knowledge into productive knowledge: what we need in order to produce the foreign language is to learn to use the underlying mechanism of target language production, and all that this entails. Practice, of course, is one, but not the only, necessary component in this process. The mechanism

of production is different from the one we learnt for comprehending the language, and clear manifestations of the differences are provided by how learners use cross-linguistic similarities. In vocabulary studies similarities have been found to be relevant when cognates have been studied, but this topic needs to be seen in relation to other areas in which learners make use of cross-linguistic similarities. Vocabulary acquisition and grammatical studies, which have often been pursued as isolated branches of investigation, need to be brought into closer contact with each other. The different ways in which transfer is manifested in comprehension and production and in the various linguistic areas should be set out more comprehensively than has been done so far.

This study seeks to elucidate the manifold aspects of cross-linguistic similarities and the learner's use of them in comprehension, in learning (both learning for comprehension and learning for production) and in production. The interaction of transfer with other variables in SLA is, however, complex and many more approaches originating from associated linguistic and psychological disciplines are needed to provide a full picture of exactly how similarities, cross-linguistic as well as intralinguistic, affect the learning of a new language.

Most tests of English surveyed in this study have been given to learners in Finland, which is a country exceptionally well suited for comparative investigations of foreign language learning because of the cultural and educational unity of Finnish and Swedish speakers in the country (see below, pp. 34ff.).

This book is a further development of ideas briefly put forward in my previous book from 1987 and some later articles (Ringbom, 1992, 2005, 2006). It opens with an outline of the different types of cross-linguistic similarities. Chapter 3 deals with L2 comprehension, a relatively neglected area in SLA research. It begins with a survey of some research into comprehension of an unfamiliar language and further describes the language situation in Scandinavia, where speakers of Swedish, Norwegian and Danish can use their own L1 and rely on being generally understood in the neighbour countries. The next two chapters focus on the differences in the use of cross-linguistic similarities in comprehension and production and outline the language situation in present-day Finland. In Chapter 6 the results of various tests of English in Finland are analysed, comparing Finnish and Swedish speakers. Chapters 7 and 8 provide a discussion of how two different types of transfer, item transfer and procedural transfer, are manifested in learner language. The concepts of skill theory and automaticity are briefly commented upon in Chapter 9. Chapter 10 is an account of how foreign language learning develops, beginning with item learning for

comprehension and ending with system learning for production, with the intermediate stages of item learning for production and system learning for comprehension. The last chapters before the conclusion sketch possible consequences for language teaching, and the need for further research.

A subsidiary aim of this book is to provide a survey of research in the learning of English in Finland, making use of available national statistics and also taking into account a comparative international perspective. Information will be given on some relatively unknown Finnish works dealing with transfer-related aspects of foreign language learning in Finland.

Chapter 2

Different Types of Cross-linguistic Similarities

Similarity, Contrast and Zero Relations

Similarity is basic, difference secondary. The search for similarities is an essential process in learning. The natural procedure in learning something new is to establish a relation between a new proposition or task and what already exists in the mind. Chronologically, perception of similarity, something positive, comes first, differences, something negative, come into the picture only if similarities cannot be established. Noordman-Vonk (1979: 51): also has a relevant comment: 'When subjects have to judge whether a certain relation between concepts exists, they first try to find positive evidence for that relation. If this cannot be found, they will try to find evidence that falsifies the relation'. Semantic similarity is thus judged at an earlier stage of the process than semantic difference. Schachter (1983: 102) agrees: 'Normal adults ... tend to look for verification of their hypotheses, not disconfirmation'. We do not establish negative relations until we are sure a positive relation does not exist. However, in order to establish meaningful differences there must be an underlying similarity. As Corder (1973: 234) says, 'In order to compare anything the dimensions or categories used must be applicable to both objects'. James (1980: 169) makes the same point: 'It is only against a background of sameness that differences are significant'. Making use of perceived cross-linguistic as well as intralinguistic similarities facilitates the learning task.

As in all semantic matters, there is no sharp borderline between difference and similarity. They are in different positions on a continuum, where we can discern three cross-linguistic similarity relations: (1) a similarity relation, (2) a contrast relation, and (3) a zero relation.

