INTERFERENCE PHENOMENA IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING- SOME OBSERVATIONS FROM ROMANIAN-ENGLISH CONTACT

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Abstract:

    Foreign language learning is the locus of varying degrees of interference from the learner's first language (L1), the product of this influence being called interlanguage. As such, it is important to identify those areas of the L1 which could lead to negative transfers into the target language and thus result in imperfect learning. The present paper is concerned with English learning by speakers of Romanian, and analyses possible L1 retentions resulting from the use of English borrowings that diverge grammatically from their original counterparts. The particular cases described will be those of borrowed words which have undergone a process of conversion, and the use of bilingual verb phrases headed by the Romanian verb 'a face' and containing an English noun.

Keywords: first language, foreign language, interference, negative transfer, borrowing

1. Introduction and literature review

When discussing language learning researchers traditionally make a distinction between second language acquisition, i.e. the learning of a language in natural settings, for instance by immigrants who have to acquire the dominant language of the host community, and foreign language acquisition, i.e. the learning of a foreign language through formal instruction, for example in the classroom. An alternative phrase used to describe the language being acquired is target language (TL). No matter how we choose to call it, it is well known that when learning a foreign or second language, this language may be changed in different ways under the agency of its learners. As Winford states "s*peakers attempting to communicate in a language they are acquiring may resort to various strategies to achieve success. In doing so, they create versions of the TL that differ in many ways from the varieties used by its native speakers". (2003: 208)*

Such developing learner versions of the target language are generically called *interlanguage*, and they result from several underlying mechanisms of creativity the learner may employ. These mechanisms include the use of features from the learner's primary or dominant language, also called substratum influence, various kinds of simplification of the target language structures, and changes that are internal to the interlanguage system. For instance, learners of English may overgeneralize the regular past tense suffix *–ed* to irregular verbs and produce forms such as *leaved* instead of *left*, *buyed* for *bought*, *thinked* for *thought*, while the overgeneralization of the regular plural in *–s* may lead to such forms as *sheeps* for *sheep*, *informations* for *information*, etc.

Features in the first category mentioned above, i.e. influences from the learner's native language, are included under the umbrella term of *interference*, although some writers (Clyne 1972, 2003) use the term *transfer* to describe them, while others (Winford 2003: 210) prefer the more general term *L1 influence* to refer to the results of this process: *L1 influence manifests itself in the form of L1 features that learners introduce into their developing version of the L2, or interlanguage (henceforth IL). Such features might be referred to as "L1 retentions", which constitute a significant input to the restructuring of the IL system.*

The native language features introduced into a speaker's interlanguage or the "L1 retentions", can include words, sounds and sometimes morphemes, as well as syntactic patterns. Thus, sometimes learners resort to the lexical inventory of their mother tongue in order to fill gaps in their target language vocabulary. These influences may be direct, in the form of whole words being transferred, or more indirect, "leading learners to reinterpret TL words in terms of the semantics of similar L1 forms, thus creating new meanings for the former" (Winford 2003: 211), the so called false friends. These various forms of L1 retentions are underlain by the Semantic Equivalence Hypothesis, which claims that "conceptual patterns and linguistic/ semantic coding practices in the L1 provide the essential criteria for those in L2" (Ijaz 1986 quoted in Winford 2003)

As regards the native language influence on the target language syntax, this takes place mostly in the early stages of learning, when learners employ their native language word order to produce utterances in the language they are acquiring. Thomason and Kaufman (1988: 39) also show that interference does not begin with the vocabulary, but with sounds and syntax, and illustrate this idea with an example from Rayfield (1970): the Yiddish spoken by Yiddish-English bilinguals in the United States is characterized by the borrowing of English features, mostly lexical, whereas their English shows more structural interference from their native language.

