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“Understanding What You’ve Never Learned?” Chances and Limitations of Spontaneous Auditive Transfer Between Slavic Languages

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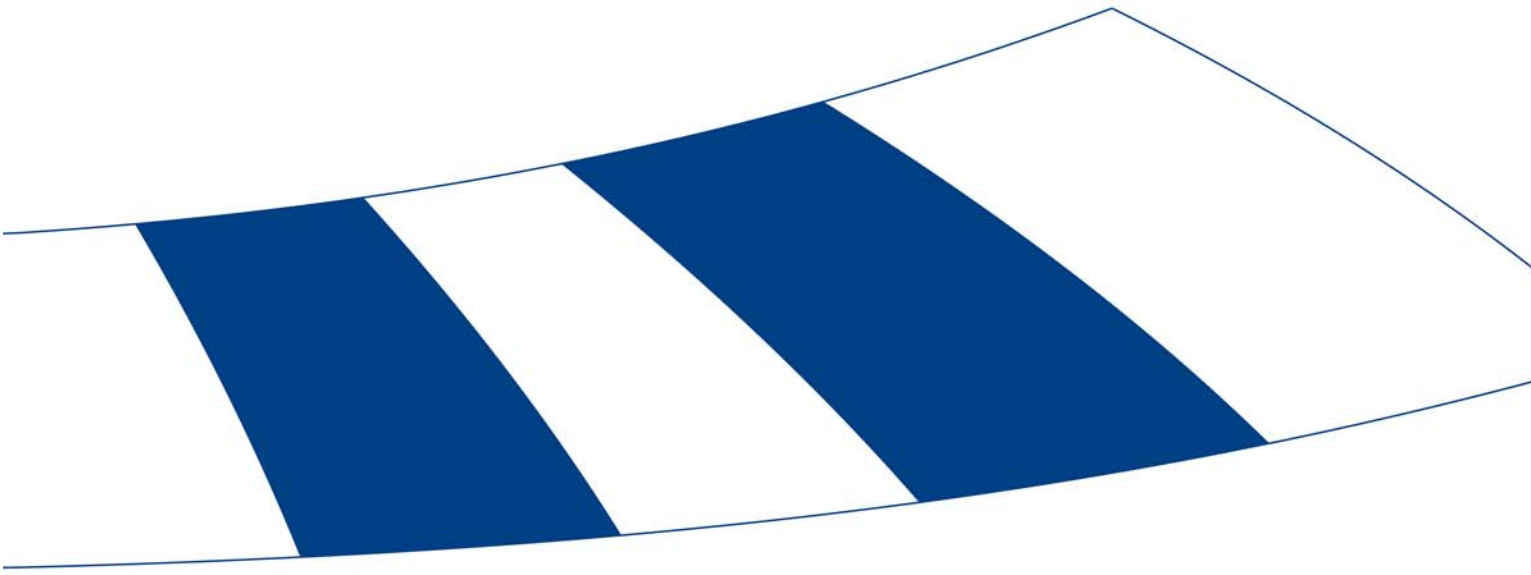

Abstract

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"Understanding what you've never learned?" – Chances and limitations of spontaneous auditive transfer between Slavic languages

This paper is dedicated to the investigation of receptive transfer with a special focus on the comprehension of spoken utterances in nonfamiliar Slavic languages. It investigates the possibility of applying the concept of passive multilingualism to the field of Slavic languages. It is often assumed that closely related languages provide ideal conditions for mutual intelligibility. By means of positive transfer from a previously known language of the group, one can achieve a certain degree of passive knowledge in related languages, even if these have never been learned consciously. In this paper, however, it will be shown that spontaneous intercomprehensibility of spoken utterances within the group of Slavic languages is rather restricted. After a short outline of the peculiarities of receptive and auditive transfer phenomena, as opposed to productive and written transfer, the paper provides empirical evidence for the failure of comprehension at different stages of the perception process.

Keywords

Cross linguistic influence; Interlanguage transfer; Third language acquisition; L2-influence; Speech perception; Slavic languages; Receptive multlingualism

Introduction

Listening skills: an essential part of multilingual competence

Research material on cross-linguistic influence and transfer phenomena focusses a great deal on problems occurring in language production (Marx 2003, 77; Ringbom 2003, 66). It usually points out the typical difficulties students of a certain native language face while acquiring another language, and demonstrates the challenges by examples of typical mistakes found in the learners' interlanguage utterances. In some cases studies also concentrate on the question of how previously achieved linguistic knowledge can accelerate or hinder the process of second or third language acquisition (see e.g. Hufeisen-Lindemann 1998, Cenoz-Hufeisen-Jessner 2001, Cenoz-Hufeisen-Jessner 2003, Hufeisen-Marx 2003).

Receptive transfer plays a certain role in some multilingual didactic concepts, e.g. the EuroCom concepts for different Indoeuropean language families, which try to enhance learners' comprehension skills in closely related languages (see e.g. Rutke 2002 and Kischel 2002 for languages from different language families, Klein-Stegmann 2000 for Romance and Zybatow 2002 for Slavic languages). To a large degree, however, these concepts are restricted to the development of reading skills while listening skills are widely neglected or play a minor role.

