

## PORTUGUESE-ENGLISH CROSSLINGUISTIC INFLUENCE

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*Working with Portuguese learners of English pursuing a degree in translation has brought to our 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 our students' contact with the English language, and even a certain reluctance to draw upon existing Portuguese-English correspondences. Our objectives are to describe a few of these linguistic peculiarities, to explain them in the light of crosslinguistic influence theory, and to discuss how raising our students' consciousness to these problems may help them keep the two languages apart.*

What happens when two or more language systems come into contact with each other in the minds of language learners has long been an object of interest both to language teachers and linguists. In this talk we are going to describe a number of idiosyncrasies typical of Portuguese-English language contact by using examples taken from what our students - Portuguese learners of English pursuing a degree in translation at ISLA - say and write. We will also attempt to explain these peculiarities in the light of crosslinguistic influence theory, and at the end of this talk we will suggest that raising our students' consciousness to these problems may be a useful way of helping them keep the two languages apart.

Those who work in close contact with native Portuguese learners of English are more or less familiar with the more obvious English language errors that are typical of Portuguese learners of English, like, for example, saying "I pretend to buy a new car" instead of "I intend to buy a new car". Clearly, Portuguese students who say "I pretend to buy a new car" are assuming that **pretend** means 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. Further examples of errors of this type are presented in table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1 Evidence of Portuguese to English Negative  
Transfer: LEXIS

- |   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>* She is very <u>sensible</u> (Ela é muito <u>sensível</u>)</li><li>* She had a lot of <u>exit</u> (Teve muito <u>êxito</u>)</li><li>* Eliza thinks Higgins wants to <u>prejudice</u> her (Eliza pensa que Higgins a quer <u>prejudicar</u>)</li><li>* He likes learning new <u>idioms</u> (Gosta de aprender <u>idiomas</u>)</li><li>* I don't understand your <u>letter</u> (Não entendo a tua <u>letra</u>)</li><li>* The idea is <u>giving result</u> (A ideia está a <u>dar resultado</u>)</li></ul> |
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It is perhaps through "false-cognate" errors like the above that the influence of Portuguese upon English is the most obvious. However, this influence is not limited to lexis. We will demonstrate now, in tables 1.2 to 1.6, that the influence of Portuguese upon our students' English language production is present at all levels of linguistic analysis.

Table 1.2 Evidence of Portuguese to English Negative Transfer: PHONOLOGY  
(examples of how phonological transfer affects spelling)

- \* People steal speak English with different accents
- \* she leaves in Almada
- \* we say what we ear

Table 1.3 Evidence of Portuguese to English Negative Transfer: ORTHOGRAPHY

- \* I speak english (falo inglês)
- \* a little italian village (uma pequena vila italiana)
- \* Imense (imenso)
- \* pratically (praticamente)
- \* vehicules (veículos)

Table 1.4 Evidence of Portuguese to English Negative Transfer: MORPHOLOGY

DERIVATION

- \* impredictable (imprevisível)
- \* disinteresting (desinteressante)
- \* The politics are corrupt (os políticos...)
- \* The critics weren't positive (as críticas)
- \* The area is habited by ... (habitada)

INFLECTION

- \* free times (tempos livres)
- \* homeworks (trabalhos de casa)
- \* informations (informações)

