

Discussing Language Transfer

Coordinators

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Project Summary

In his book *Lass mal sitzen*, Reinhard Wolff (2010) describes a variety of different, but all very funny German sentences that he heard people in the Netherlands say. In one of his anecdotes, he talks about a Dutch bus driver who said *Ich verführe jeden Tag 200 Menschen*, undoubtedly based on the Dutch word *vervoeren* (to transport). However, although the German *verführen* sounds very similar, its meaning is very different. In fact, the bus driver had actually said that he was seducing 200 people a day, probably leading to a few raised eyebrows in his German interlocutors. This phenomenon, using words or constructions from one language in another, is referred to as transfer, and it frequently occurs in second language acquisition (Cook, 2003; N. C. Ellis, 2006; R. Ellis, 1994).

In this project, we explore transfer in the other direction, that is transfer from the speakers' second language to their native language. This transfer often happens to speakers who are thoroughly bilingual (Schmid & Köpke, 2018). Figure 1 shows an exchange in a Facebook group specifically aimed at (native) German speakers living in the Netherlands. One speaker introduces herself to the other members. She writes that her German has become increasingly 'lousy' over the years that she has lived in the Netherlands. Other members comment that they have very similar experiences (marked in blue). There are also cases of actual transfer in the text itself (marked in red), such as *zu dem punkt wo* based on Dutch *op het punt dat, hier kommt in kürze ein ende dran* based on *hier komt binnenkort een einde aan*, or the Dutch spelling *ideaal* instead of *ideal*. At some points, the speaker switches to Dutch completely (marked in green). Overall, this exchange shows that speakers who frequently use another language can experience quite far-reaching changes in their native language and, importantly for this project, speakers are often quite aware of these changes.

By far the majority of research on transfer, including our own, has focused on what kinds of transferred constructions commonly occur (Ribbert & Kuiken, 2010; Schmid & Köpke, 2018) or how social factors affect the extent of transfer (e.g., Steinkrauss & Schmid, 2016). This privileges 'cognitive' research questions, about aspects of language use that are produced as the automatic outcome of a process in which the speaker's mind activates words and grammatical constructions that are easy to retrieve because they are well entrenched, thanks to extensive previous activation of the same units. However, this psycholinguistic bias in transfer research leaves unexamined what the consequences are of the fact, established for many domains of language use, that people's verbal behavior is also the product of intentions, and of conscious reflection on language, especially on what speakers consider salient (Schmid & Günther, 2016). Some studies indeed do show that bilinguals are aware of transfer. Sevinç and Backus (2017) report that third generation Turkish immigrants in the Netherlands feel anxious over the negative feedback they receive about the Dutchisms in their Turkish but often feel powerless to avoid them. Similarly, participants in our previous study on transfer in the speech of native German speakers who live in the Netherlands, reached out to us to tell us more about their experiences, their German language use, and how other German speakers react to signs of transfer in their German. Facebook groups like the one mentioned above also contain regular discussion about these topics. The aim of this project is to give voice to bilingual speakers, listen to what they find important, and discuss language transfer with them, and to explore the degree to which salience, intentionality and reflection play a role in facilitating or combating transfer. It does so from two perspectives, a communicative one and a social one.

Communication perspective

One trainee will focus on communicative aspects of language transfer, such as speakers' metalinguistic awareness and their transfer strategies. Participants will discuss when they are aware of transfer, whether this has changed over the years that they have lived in the Dutch environment, and how they deal with transfer. One possible strategy is exemplified in Figure 2. When a speaker asks whether a German expression is also possible in Dutch, others reply that when they are unsure about whether an expression is possible in the other language, they just 'tinker the two languages together'. These speakers clearly do not try to avoid transfer, but rather use it as a tool to express themselves in an effective way. Other speakers are likely to use different strategies, especially if their attitudes towards transfer are less positive. The trainee will also look at the actual language transfer that occurs in the discussions, analyzing which constructions are commonly transferred, whether there are differences across speakers, whether speakers who try to avoid it indeed produce less of it, and whether the transfer seems to depend on the topic that is being discussed at that moment.

