

# Using Translation Traps to Sort Out Portuguese-English Crosslinguistic Influence

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Working with Portuguese learners of English pursuing a degree in translation has brought to my attention a number of idiosyncrasies typical of Portuguese-English language contact. These include English errors seemingly attributable to Portuguese considerations, Portuguese mistranslations which appear to be a result of my students' contact with the English language, and even a certain reluctance to draw upon existing Portuguese-English correspondences. My objectives are to describe a few of these linguistic peculiarities, to interpret them in the light of crosslinguistic influence theory, and to show how setting up deliberate translation traps for the students may help them keep the two languages apart.

## PORTUGUESE-ENGLISH CROSSLINGUISTIC INFLUENCE

Anyone who works with the teaching of foreign languages is probably familiar with the way learners get the language they are learning, their native language and sometimes even other languages mixed up. There are times when learners mix up languages on purpose, as a communication strategy, just to get meaning across. For example, learners who don't know a word in the target language may try to say it in their native language with a target language accent in the hope of being understood. There are other times, however, when learners mix up languages without realizing it, particularly when they first begin to learn a new language and perceive that parts of it are similar to the languages that they already know (Ellis, 1986).

Technically speaking, the term used to describe this form of crosslinguistic influence is language transfer, which can be either positive or negative<sup>2</sup>. Positive transfer needn't concern us here, for it occurs when a learner's prior knowledge of one language actually helps rather than hinders his or her performance in a second language. Negative transfer, however, occurs when learners produce errors because of the influence of one language upon another. Those who work in close contact with native Portuguese learners of English are more or less familiar with the more obvious cases of negative transfer that are typical of these learners, like saying

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<sup>2</sup> Odlin (1989:27) has defined transfer as "the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired".

[1] \*I **pretend** to buy a new car

This and all other examples shown here are by Portuguese university students pursuing a degree in Translation<sup>3</sup>. Clearly, the student who said [1] was assuming that **pretend** meant the same as **pretender**, when in fact the two words have different meanings in the two languages. False cognates such as **pretend** and **pretender** are at the origin of many errors by students who draw on their knowledge of Portuguese to speak and write in English.

But false cognates are not the only source of negative transfer. It is important to realize that, although less obviously, negative transfer can manifest itself at all levels of linguistic analysis.

[2] \*She leaves in Estoril

Sentence [2] is an example of how negative phonological transfer has affected spelling. The student in question could not distinguish between the English phonemes /i/ and /i:/, and, after rehearsing the word orally in her mind, ended up writing **leaves** instead of **lives**.

[3]\*I'm learning english and french

Example [3] holds evidence to the negative transfer of orthography. The student probably wrote **English** and **French** with a small **e** and a small **f** because in Portuguese these words do not need to begin with capital letters.

[4]\*The Algarve is very touristic

Sentence [4] is an example of negative transfer at the level of morphology. The student invented the adjective **\*touristic**, which doesn't exist in English, probably because of the Portuguese adjective **turístico**.

[5]\*If a person has no money, she can't get married

[6]\*She has afraid of dying

[7]\*I can't concentrate myself

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<sup>3</sup> Further examples of Portuguese-English crosslinguistic influence can be found in Frankenberg-Garcia & Pina (1997).

Sentences [5] to [7] are all examples of negative transfer at the level of syntax. The gender-agreement error in [5] has probably occurred because the Portuguese translation of **person, pessoa**, is a feminine noun. In sentence [6] **\*has afraid** appears to come from the Portuguese **tem medo**. The student must have considered **afraid** to be a noun like **medo** rather than an adjective that needs to be preceded by a copula verb. In [7], the error seems to stem from the fact that the Portuguese cognate of **concentrate, concentrar**, is a reflexive verb, whereas in English it isn't.

Negative transfer at the level of discourse and pragmatics is not as easy to detect, but this does not mean that it does not exist. A typical problem of the discourse of Portuguese learners of English when they are writing longer texts is depicted below<sup>4</sup>.

[8]**William Golding** was born in Cornwall in the beginning of this century. [8a]**He** joined the Royal Navy in the Second World War, and what **he** saw made **him** think that human beings were evil. [8b] **?The author of *Lord of the Flies*** won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1983.