Table 1.5 Evidence of Portuguese to English Negative Transfer: SYNTAX

<p><b>WORD ORDER</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>* I also am tired (Também estou cansado)</li><li>* She likes very much to read (Gosta muito de ler)</li><li>* The american sheriffs each day work less (Os xerifes americanos trabalham cada dia menos)</li></ul> <p><b>GENDER AGREEMENT</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>* If a <u>person</u> has no money, <u>she</u> can't get married (Se uma pessoa não tem dinheiro, não pode casar)</li></ul> <p><b>NUMBER AGREEMENT</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>* other<u>s</u> countries (outros países)</li><li>* this kind of vegetable<u>s</u> (este género de legumes)</li><li>* the United States <u>are</u>... (os Estados Unidos são...)</li></ul> <p><b>COLLOCATION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>* She <u>has</u> afraid of dying (tem medo de morrer)</li><li>* She <u>has</u> twenty years (tem vinte anos)</li><li>* When she heard the news she <u>stayed</u> happy (...ficou feliz)</li></ul> <p><b>PREPOSITIONS FOLLOWING VERBS, NOUNS AND ADJECTIVES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>* She was very nice <u>with</u> me (foi muito simpática comigo)</li><li>* She is married <u>with</u> a Frenchman (é casada com um francês)</li><li>* I dreamt <u>with</u> the sea (sonhei com o mar)</li><li>* It will depend <u>of</u> the weather (vai depender do tempo)</li><li>* A person that just thinks <u>in</u> money (só pensa em dinheiro)</li><li>* This book is <u>of</u> Saramago (este livro é do Saramago)</li></ul>
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Table 1.6 Evidence of Portuguese to English Negative Transfer: DISCOURSE (1)

<p><b>ABUSE OF PORTUGUESE TOPIC MARKERS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>* In what concerns...</li><li>? Regarding...</li><li>? With respect to...</li></ul> <p><b>TEXT-INTERNAL REFERRING EXPRESSIONS LACKING COHERENCE IN ENGLISH (2)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>? Jane Austen</li><li>.....</li><li>.....the author of Emma.....</li><li>.....the British writer.....</li></ul>
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Originally, errors such as the ones we have just described were called "interference" errors (Lado 1957). However, interference is no longer a very popular name for describing this kind of linguistic phenomenon, for it is a term associated with behaviouristic accounts of second language acquisition. From a behaviouristic perspective, all the errors we have pointed out so far were regarded as Portuguese language habits interfering with the acquisition of proper English language habits.

Of course nowadays it is widely agreed that language-learning is not so simplistically a question of habit-formation, and that the influence of a first language upon second language learning does not manifest itself merely in the form of interference.

In fact, a learner's knowledge of Portuguese often helps rather than hinders his or her acquisition of English. One mustn't forget that the two languages are in many respects very similar. The number of Portuguese-English "false friends" like **pretender-pretend**, for example, is relatively small if compared with the number of Portuguese - English "real friends" - that is to say, English words that Portuguese learners have never seen before, but whose meaning they can fairly accurately guess based on their prior knowledge of Portuguese. An example of this is the very word **interference**, which is a cognate of the Portuguese **interferência**.

Instead of the term interference, linguists now tend to prefer the more neutral term Language Transfer to describe the influence of languages that learners already know upon languages that they are learning (3). Language Transfer can be divided into positive and negative transfer. Negative language transfer occurs when a learner's first language causes him or her to make second language errors like the **pretender-pretend** error (and all the examples we've given so far). Positive transfer occurs when a learner's first language enables him or her to make correct predictions about the second language, like guessing that **interference** means more or less the same as **interferência**.

One must be aware, however, that positive transfer does not occur every time there are similarities between languages. In fact, we have observed that our students are very often reluctant to draw upon a significant number of Portuguese-English correspondences. The examples in 2 below illustrate this.

Table 2. Evidence of a reluctance to draw upon Portuguese-English correspondences

STUDENTS PREFER...	INSTEAD OF	PORTUGUESE EQUIVALENT
*unconsistent	inconsistent	inconsistente
*unfrequent	infrequent	infrequente
for instance	for example	por exemplo
unchanged	unaltered	inalterado
unfair	unjust	injusto
to put up with	tolerate	tolerar
to go on	continue	continuar
to be frank	lay one's cards cards on the table	pôr as cartas na mesa
see the end of a difficult situation	see the light at the end of the tunnel	ver a luz ao fundo do túnel

After seeing these examples, the natural question that arises is why do students sometimes fail to take advantage of the similarities between Portuguese and English that do exist? Or, to put it differently, why is it that students don't always transfer positively when there is an opportunity for positive transfer?

