

# FROM RUSSIAN TO POLISH: POSITIVE TRANSFER IN THIRD LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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## ABSTRACT

Multilingual learners possess a larger repertoire of phonetic-phonological parameters, of language awareness and phonological knowledge as well as an increased cognitive flexibility, which supports their acquisition of the phonetics of further foreign languages. This paper shows phonetic similarities between Russian (as L2) and Polish (as L3) which can be used for positive transfer by native speakers of German (L1) learning these Slavic languages. Pedagogical implications concerning the teaching of phonetics for a third language are drawn.

**Keywords:** third language acquisition, positive transfer, Russian, Polish, language awareness.

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Menschen, die neben ihrer Muttersprache (L1) bereits eine Fremdsprache (L2) gelernt haben, verfügen über ein größeres Repertoire an phonetisch-phonologischen Parametern, an Aussprache-Lernstrategien und metalinguistischem Wissen, was ihnen das Erlernen der Aussprache weiterer Fremdsprachen (L3) erleichtern kann. In diesem Beitrag werden am Beispiel der slawischen Sprachen Russisch und Polnisch Ähnlichkeiten und Gemeinsamkeiten im phonetischen Bereich aufgezeigt, deren Bewusstmachung Lernende für einen positiven Transfer nutzen können.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Multilingualism is the norm and one of the declared aims of education in Europe. Yet, research on the acquisition of further foreign languages after a first foreign language is still in its infancy, especially in the area of pronunciation. Positive effects of prior phonetic knowledge on further language acquisition remain as yet unexplored. Those beneficial effects such as the development of meta-linguistic competence and the development of specific learner strategies were discovered by researchers in multilingual language acquisition. Mißler [6] showed that the acquisition of a third language is facilitated by the knowledge

of a second language, especially when the two languages are typologically related.

Previous research in contrastive phonetics concentrates on errors in the speech production of learners of an L2. As Jessner [3] shows in a comprehensive overview, studies in the field of third language acquisition have confirmed that both the learner's L1 and L2 can be sources of cross-linguistic influence when learning a third language. According to Pyun [7], the interlanguage of language learners contains phonological knowledge from at least four different sources:

- native language (L1) rules
- first foreign language or second language (L2) rules
- currently learned foreign language (L3) rules
- "interrules", which are developed as bridges between the already acquired languages and the currently learned language.

This paper assumes that in the area of phonetics and phonology, there are a number of similarities between languages that can facilitate the acquisition of further languages given that the learner is supported in recognizing and becoming aware of these features.

## 2. TRANSFER FROM L2 TO L3

Previous psycholinguistic models mostly deal with the language acquisition of immigrants who acquire their second language in informal contexts, e.g. the Speech Learning Model by Flege et al. [1]. Neither the feedback of language teachers nor the cognitive resources of adult learners play a role in these studies. Phonetic transfer always seems to be negative (foreign accent) and appears as interference from L1 to L2 or, as in the study by Hammarberg/Hammarberg [2], as negative influence from L2 to L3. The following considerations focus on experienced language learners who learn an L3 in a foreign language classroom where they consciously compare the pronunciation of their languages. It will be shown that learners can profit from their learning

experience acquired due to the learning of their previous foreign language(s). The EuroCom project which is based on these considerations is introduced. Furthermore, fields of phonetic transfer in the Slavic languages will be described for multilingual learners with the language profile L1 German – L2 Russian – L3 Polish.<sup>i</sup>

### 2.1. The advantages of multilingual learners

With the introduction of the first foreign language (L2), a number of learning experiences take place which support the acquisition of a second foreign language (L3). These include

- understanding of language learning processes,
- the development of foreign language learning strategies, and
- the acquisition of a new language system for comparison with further systems.

Third languages can build on these experiences created by the L2 and the L2 learning process, shortening the time needed to learn the next language(s) as well as the effort invested into language learning. This is especially the case when learners are trained to search for and notice similarities and differences between languages and to apply this knowledge in the learning of new foreign languages.

