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**UNIVERSIDAD DEL SALVADOR**

**FACULTAD DE LETRAS**

**TRANSFERABILITY IN  
SLA LEXICAL ACQUISITION: THE VERB *TURN*.**

**PhD Student: Angela Teresa Bartolazzi, Public Sworn Translator**



USAL  
UNIVERSIDAD  
DEL SALVADOR  
**PhD THESIS**

**Thesis Advisor: Maria Susana González, MA**

**Buenos Aires, October 2009**

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*Certified Public  
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... Gladly therefore will I glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 For which cause I please myself in my infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ. For when I am weak, then am I powerful.

2 Corinthians 12: 9, 10

We thought a day and night of steady rain  
was plenty, but it's falling again, downright tireless...

... Much like words

But words don't fall exactly; they hang in there  
In the heaven of language, immune to gravity  
If not to time, entering your mind  
From no direction, travelling no distance at all,  
And with rainy persistence tease from the spread earth  
So many wonderful scents ...

Robert Mezey, *Words*

... Words strain

Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still...

T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*

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*Abbreviations*

CA	Contrastive Analysis
CAH	Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis
DA	Discourse Analysis
EA	Error Analysis
IL	Interlanguage
MDH	Markedness Differential Hypothesis
NL	Native Language
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
TL	Target Language
L1	First Language or NL
L2	Second Language
PA	Performance Analysis
UG	Universal Grammar



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## INTRODUCTION

### Scope of the study

Language is part of the semiotic or symbolic function, that is, of the various ways in which the individuals represent to themselves the outside world and their own actions and experiences. (Hamers & Blanc, 1989, p. 60) Without this semiotic function thought could not be expressed ... [and] [u]nlike other aspects of the semiotic function ... [language has to be] transmitted to the child (*ibidem*, p. 61).

Language has two main functions: it is used for communication and for organizing knowledge but, at the same time, it is an object of analysis, that is to say that an individual also uses cognitive organization to analyze language and he manipulates language in order to organize knowledge (metalinguistic knowledge). The development of language is highly dependent on socialization processes and on "the existence of language-behaviour models in the child's environment" (*ibidem*, p. 64). In the early stages of this development, language is highly contextualized but "[a]s the child grows older language is used in more decontextualized ways and he learns to use it as an active organizer in thought processes" (*ibidem*, p. 66): the child appropriates language to express abstract ideas. This kind of language, which is a prerequisite for the use of language as a cognitive organizer, depends more on linguistic than on situational information and its development seems to be promoted through a number of language-related activities between adult and child (cf. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development construct, Vygotsky, 1978).<sup>1</sup>

Social context is also an important factor since in order for the child to acquire language, it has to be transmitted to him. According to Moscovici (1984), the

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<sup>1</sup>Vygotsky claims that properly organized learning, which occurs when the child is interacting in his environment under adult guidance and/or in cooperation with his peers, creates the zone of proximal development, i.e. evokes a variety of processes which once internalized become completed maturation cycles and as such provide a basis for the child's independent and potential achievement. The ZPD involves at least two levels of development and can be described as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving" (i.e. the functions that have already matured, the end products or "fruits" of development) "and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (i.e. functions that are in the process of maturation, "buds or flowers of development") (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 87).

cognitive function only develops through social interaction and it is through social interaction that the transmission of knowledge occurs (Hamers & Blanc, 1989, p. 62).

There are three main theoretical positions that aim at explaining how first languages are learned. First, behaviourists thought that language learning could be reduced to imitation and habit formation. From this point of view, success would be greatly influenced by "the quality and quantity of the language which the child hears, as well as the consistency of the reinforcement offered by others in the environment" (Lightbown and Spada, 1993, p. 1). Even though this position fails to explain how complex grammatical structures are acquired, it seems to account for the acquisition of routine aspects of language. Second, the innatist position (Chomsky, 1959) argues that children are endowed with an innate capacity to learn languages, that is, languages do not have to be taught and language development occurs in the same way as other biological functions develop. In this view, language acquisition can be described as theory construction: the child is born with the ability to discover the underlying rules of a language system and is able to develop the theory of his language with very small amounts of data from that language. Chomsky refers to this capacity as Universal Grammar (UG) since "the underlying rules of the grammar of any language may not be specific to that language but may instead be the rules of human languages in general" (Selinker, 1992, p. 78). Third, the interactionist position claims "that language develops as a result of the complex interplay between the uniquely human characteristics of the child and the environment in which the child develops" (Lightbown and Spada, 1993, p. 14). The interactionists posit that both innate and environmental factors have to be considered to account for the language acquisition process (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991, p. 266). In this perspective, "language which is modified to suit the capability of the learner is a *crucial* element in the language acquisition process" (Lightbown and Spada, 1993, p. 14).

As regards second language acquisition, theories also

range along a continuum from nativist through interactionist to environmentalist ... [according to] ... the relative importance they attach to innate mechanisms and knowledge, to interactions among innate abilities, learned abilities and environmental factors, and to experientially conditioned learner characteristics and the linguistic input (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991, p. 226).

When referring to the goal of SLA, Ellis comments that it should be



the description and explanation of the learner's linguistic or communicative competence [...] the researcher must examine aspects of the learner's usage or use of the L2 in actual performance, by collecting and analysing either samples of learner language, reports of learners' introspections, or records of their intuitions regarding what is correct or appropriate L2 behaviour (Ellis, 1994, p. 15).

