Are we in control of our own language use? – the case of (un)intentional language transfer

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Project Summary
One of the fundamental questions in linguistic research is the question to what extent our language use happens intentionally or automatically: on the one hand, we can choose to express ourselves in certain ways that fit our communicative goals, yet at the same time, language processing and production happens so quickly that it also has to heavily rely on automatic processes. Despite its significance, this contrast between intentional and automatic processes has been insufficiently explored so far, partially due to a divide in linguistics into the fields of sociolinguistics, which mainly focuses on intentional aspects, and psycholinguistics, which mainly focuses on the automatic ones. This division is to a large extent also present within our own school, with DCU and DCC mostly focusing on sociolinguistic or psycholinguistic questions respectively. More research is needed that integrates these two perspectives, allowing us to study language as both a social and a cognitive phenomenon (Dabrowska, 2020), and the project that we propose here aims to do that by closely collaborating across the departments of DCU and DCC.

   The empirical focus of this study is on language change in native German speakers living in the Netherlands. These speakers frequently use Dutch in their daily lives, and as a result oftentimes experience transfer from their second language Dutch to their native language German (Barking et al., 2021; Ribbert & Kuiken, 2010). As part of the 2020 RTS project[1], we conducted focusgroup discussions with a number of these speakers, which resulted in a rich dataset containing information about their experiences and attitudes towards transfer. Importantly, we believe that closer inspection of this dataset could also provide us with valuable information about the contrast between intentionality and automaticity in our language use. The analysis that we propose here would focus both on *what* speakers say (e.g., how they feel about transfer as a potential reason about why they would want to put in the extra effort to be intentional about their choices) and *how* they say it (e.g., using transferred constructions, correcting themselves, etc.; see also Nycz (2016) for similar analyses focusing both on content and form). Analyzing the data in this way – coupled with additional data about speakers' intentionality in regards to the transfer observed in the discussions (see 'Project Timeline') – therefore could greatly improve our understanding of transfer, and help us conceptualize more generally how the social and cognitive aspects of language work together.

Project Timeline
Adding new data about awareness and intentionality (month 1): In a first step, we contact our participants of the focus group study again, who almost all indicated to be willing to take part in follow-up studies. We will present them with (parts of) their own transcripts and ask them to indicate any Dutch transfer that they notice in these transcripts. Additionally, participants indicate whether these examples were mostly the result of automatic processes or of them intentionally 'playing with the languages'.

Data analysis (month 2): We then analyze the focus group data with a focus on key moments that can tell us something about the contrast between speakers' intentionality on the one hand, and automatic processes resulting in transfer on the other hand. This analysis is complemented with the

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[1] The 2020 RTS project – titled 'Discussing Language Transfer' – is carried out by Noëlle Sommer and Markus Pandrea and supervised by Ad Backus, Maria Mos, and Marie Barking (see here for a brief overview of the results so far). The current proposal is about a spin-off project of this larger focus group study that looks at the data with a new theoretical focus and also includes a new data collection component. We therefore think that this projects stands enough on its own to qualify as a new project, while – by building on the data that was collected in previous stages – being feasible to complete within the proposed time frame.

additional data collected in step 1, helping us to correctly interpret the the examples of transfer that we observe in the focus group discussions.

Results and write-up (months 3+4): Based on the results of the focus group data and the additional data, we write an article draft for a relevant peer-reviewed journal.

Research Trainee Profile

We look for a student who is interested in linguistic research, for instance a student from the MA programs in Communication and Information Sciences, Online Culture, or the Research Master. The trainee will be trained on the job in how to analyze 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 DCU and DCC 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.

References

Barking, M., Backus, A., & Mos, M. (2021). Individual Variation in Cross-Linguistic Generalization. *Manuscript Submitted for Publication*.

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