Most students of a third language who learned their L2 in a formal setting

- already know that their native language differs with respect to the sound system and prosody from other languages,
- might know that in most languages there are certain rules for the correspondences between phonemes and graphemes,
- might be acquainted with the international phonetic alphabet (IPA),
- already know some phonological rules,
- are aware of typical phonetic features of their native language which lead to the perception of a foreign accent in the target language,
- have experience with the articulation of new sounds.

This knowledge and meta-linguistic awareness helps them to focus on phonetic peculiarities of the target language and to better understand explanations concerning its articulation and prosody.

### 2.2. The EuroComSlav Project

With the goal of receptive multilingualism, projects such as EuroCom (*European inter-comprehension*) portray systematic similarities within a language family to aid learners with a base in one language in order to acquire receptive competencies in further related languages. The EuroComSlav project (EuroCom for learners of Slavic languages), for example, builds on the basis of Russian as bridge language to guide learners in reading Polish, Czech, Bulgarian, and other Slavic languages. In order to achieve this, EuroCom relies on the “Seven Sieves” concept by Klein/Stegmann [4], which guides learners through the different linguistic bases on which to find similarities between better and lesser known languages.<sup>ii</sup> For the purposes of pronunciation learning, two sieves are especially relevant:

Sieve 3 focuses on sound correspondences, which are regularities in the translation of sounds between languages. In the case of Russian and Polish, for example, [r] in Russian often is realised as [ʒ] in Polish, such as is the case with *reka-rzeka* (“river”); or [tʲ] becomes [tʲʃʲ], as in *ten'-cień* (“shadow”). Only learners who can deduce from the spelling of a word to its correct pronunciation are capable of recognizing related words, e.g. from Russian to Polish, without consulting a dictionary. This sieve enables users of EuroComSlav to identify common lexical features regardless of their separate historical phonetic development. The main types of sound correspondence resulting from the phonetic shift in the Slavic languages and which are didactically relevant will have to be deduced and presented in a way which is as economic and effective for the learner as possible.

According to Zybatow [8], sieve 4 in EuroComSlav is designed to clarify the orthographic conventions for the originally Slavic sounds in the Slavic languages using the Latin alphabet. Such correspondences can be utilized as a basis for positive transfer between languages, thus aiding in the development and internalization of a new language system.

If similar Russian and Polish words are consciously compared, the typological kinship will become obvious and the “new” Polish words can be memorized more easily.

### 2.3. Positive phonetic transfer

Positive phonetic transfer in the acquisition of an L3 is defined here as the correct application of a phonetic phenomenon (which does not exist in the L1 of the learner) from the L2 to the L3. In this definition, the successful suppression of negative transfer to an L3 counts as positive transfer as well. That means that the learner consciously avoids predicted interferences from L1 to L2/L3.

In the following, transfer by learners with the language combination L1 German – L2 Russian – L3 Polish is discussed.

As Mehlhorn [5] showed, native speakers of German have a number of possibilities for positive transfer in the typologically related foreign languages Russian and Polish, e.g. in terms of

- palatalization,
- regressive assimilation of voicing,
- certain sounds, e.g. the alveolar trill [r],
- complex consonant clusters,
- binding of words,
- articulatory setting.

Additionally, native speakers of German who learned in their Russian classroom that the stress pattern of their native language deviates from the other language's, created phonological awareness of the importance of word stress. This could help them focus on the correct stress in their L3, Polish. Thus, in the acquisition of a further language they will profit from general phonological awareness developed in the acquisition of another language without the two languages having exactly the same phonological system.

Learners with German as L1 have to suppress a number of pronunciation phenomena in Russian, which have to be avoided in Polish, too, e.g.

- no glottal stop before stressed vowels,
- no differentiation of long and short vowels in stressed syllables,
- no final devoicing within a word,
- no aspiration of voiceless stops.