The answer to this rather intriguing question has to do with a learner's psychotypology, which is the technical term coined by Eric Kellerman (1983, 1987) to account for a learner's perception of language distance.

According to Kellerman, a learner's perception of how similar or how different two languages are is not constant. When students first begin to learn a new language, they tend to capitalize on everything that is similar between this new language and the language or languages that they already know. This is the stage when transfer, whether positive or negative, occurs most frequently.

As students learn more about the new language, they will begin to notice that not everything in it that appears to have an equivalent form in the language or languages they already know is in fact the same. At this stage, Portuguese learners of English begin to realize that **pretend** is not the same as **pretender**, that prepositions are used differently in the two languages, that word order sometimes has to be changed, and so on. What happens is that as they learn, their perceptions of language distance change. It is at this point, then, that they begin to distrust most things that are similar in the two languages. The result is that students purposefully avoid any form of transfer. Thus in their efforts not to mistake **pretend** for **pretender**, they end up not capitalizing on similarities such as **infrequente** and **infrequent**.

This stage of increased language distance perception is marked by two very interesting crosslinguistic influence phenomena. The first is that students begin to form the sometimes false idea that the bigger the difference between Portuguese and English, the better the English. So they will come and very confidently tell us that **for instance** sounds far much better than **for example** (which reminds them of **por exemplo**) and that a phrasal verb like **to go on** is much nicer than a boring old verb like **to continue** (which sounds too much like **continuar**).

The second interesting thing that occurs as language distance perception changes is that students who used to get things right all of a sudden start making silly mistakes. Let me illustrate this with an example. Initially, as a result of positive transfer, a student correctly guesses that the English for **infrequente** is **infrequent**. This felicitous guess is often mistaken for proficient language behaviour. It is obviously not, however, for as the learner's perceptions of the differences between Portuguese and English change, this learner will begin to notice that many English words take the negative prefix UN instead of IN, and will conclude (wrongly, of course) that the English for **infrequente** must be **\*unfrequent**(4). Although this may appear to be a regression, this kind of error is in fact a step towards proficiency. Rather than regressing, a student who all of a sudden begins to say **\*unfrequent** instead of **infrequent** is simply showing that he or she is trying to make sense of the target language instead of transferring indiscriminately everything that appears to be alike in the two languages. This kind of error is therefore evidence that the student has rejected an initial assumption that all that is similar in the two languages is transferable, and it is also evidence that the student is attempting to organize the target language into a coherent framework(5).

Of course students will only be successful in a later stage, when they receive sufficient input to challenge their misconceived perceptions of language distance. They will then begin to realize that there are, after all, a number of similarities between Portuguese and English that they can confidently trust. It is only at this more advanced stage, then, that students will see that **for instance** is not really much nicer than **for example**, and that **to go on** is not always better than **to continue**(6).

So far we have only talked about how our students' knowledge of Portuguese affects their English. We must not forget, however, that crosslinguistic influence may also work in the opposite direction. Therefore to complete our inventory of Portuguese-English crosslinguistic influence, table 3 below shows a few Portuguese language errors by our students which clearly seem to stem from their contact with English:

Table 3: Evidence of English to Portuguese negative transfer

<p><b>LEXIS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*actualmente (meaning "actually")</li> <li>*eventualmente (meaning "eventually")</li> <li>*novela (meaning "novel")</li> <li>*subscritores (meaning "subscribers")</li> <li>*uma tarifa de regresso (meaning "a return fare")</li> <li>*um serviço de parcelas expresso (meaning "an express parcel service")</li> <li>*exposeram-no no julgamento (meaning "he was exposed during the trial")</li> <li>*vou suportá-lo nas eleições (meaning "I'll support you in the election")</li> <li>*Às três horas? Deixe-me ver aqui no meu diário (meaning "let me check my diary")</li> </ul> <p><b>SPELLING</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Eurotunnel (instead of "Eurotúnel")</li> <li>*entertimento (instead of "entretenimento")</li> <li>*entrevista (instead of "entrevista")</li> <li>*estructura (instead of "estrutura")</li> <li>*victorioso (instead of "vitorioso")</li> </ul> <p><b>SYNTAX</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Foi <u>uma</u> jornalista no Chile (from "were you <u>a</u> journalist in Chile?")</li> <li>?É o filme fiel ao livro? (from "Does the movie stick close to the book?")</li> <li>*Tenho trabalhado aqui há dez anos (from "I've been working here for ten years")</li> <li>?Um belo, sólido e pesado monumento (from "A fine, solid, heavy monument")</li> </ul>
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Given this array of crosslinguistic influence phenomena, the natural question that arises in the minds of language teachers is whether there is anything that can be done to help second language learners keep languages apart. There is of course no magic formula. But if you agree that second language development can be supplemented by some kind of teacher intervention (7), then one possible route towards helping learners keep languages apart is to help them become aware of where and when their discourse is affected by crosslinguistic influence. Michael Tomasello and Carol Herron (1988) conducted a study

in which they found that students tended to learn more when the teacher commented on their language transfer errors than when instruction focused only on examples of correct usage. So it seems to be a good idea to pay attention to students' language transfer mistakes, and to use these mistakes as a basis for teaching.

In further study, Tomasello and Herron (1989) compared two different ways of dealing with transfer errors in the classroom. While one group of students was presented with an explanation of linguistic differences which could lead to transfer errors, another group was given exercises which actually induced the students to make transfer errors so that later on their errors could be discussed with the teacher. The students who were encouraged to make transfer errors apparently learned more than the ones who were simply warned of the linguistic differences which could lead to negative transfer. So instead of simply cautioning students against negative transfer, it seems to be more effective to allow and even invite transfer errors to take place, and then, in a second phase, explain what the correct form is.

To conclude, we would simply like to add that apart from helping students deal with just the **errors** resulting from negative language transfer, students would probably benefit from becoming aware of all aspects of crosslinguistic influence which affect them, including those, such as a reluctance to draw upon certain Portuguese-English correspondences, which do not necessarily result in error.

#### NOTES

1. 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 (1991) 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.

2. Halliday and Hasan (1976) would have used the term lexical cohesion instead of coherence here, for they regard cohesion as part of coherence. For Widdowson (1973), Carrel (1982) and many others, however, it is the reader-dependent term coherence rather than the text-bound term cohesion which must be applied. Regardless of the terminology used, the schemata for co-classification or co-extension necessary for the reader to regard the Jane Austen example as coherent (or according to Halliday and Hasan, cohesive) can be easily accessed by any person who is well-read in English literature. However, well-read native writers of English would not normally stretch co-classification or co-extension this far without stating explicitly that Jane Austen is British and that she is the author of Emma. The tolerance for this kind of lexical cohesion without any explicit anaphoric form of clarification is apparently much greater in Portuguese.

3 The languages learners already know may be their mother tongue or any other language that they are already familiar with. 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".

4. 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).

5. Corder (1981) has called this hypothesis-testing.

6. For the sake of clarity we have greatly simplified the three stages of language distance perception by depicting them as three distinct phases which occur in succession to each other. 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.

7. Here we must mention that there are two opposing theories regarding second language development: one which contends that a second language can only be acquired, and one which claims that, apart from being acquired, a second language can also be learnt. Those who defend the idea that second languages can only be acquired are really saying that the only way to learn a second language is by learning how to use it, the role of the teacher being simply to provide learners with language input (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982; Krashen and Terrel 1983). In contrast, those who believe second languages are learnable are saying that understanding how a language works may help a student learn how to use it. In this case, apart from being a source of language input, teachers have the specific task of teaching grammar (Sharwood-Smith 1980 and 1994, Tomassello and Herron 1989).

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