

Vocabulary interaction among the three languages of trilingual children

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Abstract: The aim of the present study was to examine vocabulary interaction and more specifically cross-linguistic influence among the three languages of trilingual schoolchildren. The three languages of our sample were: Greek (either as an L1 or L2) Albanian (either as an L1 or L2) and English (L3). Two types of cross-linguistic influence, i.e., interactional strategies and transfer lapses, were detected while they narrated two different stories. Our results showed that the presence of three languages created complex patterns in the activation of languages in speech production among the trilinguals of our sample.

Key words: trilinguals, vocabulary interaction, cross-linguistic influence

1. Introduction

Recently there has been a tendency to teach students a third or in some cases even a fourth foreign language. This has led to the increase of trilingual children and this fact has had as a result the emergence of a new research and educational field, that of trilingualism (Griessler, 2001). Besides, according to Tucker (1998), multilinguals are far more than monolinguals worldwide.

According to Aronin (2005) twentieth century can be distinguished into three stages as far as the number of languages is concerned. The first stage, which is defined as the monolingual stage, starts from the beginning of the twentieth century and goes up until the 1950s. The second stage, the bilingual one, extends from approximately the 1960s until the end of the 1980s, whereas the third stage that is defined as the tri – multilingual, starts from the early 1990s and continues till today.

As trilingualism is a rather recent field of research it has been variously defined. In fact “trying to reach to a proper definition of multilingualism could be said to be the most demanding problem of current linguistics” (Jessner, 2008). Furthermore, Cenoz and Genesee (1998) suggest that a student should be defined as trilingual if s/he can use her/his three languages to communicate in both oral and written speech. Due to the fact that many scholars argue that learning an L3 differs from learning an L2, multilingualism is only used (or should be used) to refer to the learning of more than two languages (Hufeisen, 1998).

It was previously thought that children who learn a second or a third language may face problems in their language development but luckily this is not anymore supported. According to recent data on bilingualism/trilingualism (Brohy, 2001; Hufeisen, 1998; Jessner, 1999), children who learn a second or a third language appear to be more intellectually acute. Furthermore, Griessler (2001) suggested that a third language has a beneficial effect on a child's two other languages, not only on his grammatical awareness but also on his linguistic abilities, his memorizing techniques and his communication strategies. Brohy (2001) also mentions that bilingual children are more receptive to learning a third language compared to children who approach their second language with the help of just their mother tongue. Bialystok (2001) suggested that a bilingual does not only have universally superior metalinguistic advantages and abilities

but increased abilities in tasks that require attention to L1. Andreou (2007) pointed out that trilinguals have better phonological awareness than bilinguals since they have heightened sensitivity to the phonological units of words probably because they must attend carefully to the speech stream in order to make distinction among their three languages and to organize their developing lexicon.

Furthermore, McLaughlin (1990) supports the view that multilingual learners use different strategies compared to monolingual learners, who only learn their first language, due to their experience in language learning. Thomas (1992) also, based on her third language acquisition studies, suggested that when a student has a former linguistic experience s/he uses strategies which influence her/his future success in the foreign language classroom. Kemp (2001) on the other hand showed that multilinguals pick up the grammar of another language faster, meaning that they use more grammar learning strategies. Furthermore, she points out that an experienced multilingual learner develops automaticity in processing several foreign languages depending on the linguistic environment.

Studies on L3 acquisition and L3 use have shown that L2 in a trilingual system takes up a specific role; L3 learners or users do not rely on their L1 as one would expect, but mainly on their L2. In various studies of learning an L3 of Indo-European origin, L3 learners whose L1 is typologically unrelated to the L2 and/or L3 showed a tendency to transfer knowledge from their L2, or in the case of bilinguals, from the related L1 (e.g. Chandrasekhar, 1978; Ahukanna, Lund & Gentile 1981; Bartelt, 1989; Hufeisen, 1991; Cenoz, 2001; Wei, 2003, Jessner, 2008). In addition, Tremblay (2006) indicates that L2 exposure may influence the learners' ability to exploit their knowledge of L2 to escape from their lexical deficits in L3, whereas L2 proficiency plays a major role in the frequency with which the L2 intrudes during L3 production.

Speech production in the different languages a multilingual uses can potentially share most of the general characteristics of speech production in monolinguals and bilinguals but necessarily presents more complexity and implies some specific characteristics derived from the interaction between different linguistic systems (Cenoz, 2003). Since multilinguals have the luxury to activate several languages at the same time, cross-linguistic influence in speech production has been a much more popular field within the studies on multilingual lexicon. The way a person's languages interact with each other is a source of valuable information about the multilingual lexicon as well as the mental lexicon.

