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## L1 VS L2 SPOKEN MODALITY USE: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS – PART 2

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### Abstract

This article discusses the role of input in the development of discourse competence with reference to modality use, as well as the role of language transfer, which can in fact cover many aspects L2 communication, for instance, cultural codes or elements of the politeness system, including modality, in L2 learning. It indicates that just exposing the learner to linguistic input may not enable them to fully comprehend the pragmalinguistic intricacies of authentic communication. It also suggests pragmalinguistically intricate features of communication may fail to be taken in even by the advanced foreign language learner, since they may not meet the relevance requirement of the input provided.

### 1. Introduction

Modality is often seen in applied linguistics as just an aspect of grammar, restricted to the use of modal verbs. However, this is not the whole story. Modality, after all, as a means of overtly, and often covertly, conveying a speaker's stance, is a pragmalinguistic device which constitutes a significant domain in discourse construction, whether as a social practice, "produced, circulated, distributed, consumed in society" (Blommaert 2005: 29), a product of specific routines cultivated in a given community, realised through the use of concrete linguistic objects, specific texts or text-types (Blommaert 2005: 29), or as an individualised rhetoric of the speaker. Thus, it is no surprise that to determine a possible relation between L1 and L2 modality use is quite

an undertaking. Modality, as a constituent of discourse, embraces the vast territory of linguistics as well as the pragmalinguistics of communication, both the grammar of speech, and the meaningful relation of an utterance, including the situational context, mood or cultural setting of an interaction (Grzegorzczkova 2007: 42). It also includes paralinguistic means of communication, such as symbols or non-verbal interaction, materialising in the vast realm of semiosis (Blommaert 2005: 2).

This article attempts to discuss two psycholinguistic areas that affect the eventual outcome of L2 learning with respect to the development of spoken discourse competence: (1) the role of input, and (2) discourse transfer. With respect to the former, Krashen's classic, yet not always correctly interpreted, Zero Option is discussed alongside the Noticing Hypothesis and Wilson, Sperber's Relevance Theory. With respect to the latter, cross-linguistic influences including the transfer of culture-specific features of discourse as well as conceptual interference are outlined.

## 2. The role of input in discourse competence development

The perceptions of the role of input in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) have undergone a number of radical changes. Since the behaviourist-vs-mentalistic debate in the 1970s, new approaches regarding input have been introduced in applied linguistics. That input was beneficial for L2 learning was no longer polemical. What generated heated debates, and still does, was what types of input help L2 learning, and what other conditions are necessary for acquisition to take place.

Krashen's (1982) SLA Theory, often mistakenly named the Zero Option, posited that no explicit instruction is necessary for subconscious acquisition to take place as long as large amounts of good quality, interesting or relevant comprehensible input, slightly beyond the current productive capabilities of a self-confident and highly motivated acquirer, are provided in low-anxiety situations. Although his concept of exposure to input through the negotiation of meaning apparently had an intuitive appeal to a number of practitioners and certain linguists (e.g. Wode 1981), globally it generated controversy among theoreticians, who rejected Krashen's theory as pseudo-scientific (Gregg 1984; McLaughlin 1987). Nonetheless, Krashen's non-interface position does make sense, especially in the case of linguistic phenomena which require not so much an explicit understanding as an intuitive conceptualisation of their usages. It seems that modality is one of these phenomena.

In addition to his critique of Krashen's SLA theory, McLaughlin (1987) proposed the concept of automatization in language production. He suggested that learners can move from controlled processing of language forms to automatic processing, mainly by repeated practice (McLaughlin 1987). This proposition was supported by others, notably Johnson (1994), who argued that learners achieve communicative competence by a process of "automatization," helped by a series of tasks progressively less focused on form. The role of input in L2 learning then was no longer central as grammar left the ELT peripheries and began to regain its position among both applied linguists and practitioners. Although such an approach may indeed help an explicit

conceptualisation of grammatical forms, it is less likely to promote the cognition of intricate, multidimensional pragmalinguistic phenomena, for instance, modality.

