



وزارة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي

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عنوان المحاضرة: The Role of Transfer in Second Language Learning

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The Role of Transfer in Second Language Learning in Yule's *The Study of Language*

1. Introduction:

What Affects Second Language Learning? While first language acquisition tends to occur naturally during early childhood, second language learning (L2) is shaped by a wide range of cognitive, social, and linguistic factors. George Yule, in the chapter “Second Language Learning”, explores these factors in depth, including motivation, age, input, and transfer. In this lecture, we will focus on one central

phenomenon that strongly influences the success and challenges of L2 learning: language transfer.

2. What Is Language Transfer?

Transfer refers to the influence of a learner's first language (L1) on the second language (L2). It plays a major role in how learners produce and understand L2 structures. Sometimes this influence is helpful, but other times it creates errors. Yule defines transfer as the process whereby "features of the first language are carried over into the second language." There are two main types: Positive Transfer: When L1 and L2 share similar features, and L1 helps the learner produce correct L2 structures. Negative Transfer (Interference): When L1 structures differ from L2, leading to errors in pronunciation, grammar, or word choice.

3. Positive Transfer:

When L1 Helps In cases where the first and second languages share similar grammatical structures, vocabulary, or sound systems, learners often benefit. Examples: A Spanish speaker learning Italian may easily transfer verb conjugation patterns or vocabulary (problema in Spanish vs. problema in Italian). An English speaker learning Dutch might successfully transfer subject-verb-object (SVO) word order. This type of transfer is generally facilitative, and Yule notes that it can speed up the learning process, especially in closely related languages.

4. Negative Transfer (Interference):

When L1 Hurts Negative transfer occurs when the learner applies L1 rules inappropriately to L2. This often results in grammatical errors, word order issues, or phonological mistakes.

Examples:

- A French speaker may say: “I have 25 years” (from French J’ai 25 ans) Instead of: “I am 25 years old.”
- An Arabic speaker might omit the verb “to be” in English: “He teacher.” (influenced by Arabic, which lacks a present-tense copula)
- A Japanese speaker may place the verb at the end of a sentence: “I to the store went.”

Yule emphasizes that these patterns are predictable once the differences between L1 and L2 are analyzed, which makes contrastive analysis a useful tool in language teaching.

5. Interlanguage and Transfer

Yule introduces the concept of interlanguage, a term used to describe the evolving, rule-based system a learner builds while acquiring an L2. This system includes features of the L1, L2, and unique learner innovations. Transfer plays a significant role in shaping interlanguage, especially in early stages. Learners will often overgeneralize L1 structures before gradually adapting to L2 norms.

> Example: A German speaker learning English may initially say: “The dog of my neighbor barks all night.”

(calque of German Der Hund meines Nachbarn) Over time, the learner may adjust to: “My neighbor’s dog barks all night.” Interlanguage is dynamic and reflects both the learner’s linguistic background and their developmental path in acquiring the second language.

6. Classroom Implications:

How Teachers Can Handle Transfer Understanding transfer helps language teachers: Predict common learner errors based on students’ L1s,

Avoid overcorrecting natural stages of interlanguage, Design targeted instruction to address specific transfer-related issues,

Provide contrastive examples that help students become aware of L1–L2 differences. Example Activity: Give students sentence pairs that compare L1-influenced errors with correct L2 forms. Ask them to identify the differences and explain why one version is more appropriate.

7. Conclusion

Transfer is a central concept in second language learning, explaining both successes and struggles learners face. As George Yule points out, the influence of L1 on L2 can lead to facilitation (positive transfer) or interference (negative transfer), especially in grammar and pronunciation. Teachers, learners, and linguists benefit from recognizing these patterns. When understood clearly, transfer becomes a predictable and manageable part of the learning process, rather than a source of mystery or frustration.

Optional Discussion Questions:

1. Can you think of examples where your first language helped or hindered your English learning?
2. Why might transfer lead to more errors in pronunciation than in vocabulary?
3. How could knowing your students' first language help you teach them more effectively?

Recommended Reading:

- Yule, George. The Study of Language, Chapter on “Second Language Learning”

- Lightbown & Spada (2006). How Languages Are Learned (for extended discussion on transfer and interlanguage)