The central area, where knowledge of foreign languages is applied in multinational enterprises however turns out to be oral communication. While written communication can largely be translated, facing oral communication situations requires the ability to understand and react immediately. Oral multilingual communication is thus based on the assumption that each of the participants is able to understand the languages being spoken. This does not inevitably involve active knowledge, as the production can be made in the speaker's native language or in some lingua franca. But it does rely on passive knowledge on the side of the participants and relies on their receptive competence.

Especially when oral communication takes place between native speakers of closely related languages, there is a certain tendency not to use a lingua franca but to rely on the mutual intercomprehensibility of the

languages in question. This tendency can be observed among Scandinavian languages, but also between Slavic languages, compare for example communication between Czech and Slovak speakers (Nábělková 2007). This phenomenon is known as passive bilingualism: participants use their native language for the production of utterances and are able to understand utterances in the interlocutor's native language, even if they have never actively and systematically acquired it.

For the development of multilingual competence the applicability of passive bilingualism to non-native speakers has to be examined: passive tri- or multilingualism would thus involve the active use of a previously acquired foreign language (L2) and the ability of understanding utterances in languages related to L2, which have not been systematically acquired by the listener (L3).

This paper tries to investigate the possibility of applying this concept in the field of Slavic languages. First, it will sketch out the characteristics of receptive transfer and auditive transfer as opposed to productive and reading transfer. It will then present data gained in a cross-Slavic comprehension test and show the limitations for mutual intercomprehension between Slavic languages on different stages of the perception process. It will discuss the influence of proficiency and L1 or L2 status on the basis of the results and work out some consequences for a didactic concept that tries to actively develop passive multilingual competence in the field of Slavic languages.

Receptive auditive transfer and its characteristics

First, I will try to outline the main characteristics of receptive oral (auditive) transfer, focussing on the main differences between productive and receptive transfer on the one hand, and between reading and listening transfer on the other.

Characteristics of receptive transfer

Transfer in language comprehension as compared to transfer in language production shows some typical characteristics, which mostly are not referred to in investigations focussing on language production. These differences can be grouped into three major areas: hidden instead of overt transfer, transfer of meaning instead of transfer of form and the inverted problematic of marked and unmarked items.

Hidden vs. overt transfer

The main problem in investigating receptive transfer is the fact that its results do not appear overtly on the surface of the language structure as they do in speech production (Steinhauer 2006, 22-23). Whereas negative transfer in production leads to deviations from the norm of the target language, which can be directly observed in the utterances made by L2 (or L3) speakers, negative transfer in reception leads to deviations in the conceptual representation, which the listener develops on the basis of the perceived input. This representation does not correspond to the conceptual representation intended by the speaker. Negative receptive transfer thus results in phenomena known as misunderstanding, in cases, when the listener builds up an incorrect concept, or in non-understanding, in cases when the listener is not able to build up a conceptual representation at all (see e.g. Odlin 1989, 39). In any case, the failure of the reception process cannot be observed as such, but can be deduced only from an inappropriate reaction, that is, on the basis of a new utterance. This may be the main reason why receptive transfer is not as central an object to research as mistakes made in productive transfer.

In this sense, receptive transfer can be characterized as transfer that stays hidden, whereas productive transfer is overt. When becoming overt, negative productive transfer can be recognized and corrected, thus preventing the item in question from fossilization. In the case of hidden transfer, however, the misinterpretation of a certain item can remain undetected and thus uncorrected. Negative receptive transfer can lead to the stabilization of the assumed but incorrect meaning and thus to the fossilization of the receptive mistake. In order to discover the inadequateness of the stabilized meaning and to reinterpret it, strong inappropriateness of context leading to a strongly inappropriate reaction is necessary.

Transfer of meaning vs. transfer of form

Another feature, where receptive transfer differs largely from productive transfer, is connected with the different directions of encoding and decoding the communicated message. In language production, a given concept is put into the corresponding form. Transfer phenomena arise when the similarity between con-

cepts gets associated with a similarity in form, so that the linguistic form of a certain item is transferred from a previously known language into the target language. Ringbom (2001, 60) calls this kind of process "transfer of form" and sees as its cause the "assumed similarity" between the forms which the languages involved in the transfer process use for the same concept.

In language reception on the other hand, the correct form in the target language is already given: what has to be found is the corresponding concept. Transfer in reception arises when the similarity between forms is associated with a similarity in the corresponding concepts. In Ringbom's words, receptive transfer is facilitated not only by "assumed similarity" but by similarity, that is actually "perceived" (Ringbom 2001, 66). What is transferred here is not the form of a linguistic item but the meaning attached to it. In this sense, receptive transfer could be called "transfer of meaning", as the transferred item is linguistic meaning exclusively. Interestingly, Ringbom uses the term "transfer of meaning" for production phenomena such as loan translations and coinings, and does not relate it to the reception process.

Inversion of the polysemy problem

There is yet another difference between receptive and productive transfer which is facilitated by the different directions of the encoding and decoding process. It becomes obvious in cases where certain (lexical or grammatical) distinctions are expressed differently in two languages. One of the languages expresses this distinction overtly, whereas the other language has one polysemic expression for both.