The study of cross-linguistic influence has focused on pointing out the reasons that can give us information on the use of one or more languages. According to Cenoz (2001) there are two types of cross linguistic influence: a) *Interactional strategies* which are intentional switches into languages other than the target language; their presence will depend on the language mode so that their frequency is related to the bilingual and monolingual mode adopted by the speaker, and b) *Transfer lapses* that are non-intentional switches and are not preceded by a pause or false start and can be regarded as automatic.

When comparing formal and informal communicative situations, Dewaele (2001) reported that trilinguals (Dutch-French-English) presented a higher percentage of mixed utterances in informal situations. As far as the cross-linguistic influence in a multilingual system is concerned, it does not only take place between the L1 and L2 but also between the L2 and the L3, and the L1 and the L3 (Jessner, 2008).

Based on the above findings, we decided to study the interaction of the three languages of trilingual schoolchildren. Our hypothesis was that our learners will use

their L2 as the source language or default supplier of cross-linguistic influence while using their L3, like in most of the so far studies conducted so far.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Our sample consisted of 10 trilingual children, who attended the fifth year of state primary schools. Their mid age was 9.3 months. Their three languages were Albanian, Greek and English. Their level in L3 (English) was estimated 'beginners' according to their teacher. There were 6 girls and 4 boys: all of them were children of Albanian immigrants and they were born in Greece.

First of all, we collected data regarding our learners. These were categorized into two groups:

Group 1 included 5 children, 3 boys and 2 girls: their L1 was Albanian, L2 Greek and L3 English.

Group 2 included 5 children, 1 boy and 4 girls: their L1 was Greek, L2 Albanian and L3 English.

Regarding Group 2, the children's parents explained to us that they had decided to speak to their children in Greek, even though their level of Greek might not have been so high, because they wanted their children to be able to adapt more easily to the Greek society. This is probably a rather usual strategy immigrants adopt when speaking to their children.

2.2 Instruments

The children were asked to narrate a picture story the "Little Red Riding Hood". This was not part of the language syllabus of the class but it is a quite well known fairy tale. (Story 1). Then, they were asked to narrate a picture story taken from their course book ("Fun Way English 2"), that all of them had already done in their English class (Story 2).

Before the interview, the children were reminded that they could use whichever language they might need while narrating. They were actually told: "these three languages are all yours; you can use them if you feel you need to".

For the purpose of these interviews, we used an interpreter to help us with Albanian, every time children would use it while narrating the picture stories. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed and all cases of cross-linguistic influence were identified.

We considered two types of cross-linguistic influence: a) *Interactional strategies* and b) *Transfer lapses*, as previously described by Cenoz (2001).

3. Results

The types of cross-linguistic influence that group 1 used are as follows:

Group 1: *Interactional strategies*: When seeking for help from their interlocutor all learners of group 1 would use Greek, their L2. For example in story 1:

- (1a) Πώς λέμε «κοκκινোসκουφίτσα»;
- (1b) Μπορώ να ρωτήσω μια λέξη;
- (1c) Δε θυμάμαι τη λέξη «λίμνη».
- (1d) Πώς είναι «ξεγελάστηκε»;
- (1e) Να πω ότι η γιαγιά δε βλέπει;

In story 2:

- (1f) Το «ρομπότ» δεν είναι το ίδιο και στα ελληνικά;
- (1g) Τον «κουβά» πως τον λέμε στα ελληνικά;
- (1h) Να πω ότι ο Billy κοιμάται;
- (1i) Πώς είναι το «πίνω»;
- (1j) Δε θυμάμαι τη λέξη «ξυπνάει»

Transfer lapses:

Story 1

In a total of 123 utterances, 64 of them (52%) were transfer lapses from their L1 Albanian. Examples:

- (2a) He trembi (scares) and she u fut ne dollap (goes into the wardrobe).
- (2b) He ask what ka (has) big dhomb (tooth).
- (2c) The girl atije eshte (is there).
- (2d) The girl bashke (with) the grandmother trembi (are scared).
- (2e) Vajze (the girl) sees the wolf.

Story 2

In a total of 316 utterances, 60 of them (19%) were transfer lapses from their L1 Albanian. Examples:

- (3a) The robot pi (drinks) water.
- (3b) The robot pastron (cleans up).
- (3c) He piu (drinks) uje (water).
- (3d) Robot wakes up cuni (the child).
- (3e) Robot plays muzike (music).