Social perspective

The other trainee focuses on the social implications of transfer, on how bilingual speakers feel about transfer. Around the world, communities tend to hold rather negative attitudes towards both the use of foreign words and the use of constructions that betray transfer, though not all transfer gets noticed. Negative views often seem linked to ideologies about purism and the idea that somehow it is a sign of laziness if you allow foreign interference into your language, or that you just do not care enough. However, this outsider perspective limits our view of how speakers themselves evaluate transfer in their everyday contexts. Note, for instance, how the speaker in Figure 1 laments that her parents often criticize her German. Trainee 2 will investigate how speakers define their identity as German-Dutch bilinguals, how they interpret community discourse about transfer, whether they feel any anxiety about their language use, and what can be done to raise awareness of unintended negative side-effects of having your language use criticized for features that would be hard to avoid even if you wanted to.

Project timeline

Preparing and conducting focus groups (months 1-3):

The trainees conduct focus groups with native German speakers living in the Netherlands. This group was chosen because (a) there is a large group of German speakers living in the Netherlands, and (b) speakers tend to experience quite a lot of transfer from Dutch to German¹ (Brons-Albert, 1994; Ribbert & Kuiken, 2010). Besides, as evidenced by the regular discussions on Facebook (see Figure 1 and Figure 2), these speakers are motivated to discuss their experiences. The focus groups take place in an online environment. Participants are provided discussion prompts to start the discussions about their experiences with language transfer (see Bates et al. (2009) for a similar set-up).

- Milestones: designing discussion prompts based on a literature review (trainee 1 focusing on the communicative perspective, trainee 2 focusing on the social perspective), ethical clearance, setting up the online environment, initiating and monitoring discussion groups.

¹ This means that the two trainees have to be proficient in German, one of them enough to conduct the focus group discussions. If it is not possible to find a suitable trainee who is proficient in German, it would also be possible to switch to a different population, for example, Dutch speakers living in Germany.

Coding the data (months 4-6):

The two trainees will code the focus group discussions for content based on the communicative perspective (trainee 1) and social perspective (trainee 2). Importantly, as (most of) the discussions are in German, the discussions will also be coded for actual language transfer. This makes it possible to compare speakers' perceptions of transfer and the actual language transfer that they experience during language production.

- Milestones: coding focus group discussions for content and transfer.

Results and write-up (months 8-10):

The two trainees will perform a content analysis based on the coding in the previous step (trainee 1 focusing on the communicative perspective, trainee 2 focusing on the social perspective). Besides, connections between the two perspectives (e.g., do different attitudes lead to different transfer strategies?) and the actual language transfer (e.g., do speakers' attitudes/transfer strategies influence the extent of transfer?) will be explored.

- Milestones: content analysis, analysis transfer; writing first draft of an article for a relevant peer-reviewed journal.

Research Trainee Profile

Project 1 focuses on communication and Project 2 on identity issues. For this reason, we will look for trainees with complementary expertise, for instance students from the MA programs in Communication and Information Sciences and Online Culture, respectively. Research Master students with expertise in any or both fields will also be attractive candidates, but BA students with excellent grades or proven research skills will also be considered. The trainees will be trained on the job in how to conduct focus group research; any experience with qualitative research will be a plus. An overall goal of the project is to show how phenomena are often fruitfully studied from various perspectives, and for that reason an open attitude towards various ways of doing research, including those common in current DCC and DCU research, will be something we look for in prospective trainees. Candidates can apply for the job by sending a motivation letter by email to m.barking@tilburguniversity.edu, including as attachment an up-to-date resumé.

Figure 1: Example discussion about changes in the speakers' native language German.