The consequences for Second (as well as Third) Language Acquistion can be described as follows: In language production polysemy leads to transfer phenomena when the source language has a polysemic and the target language two different expressions. A speaker then faces the difficulty of choosing the correct of two differentiated forms. In reception, however, the difficulty is inverted: problems for a listener arise when the target language has a polysemic expression, while the source languages distinguish the two concepts. The question of choosing the correct concept can be solved only on the basis of contextual information. But listeners who transfer an undistinguished concept from the source language are often not aware of the polysemy of the item. Problems of this type can arise on different levels of decoding, on the phonological level as well as on morphological, syntactic and lexical level.

Some researchers (e.g. Wode 1993) tend to use the term "markedness" for this kind of phenomena. Differences in markedenesss between languages are seen as one of the main factors that inhibit or faciltate transfer phenomena and determine the probability of the occurrence of transfer phenomena (Wode 1993, 257). As there is no generally agreed definition on the term "markedness", which is used in quite different senses, we will not make use of it here and classify the above mentioned phenomena as caused by interlanguage differences in polysemy.

Characteristics of auditive transfer

Within receptive transfer there can be differences depending on the medium of communication. The main differences affecting the occurrence of transfer phenomena within the decoding process are: linearity of input and limited repetition of the reception process, restricted influence on reception time by the recipient, missing graphic information. These differences represent disadvantages provided by acoustic information only compared to visual input. All of them result in a fourth difference, the lesser amount of context, which restricts the strategy of context inference in auditive reception. There are, however, two differences which represent advantages of auditive reception: one is additional information from prosody and the second is that in auditive reception no problems can arise from orthographic differences.

In oral reception, the input is presented in a strictly linear order with only very limited possibility to repeat the reception process. Whereas reading in principle gives the recipient the possibility of unlimited repetition of the reception process, the listener has to cope with the received input immediately with only a very restricted chance of repetition. In face to face communication it is possible to ask the speaker to repeat his or her utterance, but the use of this strategy is limited to a few instances. Unlike in written texts, nonlinear relationships between items in spoken utterances are harder to detect, especially when congruence between elements is not expressed by means of word order (that is by closeness or distance), but by other means such as morphological congruence.

Another restriction in the reception of spoken texts is reception time. Again, in reading comprehension the recipient is free to choose the appropriate time for reception. In oral reception, the reception time is predetermined by the speech rate chosen by the speaker.

A difference given by the channel itself is the lack of graphic information in oral reception. Whereas sentence borders normally can be detected by means of intonation and pauses made by the speaker, word boundaries are much more affected by missing graphic signals, since segments on the word level are not consequently made overt by pauses. Although some Slavic languages (namely the languages with fixed stress as Czech or Polish) make use of prosodic features to signalize word boundaries, this kind of prosodic information is not likely to be successfully transferred into other languages, since the limitative function of prosody is not displayed in the same way in every language (see Cutler 1999, 45). As prosodic features differ largely across Slavic languages, they cannot be regarded as an item that can be easily transferred and can play a positive role in comprehending oral texts in other Slavic languages. In fact, detecting word boundaries turns out to be one of the most demanding tasks in understanding non-familiar Slavic languages on the basis of previously acquired ones.

Moreover, the missing distinction between upper case and lower case letters in oral speech does not convey information that helps to distinguish proper names from appellatives. Thus, the distinction between these two classes of nouns can be mixed in auditive reception.

The three disadvantages of oral reception – linearity of input, lacking control of reception speed and lacking graphic signals – result in a further disadvantage in auditive comprehension: the lesser amount of context that can be used for inference, a strategy used in monolingual comprehension for filling up gaps caused by items not understood in the recognition process. Auditory comprehension in non familiar languages often produces too many gaps, so that the remaining items cannot form a sufficient context for inferring. As a consequence, the role that context plays in first or second language comprehension (e.g. building up a semantic framework that influences expectation of further input; contributing to the disambiguation of different meanings; discovering semantic inconsistencies of transferred items) does not work as well in auditive reception as in reception of written texts.

On the other hand, there are some features that make spoken utterances easier to understand than written ones. What helps in comprehending the overall situation and thus contributes to the building up of a semantic framework is prosody. Although in cross-linguistic comprehension prosody does not contribute to the detection of word boundaries, it can deliver useful information in the field of sentence borders and sentence type as well as in interpreting the communicative situation. Thus, it can to some extent compensate for the lack of graphic signals. As prosody is often influenced by emotional factors, it also carries some kind of information that is not expressed in written texts at all.

Last but not least, auditive reception can be easier than reading, when different writing systems or differences in orthographic rules blur the phonetic similarities between languages. In these cases the absence of a graphic form of language can contribute to the understanding instead of complicating it.

Features blocking the reception process in auditory comprehension between Slavic languages

The following section shows some examples of misperception between closely related languages that were collected in a cross-Slavic comprehension test. The aim of this overview is to identify crucial points within the reception process, i.e. linguistic levels where the reception process is blocked. At these levels, positive transfer is not possible, and transfer from related languages may therefore lead to misinterpretations. The examples are grouped according to linguistic levels on which they occur, starting with the phonological level of identifying phonemes and segmentation of input, stepping on to the level of morphology and syntax and ending up at the lexical level. The goal is to give a brief classification of different types of misperceptions and their origin. A quantitative analysis of the misperceptions and their impact on the total result of comprehension must be left to a deeper analysis of the material. A short introduction describes the setting of the test and the participants' linguistic prerequisites.