When a learner's first language and target language do not match each other closely, the various types of retentions described above will result into "imperfect learning", representing forms of "negative transfer", whereas in cases of close match this transfer is positive. This idea was summarized by Weinreich as follows: "*The greater the difference between the systems, i.e. the more numerous the mutually*

exclusive forms and patterns in each, the greater is the learning problem and the potential area of interference". (1968:1)

2. English borrowings in Romanian as a source of interference

The focus of analysis in the present paper will be constituted by English borrowings that have undergone various grammatical changes when adopted into Romanian, for example the conversion of different parts of speech into nouns, the intransitive use of English transitive verbs, or the use of bilingual verb phrases instead of lexical verbs. We believe that these borrowed features can exert a considerable influence on the learning process in situations requiring their use in the target language, as the changes they have suffered can constitute a source of negative transfer and therefore imperfect learning. In particular, the identity of form between the English original and its grammatically altered copy can lead to a particularly strong retention of the L1 form in the target language. For example, unsystematic observation of students' performance has revealed such mistakes as *to do outsourcing* for *to outsource (an activity)* on the model of *a face outsourcing*, or *to have a fresh* for *to have a fresh juice* on the model of *a bea un fresh*. This is why it is important to identify problematic areas which could cause interference. Two main types of borrowings will be investigated in this paper: nouns resulting from the conversion of other speech parts, and verb phrases with the verb "a face" and an English noun.

Part of speech conversion mostly involves the nominal use of English adjectives, adverbs and verbs, which occupy syntactic slots normally reserved to nouns in Romanian. This conversion path is described as common by Romanian linguists, being distinctly connected with the process of borrowing, and identifiable by certain semantic and syntactic marks (Guţu-Romalo (coord.) 2005 I: 134): the use of the definite or indefinite article (examples 1 and 2 below), the subject position (example 3) and the use of these words in prepositional phrases most commonly headed by *de*, but also by other prepositions, *e.g în, cu, prin, pentru, la* (examples 1 and 4-6).

(1). *Această tendinţă de emitere de carduri pentru sectorul de <u>corporate</u>, este mai probabil ca <u>un co-branded</u> cu o companie de telefonie mobilă…*

(2). *Astfel, au fost deja lansate pe piaţă carduri care permit accesarea în continuare a creditelor de consum, prin <u>co-branded-ul</u> Altex Euroline …*

(3). *Nu înseamnă că <u>open-source</u> e dezvoltat numai de cei care vor sa lucreze voluntar.*

(4). *Oamenii care lucrează în<u> outdoor </u>au o deformaţie profesională: se tot învârt prin lume cu capul pe sus, în căutare de locaţii bune.*

(5). *Tariful include: bilet de avion Budapesta Monastir, şapte nopţi cazare cu <u>all-inclusive</u> la hotel…*

(6). *Cele mai bune zone pentru <u>offshore.</u>*

In all these cases, English uses these words only as adjectives, either predicatively after the verb *to be,* or in noun phrases such as *co-branded*

products/services, etc, open-source software/ technologies/ platforms/ systems, etc, outdoor activities/ restaurant/ advertising, etc, all-inclusive holiday/ travel/ package/ price, etc, offshore companies/ sectors, etc. Other borrowings that are used as independent nouns in Romanian and mostly as adjectives or modifying nouns in English include *fresh (fresh juice)*, *greenfield (greenfield investment/plant/project, etc)* but also *investitii greenfield*, *hard (hardware)* and *soft (software)*, *OTC (OTC drugs)*, *second-hand (second-hand clothes/ shops/ etc)*, *wireless (wireless network)*. This situation can make it difficult for students to translate sentences containing these borrowings in the absence of explicit explanations regarding the differences between the two languages. The following examples from *Capital 2005* illustrate such potentially problematic situations.

7. Anul acesta, spre deosebire de anii anteriori, a avut loc un boom al vânzãrilor de limonade, de <u>fresh- uri</u> ….

[This year, unlike the previous years, has seen a boom in the sales of lemonades, fresh juices …]

8. …. nu s-a luat, încã, o decizie în ceea ce priveşte dezvoltarea de <u>green-field-uri</u> pentru generarea energiei electrice…

[… no decision has been made yet regarding the development of greenfield plants for power generation…]

9. Producãtorii de <u>hard</u> au descoperit softul TENDINŢÃ PC - au început sã fie oferite la pachet cu sistemul de operare, antivirusi si jocuri.

