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On Pragmatic Transfer

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Introduction

Studying pragmatic transfer today implies carrying out interdisciplinary empirical research: on the one hand, one must be aware of the evolution of thoughts and methodology and of the findings within SLA research; on the other hand, knowledge of pragmatic theory and practice is also necessary. There is a clear convergence of these two disciplines of study in what has been termed *INTERLANGUAGE PRAGMATICS*, where the study of pragmatic transfer remains one of the most frequently addressed issues.

Kasper (1992: 203) defines Interlanguage Pragmatics as "the branch of second language research which studies how non-native speakers ... understand and carry out linguistic action in a target language, and how they acquire L2 pragmatic knowledge". This means that the area of concern is the use (in both directions: production and comprehension) of the learner's interlanguage from a pragmatic standpoint and the process of acquisition of the pragmatic categories of the target language (see also Kasper 1996:1).

Kasper & Blum-Kulka (1993) expand the scope of the field to include the study of the emergence of intercultural styles in bilingual speakers in a language contact situation and the use of L2 communication strategies. In their discussion of ILP, the authors identify five research areas: (i) pragmatic comprehension; (ii) production of linguistic action; (iii) development of pragmatic competence; (iv) pragmatic transfer; and (v) communicative effect.

The aim of this paper is to reconsider the role of the L1 in interlanguage pragmatics. This means that we shall study pragmatic transfer within the frames of cross-cultural pragmatics and SLA research. As Kasper & Schmidt (1996: 150) put it "to date, the role of pragmatic transfer has been the only issue specific to interlanguage studies that has received sustained attention in ILP and, thus, aligns ILP with mainstream second language acquisition research".

1. Historical overview: General studies on language transfer.

Interlanguage Pragmatics is a young discipline that dates back to the late 1970s-early 1980s; but transfer studies originated even before the field of SLA research emerged as we know it today, during the 1940s and 1950s. Additionally, transfer studies did not address pragmatic issues until recently. Consequently, in order to study the role of the L1 in interlanguage pragmatics one must refer back to the origins and evolutions of research on general language transfer.

The notion of transfer was first invoked during the Contrastive Analysis (CA) period which was linked to behaviourist views of language learning and to structural linguistics. The amazing effect that the L1 had on using the L2, mainly at the level of pronunciation, led researchers in the 1960s to forward the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH). In those days, there were two widely held beliefs. Firstly, that the NL strongly influenced the L2. Secondly, that this influence was negative. Accordingly, contrastive analysts believed the L1 interfered with L2 learning. The CAH suggested that where two languages were different, there would be negative transfer or interference since learners would experience difficulty that would result in the production of errors; and that where two languages were similar, there would be positive transfer since learning would be facilitated and no errors would result.

As soon as the 1970s, CA and behaviourism fell into disfavour and the CAH became theoretically and practically untenable. Mainly due to Chomsky's claims on the nature of learning, a cognitive approach to SLA emerged bringing about a radical shift of perspective. This approach emphasized the developmental nature of language acquisition placing little, if any, importance on the influence of the L1.

This led to two different ways of accounting for the role of the the first language in SLA. In one, researchers treated transfer as one of several processes involved in SLA, moving from a product-oriented to a process-oriented approach to account for L1 influence. This approach was adopted by Selinker (1972), Nemser (1971) and James (1971) who saw that the learners' L1 was one of the major determinants of their IL, although not the only one. It was this view of transfer that came to dominate and to lead researchers to investigate how transfer interacts with other processes. The second way of dealing with transfer is what Ellis (1994: 309) calls the 'minimalist approach' which sought to minimize the importance of the L1 and to emphasize the contribution of universal processes of language learning, such as hypothesis testing, stressing, in this way, the similarity between L2 and L1 acquisition.

The notion of transfer was closely linked to behaviourist theories of language learning. However, several reasons lead to a different account of this notion: 1. L1 transfer is not adequately explained in terms of habit formation; 2. The notion of transfer must also account for phenomena such as avoidance caused by L1 influence; and 3. Languages other than the L1 (L3...) can also have a linguistic influence on SLA and use.