The problem here seems to be a consequence of the fact that instead of writing **Golding** in [8b], which is what a native speaker of English would probably do, the student chose to write the synonymous noun phrase **the author of *Lord of the Flies***, which is cohesive in European Portuguese. In English, however, even though anyone who is well-read in English literature will know that William Golding and the author of *Lord of the Flies* are the same person, this form of lexical cohesion is only used if the relationship between Golding and *Lord of the Flies* has actually been spelled out in the text. As it stands, native English readers who are not familiar with the work of Golding might be led to think that the author of *Lord of the Flies* and William Golding are actually two different people.

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<sup>4</sup>When discussing negative transfer at the level of discourse, one can no longer talk about error because discourse is not based on rules but on regularities. Kaplan (1972) nevertheless asserts that rhetoric, coherence, unity and style are arbitrary but rule governed in any given language in the same way as phonological, morphological and syntactic choices. This view is still widely held today (Grabe and Kaplan 1996, Odlin 1989, and Connor 1996). Frankenberg-Garcia (1990) has outlined various ways in which academic and scientific texts by native Portuguese writers of English exhibit non-native rhetorical patterns which seem to stem from Portuguese discourse parameters applied to English.

All the examples discussed so far are of Portuguese to English negative transfer. In the case of students of translation, however, negative transfer can also manifest itself in the opposite direction. As you will see from the examples below, when translating from English into Portuguese, Portuguese translation students also make mistakes which seem to stem from their contact with English.

[9]\*Vou suportá-lo nas eleições

[10]\*entertenimento

[11]\*Tenho trabalhado aqui há dez anos

Sentence [9] holds evidence to the negative transfer of lexis from English to Portuguese. The student translated **support** into **suportar**, when the correct Portuguese translation of the word in the sense used here would have been **apoiar**. The Portuguese spelling mistake in [10] is probably a consequence of the English spelling of the word **entertainment**. In Portuguese, the correct spelling is **entretenimento**. In [11], **tenho trabalhado** is a direct translation from the English present perfect **have worked**. The Portuguese verb that should have been used in this translation is the present indicative **trabalho**.

Having shown examples of Portuguese to English and English to Portuguese negative transfer, at this juncture I must point out that crosslinguistic influence includes not only transfer, but also, and rather significantly, the avoidance of transfer. If when learners first begin to learn a second language they rely heavily on the transfer of everything they perceive as being similar between the second language and the languages that they already know, as students learn more about the second language, they begin to realize that not everything that appears to be similar in this new language and the languages that they already know is in fact the same. This stage is marked precisely by the avoidance of transfer (Kellerman 1983,1987; Sharwood-Smith, 1983). For example, Portuguese learners of English may begin to notice at this stage that **pretend** is not the same as **pretender**. At the same time, however, these students will also begin to distrust things that are truly similar in the two languages. So in their efforts not to mistake **pretend** for **pretender**, the students will end up not capitalizing on similarities like **infrequente** and **infrequent**.

This intentional avoidance of transfer is at the root of two very interesting crosslinguistic influence phenomena. The first, as depicted in [12] and [13] below, is that students begin to form the sometimes false idea that the bigger the difference between Portuguese and English, the better the English.

[12]for instance > [12a]for example  
[13]to go on > [13a]to continue

I have noticed that many of my students systematically prefer [12] to [12a] when translating the Portuguese expression **por exemplo** into English. When I asked them why, they said it was because [12] sounded better than [12a]. Similarly, many students seem to think the phrasal verb [13] is a better translation of the Portuguese verb **continuar** than the true cognate in [13a].

The second interesting thing that occurs when learners are intentionally trying to avoid transfer is that students who used to get things right all of a sudden start making silly mistakes. Let me illustrate this with an example by one of my students.

[14]infrequent [14a]\*unfrequent

Initially, as a result of positive transfer, the student correctly translated the Portuguese word **infrequente** into [14]. This felicitous guess translation could have easily been mistaken for proficient language behaviour if it weren't for the fact that few weeks later the same student translated **infrequente** into [14a]. What happened is that he began to notice that many English words take the negative prefix **un** instead of **in**, and ended up concluding (wrongly, of course) that the English for **infrequente** must be [14a]<sup>5</sup>. Although this may appear to be a regression, it is in fact a step towards proficiency. Rather than regressing, learners who make this kind of error are really trying to make sense of the target language instead of transferring indiscriminately everything that perceive as being linguistically alike<sup>6</sup>.