The material

Examples are taken from a cross-Slavic comprehension test carried out in May and June 2007 at the Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration. Participants were students of International Business Administration, who had been attending language courses in either Russian or Czech for at least 4 semesters, so that everyone had at least one Slavic language as L2. More than 50% of them had German

as L1, the others were L1 speakers of different Slavic languages. The total number of participants is 108. The participants were confronted with recorded spoken utterances in Slavic languages, which they had not learned before (Polish, Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian, Bulgarian and Czech or Russian respectively, depending on the L2 acquired). They had to solve a set of different tasks: understanding the global communicative situation as well as single words, focussing on some specific piece of information as well as comprehending a sentence as a whole. All utterances were repeated twice. The students were asked to write down the results on paper in their mother tongue.

The phonological level

Many of the misperceptions observed were caused by differences on the phonological level. I will divide the field of phonological misperception into two distinct subclasses: the first is the problem of identifying phonemes; the second is the supraphonological level, where differences between the languages may lead to problems in the correct identification of word units.

Reception of discrete phonemes

In some cases, incorrect interpretation of the phonemic character led to incorrect associations with lexemes known from other languages. So phonological misperception and lexical transfer turned out to be in some way connected. As the spelling mostly gives more explicit information about phonemes, many of the misperceptions and misinterpretations would not have occurred in reading comprehension. There is, thus, a large area of misinterpretations that occurs in spoken language comprehension only and can be caused by the communication channel.

These are especially frequent when phonological rules between the two languages involved in the transfer process do not correlate, so that the different allophonic quality in the target language blocks the activation and comprehension of etymologically similar words in the previously known Slavic language (the Slavic source language). A good example here is the reduction of unstressed vowels in Russian: the occurrence of the allophone [a] for the phoneme /o/ is not present in other Slavic languages like Czech or Polish. Thus, an etymologically similar word as *okno* may not be identified by listeners with knowledge of Czech, since the phonetic form is too different from the corresponding Czech word. In its written form, however, identification of the lexeme would not cause any problems, since the Russian spelling rules are morphological and not phonetic in this case.

Let us consider some of the examples of phonemic misperception from the corpus.

One of the most problematic cases is the sound represented by the letter *ł* in Polish, which is pronounced as a bilabial glide (similar to *w* in English *wall*). Its equivalent in other Slavic languages is the lateral sound l. In written comprehension, there is no difficulty in identifying the equivalent letter, since Polish uses the modified letter l to express this phoneme. In auditory comprehension, however, the difference between the sounds in question is too large for spontaneous identification. As a consequence, many etymologically related words across Slavic languages cannot be identified. The listeners thus cannot make use of interlingual cognates because of phonological differences which block the comprehension process. There are quite a lot of examples in the corpus, I will quote two of them here: In the Polish sentence *miło cię widzieć* “nice to see you” the two words *miło* “dear, nice” and *widzieć* “to see” both have true cognates in other Slavic languages, but *widzieć* is identified significantly more often than *miło*. The different pronounciation of the soft consonants *ć* and *dź* in *widzieć* apparently does not block identification, whereas the different pronounciation of *ł* in *miło* does. Another frequent occurrence of *ł* which regularly leads to miscomprehension is the Polish past tense form. Here the phonological difference blocks the correct identification of the morphological category in question, which in turn leads to misinterpretation on the morphological level (for examples see on the morphological level, page 9).

Segmentation problems and prosodic differences

A greater amount of problems than those caused by direct phonetic and phonological differences is found in the field of segmentation. Identifying the correct boundaries of linguistic items in a non-segmented input is one of the challenges that listeners face even in their mother tongue. This ability is thus highly automatized and strongly related to boundary signals used by the L1. Learning a L2 is often connected with revising these listening habits and replacing them with L2-specific rules. It is thus not surprising that in listening tasks with nonfamiliar languages where listeners were given no instruction concerning prosodic differences between the languages in question, segmentation is one of the fields where most misperceptions occur. It is

interesting to see which rules are applied to the L3-input automatically: L1-rules or L2-rules? Or is the decisive criterion for choosing the adequate segmentation strategy not based on the status of languages (L1 or L2) but on lexical similarity or presumed linguistic distance (a criterion frequently named psychotypology)? Let us first consider different consequences of mis-segmentation and classify them into typical subclasses. The problem of segmentation can result in three different types of mistakes:

a) A word boundary can be assumed, where in fact there is none in the presented input (*additional boundary*).

b) A word boundary existing in the presented input, is not identified (*ignored boundary*).

c) A combination of the first and second case, a word boundary can be put in a wrong place, both ignoring one that is present and adding one at a place where there is none (*shifted boundary*).