An approach which might reconcile these two extreme positions and, consequently, might allow an understanding of the formalities of modality use and a conceptualisation of its multidimensionality is the Weak Interface Position, which originated in Higgs and Clifford's (1982) study of L2 learners in naturalistic settings. This work demonstrated fossilisation at relatively low levels, which was further investigated in Schmidt and Frota's (1986) qualitative, impressionistic study of Schmidt's interlanguage development in naturalistic settings. The research concluded that the forms were noticed in the out-of-class input after they were actually taught. As they wrote:

It seems that if [R] was to learn and use a particular type of verbal forms, it was not enough for it to have been taught and drilled in class. It was also not enough for it to occur in input, but [R] had to notice the input...[R] subjectively felt as [he] was going through the learning process that conscious awareness of what was present in the input was causal. (Schmidt, Frota 1986: 281)

The insufficiency of exposure to comprehensible input was also noted by Swain (1985), who admits that input may be essential to SLA, but also observes that it is not the only condition necessary to ensure native-like performance. This finding appears to apply particularly to advanced learners of English, whose learning should not be, as it seems, limited to negotiation of meaning or provision of comprehensible input.

That noticing initiates the construction of output through the conversion of input into intake is indisputable. Figure 1, however, indicates that the role of noticing is not only restricted to initiating the process. Its role in converting input into output is more than catalytic, since noticing is the necessary condition for the whole process to take place.

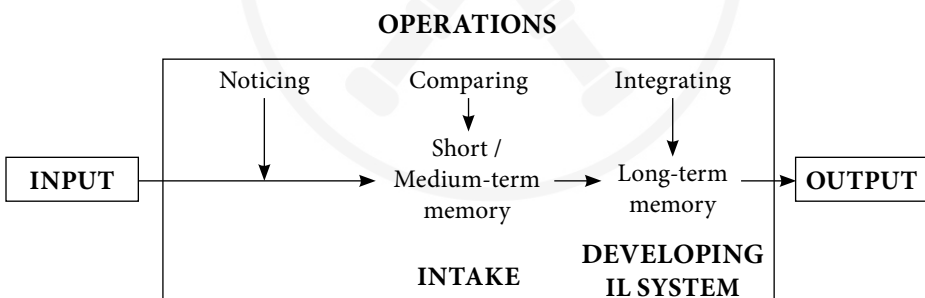


Figure 1. The process of learning implicit knowledge (Ellis 1997: 119)

What helps the acquirer to notice input is then the central question in the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt 1990). The process, it seems, can be helped through, for example, language instruction, which can raise L2 learners' consciousness of the

particular input provided and the frequency of input (Schmidt 1990; Skehan 1998), which suggests that a form present repeatedly in the input will increase the likelihood of noticing, or perceptual salience (Slobin 1985; Skehan 1998), which represents the learners' inclination to attend to those features of input which seem important to them. The Noticing Hypothesis also posits that noticing as such may not be enough for input to be taken in. It seems that in order to construct natural discourse a learner, particularly an advanced one, has to "attend to linguistic features of the input" (Thornbury 1997: 326), to notice the gap between authentic discourse and their own interlanguage representations. This operation helps the learner see and integrate the nuances of the target input, such as the gradation of confidence, obligation or affect in modalising their speech.

However, realising that a new language feature is at variance with one's L2 representation may not be enough to integrate input into the language system. The inferential model of communication proposed by Wilson, Sperber (2004) posits that it is effect and effort factors that determine the relevance of input and, consequently, the conversion of input into intake. The relevance of input is illustrated in the following example of a communicative act:

Mary, who dislikes most meat and is allergic to chicken, rings her dinner party host to find out what is on the menu. He could truly tell her any of three things:

(2) We are serving meat.

(3) We are serving chicken.