Under this new light, Sharwood-Smith and Kellerman (1986: 1) argue that the term transfer is inadequate and, therefore, posit an umbrella term, *cross-linguistic influence,* that allows "to subsume under one heading such phenomena as 'transfer', 'interference', 'avoidance', 'borrowing' and L2-related aspects of language loss". They suggest the term transfer be restricted "to those processes that lead to the incorporation of elements from one language into another".

But despite their excellent review of language transfer, the fact is that the term transfer has persisted over time, although now it has a much broader scope, including all the factors that Sharwood-Smith & Kellerman (1986) incorporated into their notion: cross-linguistic influence.

Researchers such as Odlin (1989) or Ellis (1994) seem to support this generalist approach, as we can see in the following definition:

> 'Transfer' is to be seen as a general cover term for a number of different kinds of influence from languages other than the L2. The study of transfer involves the study of errors (negative transfer), facilitation (positive transfer), avoidance of target language forms, and their over-use (Ellis, 1994: 341).

Cases of L1 loss and incorporation of L2 features into the native language should be incorporated into a comprehensive definition of transfer. As I mentioned above, Kasper & Blum-Kulka (1993) or Sharwood-Smith & Kellerman (1986), among others, claim that this sort of L2 influence on to the L1 also pertains to interlanguage studies.

2. Towards a definition of pragmatic transfer.

Trying to reach a comprehensive and sound definition of pragmatic transfer is problematic since both component parts of the phrase are, in themselves, problematic as they have been used with different meanings and/or with similar meanings but under different labels. As to the notion of *transfer*, we have seen its evolution, and the alternative labels that have been suggested by different researchers and finally commented on how this notion is understood nowadays.

As to the notion of *pragmatics*, there is disagreement about how to define the scope of interest proper. Although pragmatic transfer has been referred to as sociolinguistic transfer (Wolfson, 1989), transfer of L1 sociocultural competence or cross-linguistic influence (Beebe et al., 1990), transfer of conversational features or as discourse transfer (Odlin, 1989) reflecting the different ideas about pragmatics and about transfer and/or the different objects of study, the term pragmatic transfer will be maintained in this paper as it is understood by Kasper (1992) who considers it refers to the influence that previous pragmatic knowledge has on the use and acquisition of L2 pragmatic knowledge.

> pragmatic transfer in interlanguage pragmatics shall refer to the influence exerted by learners' pragmatic knowledge of languages and cultures other than L2 on their comprehension, production and learning of L2 pragmatic information (1992: 207).

Pragmatic knowledge is to be understood as referring to "a particular component of language users' general communicative knowledge, viz. knowledge of how verbal acts are understood and performed in accordance with a speaker's intention under contextual and discoursal constraints" (Faerch & Kasper, 1984: 214).

As we can see, Kasper's approach (1) is process-oriented; (2) allows the study of transfer in learning and in communication; and (3) is comprehensive, in the sense that she talks of 'influence' without explicit mention of the types of influence referred to. However, in her study she provides examples of positive and negative transfer, avoidance and over-use but does not consider the different directionalities of transfer. I believe that given her position about interlanguage pragmatics in her 1993 work with Blum-Kulka mentioned above, she would regard today the incorporation of L2 pragmatic features into the native language as instances of pragmatic transfer.

3. A process-oriented approach: Transferability constraints.

When investigating learner language, Kasper & Dahl (1991: 225) wisely observe that some phenomena have been arbitrarily attributed to transfer in a simplistic, 'obsolete' way on the grounds of the similarities and differences holding between learners' L1 and L2. Instead, a process-oriented approach should be adopted. This implies: (i) to identify *what* is transferred, and (ii) to determine under what circumstances transfer takes place. In this way, resulting research may be said to have explanatory power.

The conditions that promote or inhibit transfer are called ***transferability constraints***. Although there's no agreement as to what constraints operate in the process of pragmatic transfer, or to what extent, we shall now review some of the conditions that have been shown to affect its occurrence.