I will give several examples of each of these occasions, trying to explain both the reasons for their occurrence and the consequences for comprehension:

a) Additional boundaries

An additional word boundary can have the consequence that only parts of a certain word are understood. The reason for this can be sheer length of the word in question, as words containing more than three syllables tend to be not perceived as one unit. Note that in the following examples the assumed word boundary is put in a place where there is only a morpheme boundary in the input. In most of the cases, the root is identified, while certain additional morphemes (mostly affixes) are ignored or not recognized as part of the word unit.

- In the Bulgarian example *novoto* “new (def. article)” only *novo* “new” is recognized, whereas the postponed definite article is ignored.
- In the Russian *dogovorit’sja* “to arrange a date” only *govorit’* “to talk” is recognized, both the prefix and the postponed reflexive suffix are ignored.
- From Bulgarian *učastie* ”participation“ only *čast* ”part“ is recognized, the prefix as well as the neuter ending are left aside.

In some cases this comes up with international lexemes as well, as in the Czech *rekonstrukcí* “reconstruction (Instrumental Sg.)”, where only *konstrukcí* “construction” is recognized and the international prefix *re-* is ignored.

In all of these cases, the affix-stripping does not lead to a considerable change in meaning, since disregarding the additional meaning of the prefix leaves the pure meaning of the root, which can still play its role in the building of a semantically coherent utterance.

As a counterexample, where the affix-stripping causes a wrong lexical association, we can use the Polish example *zadowolenie* “satisfaction”, where only *dowolenie* is recognized, whereas the prefix is either ignored completely or confused with a preposition (see below). This leads to an association with a deceptive Czech cognate *dovolená* “holiday”. Here the assumed word boundary does have severe consequences for lexical interpretation of the resulting parts.

Word boundaries can be assumed also at the border between two roots of a compound word, which leads to the fact that only one part of the compound word is understood: in the Bulgarian example *međunarodno* „international“ only the second part *narodno* “national” is recognized, another Bulgarian example is *poluostrov* “peninsula” where only the second part *ostrov* “island” is recognized. Typical candidates for this kind of division of compound words are compound numbers, where in fact a word boundary exists in spelling, but not in spoken input. Quite often only certain parts of the compound number are recognized, e.g. only the part *devet* “nine” in *devet stotin* “nine hundred”.

Also, there are quite a lot of examples in which both parts of morphologically complex words are understood, but not seen as a unit and therefore split into two separate words. This can once more occur at morpheme boundaries, where each bound morpheme is given the quality of its own word unit: So the above mentioned Polish example *zadowolenie* “satisfaction” can be split up, perceiving the prefix *za-* as an free morpheme, resembling the preposition *za* “for”. A similar example can be seen in the case of Bulgarian *izvestna* “well known”, where the prefix *iz-* is interpreted as a preposition *iz* “from”.

In some relatively rare cases, the splitting up of a word into two units takes place even within the morpheme, so that the whole unit must be completely reinterpreted (see the examples on page 12).

b) Ignored boundaries

While it may seem quite easy to explain that listeners in a L3 search for the smallest units which can be meaningful, i.e. morphemes, and therefore tend to split up complex word units into smaller meaningful subunits, in the data obtained the reverse process can also be observed. These are cases where an existing word boundary is not realized and two separate word units are perceived as one complex word. This can be seen in many cases as the reversion of the above described process of morpheme stripping. In most examples it is prepositions which are attached to the adjacent word and interpreted as morphemes: as suffixes when they are attached to the preceding word or as prefixes when attached to the following word. For example the Bulgarian *na grada* "of the town" is heard as one word *nagrada*, resembling the Russian word *nagrada* "decoration"; Bulgarian *prez chiljada* "in thousand" is interpreted as one word *preschilada*, Polish *korki na mieście* "traffic jam in town" the first two words are combined to form one word *korkina*. Interestingly, in the latter two cases, there can be no lexical meaning assigned to the resulting one word form, since more or less nonsensical words are created.

An interesting example is the Bulgarian preposition *na* "on" which can serve in a grammatical function as signalling the genitive (or dative) case. In these contexts it does not express any lexical meaning, so that it can easily be perceived as a grammatical affix and attached to the preceding word. In the Bulgarian sentence *novoto ime na izvestnija hotel* "the new name of the famous hotel" the two words *ime na* "name of" are therefore segmented by Russian L2-listeners as *imeno* "especially". Here, listeners are not only inspired by the meaning of the resulting Russian lexeme, but also transfer prosodic rules like reduction of the unstressed vowel o from the L2 to the target language. This example can be seen as a case where transfer phenomena on the segmental and on the prosodic level interact.

c) Shifted boundaries

In some cases the two processes of splitting up and conflating of word units are combined with the result that an existing word boundary is shifted. I will give three examples of this kind from the data: The first two examples are combinations of an additional followed by an ignored word boundary, the third example on the other hand is a combination of an ignored word boundary followed by an additional one:

- In the Russian phrase *v samom ekologičeski čistom rajone Moskvy* "in the ecologically cleanest part of Moscow" the two words *rajone Moskvy* are segmented by listeners with Czech L2 as *nemaskuj* "don't mask".
- Several instances were found of the following example, where the Bulgarian postponed article, forming a word unit with the adjacent word, was split up and interpreted as a prefix belonging to the following word: Bulgarian *meždunarodnoto letište* "international airport" is segmented as *mezinárondní doletiště*. This phenomenon appeared with Czech L2 only, since Bulgarian and Czech share the cognate *letište* / *letiště* "airport", while Russian uses the international word *aeroport*. Moreover, it is facilitated by the existence of the Czech verb *doletět* "to fly somewhere, to reach by flying".
- The prefix of the following word is split up and seen as belonging to the case ending of the word before: Bulgarian *frensko učastie* "French participation" is interpreted as *frenskou casti* "French part".