(4) Either we are serving chicken or (7<sup>2</sup>-3) is not 46. (Wilson, Sperber 2004: 610)

Although all the three responses would satisfy Mary's inquiry, Wilson and Sperber make a claim that (3) is more relevant than both (2) and (4) for the following reasons. For reasons of cognitive effect, (3) and (4) are of equal value. The message conveyed in (2) is derivable from (3) and the messages conveyed in (3) and (4) are the same. For reasons of processing effort (3) is more relevant than (4), since processing (4) requires more effort on the part of the listener. Wilson, Sperber (2004: 610) conclude that "when similar amounts of effort are required, the effect factor is decisive in determining degrees of relevance, and when similar amounts of effect are achievable, the effort factor is decisive." They also define the optimal relevance of an ostensive stimulus in inferential communication as (1) "relevant enough to be worth the audience's processing effort" and (2) "the most relevant one compatible with communicator's abilities and preferences" (Wilson, Sperber 2004: 612).

The Relevance Theory suggests, then, that the input which L2 learners are most likely to notice is that which satisfies the audience's communicative needs with the minimum effort involved in processing the message. Modality, as a complex pragmalinguistic device, may be beyond the interest/relevance range of the student and consequently may fail to be noticed. It seems this can be best achieved in various naturalistic settings, as well as in EFL classroom practices that trigger "an automatic process of learners' searching for optimal relevance of the teacher's utterances" (Niżegorodcew 2007: 16), or of the other input provided.

### 3. The role of transfer in discourse construction

The role of language transfer in L2 communication is perceived as both negative and positive. It both impedes the exchange of information and yet at the same time promotes it. This phenomenon appears to be of great value to L2 learners, as the skillful management of language transfer by the language instructor may enhance the quality of discourse construction and accelerate interlanguage development. This section will discuss the roles of language transfer, both positive and negative, in discourse construction. Although language transfer can be bidirectional, that is it can proceed both from L1 to L2 and from L2 to L1, this section will mainly discuss the former.

#### 3.1. Pragmalinguistic transfer

L1 transfer is not restricted to linguistic phenomena, upon which most research focuses, but also includes pragmalinguistics (Littlewood 2001). It is a common observation that L2 learner production, even if it meets grammatical rigours, is often far from native-like output, with one of the possible reasons being the learner's "subconscious mapping of first language discourse strategies onto the second language" (Thorne 1998: 4). L2 learners, after all, often do "not look for the perspectives peculiar to [the L2] language" (Kellerman 1995: 141) and instead unconsciously "seek the linguistic tools which will permit them to maintain their L1 perspective" (Kellerman 1995: 141), an approach which Kellerman (1995: 141) pessimistically gives the metaphorical label of "transfer to nowhere." Whether positive or negative, discourse transfer does take place. Yet which, and to what extent, discourse devices can be transferred still requires investigation. The following discussion focuses on the domains of discourse affected by cross-linguistic influence.

As suggested by Odlin (1989), discourse transfer can include politeness systems, speech acts such as requests or apologies, as well as indirection and conversational style, so these domains of communication that are often realised by modality. This suggests that these discourse aspects "fall within the realm of pragmatics" (Odlin 1989: 48) and overlap with cross-cultural phenomena. An example could be the use of a "yes" reply to a negative question by a Chinese speaker of English, which breaks the English discourse convention (Littlewood 2005: 506), a discourse error also committed by Polish users of English.

