

Winter School on Multilingualism across the Lifespan

6 – 8 February 2012, at the Institute of Multilingualism, Fribourg

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Building a case for transfer

As pointed out by Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (1999, p. 10), “the contemporary view of learning is that people construct new knowledge and understandings based on what they already know and believe.” If this is true—and furthermore if it is *always* true—then it is probably unavoidable that a person’s acquisition of a new language will be influenced by the knowledge of any language(s) that he or she has previously learned. This type of influence, which is commonly referred to as transfer or crosslinguistic influence, has been documented at all stages of acquisition and in practically all domains of language knowledge and use (see Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008; Odlin, 1989). It has also been documented in the reverse direction, with new learning in one language bringing about changes in a person’s knowledge of a previously acquired language (see, e.g., Cook, 2003; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008).

Despite the prevalence of crosslinguistic influence, researchers and theorists have discovered a number of possible constraints on its occurrence (see, e.g., Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008; Kellerman, 1983; Ringbom, 2007; Schachter, 1983). Some scholars have gone so far as to claim that transfer is negligible or even non-existent under certain conditions or in certain domains of language, such as morphology and syntax (Dulay & Burt, 1973; Eubank, 1993/1994; Håkansson, Pienemann, & Sayehli, 2002). Crucially, researchers’ ability to confirm or falsify these claims and to clarify the conditions under which transfer is either likely or unlikely to occur requires a well-developed, principled approach to determining definitively, accurately, and precisely when crosslinguistic influence has and has not occurred in the language use of language learners, bilinguals, and multilinguals.

This paper outlines the key components of the framework I propose regarding the achievement of argumentative rigor in building a case for or against the presence of crosslinguistic influence in a given sample of learner data. I describe how a case can be built on multiple, complementary arguments, each of which rests on its own set of premises and pieces of evidence. Additionally, I discuss the types of evidence that are relevant to each argument, how those types of evidence are gathered and interpreted, and ultimately how they contribute to the rigor of the argument.

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