Summing up, segmentation problems can result in quite different types of reinterpretation of word boundaries. The results can be splitting of larger word units as well as conflating independent words into a complex unit and shifting of word boundaries. What most of the examples described above have in common is that word boundaries are assumed at places where there are in fact morpheme boundaries, and that independent words are seen as mostly non-lexical parts of adjacent words. There are two crosslinguistic factors that can be seen as facilitating the process of segmentation shifts: the one is the existence of morphemes that can be perceived as affixes and at the same time as independent units (e.g. prepositions like *za* and *na*) in both the target and the source language. The factor of presumed typological closeness can therefore be seen as more influential than the status of the source language as L1 or L2. The second factor is crosslinguistic differences in prosodic features. These differences do not allow transfer of the delimitative function of prosody from one language to another. Prosody is thus by no means a helpful feature to distinguish word segments, as Slavic languages, despite their relationship, do not make use of this phenomenon in the same way.

The morphological level

The field of grammatical morphology is regarded as one of the most promising areas for positive transfer, since Slavic languages share a great deal of common morphological features. This is true for the phonetic form of grammatical morphemes as well as for the morphological system as a whole. The questions concerning morphology are whether listeners make use of these transferable features in spontaneous comprehension and to what extent morphological differences between Slavic languages can influence the process of comprehension in a negative way. These two questions will be answered in the next section; I the following section we will take a closer look at the question of whether listeners are able to distinguish between grammatical and lexical morphemes, i.e. between inflection and derivation.

Grammatical features

The comprehension process can be blocked on the morphological level when certain morphemes are not recognized because of their different phonetic form in the target language. Then, phonological and morphological features combine in blocking the comprehension process. Other kinds of errors are based on the morphological level exclusively. In these cases, morphemes are identified but assigned an incorrect grammatical meaning. Thus, morphological differences between the languages in question, i.e. differing grammatical morphemes, lead to a wrong interpretation of the input. (see Selinker / Lakshamanan 1992 on the role of morphology in interlanguage transfer).

I will give some examples of the first case: in the Polish *garantujemy domową atmosferę* “we guarantee domestic atmosphere” the case endings containing nasal vowels are not correctly identified on the phonological level, which leads to a wrong interpretation on the morphological level. Especially candidates with Czech L2 tend to “hear” diphthongs instead of nasal vowels here. This leads them to interpret the whole phrase as an instrumental case instead of an accusative. Some listeners even add the preposition *s* “with”, which is followed by the instrumental case, although it is not present in the input. The identified result to the example above is then *s domovou atmosferou* “with domestic atmosphere”.

Another example for phonological misperceptions causing defective morphological interpretation is the Polish past tense form *zaczałam studium* “I started studying”. Forms like *zaczałam* “I started” are often not recognized as past tense forms and interpreted as present tense forms instead. The reasons for these misinterpretations can lie in two levels: on the phonological level, the pronounciation of *ł* as a bilabial glide does not allow an identification with an l, the typical morpheme of past tense forms in all other Slavic languages (compare the discussion on page 6). On the morphological level, it is the personal ending added to the past tense form which is unfamiliar to past tense forms in other Slavic languages, where the category of person is expressed either by an auxiliary verb (as in Czech) or not at all (in Russian). Especially for listeners with Czech L2 the ending of a verb form in *-am* resembles a quite frequent pattern of present tense forms. Therefore candidates with Czech L2 tend to misinterpret the form as present tense, whereas listeners with Russian L2 simply cannot identify the word form.

On the other hand, morphological differences may cause problems on the syntactic level of interpretation, e.g. when a certain morphological form is not identified correctly and therefore the morphological category of the segment in question remains undetected. As a consequence, congruence between word forms is not discovered and the underlying syntactic structure is not identified. An example from the corpus is the Czech phrase *s překrásnými secesními interiéry* “with beautiful art nouveau furniture” here the word *interiéry* is not identified as representing an instrumental plural form and therefore not seen as being syntactically related to the adjacent congruent adjective forms.

Another consequence of negative transfer on the morphological level is the confusion of word categories. This takes place when certain grammatical or lexical morphemes are ignored.

As a consequence, the listeners tend to assign a word category to the word segment identified. So word category mistakes can result from phonological mistakes as well as from incorrect segmentation.

Examples where segmentation problems lead to misinterpretation of word categories can be found quite often in the data:

- *blizko* (“near”, adverb) instead of *blizost* (“nearness” noun),
- *dom* (“house” noun) instead of *domowa* (“domestic” adjective),
- *garant* (“garanty”, noun) instead of *garantujemy* (“we guarantee”, verb).