Discourse interference in the Polish conversational style is often related to its straightforwardness, which clearly represents the uniqueness of the Polish politeness system. As claimed by Ronowicz (1995: 36):

Poles will not hesitate to use a straightforward 'Nie' to disagree during an informal argument. Similarly you might hear 'Wcale nie' (No way), 'To jest bez sensu', or 'Nie zgadzam się'. Poles tend to be quite direct in expressing opinions and disagreeing, since an argument, as long as it is not abusive, is not only considered a good way of exchanging ideas, but also an enjoyable form of conversation. (Ronowicz 1995: 36)

The choice of a politeness system is not only dependent upon the situational or linguistic context, but is also a culture-specific process, so L2 learners are likely to utilise their

L1 pragmalinguistic devices in their target languages. Although some researchers seem somewhat surprised when L2 learners transfer L1 pragmatic features despite the fact that they “have been shown to display sensitivity towards context-external factors (...) and context-internal factors such as degree of imposition, legitimacy of the requestive goal and ‘standardness’ of the situation in requesting, and severity of offense, obligation to apologize, and the likelihood of apology acceptance in apologizing” (Kasper 1992: 211–212), pragmalinguistic transfer is indeed common in language classrooms.

Polish learners are no exception in this respect. They may use different politeness systems in addressing their interlocutor, for instance, when greeting, responding to thanks or apologising (cf. Jakubowska 1999). In apologies, it is not unusual to hear a Polish learner use the English *I’m sorry* in excuse-me contexts. Although both English and Polish speakers use a wide range of apology strategies, Poles are likely to do so less frequently than the English (Ronowicz 1995). They are also less likely to admit their responsibility for the possible inconvenience (Jakubowska 1999: 72).

It is also a common belief that cross-cultural differences are observable in turn-taking conventions, with Polish speakers being more straightforward and English interlocutors more defensive. However, although it seems that straightforwardness is indeed characteristic of the Polish conversational discourse, a study by Okulska (2006), which investigated communication strategies used in inquiries by Polish and American native speakers, suggests the opposite might be true. The research (2006: 195) surprisingly indicates it is Polish speakers that may, in fact, use more indirect requests and inquiry strategies than their American counterparts.

A conversational style may include language-specific elements such as structural distinctions that are seen in the register, politeness systems, and other sociolinguistic norms. A speaker validates these norms when they occupy a frame space which is “normatively allocated” (Goffman 1981: 230) and violates them when they “take up an alignment that falls outside this space” (Goffman 1981: 230). This apparently occurs when L1 conversational conventions, differing from L2 norms, are transferred to L2. Yet, this violation may have an idiocratic value. According to certain research, it is the deviation from these norms that marks the individual conversational style of the speaker (Odlin 1989: 56). In such cases, to determine whether the transfer of an individual L1 conversational style, e.g. more or less modalised speech, has a negative or positive dimension would be quite an endeavour.

As indicated above, much of the available research views discourse transfer from a sociolinguistic, inter-discoursal perspective. It must be realised, however, that although certain culture-specific linguistic influences are universal for a given community, it is also the psycholinguistic idiocracies that determine in large part the transfer of discourse devices, a fact which highlights the need for further study on intra-discoursal language transfer.

A conversational style can also be viewed from a non-linguistic perspective, a fact that causes complications in contrastive analyses. As claimed by Odlin (1989: 56) “(...) many paralinguistic elements can also serve to mark a conversational style: intonation and related characteristics such as loudness and speech rate, gestures, facial expression, physical posture, and the like.” Research indicates, for example, that many

speakers of English as a foreign language might transfer some of their L1 gesture procedures into their English communication (Gullberg 2008: 286). The transfer of these discourse devices may stem from the unfortunately incorrect assumption by L2 speakers that their L1 norms are universal.

Discourse transfer can also exist on a metaphorical level. Metaphors, from the language transfer perspective, are particularly difficult for L2 learners to either comprehend or use appropriately. Polish learners' L2 metaphoric output, for instance, is often affected by negative L1 transfer, as metaphors "such as *bring something (a fact, situation) home to someone* and *drive a message/idea home* do not have semantically similar equivalents in the students' first language" (Pütz 2007: 1152).

