
UDK 811.111'36:811.163.42'36

811.163.42'36:811.111'36

Izvorni znanstveni članak

Primljeno: 10. V. 2011.

IZABELA DANKIĆ – MATEA KARADŽA
Filozofski fakultet Sveučilišta u Mostaru
izabela.dankic@gmail.com

INTERFERENCE BETWEEN CROATIAN AND ENGLISH: A PILOT STUDY ON THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH NEGATION

Summary

The purpose of this pilot study was to examine whether any negative transfer or interference between Croatian and English can be observed by analyzing the usage of negatives. The subjects are 57 students (fifteen to seventeen year old). They were asked to complete three tasks (acceptability preference, acceptability judgment and elicited translation). The results suggest that there is negative interference between Croatian and English. We also point out that students should be made aware of cross-linguistic differences between the use of negatives in Croatian and English. Their instruction should be modified to eliminate certain difficulties in the English language resulting from cross-linguistic interference as observed in this study.

Key words: *interference, negative transfer, negation, English, Croatian*

Introduction

It has been widely accepted that the *native language* (NL) influences the acquisition of the second language (SLA).¹ However, many discussions and studies have been devoted to determining how and when this influence is made manifest. This resulted in a need to define a special subfield of SLA called *language transfer* (LT). It has been strongly tied in with different theoretical perspectives on SLA. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was believed that NL played a decisive and negative role in the acquisition of the second language (Larsen-Freeman – Long, 1991: 96). It was taught that the interference between NL and SL could be predicted by comparing and contrasting the learners NL and second language (SL). However, research findings have not supported this claim for the contrastive analytical approach.

A widely held position in the 1990s was that the interference is influenced by the student's stage of learning and that errors do not always occur when they are expected. The differences between NL and SL do not always result in learning difficulties (Larsen-Freeman – Long, 1991: 191). Today second language acquisition has become a cover term for acquisition after a first language has been learned (Gass – Selinker, 2008: 21) including third, fourth, fifth and so on. Multilingual acquisition studies are also promoted because they allow a more complex analysis across languages.

The purpose of this pilot study is to examine whether any negative transfer or interference between Croatian and English can be observed by analyzing the production of negatives. Its results would help assess the need for a larger study which would scientifically confirm or dispute interference between Croatian and English.

The term transfer is used here to define a process of transfer as one process (without separation into two processes, negative versus positive) and only based on the output we can determine whether this process is positive or negative. Gass and Selinker (2008) suggest that the

1 In this article, the term second language is used to encompass both foreign and/or other language(s) a person acquires as opposed to the native language.

terms *positive and negative transfer* refer to the product of transferring although their use implies a process.

The modern literature on SLA includes reports on the acquisition of English by native speakers of other Slavic languages (Gass – Selinker, 2008). But, one cannot generalize about a process of transfer since the results indicate differences in acquisition even if the subjects are speakers of related languages (Duškova, 1984). Therefore, all claims about a possible negative transfer between Croatian and English should be examined.

The use of negatives in Croatian and English is interesting for observation and research since Croats use pre-verbal and English speakers use post-verbal negation. Croatian allows multiple negatives, while modern academic English syntax does not allow double or more negatives within a sentence. While the use of negatives in English is limited to one in a sentence and the use of double negatives is considered to be ungrammatical, the use of double negatives is acceptable and grammatical, in many Slavic languages including Croatian. Some researchers found that the acquisition of negation in other languages which manifest negation differently (German and Norwegian) was related to the restructuring skills of the observed speakers (Ellis, 1997). Restructuring is defined as a process when learners move from one stage of learning to another guided by their perceptions about what is transferable and by their stage of development. These changes or reorganization of learner's grammatical knowledge is characterized by "discontinuous or qualitative change" and "each new stage constitutes a new internal organization" and not simply "the addition of new structural elements" (McLaughlin, 1990: 117).

1. Methodology

The purpose of this pilot study is to examine whether any negative transfer or interference between Croatian and English can be observed by analyzing the production of negatives by Croatian students of English. The subjects are 57 students and native speakers of Croatian divided into three groups based on the number of years of English language

instruction they have had during their formal education. The subjects assigned to the first and second group are 33 students in the second year of high school and the third group comprises 24 students in the eight year of elementary school (Table 1.).

Group	Number of years of formal English instruction
Group 1 (17 students)	6
Group 2 (16 students)	2
Group 3 (24 students)	4

Table 1. Subjects divided based on the number of years of formal English language instruction

A written test was administered to the students. It consisted of three tasks: an acceptability preference task, an acceptability judgment task and an elicited translation task. The first task consisted of five pairs of sentences. A pair of sentences included a sentence which was more similar to its Croatian equivalent. Although all sentences were grammatically correct, the students were asked to decide whether both or one of the sentences were right or wrong. For example:

Task 1. Question 3.