In the first two examples, a derivative suffix is ignored and only the root is recognized. Since word category changes in the derivational process, ignoring of the affix blocks the process of assigning the correct word category to the identified segment. The word category is then chosen in accordance with the word category of the root. Both examples show that there are different possible directions (e.g. from noun to adverb; from adjective to noun) depending on the word category of the identified segment.

The third example shows the effect of non-identification of grammatical morphemes. In the example above, both the personal ending *-emy* along with the verbal suffix *-uj-* are ignored. Both morphemes would have permitted the recognition of the word category verb. Since they both have not been identified, the nominal root alone is the only trigger for assigning a word category. The segment is therefore associated with the nominal category.

Differentiation of grammatical and lexical morphemes

Some word category errors result from the confusion of grammatical and derivative morphemes. These cases are located in an area where grammatical (morphological) transfer and lexical transfer overlap as the border between grammatical and derivative morphemes is not always clear cut.

An example of this phenomenon is the Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian *rekvisite za sportove* “requisites for (different kinds of) sport” where *sportove* is an accusative plural form. The morpheme *-ov-* serves as plural marker in BCS in monosyllabic words, and *-e* is the case marker for the accusative plural. Listeners with Czech L2 tend to understanding the whole segment as an adjective *sportové*. They reinterpret the grammatical morpheme *-ov-* as a lexical morpheme that serves for derivation of adjectives from nouns. The morpheme *-e* is then seen as expressing either the neutral singular or the inanimate masculine or feminine plural (in most cases this remains unspecified).

Another example where misinterpretation of derivational morphemes leads to a confusion of word categories is the Bulgarian adjective *frensko* “french”. Again listeners with Czech L2 understand it as representing a noun “France”, as they identify the derivational suffix *-sko*, but do not recognize it as a morpheme deriving adjectives from nouns but as a morpheme which serves for naming countries as in Czech (see examples like *Dánsko* “Denmark”, *Polsko* “Poland”, *Rusko* “Russia”). Note that *frensko* is not a Czech-Bulgarian cognate here since the Czech word for France is *Francie*. Thus, listeners do not identify a whole word segment but a bound morpheme and transfer its meaning into the target language. This can be seen as a clear case of receptive morphological transfer, in which the meaning of a bound morpheme is transferred, not the meaning of a certain word form.

The examples found in the corpus make it seem likely that grammatical affixes can be interpreted as derivational affixes and different derivational affixes can be confused. However, there are no cases of derivational affixes in the corpus being understood as grammatical morphemes. The fact that this kind of transfer could not be observed does not imply that it is completely impossible, but in comparison with the two other types it seems to be rare.

Another phenomenon in connection with derivational affixes is the stripping and substitution of affixes, mostly prefixes. In quite a lot of cases, only the word stem is recognized by listeners, whereas the prefix is either ignored completely or substituted by another prefix which fits a word in the L2. So instead of the Bulgarian *isključitelno* listeners with L2 Russian tend to hear the word *zaključit'*, where they removed the prefix *is-* and substitute it by another prefix *za-*.

The phenonemon of affix substitution is not restricted to prefixes as in some cases it occurs whith derivational suffixes as well. So listeners with Russian L2 strip the suffix *-owy* in the Polish words *domowy* and *komfortowy* and substitute them with suffixes rendering Russian words like *domašnij* and *komfortnyj*.

In the Polish word *zadowolenie* “satisfaction” even stripping of the prefix and the suffix is combined. Listeners with Russian L2 are able to relate it to the Russian equivalent *udovol'stvie*, which has the same meaning. The process leading up to this result is quite complex and consists of two affix substitutions: the Polish prefix *za-* is replaced by the Russian *u-* and at the same time the Polish suffix *-enie* is substituted by the Russian *-stvie*. The example shows that listeners are able to detect similarities between languages even in cases where there are quite considerable differences in the morphological structures of the word in question (for a detailed analysis of this example see Heinz forthcoming).

The lexical level

The lexicon is regarded as the linguistic level where the most instances of transfer occur (Steinhauser 2006, Ringbom 2001, Wode 1993). Lexical items are easy to identify and therefore highly transferable. Although our data also contained a lot of instances of transfer on the levels of phonology and morphology, this claim seems to be confirmed by the data gained in our comprehension test. The number of transferred lexical items – positive and negative – is too high to be fully presented here. We will therefore concentrate on two questions of negative lexical transfer that can be considered typical cases for a blocked comprehension process on the level of lexis.

The first one is the distinction of proper names and appellatives, a problem which is quite easy to solve in reading comprehension but can be seen as one of the typical problems arising in auditory comprehension. The second one is the well-known problem of "false friends" between Slavic languages, i.e. phonetically identical or similar words that are transferred from the source language despite their different meanings in the target language. The interesting question here is whether the semantic context enables the listener to detect the inappropriate meaning of the transferred item.

Distinction of proper names and appellatives

Since spoken texts do not convey graphic information like upper case letters or inverted commas, it is not trivial for listeners to distinguish between proper names and appellatives. There are quite a lot of errors in the corpus that stem from this difficulty. Misperceptions caused by this problem can be observed in both directions: proper names perceived as appellatives as well as appellatives perceived as proper names.