Admittedly, if the most recently learned L3 of the student is very present in the learner's mind at the moment, negative transfer from L3 to L2 is possible as well (here: features of a Polish accent in Russian).<sup>iii</sup>

### 3. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

It is when learning their L2 that students consciously concentrate on the pronunciation in a language for the first time. Since the capability of

adults imitating the sounds and prosody of a foreign language is limited, it is not sufficient for teachers to pronounce new sounds like the alveolar [r] correctly. Teachers should also include the following procedures in their classroom routine:

- giving information about differences of certain sounds in the native and the target language, e.g. the [r],
- using perception exercises focusing on the discrimination and identification of target language sounds, e.g. to differentiate between palatalized and non-palatalized sounds,
- giving information about the orthographic realization of the target sounds,
- providing explanation about the articulation of the new sounds, ideally with acoustic learning material from native speakers of the target language and pictures illustrating the kind and place of articulation,
- providing possibilities to practice the new articulation,
- giving constructive feedback about the performance of the new articulation, i.e. individual correction of deviant articulation with hints, *what* was pronounced erroneously and *how* the articulation can be improved; confirmation of correct articulation,
- providing possibilities of substantial exercising of the new articulation with the aim of automation.

The above mentioned measures comprise the teaching of phonetic and meta-linguistic knowledge, i.e.,

- knowledge about phonetic differences between L1, L2 and L3,
- knowledge about phoneme-grapheme correspondences in the target language,
- knowledge about place and kind of articulation as well as prosody of the target language,
- learning strategies,
- learner's knowledge about their pronunciation performance (their learning needs).

Next, three examples illustrate this point:

Native speakers of German who were shown in their Russian classroom that the insertion of a glottal stop constitutes a typical feature of the German accent and who were introduced to the sound contexts in which this phenomenon occurs, can consciously try to avoid the insertion of the glottal stop. If they succeed in avoiding it in their first foreign language, they should be capable to

use this language awareness for their phonetic performance in further (Slavic or Romance) languages. The same holds true for the aspiration of voiceless stops in their foreign languages. Thus, the articulatory suppression of these phonetic peculiarities of German need not be practiced for every foreign language separately. Instead, in the new foreign language information about whether the language in question possesses this feature or not should be sufficient. The prerequisite is that in the foreign language classroom, learners receive the opportunity to compare languages and to focus on phonetic form.

In Russian textbooks and easy readers, usually the stressed syllable is marked with an accent symbol <˘> above the stressed vowel (e.g. *góroda, gorodá; ókna, okná*). This facilitates reading for learners of Russian and can be used simultaneously as a conscious learning strategy to memorize the correct phonetic form of new words. Teachers of Russian should explain to their learners the meaning of this symbol and encourage them to include this information when writing down and learning vocabulary, especially as the word accent position in Russian carries important grammatical information. If learners are used to focus on word stress position, it will be easy for them to stress the penultimate syllable in Polish words and to pay attention to stress shifts as in *język – językami* (“language-NOM.SG” – “language-INSTR.PL”); *pracuję – pracujemy* (“I work” – “we work”).

Whereas it is not necessary for language learners to use the IPA actively, the capability to decode certain transcription symbols could function as a helpful learning strategy. With the help of this inventory, learners can look up the pronunciation of new words in a dictionary or copy down selected information about pronunciation of new words they want to focus on.

For adult learners, it is important to understand the nature of their phonetic deviations. Thus, teachers should try to maximize the possibilities of noticing via *focus on form*. This enables a reflection and awareness process which leads to deeper processing and hence more profound learning – even outside the foreign language classroom.

#### 4. SUMMARY

If the learning of phonological features and processes in a foreign language takes place in a formal setting, learners can be enabled to become aware of native language processes. Provided

adequate instruction, the learners can succeed in suppressing certain native language characteristics in one foreign language and thus facilitate the acquisition of other foreign languages. Learners can apply phonetic knowledge leading to language awareness and thus are increasingly put into the position to improve their pronunciation on an autonomous basis.

#### 5. REFERENCES

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<sup>i</sup> Besides, in reality the language profile of multilinguals is even more complex than described heretofore. Mostly, native speakers of German have learned English as their first foreign language, so that Polish could be the third or even fourth foreign language (which in turn might still contribute to raised language awareness).

<sup>ii</sup> These include: 1. common vocabulary; 2. function words; 3. sound correspondences; 4. graphemes and pronunciation; 5. syntactical structures; 6. morpho-syntax; and 7. affixes.

<sup>iii</sup> Negative transfer from L2 to L3 (here: features of a Russian accent in Polish) could be possible in terms of reduction of unstressed vowels and the pronunciation of the grapheme <e> in the two languages.