Investigating distribution patterns of types of transfer across source languages

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Crosslinguistic influence and transfer constitute some of the most central issues in third language acquisition research today. Not only does transfer provide surface evidence of non-selective lexical access in multilingual language processing, but it also offers insight into learners’ crosslinguistic awareness. In lexical transfer, two main types of transfer are generally distinguished: borrowings (i.e. code-switches) and foreignisings (i.e. word construction attempts). The former refers to transferred item that did not undergo any changes, while the latter refers to items that were adapted to fit the target language’s ortho-phonological rules.

Previous research has found that these types of transfer do not evenly originate from different source languages. In speaking, Bardel and Lindqvist (2007) found that their L3 Italian learner used more foreignisings from their higher proficiency L2, French, while using more borrowings from their lower proficiency L2, Spanish. In writing, Lindqvist (2015) analysed 63 participants’ L3 French and found borrowings to mainly originate from L1 Swedish, while foreignisings mainly came from L2 English. There thus seems to be a particular distribution pattern for different types of transfer across source languages.

The aim of the present study is to confirm such a distribution and to discuss its underlying causes. Data was gathered from 79 young multilingual learners in Luxembourg. Written and spoken production were elicited using a picture story description task, and a questionnaire was used to collect information about participants’ psychotypological beliefs and proficiency levels.

The results indeed show a particular distribution of types of transfer across source languages. Potential underlying reasons are discussed, with a focus on learners’ psychotypological beliefs. It seems that the more closely related a language (or individual item) is perceived, the more likely it is that the learner attempts adaptations. With increased confidence that the word will also exist in the TL, foreignisings thus outweigh borrowings.

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