A) *He doesn't do anything right!*

B) *He does nothing right!*

1) only A is correct 3) both A and B are correct

2) only B is correct 4) both A and B are incorrect

The second task, an acceptability judgment task consisted of three sentences written in four different ways. Two sentences were grammatically correct in English (one with the contracted and the other one with the uncontracted *not*). Two other sentences were grammatically incorrect but logically more similar to their Croatian equivalent. One sentence contained a pre-verbal negation used in Croatian and the other a post verbal negation. The subjects had to decide which sentence is correct or incorrect by circling the correct sentences and placing an \times in front of the sentence(s) they consider to be incorrect. For example:

Task 2. Question 1.

- A) *John does not love Mary.*
- B) *John doesn't love Mary.*
- C) *John not loves Mary.*
- D) *John loves not Mary.*

The third task was an elicited translation task. The students were asked to translate five Croatian sentences containing three or more negative words into English. They were also reminded that the standard English language does not allow double negation. For example:

Task 3. Question 1. *Nitko nikada nigdje ništa ne pjeva.* (all negative words)

The students were given 45 minutes to complete these three tasks in an instructed setting – in the classroom.

The form of the collected data is quantitative since we observe the number of correct responses provided by the students. Nevertheless, the type of this research is exploratory since the manner of data collection is nonexperimental. We have decided to use tasks since a task is devised to reveal what a learner knows and „the range and nature of the choices or judgements and the selection of the contexts is based not upon a description of the target language but upon what is known (however limited)“ of what the students know and should know (Corder, 1981: 60). Their choices and judgements would indicate what they know at the stage they are observed.

2. Results

The results will be presented in three sections based on the three tasks students were asked to complete.

2.1. The acceptability preference task results

Although the subjects were presented with five pairs of grammatically correct English sentences, the results suggest that they had problems identifying whether both of them are correct or not. If one looks

at the responses of all subjects, it can be seen that only 27.37% were correct, 13.33% responses indicate that the subjects found both of the statements to be incorrect and the rest of the responses suggest that the subjects preferred one or the other statement. Since Croats use pre-verbal negation it is interesting to examine what English sentence the subjects preferred. The sentences the students preferred the most are presented in Table 2.

The most preferred sentence:	Preference by			Total
	Group 1 (n= 17)	Group 2 (n= 16)	Group 3 (n= 24)	
"I don't want any more of your money."	10	7	12	29 (50.88%)
"She never wants to see him again."	9	7	7	23 (40.35%)
"He doesn't do anything right."	4	7	12	23 (40.35%)
"She hasn't got anything to say." "She has nothing to say".	8	6	8	22 (38.60%)
"Haven't you got anybody to help you?"	7	9	9	25 (43.86%)

Table 2. The most preferred sentences by the observed groups of subjects

The preference for both sentences was higher than the individual preferences in the case of the fourth pair of sentences. The students who decided to give preference to only one sentence found the sentence "*She has nothing to say*" more acceptable (29.82%). It can be implied that the more advanced students (Group 1 and Group 3) show more preference for the sentences which are closer to Croatian than the less advanced students who have been studying English for two years (Group 2).

2.2. The acceptability judgment task results

The subjects were presented with three sets of four English sentences and were asked to circle the sentences they find to be correct. We were particularly interested to find out if any of them would mark the sentence with a pre-verbal negation as an acceptable one although that English sentence is not grammatically correct. Although the majority of all subjects mark the grammatically correct sentences as the acceptable ones, one can see how many have also marked the incorrect sentences with the pre-verbal negation as correct in Table 3.

The incorrect sentence with the pre-verbal negation:	Preference by			Total
	Group 1 (n= 17)	Group 2 (n= 16)	Group 3 (n= 24)	
"John not loves Mary."	2	3	3	8 (14.03%)
"My brother not goes to school."	0	6	2	8 (14.03%)
"She not likes pizza."	2	1	2	5 (8.77%)

Table 3. Students' preference for the incorrect sentence with the pre-verbal negation

The results for this section suggest that the majority of the subjects made correct judgments concerning the correct English sentences. But, after carefully examining the responses, we observed that some students found the correct sentences with uncontracted *not* to be unacceptable. The results for these sentences are presented in Table 4.