Of course, after receiving sufficient input to challenge their misconceived assumptions about the similarities and

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<sup>5</sup>This kind of error is known as overgeneralization. Based on the a limited exposure to the second language, learners create rules that have a wider coverage than is sanctioned (Selinker, 1972).

<sup>6</sup>Corder (1981) has called this hypothesis-testing.

differences between the first and the second language, students who go through a stage of transfer avoidance will eventually begin to realize that there are, after all, a number of similarities between Portuguese and English that they can indeed trust<sup>7</sup>.

#### TRANSLATION TRAPS

Given this array of crosslinguistic influence phenomena, the natural question that arises is whether there is anything that can be done to help language learners sort out the not very simple language mix in their minds. Those who work with foreign language teaching are probably familiar with the often-heard recommendation that the least that can be done to avoid languages getting mixed up is to try to make learners use the target language as much as possible, and at the same time clear their minds of their native language<sup>8</sup>.

Another popular recommendation to prevent learners from mixing up languages is to dissuade them from translating. In their famous *Teaching Practice Handbook*, Roger Gower and Steve Walters describe translation as "a dangerous habit for the students to be encouraged into" because, they say, "there are numerous occasions when seemingly obvious structural or lexical equivalences are used differently in an English-speaking context" (Gower, R. & Walters, S., 1983:67).

But what do you do if you are there to teach translation? You cannot tell your students to think only in English and forget the Portuguese, or think only in Portuguese and forget the English, and you certainly cannot tell your students not to translate. Whatever the dangers of

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<sup>7</sup>For the sake of clarity, I have depicted the stage when students rely heavily on transfer, the stage in which they avoid transfer and the stage when they finally realize that some but not all similarities between languages are true as being being three distinct phases which occur in succession to one another. In reality, however, learners may experience all three stages at the same time as they struggle to accommodate different aspects of the second language, and they may skip from stage one to stage three without giving any indication of going through stage two. For further information on this kind of linguistic behaviour, see Kellerman's (1987) U-shaped curve model.

<sup>8</sup>For a brief review of the use of the first language in the second language classroom, see Frankenberg-Garcia (1998).

using translation in the classroom are, they must be confronted head-on.

One way of confronting the problems of crosslinguistic influence that are sometimes exacerbated by translation is to actually try and make students aware of their Portuguese-related problems of English and their English-related problems of Portuguese. If you begin to take note of these problems, you can then prepare specific translation exercises - or translation traps - that will force students to focus on the ways in which they tend to get Portuguese and English mixed up. Below are examples of how this can be achieved.

#### Example 1: Portuguese to English preposition trap

Portuguese learners of English often transfer Portuguese prepositions into English unwittingly. To draw their attention to this problem, they can be asked to translate into English sentences such as:

- [1] Estou cansada de estudar
- [2] O João ficou zangado comigo
- [3] A Maria foi muito simpática comigo.
- [4] É casada com um inglês.
- [5] Você já leu aquele livro do Dick Francis?

Without trying too hard, the students might get the first two sentences right:

- [1a] I'm tired of studying.
- [2a] João was angry with me.

The next three sentences, however, are intentional translation traps inasmuch as the prepositions in them cannot be translated literally:

- [3a] Maria was very nice to me.
- [4a] She's married to an Englishman.
- [5a] Have you read that book by Dick Francis?

If the students translate the prepositions literally, they will produce:

- [3b] \*Maria was very nice with me.
- [4b] \*She's married with an Englishman.
- [5b] \*Have you read that book of Dick Francis?

Forcing the students to fall into this preposition trap seems to be a very effective way of helping them

concentrate on the fact that they cannot translate every preposition they see literally.

#### Example 2: English to Portuguese cognate adverb trap

Portuguese learners of English often mistranslate cognate adverbs. To help them discriminate between adverbs which are true and adverbs which are false cognates, they can be asked to translate [6] to [11] into Portuguese.