Ellis (1994) identifies several sociolinguistic factors that condition the occurrence of pragmatic transfer. Research has shown that learners regularly perform speech acts such as requests, apologies, and refusals in accordance with the sociolinguistic norms of their native language, despite the fact that they

> ... have been shown to display sensitivity towards context-external factors such as interlocutors' familiarity and relative status ... and context-internal factors such as degree of imposition, legitimacy of the requestive goal and 'standardness' of the situation in requesting, and severity of offense, obligation to apologize, and likelihood of apology acceptance in apologizing (Kasper, 1992: 211-212).

This means that both native and nonnative speakers vary their strategies in different contexts, although learners’ variation follows their own L1 sociolinguistic patterns.

Another set of transferability constraints is related to pragmatic universals and to speakers' perceptions of their own language as well as to perceptions of language distance between the L1 and the L2. It has been shown that perceived universality or language-specificity of pragmatic categories conditions the occurrence of transfer (e.g. see Olshtain 1983 for apologies or Takahashi 1996 for requests). More research is needed to explain how these factors work. In fact, Kasper & Schmidt (1996: 155) affirm that although learners sometimes hesitate to transfer potentially universal strategies “a more common problem is that they assume universality (and transferability) when it is not present”.

We can also identify a set of three factors that have been used to explain transferabily constraints on developmental grounds: linguistic proficiency, cultural information and length of stay in the L2 community.

As to linguistic proficiency, some researchers believe that only when learners have achieved a certain L2 level will they be capable of transferring their native strategies into L2 linguistic forms. However, further research did not support this point. In a recent study, Takahashi (1996: 189) reports that “there was no definite tendency for a positive correlation nor for a negative correlation between L1 transfer and proficiency”. Similarly, Suau & Pennock’s (in press) investigation of cohesive patterns in native and nonnative texts shows the lack of correlation between linguistic and discourse competence. They argue that their results were due to independent production processes different from the process of transfer. The different results suggest that more longitudinal studies are needed about how learners with different L1s develop their pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic abilities over time, and how natural processes of language learning interact with other previously acquired languages.

The second constraint is cultural information. In fact, research supported the hypothesis that lack of culturally relevant information, irrespective of linguistic proficiency, was a more powerful constraint in the inhibition or promotion of pragmatic transfer (e.g. Eisensteisn & Bodman, 1986; 1993 for the expression of gratitude).

The third constraint that attempts to account for L1 influence on developmental grounds is length of stay in the L2 community. It has been confirmed that "extended residence in the target community does not in and of itself make 'negative' pragmatic transfer go away." (Kasper, 1992: 220). It seems that nonnative speakers use pragmatic transfer as a means of disidentification from the L2 group, although more research is needed on the operation of these constraints.

Summarizing, current studies of pragmatic transfer provide broad-scope definitions to allow for the study of how the languages known to speakers influence each other in their acquisition and/or use. Researchers nowadays adopt process-oriented approaches to the study of pragmatic transfer. Therefore they attempt to account for the multiple forms of transfer and to determine not only what is transferred (transfer load) but also the conditions under which transfer takes place, i.e. the transferability constraints that have an effect on the promotion and inhibition of transfer. Apart from the constraints mentioned above, others such as age, personality or learning context should also be considered.

4. Language and culture: Types of pragmatic transfer.

Stemming from the inseparable relationship between language and culture, Kasper (1992) identifies two types of pragmatic transfer: pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic.

Kasper owes this distinction - which has been widely adopted in subsequent research - to Leech's (1983) discussion of general pragmatics and to Thomas' (1983) study of cross-cultural pragmatic failure.

If, as teachers of EFL, we believe that we cannot separate the learning of a language from the learning about the culture in which that language will be used, we can depict the relationship that holds between both, language and culture, as shown in figure 1 below.

A very interesting aspect of this distinction lies in its pedagogical consequences. Thomas (1983) discusses the role of linguists and teachers. While linguists must report what they observe as accurately as possible, teachers need to be prescriptive to a certain extent. Teaching language in use requires both systems of knowledge: of the language and of the culture. But these "are filtered through systems of beliefs - beliefs about language and beliefs about the world" (p.99). Consequently, the teacher will have no problem in correcting pragmalinguistic failure but will have to be cautious, and not correct but just point out and discuss, cases of sociopragmatic failure that reflect the student’s systems of values and beliefs about the world[1].