Examples of proper names in the input that are understood as appellatives are the Russian *Saljut*, which is the name of a hotel, and is misinterpreted as a greeting formula by listeners. Other examples are the Bulgarian *Princess* and the appellative *princess*, or the Polish surname *Szuba*, which is similar to a Russian word meaning "fur".

The opposite case, where appellatives are not identified and understood as proper names can be observed as well: one case is the Croatian sentence *Restoran nudi jela* "The restaurant provides meals". Since two of the three word segments cannot be assigned a sensible meaning, they are as a whole interpreted as a proper name for the restaurant itself. The second example is the Bulgarian word for "mother" *majka*, which does not have a similar counterpart in the other Slavic languages (Russian *mat'*, Czech *matka*). So in the sentence tested it is perceived as a proper name for a person.

Differences in meaning: deceptive cognates and ad-hoc associations

The data gained in the corpus showed that "classical" cases of false friends, i.e. phonetic interlanguage cognates which differ in meaning are as rare as stated in the literature on this phenomenon (Zybatow 2002, 365). The following examples can be classified as cases of deceptive cognates proper, where misinterpretation is due to lexical difference exclusively:

- Czech *město* "town", which is similar sounding to the Russian "place" and by most of the listeners assigned this meaning,
- Polish *kwiecien* "April", which is similar to the Czech word *květen* meaning "May" instead.

In a greater amount of cases, however, deceptive cognates appear, even when there is no straightforward phonetic similarity between the two words in question. So Czech listeners easily substitute the sound *g* in the Bulgarian input for *h*, however the resulting Czech words have different meanings, e.g. Bulgarian *grad* "town", but Czech *hrad* "castle", Bulgarian *godina* means "year", Czech *hodina* "hour". In these cases, the phonological and the lexical level interact and provide the basis for seemingly similar words. Sometimes it is also segmentation problems that cause incorrect results on the lexical level, as in the Polish examples *pokoje* "rooms", that was interpretated by listeners with Croatian L1 as two words *po koje* "after that".

Apart from that, the stripping off of bound morphemes can lead to lexical errors when the word stem is related to a seemingly similar word with a different meaning as in the case of the Polish *zadowolenie* "satisfaction", where Czech listeners split up the prefix and the root, and the remaining *-dowolenie* is associated with the Czech word *dovolená* "holiday". Misinterpretation on the lexical level is possible even with international words, e.g. listeners mixing up the Polish *restauracija* "restaurant" with the Russian *restauracija* "renewal".

Most of the cases where errors on the lexical level appear, however, cannot be systemized in that way, since the listeners' associations are often very unspecific and therefore hard to predict. The attempt to construct a meaningful utterance out of the perceived inputs leads listeners to associations between words that can be phonetically quite distant and morphologically and lexically unrelated. What connects them is the attempt made by the listener to integrate them into a meaningful context. Besters-Dilger (2002, 388) therefore calls these cases of adhoc-cognates false friends that arise "in the observer's eyes". Such incorrect associations occurring in the corpus are:

- Russian *po povodu* "on the occasion" is associated with the root *vod-* "water".
- Croatian *bile* "they were" (feminine form) is associated with the Czech *bílý* "white".
- Bulgarian *namirajki se* "being located" is associated with several different words e.g. *Ameriki*, *nomeriki* "rooms", *reki* "rivers".
- Czech *červenec* "July" is associated with Russian *četverg* "Thursday" or with *četvërtyj* "the fourth".
- Croatian *slobodno* "free" is associated with *slovo* "word".

The limited predictability of this kind of associations makes it virtually impossible to in advance confront the learners with lists of possible "false friends" in order to prevent them from transferring incorrect meanings. Instead, an appropriate strategy to deal with this problem could be to increase the students' awareness of differences in meaning, so that ad-hoc associations are not taken for granted and transferred automatically. Students should get used to the strategy of testing the assumed meaning on the basis of the semantic context. While this strategy works quite well for reading comprehension, its applicability remains limited in oral comprehension, where reaction time is considerably shorter and chances for disambiguation on the basis of context are lower (see Heinz: forthcoming).

Conclusions

The above examples give rise to the assumption that understanding an unknown third language remains a great challenge for listeners, even if the language is closely related to a previously acquired L2. The analysis of the data shows that the reasons for misunderstanding and non-understanding can be located on different levels in the comprehension process, and that these levels interact with each other: problems caused on the phonetic and phonological level have an impact on the morphological as well as on the lexical level, misunderstandings on the morphological level influence the syntactic and the lexical level, errors on the lexical level can arise even without direct similarity of phonetic and morphological form.

It seems to be an overall pattern that the comprehension process as a whole is to a large extent influenced by the aim of reconstructing a semantically coherent and pragmatically meaningful utterance. This is why listeners make use of the inference strategy, even if very little of the syntactic and semantic context has been understood. Context inference therefore starts very early and its impact reaches back to the very starting level of comprehension, as is shown in those cases in which even phonological identification is affected by context semantics. In spoken utterances, context is therefore frequently not sufficient to distinguish ambiguous meanings or to detect semantic inconsistencies with the assumed meaning.

Spontaneous intercomprehension of spoken utterances is not likely to occur within the whole Slavic speaking community. The chance, however, exists, that this ability can be trained effectively.

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