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LANGUAGE INTERFERENCE IN MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS: THEORIES AND STORIES

МОВНА ІНТЕРФЕРЕНЦІЯ У МУЛЬТИЛІНГВАЛЬНИХ СТУДЕНТІВ: НАУКОВІ ТЕОРІЇ ТА ОСОБИСТИЙ ДОСВІД

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Geoffrey Willans, an author, journalist, and schoolmaster, once wrote, “You can never understand one language until you understand at least two.” But do you really need to learn another language to fully grasp the intricacies of your own? Does learning multiple languages enhance cognitive flexibility, or does it lead to confusion and conflict between them?

The conflict known as *language interference* (or transfer/cross-linguistic influence) is widely studied by scholars. First developed by the Prague School linguists, the term denoted “the attempted reproduction in one language of patterns previously found in another” [7, p. 210–232]. Despite numerous attempts to explain it, there is still no clear understanding of how to avoid it. The problem with the research is that language interference is extremely complex and multidimensional. A multilingual person is like a one-man band playing several instruments at once. In this analogy, each foreign language is like an instrument that must be played simultaneously. It’s not enough to just know how to play the instrument (or know the language); one must also skillfully coordinate them to produce harmonious “music” (or fluent speech).

There are many factors that can influence language fluency. Although multilinguals may share the same languages, they often face different challenges when learning them. This is why personal narratives from language learners offer valuable insights and allow us to explore how individual experiences align with, or challenge, existing models of language acquisition.

To investigate language interference, I collected personal narratives of multilingual Swiss students describing their language learning

experiences. Switzerland is known for its linguistic diversity which is the result of the geographical position, economic factors, education policies, and cultural emphasis on maintaining and promoting multiple languages. The interviewed students come from international families and speak several foreign languages. Sometimes their stories confirm existing language acquisition theories – like the importance of immersion or exposure to a foreign language – others question these models.

In linguistic studies, language interference is linked to various factors such as proficiency level, recency of exposure, etc. While certain features like immersion or emotional aspects are significant, students' stories provided contrasting views on others. For example, according to the *Linguistic Proximity Model* [9], interference is more likely for similar languages, especially if the learner is aware of these similarities or of the so-called *cross-language overlap*. Antoniou & Wright [1] suggest that the closer the languages are, the greater the chance of interference is, and the more effort the learner should put into inhibiting the source language. However, most of the students I interviewed did not experience this. They claimed that typologically different languages did not interfere, though they still presented difficulties since there were no connections to rely on.

Another factor thought to influence interference is the context of learning. Some linguists suggest that languages interact more when they are acquired in similar environments, such as in a classroom or during the same period of life [3]. Nonetheless, the interviews did not reveal any clear connection between the context of learning and language interference. Interestingly, the students reported interference between English and French, the languages to which they were most exposed. For many, French is their native language which contradicts the so-called *foreign language effect*, which claims that only foreign languages interact during language learning, not the native language [8].

Like music, language is always tied to certain emotions. Language learning is often an emotional journey, with some experiences leading to progress and success, while others end in disappointment and frustration. Many students connected language interference to their emotional state, which makes sense – when someone is stressed or anxious, cognitive resources are diminished, leading to more frequent language interactions. One student even mentioned that when she gets angry, she starts speaking French with a Greek accent, illustrating how emotions can affect language use.

Most interviewees, being proficient learners, denied experiencing significant issues with interference. They might speak with an accent or mix languages in certain expressions, but it rarely lead to miscommunication.

However, one graduate, who recently began teaching, pointed out that children learning two foreign languages simultaneously sometimes confuse words—for instance, German “falsch” with English “false”. If we take an analogy with a one-man band, a musician usually starts with a few instruments and gradually increases the complexity to master the coordination between them. Once muscle memory for each instrument is developed, they can play instinctively without having to think too much about each one. In linguistics, this aligns with *the Threshold Hypothesis* [5] which suggests that bilingual (or multilingual) individuals must reach a certain level of proficiency in both languages before they can experience the cognitive benefits of multilingualism. The participants in interviews mentioned a point at which they felt fluent (“something clicked”) and began thinking or even dreaming in a foreign language. However, as with playing instruments, it is impossible to predict exactly when one will reach that threshold level.

Personal narratives also highlighted the importance of initial conditions for successful language learning, such as language aptitude and motivation, which is emphasized in *the Dynamic Systems Theory* [2]. Aptitude is often attributed to genes [6]. While there is no single “language gene”, certain genes like FOXP2 are linked to language and speech development. One of the students thanked her mother for “the language-loving genes”.

Genetic factors work together with environmental factors such as exposure to language and social context. For instance, more than half of our research participants come from international family backgrounds which means they were exposed to at least two different languages since birth. This is a common situation for Switzerland where one third of new marriages are international [4]. Some students pointed out that they experienced confusion and mixing of languages (or dialects) as a child. One interviewee, for example, was more fluent in the language of the parent with whom she spent more time, avoiding the other parent’s language because it was confusing. The French linguist Maurice Grammont suggested the “one person, one language” (OPOL) approach for international families: if each parent uses his or her own language with the child, the child will clearly distinguish between the two languages from an early age and eventually learn both languages with ease. Such children grow up *diglossic* (i.e., speaking both parents’ languages equally well) and report having no confusion or language mixing. However, the environment outside the home can still play a significant role in how effectively they learn languages. One participant, for example, spent more time at home with his Italian-speaking mother than with his German-speaking father since the parents were separated. But because he grew up in a country where German was an official language, he spoke Italian, his mother tongue, with a strong German

accent, which only disappeared later after spending a summer with the relatives in Italy.

In conclusion, students' narratives show how individual experiences with language learning can challenge established theories of language interference. While factors like typological distance and learning context may be influential, personal experiences suggest that exposure, recency of use, and emotional states are key contributors to language interference. The interaction of certain cognitive, emotional and social factors shapes multilingual speakers. Their stories offer valuable insights into the unique challenges and successes of multilingualism, reminding us that no single theory or solution fits all learners.

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