The similarity relation means that an item or pattern in the TL is perceived as formally and/or functionally similar to a form or pattern in L1 or some other language known to the learner. A natural tendency in learners, especially at early stages of learning, is trying to establish a one-to-one relationship with a unit in another language, usually the L1. 'Word usage in a second language was shown to be strongly influenced by a

semantic equivalence hypothesis which presumes that conceptual patterns and linguistic coding practices in the L1 provide the essential criteria for those in the L2' (Ijaz, 1986: 448; see also, for example, Biskup, 1992; Hasselgren, 1994). Across related languages there will be cognates similar in both form and meaning. Full-scale cross-linguistic similarity of both form and function is, however, rare, except for very closely related languages such as Swedish and Norwegian, which in principle are mutually comprehensible. If there is grammatical congruence, this means fewer problems for the learner. An English learner will find that the noun morphology of Swedish works in much the same way as in his L1: there are only two cases, nominative and genitive. Establishing cross-linguistic similarity relations is particularly relevant for the comprehension of a new language. When both formal and functional similarities can be established, this makes for positive transfer.

Germanic and Romance languages do not generally stand in either a similarity or a zero relation to each other: they tend to have contrast relations. In a contrast relation (cf. James, 1998: 179) the learner perceives a TL item or pattern as in important ways differing from an L1 form or pattern, though there is also an underlying similarity between them. The English learner who is used to a specific third-person ending of the present tense of verbs will notice that German has a host of other personal endings for the verb as well. This means that there are problems for the learner in producing correct verbs forms, but the learner is basically aware of the existence of a system and does not have to expend great effort on learning to understand the functions of endings. Native speakers of English learning a Germanic or Romance target language will encounter both similarities and differences in varying proportions. In other words, there is both positive and negative transfer, but only negative transfer is immediately visible to the researcher. Exactly how differences relate to underlying similarities and to what extent their effect is facilitative or inhibitive is a complex question that needs to be worked out for each individual language relation. As Duskova (1984: 113) says, factors other than merely linguistic ones are also relevant here.

The zero relation does not mean that the learner finds nothing at all that is relevant to L1 as the learning progresses. There are, after all, some linguistic universals common to all languages. But the level of abstraction in these universals is so high that an average language learner cannot easily notice features that a totally different TL has in common with L1. The zero relation merely means that items and patterns in the TL at early stages of learning appear to have little or no perceptible relation to the L1 or any other language the learner knows. The learner's L1 may lack the concepts necessary to perceive fundamental distinctions in the TL. For one thing, it

takes time to understand the details of a totally different TL writing system. The learner starts learning from a platform considerably lower than the starting point for a learner who can relate at least some basic features to elements in L1. A learner who knows only Indo-European languages and starts learning Chinese will find it difficult to relate anything to his previous linguistic knowledge. The zero, or near-zero, relation of Chinese to English poses great difficulties at the early stages of learning. As Singley and Anderson say (1989: 114), 'the worst possible transfer situation is when there is no overlap between two sets of productions, in which case transfer is zero, not negative.' The learner has to spend considerable time figuring out how the new language really works. The magnitude of the learning task 'largely corresponds to the formal linguistic relatedness of the languages in question to the mother tongue' (Corder, 1979: 28). A non-Indo-European language, even if it is using the Roman alphabet, also poses initial problems, as clear similarities are not very easy to notice. Even if a closer inspection may reveal a few parallels (such as the existence of loan-words), lexical similarities tend to refer to low-frequency words not encountered at early stages of learning. Where structural similarities can be found across wholly unrelated languages, they normally need to be pointed out to the learner in an explicit way.

Perceived and 'Objective' Similarity

Kellerman stated in his seminal 1977 paper that cross-linguistic similarity relates to what the learner *perceives* to be similar between the target language and another language, usually the L1. It is not the same as 'objective' similarity. Two attempts to define objective cross-linguistic similarity theoretically are Ard & Homburg (1983: 165ff.), where parameters of form and meaning are set out,[1] and Ellegård, 1978. The criteria used for this have varied, and none of the suggested definitions has made a visible impact on SLA research. Still, it *might* be possible to arrive at a generally accepted procedure to measure language similarity. If such objective cross-linguistic similarity could be established, it would be symmetrical. Perceived similarity, on the other hand, is not necessarily symmetrical, i.e. going both ways, and in this respect it behaves like the related concept of intelligibility. Speakers of language X may find it easier to understand language Y than speakers of language Y to understand language X. Perceived similarity is a fuzzy concept, which may be elucidated if the various ways and the various circumstances in which it is manifested are studied. It is broader in scope and has more variation compared with the similarity analysed by the linguist. It is also more difficult to grasp, as it brings in the dimension of