Olla olla!
 Nun erstmal danke auch für die aufnahme 😊 auch ist die schon ein paar tage alt.. 😊 sorry für's späte schreiben. Etwas zu mir, mein Deutsch ist in den letzten jahren echt miserabel geworden.. 😊 krieg die ganze zeit von meinen elernteilen geappt dass ich mal anständig deutsch schreiben soll.. vielleicht geht das ein paar auch so? 🙄🙄🙄 dafür ist mein holländisch dann wieder bestens! Schon seit meinem 10 lebensjahr leben wir in holland. Mittlerweile bin ich 25. Seit ein paar jahren sind meine eltern wieder zurück nach Deutschland gezogen mit uns. Zu dem punkt wo wir in die weiterführende Schule kamen. Uns wurde die wahl gelassen ob wir in Deutschland oder in holland weiter zur schule gehen wollten. Wahl war schnell getroffen wegen allen Freunden die wir hatten. Also grundschule, weiterführende schule und ausbildung, alles haben wir in holland absolviert. Dann sprech ich über meinen bruder und mich. Mittlerweile in [redacted] eine Arbeitsstelle bekommen, wohne dann halt unter der woche in [redacted] boven [redacted] bij [redacted] in de buurt. Und zum Wochenende halt wieder richtung hometown elternhaus nach deutschland. Nähmlich [redacted] auf 15 km abstand zur [redacted] grenze. Also ideaal für die grossen einkäufe. Unglaublich was das für Preisunterschiede in den Lebensmitteln sind! Und mittlerweile auch schon seit fast 4 jahren einen waschechten brabander als freund geangelt! 😊 bin also schon seit ein paar jahren grensgänger oder auch grensoverschrijdende werknemer. Hier kommt in kürze ein ende dran. Dann werd mich in holland bei meinem freund einschreiben. Onder andere daarom ben ik blij dat er dit soort groepen bestaan om lekker alle kennis met elkaar te kunnen delen en nieuwe info's kunt delen over alles wat er maar met het grensleven te maken heeft! Nou de vraag; wohnen leute auch bei uns der region [redacted] oder [redacted] ?? 😊
 Groetjes 🙌

[redacted] wohne seit 28 jahren in landgraaf und das mit dem deutsch nicht mehr richtig schreiben kommt mir sehr bekannt vor 😊
 14 Std. Gefällt mir Antworten Mehr

[redacted] hahaha zum glück bin ich nicht allein 😊
 14 Std. Gefällt mir Antworten Mehr

[redacted] Ich wohne in [redacted] und bin [redacted] ich finde es schwierig von niederländisch auf Deutsch zu wechseln beim sprechen. Schreiben geht noch einigermaßen. Wenn du Lust hast kannst du dich melden und dann reden wir auf Deutsch 😊
 12 Std. Gefällt mir Antworten Mehr

[redacted] sehr gern 😊😊
 11 Std. Gefällt mir Antworten Mehr

[redacted] Herzlich willkommen ja das erkenne ich nur zu gut
 12 Std. Gefällt mir Antworten Mehr

[redacted] Herrlich, wie du zwischen den Sprachen wechselst. Das geht mir inzwischen ganz genau so. 😊
 7 Std. Gefällt mir Antworten Mehr

Figure 2: Example transfer strategies and perceptions

[redacted] 2. Januar ...

Gibt es de Ausdruck "Familienmensch" auch im Niederlaendischen?

2 Gefällt mir 4 Kommentare

[redacted] Kannst Ja auch einfach einen machen 😊 ich bastel mir das in beiden Sprachen immer so zurecht wir es mir passt. Ergänzen sich gut.
 Gefällt mir Antworten 17 W

[redacted] mach ich auch noch so, wenn ich gerade nicht auf das gute Wort komme, und dann in beiden Sprachen. Und das tolle ist, dass man eigentlich immer verstanden wird und es ab und an auch mal für einen Lacher sorgt da die Übersetzung dann nicht immer astrein ist... 😊😊
 Gefällt mir Antworten 17 W

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