- [6] They aren't normally open on Saturdays.
- [7] They are constantly trying to improve.
- [8] I'm not a student. I am a doctor, actually.
- [9] You will eventually learn how to do it by yourself.
- [10] She is presently developing a new project.
- [11] Drink this. You'll feel better presently.

They might begin by translating [6] and [7], which contain true cognates, without any problems into

- [6a] Eles normalmente não abrem aos sábados.
- [7a] Eles estão constantemente tentando melhorar.

Sentences [8] and [9], however, contain false cognates which students are likely to mistranslate into

- [8a] Não sou estudante. Atualmente sou médico.
- [9a] Eventualmente você vai aprender a fazê-lo sozinho.

instead of

- [8b] Não sou estudante. Na verdade, sou médico.
- [9b] Com o tempo você vai aprender a fazê-lo sozinho.

The adverb in sentences [10] and [11], in turn, is a true cognate in [10], but a false cognate in [11]. If the students are not aware of this, they will get [10] right, but will mistranslate [11]:

- [10a] Ela está presentemente desenvolvendo um novo projeto.
- [11a] Bebe isto. Presentemente vais sentir-te melhor.

A better translation of [11] would be:

- [11b] Bebe isto. Daqui a pouco vais sentir-te melhor.

Providing students with a series of bait sentences like these for them to translate into Portuguese, luring them to go wrong, and then explaining to them that not all adverbs which look alike in Portuguese and English actually mean the same can help them sort out this particular difficulty.

### Example 3: negative prefix trap

This example focuses on the difficulties that Portuguese learners of English have with negative prefixes. To address this problem, students can be asked to translate the Portuguese words below into English words with a similar root.

- [12] inconveniente
- [13] indecente
- [14] inconsistente
- [15] inaceitável
- [16] injusto
- [17] imprevisível

Presenting words [12] to [17] in the above order will probably induce the students to make errors. They might begin by translating words [12] to [14] correctly:

- [12a] inconvenient
- [13a] indecent
- [14a] inconsistent

However, if they hypothesize that Portuguese and English have similar negative prefixes, their predictions as to which prefix to add will fall apart when they translate words [15] to [17]:

- [15a] unacceptable
- [16a] unjust
- [17a] unpredictable

which they often translate as:

- [15b] \*inacceptable
- [16b] \*injust
- [17b] \*impredictable

Alternatively, if the learners in question have reached that stage in which they purposefully avoid transfer, then it wouldn't be surprising to find them getting words

[15] to [17] right, but translating words [12] to [14] as follows:

[12b] \*unconvenient  
[13b] \*undecent  
[14b] \*unconsistent

Irrespective of whether the students transfer prefixes from Portuguese, producing errors like **\*impredictable**, or whether they avoid transfer, use the English-sounding prefix **un** everywhere, and produce errors like **\*unconsistent**, the exercise helps them realize that they shouldn't always trust their intuitions when using English negative prefixes.

Although the above examples are very short and limited because of the time constraints of this presentation, I nevertheless hope they serve to show that, by paying attention to their students' crosslinguistic problems, second language and translation teachers can plan hundreds of translation traps to help students become aware of their Portuguese-related problems of English and their English-related problems of Portuguese. Of course you may be wondering whether this kind of exercise will not have the backwash effect of actually increasing the language-mix in the students' minds. But no, this doesn't seem to happen. From my experience, what does tend to happen is that students become more careful whenever they are confronted with problem-areas such as the ones highlighted above. So, for example, instead of assuming that prepositions can be translated literally, they will have second thoughts and will try and check if they can use the same preposition in Portuguese and in English. And given time, the students seem to end up learning which prepositions are similar and which are different without having to look them up. In fact, research findings by Tomasello and Herron (1988, 1989) show that

1. students tend to learn more when language transfer is openly discussed in class than when instruction focuses only on the target language.
2. students who are actually led to make transfer errors and then corrected end up learning more than students who have simply been warned of the dangers of negative transfer.

These findings argue against the assumption that the first language should not be used and that translation should be avoided in the teaching of foreign languages on

the grounds that apparently similar grammar and vocabulary are sometimes used differently in different languages. It is precisely to draw attention to such areas of linguistic contrast that well-planned translation traps can be useful.

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