With respect to the second group, the types of cross-linguistic influence used are as follows:

Group 2: *Interactional strategies*: During their narrations they used their L1 Greek. That is, they would ask for help from their interlocutor in Greek in both stories. For example:

Story 1:

- (4a) Δεν θυμάμαι «το δάσος».
- (4b) Να ρωτήσω κάτι; Μπορώ να πω ελληνικά εδώ;
- (4c) Πώς το λέμε «κοιτάζει»;
- (4d) Πώς είναι «τρώμαξε»;
- (4e) Να πω το «καλάθι» στα ελληνικά;

Story 2:

- (4f) “Try” είναι «προσπαθώ»;
- (4g) «Αυτό δεν μπορώ να το περιγράψω καλά».
- (4h) «Να πω ελληνικά τώρα;»
- (4i) Πώς είναι «καθαρίζει»;
- (4j) “Drink” θα πει «πίνω»;

*Transfer lapses:**Story 1*

In a total of 235 utterances, 153 (65%) were transfer lapses from their L1 Greek. Examples:

- (5a) The wolf says to her ότι υπάρχει κι άλλος δρόμος.
- (5b) Η κοκκινোসκουφίτσα goes στον άλλον δρόμο when the wolf goes to grandmother's house.
- (5c) Grandmother was waiting for her and the wolf μπήκε at the home.
- (5d) The girl sees the λύκο and is scared.
- (5e) They see the wolf leaving and they look χαρούμενες!

Story 2

In a total of 82 utterances, 35 (43%) were transfer lapses from their L1 Greek. Examples:

- (6a) He is the robot and he πίνει milk.
- (6b) His mom goes into the room and says to him 'ξύπνα' Bill!
- (6c) The robot goes to school αντί για τον Bill.
- (6d) Here αυτός πίνει γάλα.
- (6e) Πιο μετά αυτός doing music.

4. Discussion

Our results showed that the presence of three languages created complex patterns in the activation of languages in speech production among the trilinguals of our sample as previously found in Cenoz (2001). A high percentage of cross linguistic influence was found in the utterances of both trilingual groups.

More specifically, more transfer lapses were observed in both groups while they narrated the first story in comparison to the second. Story 1, "Little Red Riding Hood", was the one which was not taught at school, that is, they had not received any formal teaching on it. Therefore, they considered it familiar and felt they narrated it in an informal setting and probably that's why they made a great number of transfer lapses. This finding is in line with previous research (Dewaele, 2001) which found a high percentage of mixed utterances on the part of trilinguals in informal situations.

Another finding of ours was that both our trilingual groups in both stories used their L1 while transfer lapses occurred. This happened whether this L1 was Greek or Albanian, although Albanian as an L1 was used to a smaller extent than Greek as an L1. This finding is not in line with previous research which found that L3 learners used either both L1 and L2 in L3 oral production (Griessler, 2001; Kellerman, 2001) or only their L2 (Hammarberg, 2001; Ringbom, 1987). However, Cenoz (2001) who found in a previous research that both L1 Spanish and L1 Basque speakers used Spanish as their main source language of transfer in oral production in their L3 English provided an explanation for that. She suggested that the choice of L1 as the main source of transfer in L3 production probably has to do with individual factors such as character of the interlocutor, age of the subjects, anxiety or characteristics of the languages involved.

Concerning the interactional strategies used by the trilinguals in our study, we found out that during interaction with the interlocutor they used Greek, which was either their L1 or their L2. Perhaps this is due to their immigrant mentality. Albanian in Greece, as

an immigrants' language is not considered to have a high status: in previous studies (Cenoz, 2001) the subjects' L1 and L2 were Spanish and Basque which are official languages in Spain.

In conclusion, as previously stated, the study of cross-linguistic influence in third language acquisition is complex and presents more diversity than the study of cross-linguistic influence in second language acquisition (Cenoz & Genesee, 1998; Cenoz, 2000; Cenoz, Hufeisen & Jessner, 2001). Therefore, it is obvious that more research needs to be done on third language acquisition and learning, especially on the issue of the 'bridge language' and the conditions under which the L1 or L2 serve as the 'bridge language'. This will probably be a matter that will have to be explored in the future on a greater number of participants that would help us reach to safer conclusions.

Table I. Number of transfer lapses from L1 per group in the two stories:

	Group 1 (L1 Albanian)		Group 2 (L1 Greek)	
	Total number of lapses	Lapses	Total number of lapses	Lapses
Story I	123	64 (52%)	235	153 (65%)
Story II	316	60 (19%)	82	35 (43%)

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