The correct sentence with uncontracted <i>not</i> :	Unacceptable by			Total
	Group 1 (n= 17)	Group 2 (n= 16)	Group 3 (n= 24)	
"John does not love Mary."	1	7	10	18 (31.58%)
"My brother does not go to school."	2	6	8	16 (28.07%)
"She does not like pizza."	3	3	9	15 (26.31%)

Table 4. The correct sentences the subjects found to be unacceptable

2.3. The elicited translation task results

The third task differs from the previous two. The students were asked to translate five Croatian sentences containing multiple negations. Although the students were reminded that English does not allow more than one negation, they proceeded to use multiple negations when translating the given sentences. Many of them attempted to complete the translation, but only some of them succeeded (see Table 5).

The Croatian sentences containing multiple negations:	Correct translation provided by			Total
	Group 1 (n= 17)	Group 2 (n= 16)	Group 3 (n= 24)	
"Nitko nikada nigdje ništa ne pjeva!"	1	0	5	6 (10.52)
"Nitko nikada hništa nije krio!"	2	0	5	7 (12.28)
"Nigdje nema nikoga!"	1	0	5	6 (10.52)
"On nikada ništa ne zna."	5	2	6	13 (22.80)
"Nemoj me ništa pitati!"	12	1	13	26 (45.61)

Table 5. Results of elicit translation

The students seemed to achieve better results with less complex Croatian sentences. They also heavily relied on the Croatian rules and used double or multiple negatives. This resulted in a literal translation.

3. Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this pilot study was to examine whether any negative transfer or interference between Croatian and English can be observed by analyzing the production of negatives. The acceptability preference task results suggest that the subjects show more preference for the sentences which are closer to Croatian, but negative transfer cannot be implied since all preference task sentences were grammatically correct.

The acceptability judgment task results show that the majority of students find the correct sentences acceptable. The pre-verbal incorrect sentences were mostly chosen by the students from the second group who have studied English for two years. The most interesting finding related to this task is that nearly one third of responses indicate that three sentences with uncontracted *not* (see Table 4.) were judged to be unacceptable. Having in mind that many of the recent formal English teaching programs consider the communicative competence to be the main objective, the contracted forms are introduced before the uncontracted and dominate the students' textbooks. Therefore, this study can also be used as an impetus for a study which would research whether and why some students find contracted forms more acceptable. It should also include an examination of the presence and usage of contracted forms in the prescribed English language textbooks.

The third task results suggest that negative transfer exists between Croatian and English. The elicited English translation of the selected sentences containing double and multiple negatives in Croatian imply that the students were heavily influenced by Croatian. A larger study is needed to confirm or dispute this interference in the usage of negatives between Croatian and English. It could also provide some explanations for negative transfer suggested by our study, since at this time we can only speculate that the reasons for this cross-linguistic influence

(interference) stems from the learners' stage of development, their exposure to English and their perception on what is transferable or not. As far as the length of the formal English instruction is concerned, we can observe that difficulties related to the acquisition of negation are evident in the responses of all three groups.

Since this is a pilot study, rigorous tests (for example, an analysis of the native, target and interlanguage structures) were not applied and as with many similar discussions of transfer we are making suggestions based simply on comparisons of structures identified and produced by learners with their equivalent structures in the native language. Nevertheless, the possibility that the responses we got reflect "the influence of a non-standard" English variety or may be that "natural principles of language acquisition are at work" (Odlin, 2003: 450) should be considered in the larger study which would follow this pilot research.

The underlying objective of studies which explore cross-linguistic influence should be their contribution to our understanding and improvement of effects of instruction on acquisition processes. Making students aware of cross-linguistic differences and interference will help with certain difficulties they might have in the target language (Odlin, 2003; Spada – Lightbown, 1999). Therefore, the results of this study might direct the attention of English teachers in Mostar to reexamine their instruction in relation to the usage of negatives and negation in general.

References

- CORDER, S. P. (1981) *Error Analysis in Interlanguage*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- DUŠKOVA, L. (1984) "Similarity – an aid or hindrance in foreign language learning?", *Folia Linguistica*, 18: 103-115.
- ELLIS, R. (1997) *Second Language Acquisition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gass, S. M. – Selinker, L. (2008) *Second Language Acquisition: An introductory course*, third edition, New York: Routledge.

- LARSEN-FREEMAN, D. – LONG, M. H. (1991) *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research*, London: Longman.
- MCLAUGHLIN, B. (1990) “Restructuring”, *Applied Linguistics*, 11: 113-128.
- ODLIN, T. (2003) “Cross-linguistic influence”, in: DOUGHTY, C. J. – LONG, M. H. (eds.), *The Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*, 436 – 486, Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- SPADA, N. – LIGHTBOWN, P. (1999) “Instruction, first language influence, and developmental readiness in second language acquisition”, *Modern Language Journal*, 83: 1-22.