The pragmalinguistic-sociopragmatic dichotomy is not only useful in theoretical and cross-cultural pragmatics and in language teaching, but it also provides an adequate framework for the study of pragmatic transfer in interlanguage pragmatics.

Pragmatics

Language | culture

pragmalinguistics | **sociopragmatics**

(linguistic means of conveying illocutionary force and politeness values) | (socially appropriate linguistic behaviour)

Fig. 1. The pragmatic continuum: language - culture.
(Based on Leech 1983 & Thomas 1983)

Kasper (1992) maintains this distinction in her discussion of transfer[2]. Within pragmalinguistic transfer she deals with illocutionary force and politeness values. The latter includes both discernement politeness - i.e. politeness markers used irrespective of current communicative goal - and strategic politeness - i.e. linguistic strategies oriented to meet participants’ face needs (see Brown and Levinson, 1987). Kasper offers the following definition:

> Therefore 'pragmalinguistic transfer' shall designate the process whereby the illocutionary force or politeness value assigned to particular linguistic material in L1 influences learners' perception and production of form-function mappings in L2 (Kasper, 1992: 209).

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[1] In this respect, consider Riley’s (1989: 234) comment: “To put the problem more concretely, what gives the teacher of immigrant workers the right to tell them that their way of doing things is wrong? And is his/her teaching aim to transform his/her learners into French or German or English ‘native speakers?’ If not, where does the acculturation stop?”

[2] Note that in the two definitions that follow, cases of Ln⇒L1 transfer are ruled out. As we mentioned before, these should be included, especially given the author’s position in later works.

As far as sociopragmatic transfer is concerned, She includes context-external factors - i.e.which refer to participants' role relationships irrespective of a given linguistic action - and context-internal factors - which are intrinsic to a particular speech event. Therefore:

> Sociopragmatic transfer, then, is operative when the social perceptions underlying language users' interpretation and performance of linguistic action in L2 are influenced by their assessment of subjectively equivalent L1 contexts (Kasper, 1992: 209).

Despite the usefulness and wide application of this dichotomy, to cover the full range of transfer possibilities that students who try to communicate in a L2 could, and do, use we should account for further transfer categories. Riley (1989) adds two further categories of pragmatic failure to those identified by Thomas (1983) which, with some changes, could be applied to the analysis of pragmatic transfer.

Riley (1989: 237-39) situates pragmatics within a general theory of social action and suggests that for a complete account of pragmatic errors we need four categories: pragmalinguistic, sociopragmatic, inchoative, and non-linguistic errors. Inchoative errors “are the result of a failure to appreciate the ‘true’ value of discourse, in both quantitative and qualitative terms” (p.237) and refer to cross-cultural variation at the level of the relative status of silence and speech and the overall social role of discourse. The last category, non-linguistic errors, is quite vast and heterogeneous though necessary since communication is also non-verbal.

I believe that cases of inchoative error (and also inchoative pragmatic transfer) can be studied under the category of sociopragmatic failure or transfer since this sub-category refers to perceptions of the overall social value of discourse and silence, that is, social constraints on appropriate discourse which is precisely what sociopragmatics deals with. However, the non-linguistic type cannot be neglected since it addresses essential aspects of communication and must be incorporated in an account of pragmatic transfer.

5. Different manifestations of pragmatic transfer

Different manifestations of pragmatic transfer have been identified in the literature: interference or negative transfer and facilitative or positive transfer are the most obvious types. But the influence of one language upon another may bring about different results: excessive use (or abuse) of one form or function; and under-use (or avoidance) of forms and/or functions. Finally, second or third languages can also exert an influence on the mother tongue. Obviously, these are not discrete categories. Cases of abuse or avoidance can be positive or negative. And, of course, we can have these four types in Ln⇒L1 transfer. However, these distinctions have been drawn in empirical research and I will use them to illustrate a series of cases of pragmatic transfer, which is the goal of this section.