[Hardware producers have discovered the TENDINTA PC software ….]

10. Capacitatea de productie a companiei este de pânã la 50.000 de flacoane/schimb, ceea ce înseamnã 7, 5 milioane de cutii de medicamente generice, <u>OTC-uri</u> si suplimente nutritive produse si vândute, anul trecut.

[…….. which means 7.5 million boxes of generic drugs, OTC drugs and food supplements made and sold last year.]

11. Si totusi, de ce majoritatea cumpãrãtorilor de <u>second hand</u> continuã sã meargã în târguri auto pentru a cumpãra masini de ocazie ?

[And still, why do most buyers of <u>secondhand cars</u> continue going to car markets in order to buy cheap cars?]

12. <u>Wireless-ul</u>, sau acest atât de celebru "fãrã fir", este o tehnologie care permite conectarea fãrã cablu a computerelor sau accesoriilor.

[The wireless technology allows the wireless connection of computers and accessories.]

Another strategy for the nominalization of borrowings is the use of verb phrases headed by the verb 'a face' and containing an English noun. 'A face' acts as a dummy verb which carries all the necessary suffixes for tense, mood, person and number, in this way, 'saving' the foreign verb from being inflected. Examples in this respect include: *a face check in (to check–in), a da click (to click), a face download (to download), a face exit (to exit), a face head-hunting (to head-hunt), a face hedging (to*

hedge), etc. In detail, the following table lists some of the most common bilingual verb compounds found in the economic publication *Capital* for the year 2005.

Table 1. Bilingual verb compounds in Capital 2005

a face brainstorming	'to brainstorm'	a face check-in	'to check-in'
a face bungee-jumping	'to bungee-jump'	a face lobby	'to lobby'
a face download	'to download'	a da/ face click	'to click'
a face un refresh	'to refresh'	a face play	'to play'
a face/ a efectua service	'to service'	a face shopping	'to shop'
a face head-hunting	'to head-hunt'	a face snorkel	'to snorkel'
a face hedging	'to hedge'	a face outsourcing	'to outsource'
a face rebound	'to rebound'	a face share	'to share'
a face exit	'to exit'	a face trading	'to trade'
a face design	'to design'	a face snowboard	'to snowboard'
a face tuning	'to tune'	a face dumping	'to dump'
a face update	'to update'		

Other helping verbs can be used with the same function: *a utiliza blogurile (to blog), a cunoaşte un boom / a înregistra un boom (to boom* but also *to see/experience a boom).* Sometimes, Romanian uses only nouns where English can use both nouns and verbs to describe a concept. This is the case with *boom* and *email* used only nominally when borrowed, which could restrict students' awareness of their broader grammatical function in English, thus eliminating sentences such as those marked with an asterisk fromtheir speech:

(13) *Mulţi se aşteptau să fie un mare boom pe piaţa construcţiilor.*

[The constructions market was expected to boom.*

Many people expected a boom on the construction market.

The construction market was expected to see/ experience a boom]

(14) *Am trimis un e-mail şi le-am spus că rămân în fruntea ARBO media din două motive*

[I emailed them and I told them I would continue to run ARBO media for two main reasons…*

I sent them an email and I told them …]

Incorporating borrowings through bilingual verb phrases serves some morphological purposes, namely it eliminates the need to inflect foreign verbs for mood, tense, person and number, as these inflectional suffixes are carried by the dummy verb 'a face'. However, it also eliminates some of the syntactic requirements the borrowing of the corresponding lexical verbs would impose on the sentence. Thus, most of the English verbs are transitive, requiring a direct object, whereas in Romanian

many of the bilingual verb compounds resulting from borrowing are used intransitively. For example, *a face brainstorming* is best rendered by a verb phrase headed by *brainstorm* and a noun acting as the direct object of this verb, *e.g. to brainstorm ideas, solutions*, or *to brainstorm about sth/how to do sth.* Similarly, *a face hedging* should be translated as *to hedge risk/ to hedge against risk*, *a face outsourcing* is rendered as *to outsource an activity/function/service/job*, *etc, a face headhunting* as *to headhunt staff/talent/managers, etc, a face download as to download a file/information/data, etc*, *a face service* as *to service a car/ product, etc.* The following examples from *Capital 2005* illustrate some of these phrases:

(15) *… este o utopie să ceri unei IMM clasică <u>să facă hedging</u> …*

[… it is a utopia to ask a classical SME <u>to hedge (against) risk</u> …]

(16) *…între computerele celor din reţea <u>se face download</u> chiar cu 2 MB pe secundă,…*

[… they <u>download files</u> between network computers at 2 MB per second…]

(17) *Cei de la Halo Interactive cred că este un priviligiu că <u>nu fac outsourcing</u> şi că toate produsele vândute de ei sunt vândute sub brandul firmei…*

[The Halo Interactive people believe that it is a privilege that they <u>do not outsource their activities/ functions</u> …]

(18) *…iar pe aceste teme <u>se fac</u> adevărate <u>brainstorming-uri</u>.*

[… they <u>brainstorm ideas</u> on these topics.

…they have brainstorming sessions on these topics.]

Another potentially problematic area for learners of English is represented by those situations when Romanian uses a prepositional phrase in order to refer to the patient of the action, whereas in English the same function is performed by a direct object. Examples in this respect include *a da click pe ceva (to click something), a face head-hunting pentru cineva (to headhunt somebody), a face design pentru ceva (to design something), etc* :

(19) *Dan Podoabă <u>face tuning</u> pentru maşini mărci Skoda…*

[Dan Podoabă <u>tunes Skoda cars</u> …]

(20) *Pentru antivirusul Kaspersky, <u>facem câte un update</u> la fiecare trei ore.*

[We <u>update the Kaspersky anti-virus</u> every three hours.]

(21) *Aici <u>nu se face design</u> decât pentru mobilier …*

[We only <u>design furniture</u> here …]

(22) *Am ajuns <u>să facem head-hunting</u> pentru un muncitor.*

[We have come to <u>headhunt factory workers</u>.]

Finally, there are cases of intransitive verbs, which have been borrowed as nouns in verb phrases with 'a face', even if in this case no syntactic complications could have arisen from their individual borrowing. These cases should pose fewer problems to Romanian learners of English, as syntactically these phrases do not diverge from the English verbs on which they are copied. Examples include *a face check-in (to check-in), a face lobby (to lobby), a face shopping (to shop* but also *to do*

your shopping), a face snowboard (to snowboard), a face trading (to trade but also *to engage in trading).* :

> (24) <u>*Să faci shopping*</u> *pe bulevardul Magheru în miezul zilei este o adevărată aventură.*
>
> [<u>To shop/ do your shopping</u> on Magheru Boulevard in the middle of the day is quite an adventure.]
>
> (25) *Este mare iubitor al sportului- schiază,* <u>*face snowboard*</u>*, joacă golf,…*
>
> [He is a big sports fan- he skies, <u>snowboards</u>, plays golf, …]
>
> (26) *Acest lucru este un mare avantaj pentru cei care* <u>*fac trading*</u> *utilizând analiza tehnică drept input…*
>
> [This is a great advantage for those who <u>trade</u> using the technical analysis as input…]
>
> (27). *Puteţi* <u>*face check-in*</u> *pentru zborul de întoarcere, dacă este programat în următoarele 24 de ore.*
>
> [You can <u>check-in</u> for the return flight, ….]

3.   Conclusions

It could be argued that the possible errors described in this paper will be more common in the speech of less advanced students of English. As such, an emphasis in teaching on the particular differences between Romanian and English with regard to the use of words borrowed into the former from the latter can increase students' familiarity with such structural mismatches between the two languages and contribute to a better acquisition of English.

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