### 3.2. Conceptual transfer

In the last decade or so language transfer research has developed a distinct research area in which to investigate the interactions between language and thought and, consequently, the relations between L1-vs-L2 schematic concepts and meanings in the acquisition of a second language, as seen in conceptual and meaning transfer. The former, defined by Odlin (2008: 306) as "the cross-linguistic influence involving relativistic effects," is believed to involve the use of L1 schematic concepts, such as the speakers' perceptions of the world, in L2 discourse construction and always involves meaning transfer, that is "any type of semantic or pragmatic influence from the first language" (Odlin 2008: 310). It is also claimed that conceptual transfer includes varied L1 routines of "thinking for speaking" (Slobin 1993), the outcome of which is that an L1-specific world is likely to affect the subsequent acquisition of another language.

As an example of meaning transfer that does not include conceptual transfer, Odlin gives the following Polish reference-specific mistake:

Wczoraj byliśmy z bratem w teatrze  
 Yesterday were-1st PL with brother-INS at theatre-LOC  
 = My brother and I went to the theatre yesterday.  
 (INS = instrumental; LOC = locative) (Odlin 2008: 311)

This example clearly shows that, illogical as this sentence is (the Polish *byliśmy* implies at least two referents), the transfer involves only a semantic change, which has not resulted from L1 world-specific concepts. Conceptual alteration might be illustrated in the following example of a common mistake committed by Polish EFL learners.

Polish sentence	English sentence
Wszyscy uczniowie przynieśli <u>swoje</u> zadanie na zajęcia.	Every student brought <u>his</u> homework to class.

The English *every student brought his homework to class* is not a literal translation as the Polish equivalent does not include the possessive pronoun *his*, but the neutral *swoje*. Instead, the mistake stems from the Polish conceptual language routines, in which the generic gender is male.

This section has reviewed the relevant literature on transfer research in second language acquisition. Although there are some studies that indicate L1 influences in discourse may be weaker than the transfer of L1 phonological devices, for as claimed by Odlin (1989: 67), “the enormous complexity of linguistic factors related to politeness, coherence, and so forth suggests that a learner’s native language may well be only one of a host of influences on second language discourse,” the limited systematic research in this field means that many questions still need to be answered. After all, the studies frequently cited in ELT literature mainly focus on Spanish or Japanese L1 transfer. Unsurprisingly, this leads to intuitive overgeneralisations that lack substantiation and so fail to contribute significantly to the development of applied linguistics.

#### 4. Conclusions

This article discusses the role of input in the development of discourse competence, with reference to modality use, as well as the role of the transfer of selected pragmalinguistic features of language communication in L2 learning. The discussion suggests that exposing the learner to linguistic input alone may not enable them to fully comprehend the pragmalinguistic intricacies of authentic communication, unless considerable naturalistic input is provided. Instead, it is suggested that in the case of multidimensional discourse devices such as modality, a remedial procedure is to help the learners at advanced levels of language proficiency notice the gap between the authentic target input and the learner’s discourse representations as realised in their L2 output. It is also noted that the pragmalinguistically intricate features of communication may fail to be internalised even by the advanced learner, since these features may not meet the relevance requirement, unless their nuances and effect on successful communication are clearly communicated.

It is also demonstrated that an important role in successful discourse construction is played by language transfer, which includes not only linguistic devices, but also cultural codes or elements of the politeness system, often realised through modality. How L2 learners adapt these L1 strategies in their L2 production, either reducing them or utilising L1-L2 similarities, often determines the success or failure of foreign language communication. It is suggested that the genetic proximity of the two languages plays a facilitative role in language transfer.

What still requires further research is how much and how often language transfer correlates with language proficiency. Taylor (1975, quoted by Odlin 1989: 133), for instance, asserts that “less proficient learners will rely on more transfer”, a somewhat over-generalised finding, which goes against Arabski’s claim (2006: 13) that negative transfer does not take place “at the very beginning of the English learning process, at the stage of imitation.” But what if an L2 learner does not begin their learning through imitation? The same question arises with respect to advanced learners of English. After all, the extent to which they rely on L1 transfer may in fact depend on a number of variables, such as their gender, age or learning experience, and this certainly requires further investigation.



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