Most studies address the *negative* manifestation of pragmatic transfer because it is closely related to the presentation of self, to the image of ourselves that we communicate to others (Bou & Garcés, 1994). As Thomas (1983: 111) argues "pragmatic failure ... often passes unchecked by the teacher or, worse, it is attributed to some other cause, such as rudeness, and the student is criticized accordingly".

(1) Several cases of negative pragmalinguistic transfer have been suggested. For instance, Richards & Sukwiwat (1983: 116) mention that a situation in which a Japanese learner (JE) has to express gratitude in English to a native speaker (E) may typically go as follows:

E: Look what I've got for you! (maybe a gift)
JE: Oh!, I'm sorry (*thank you* does not sound sincere enough in Japanese)
E: Why sorry?

(2) Garcés (1995) suggests that a Spanish speaker of English (SE), in accepting an invitation to a party from a native speaker (E), may be involved in the following interaction:

E: Will you be coming to my party on Saturday?
SE: Well
E: Well what?

(3) The following is an example of negative pragmalinguistic transfer in L2 comprehension that has been evidenced in the literature. Utterances such as *We must have lunch together some time* or *Let's do lunch* belong to some native American's repertoire of leave-taking formulae alongside *See you, Take care* and so on. Wolfson

(1981) reports that some of her nonnative informants have difficulties in identifying and correctly interpreting these routines. Instead, they understand these as invitations for lunch and feel anoyed at the apparent insincerity of their American friends who never really invite them.

(4) Similarly, a Taiwanese friend of mine who was doing her Thesis in Barcelona explained to me that she too felt annoyed at Spaniards who used the leave-taking routine *Ya te llamaré* and never phoned her, until she learnt the actual meaning of the formula.

(5) Another case of pragmatic transfer is suggested by Gregori & Bou (in press). In their study of backchannels in English and Spanish in several conversations, they found that Spanish learners of English used the strong form *Yes* which was never used by English native speakers. Instead, native speakers used the weak form *Yeah* frequently. But *Yeah* never appeared in the speech of the learners. Furthermore, the learners' most frequent backchannel in Spanish was the equivalent *Si*, which suggested L1 influence on the L2 production of backchannels.

(6) Transfer of L1 pragmatic information in L2 use and learning can also be *positive*. In this respect, Weizman (1993) reports a case of positive pragmalinguistic transfer of the use of nonconventional indirectness in requestive hints on the part of learners with a variety of L1s (German, Danish ...) that speak L2 Hebrew and English. She argues that learners use hints for the realization of requests in much the same way as native speakers do. She concludes that "the use of nonconventional indirectness, therefore, seems to be one of the pragmalinguistic essentials with which learners come to L2 and which, therefore, they need not acquire anew" (Weizman, 1993: 134).

(7) L1 influence may also cause *avoidance* of L2 forms and functions. Kasper studied the performance of several speech acts in interactions between German learners of English and native speakers of English. None of her German subjects used the mitigating routine *I mean*, even though its formal and functional German equivalent *Ich mein(e)* was very frequently used in comparable contexts. Some of her subjects later revealed that this routine was perceived as language-specific. Additionally, they had also been told by their English teachers not to use it. The transferability constraints underlying this case of pragmalinguistic avoidance, then, point to two factors: wrong perceptions of language distance, and a teacher-induced error.

(8) Similarly, Bou, Garcés & Gregori (1995) found that in ten three-party interviews between a native speaker of English and two Spanish students of English at an intermediate level, the 20 learners never used the discourse markers *so*, *you know* and *I mean*, even though the native speaker frequently used them.. However, learners had no difficulty in interpreting them and even code-switched to their L1 to indicate some of the functions they express. But, although their level of English should have allowed them to produce them in English, it is unclear that this case of avoidance is a result of L1 influence, since no study was conducted on students' perceptions, training or other factors that could have inhibited their use. On the other hand, students had no difficulty in using *And* and *But* as discourse markers. Due to the formal and functional equivalence of these forms in English and Spanish, Bou, Garcés & Gregori (1995) suggested that this could be due to facilitative or positive transfer.

(9) Transfer from the L1 may also result in *over-use* of certain forms or functions. Richards & Sukwiwat (1983) claim that in the Thai system of formality one finds a greater perceived social distance between the most informal and the most formal level than in the English system of formality. As a consequence, the authors argue that an "Asian learner used to such a system may not feel that English allows for a sufficiently 'high' form. This may lead to an overuse of honorifics or titles such as *sir* (used when addressing both males and females), to more frequent use of apologies, and in written English to a preference for a florid prose style with ornate vocabulary" (1983: 119). Although these are hypotheses, Japanese excuses in American English have been reported to be more formal as compared to native American excuses (see Beebe et al., 1990).

(10) Sánchez, Dolón & Martí (*this issue*) also report a case of overuse of the form *could you* in nonnative requests. While native speakers varied their requestive strategies learners used this form in most contexts: L1 influence and proficiency level are the possible explanations for this phenomenon.

(11) Eisenstein & Bodman (1993: 73-74) report a case of *Ln⇒L1* pragmatic transfer, that is, the incorporation of L2 pragmatic knowledge into the native language, in their study of the expression of gratitude in American English. In many cultures the words *thank you* are not commonly used to express appreciation to family members for acts of kindness considered part of their social roles. In this sense, one of their informants from Puerto Rico who had lived for many years in the

US, transferred into her native language sociopragmatic L2 behaviour. She described how hurt and angry her father became when she thanked him for helping her take care of her son, his grandchild. This is, therefore, an example of sociopragmatic transfer from the L2 to the L1, with a negative outcome for the speaker expressing gratitude.

In this respect, Blum-Kulka & Sheffer (1993: 219) comment that “ironically, while pragmatic competence is the most difficult aspect of language to master in learning a second language, it seems also to be, under certain conditions of bilingualism, ... the easiest to lose in the first language”.

(12) The following case of *Ln⇒L1* pragmatic transfer, which is extremely common, partly supports Blum-kulka & Sheffer’s (1993) insights. My Spanish students of English constantly report that, after a stay in England, they use more frequently the routines *Perdón*, *Lo siento* and *Por favor* as Spanish equivalents of *Sorry* and *Please*.The frequency of use of these routines in Spanish and British English is different. Spanish learners in the UK are often judged to be brusque and impolite due to their scant use of *Sorry* and *Please*. However, the same students are judged to be extremely or unnaturally polite when they come back to Spain, because they use the Spanish equivalents too frequently!

Conclusion

Summarizing the main ideas, pragmatic transfer should be understood in a broad way, accounting for the different ways in which a language may influence the acquisition and use of another language, and researchers must attempt to account for the conditions under which transfer takes place. To this end, studies should be based on analyses of native and learner data, as well as on introspective and retrospective data and provide "rich, context-based interpretive hypothesis" (House, 1993: 178). Takahashi (1996: 212) observes that it is sometimes difficult to “discern whether observed performance is attributable to L1 transfer, IL overgeneralization, or instructional effects (transfer of training).” By supplementing performance data with other types of data, the researcher will have more resources to discriminate cases of L1 transfer, and resulting research will increase its validity.

But, as teachers of English, what can we do to teach pragmatic knowledge and inhibit transfer? Schmidt (1993) points out that the necessary condition for pragmatic learning to take place is conscious attention to the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic information to be acquired. Consequently, Schmidt, together with other authors such as Thomas (1983) or Richards & Sukwiwat (1983), among others, claim that a direct approach to teaching the pragmatics of the L2 is in order. As Kasper & Schmidt (1996: 160) put it: “pragmatic knowledge should be teachable.”

The idea seems to be that if the NNS is consciously aware of the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic similarities and differences between his/her native and target languages, then negative outcomes of transfer will most probably be inhibited.

As teachers, we have the responsibility of providing the student with the necessary tools to make the appropriate pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic decisions in the target language. I’d like to finish by suggesting that one way in which teachers can help students become pragmatically aware and improve their pragmatic knowledge is by providing them with the sort of metapragmatic information outlined in this paper.

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