Very often a distinction is made between *second* and *foreign language acquisition*. When the acquisition takes place "in an environment in which the language is spoken natively" (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991, p. 6), we speak of L2 acquisition -for example the learning of French in France- and when it takes place only in an instructional setting because it is not spoken in the community, we refer to it as foreign language acquisition. However, the term "second" is generally used to express the acquisition of any language other than one's native language, it is even used with respect to studies of simultaneous bilingualism. Moreover, some researchers prefer to use the term second language acquisition or sequential language acquisition to describe "the process of learning another language after the basics of the first have been acquired" to distinguish it from simultaneous or bilingual acquisition, i.e. "the acquisition of two languages simultaneously from infancy" (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982, p. 10).

Another distinction that is frequently made is the distinction between *acquisition* and *learning*, for example, Krashen (1981) argues that acquisition and learning are two distinct and independent ways of developing competence in a second language: the former and its result or acquired competence are subconscious processes, i.e. the acquirers are only aware that they are using the language for communication. This process is similar to the way children develop ability in their L1 and is also known as implicit learning, informal learning, or natural learning. Learning, on the other hand, is a conscious process and as such, implies grammar instruction and error correction, and is also described as formal or explicit learning. According to Krashen, this distinction can also be applied to first language.

In this study, however, the terms acquisition and learning will be used interchangeably and the term SLA will be used in the superordinate sense to cover both kinds of learning, i.e. second and foreign language acquisition.

For all these reasons, the scope of SLA research -part of which will be considered in the first part of this analysis- is extremely broad and covers a wide range of aspects. Therefore, in Chapter I, we attempt to describe learner variables, but we

focus only on the most relevant to L2 acquisition, such as: age, sex, language aptitude, motivation, attitude, personality, cognitive style, learning strategies, affective factors and beliefs. Chapter II is devoted to characterizing the role of the linguistic environment in which we include input and social factors like social class, ethnic identity and learning setting. The internal, and therefore, invisible mechanisms or processes responsible for language learning that take place inside the learner's mind –i.e. “the black box”<sup>2</sup>- and, also the theoretical perspectives that aim at explaining them are considered in Chapter III. Finally in the last chapter of the first part, Chapter IV, we deal with the influence of the L1 in second language acquisition.

This influence or role of the first language in SLA, which occupies an important place among a large number of unsolved problems, is central for the purposes of our study. From a historical perspective, language transfer or the role of the learner's existing linguistic knowledge in the course of L2 development was the first factor to receive serious attention in applied linguistics so much so that in the 1950s it was considered a decisive factor in both SLA theory and methodology; furthermore whenever reliance on L1 knowledge was suspected, the term *transfer* was used. Fortunately, its importance has been reassessed in the last decades. As a result, a more balanced view of transfer has emerged: its influence is no longer denied –like it was in the 1960s- but it is seen to interact with other factors in ways which are not fully understood yet. However, Kellerman & Sharwood Smith (1986) suggest abandoning the term *transfer* not only because it might have some past negative connotations but also because it is not broad enough to cover all the aspects of L1 influence on L2 learning and, suggest using in its place a theory neutral term like cross-linguistic influence which subsumes phenomena such as “‘transfer’, ‘interference’, ‘avoidance’, ‘borrowing’ and L2 related aspects of language loss [...] thus permitting discussion of the similarities and differences between these phenomena” (Sharwood Smith and Kellerman 1986:1 in Ellis 1994, p. 301).

<sup>2</sup> ... “Language learning is sometimes described as a black box problem because although we can observe the language which learners hear and see and the sentences that they produce, we cannot observe what goes on inside the black box, i.e., how they actually learn language” (Richards, Platt, and Platt, 1992, pp. 38/9).

There are various constraints on transfer. Theorists like Zobl (1983b, 1984), Eckman (1977), Kellerman (1977), and Gass (1979), among others, proposed “linguistic markedness” based on the fact that languages have certain linguistic elements which are more basic, typical, natural, and frequent than others. The former are referred to as “unmarked” whereas the latter are described as “marked”. Furthermore, markedness can also be considered from the point of view of language typology, i.e. “when crosslinguistic comparisons of languages show that the presence of some linguistic feature implies the presence of another feature” (*ibidem*, p. 101).

Chomsky’s theory of Universal Grammar also distinguishes the rules of a language that are “core” and “periphery”. Core rules are governed by universal, abstract principles of language and are, according to Chomsky, innate such as, for example, basic word order. Core rules can be both unmarked and marked whereas peripheral rules are always marked. For Kellerman (1983), the concepts of “coreness” and “markedness” are closely connected.

Other important constraints on transfer are language distance and prototypicality. Kellerman (1977) referred to the learners’ perceptions of the L1-L2 distance as “psychotypology”. Later, in 1983, he referred to native speakers’ perceptions of the structure of their own language as “psycholinguistic markedness”. In 1986, he used the term “prototypicality” –a concept that originates in Cognitive Psychology- since, and even though he described the same concept, he dealt with the prototypical meaning of a lexical item, i.e. the one that the dictionary considers to be the primary meaning of an item.

Kellerman carried out several studies, most of which examine lexico-semantics, in order to demonstrate the importance of the learners’ perceived transferability and came to the conclusion that “learners resist transferring non-prototypical meanings” (Ellis, 1994, p. 335).

In the second part, in Chapters V and VI we describe our experiment which draws on Kellerman’s work, especially, on his *breken* study (Kellerman, 1978). Our aim is to analyze lexical transfer, more specifically, to test Kellerman’s hypothesis using another verb. That is, we assume that if his hypothesis was valid for the verb *break* (*breken*) then it could also be valid for a verb of such special characteristics as the verb *turn*. Lexical acquisition is undoubtedly at the heart of SLA, since in order to



master a language it is necessary to have a good knowledge of vocabulary so much so that a “beginner’s vocabulary” is made up of 1,000 to 2,000 words (Zimmerman, in Coady & Huckin eds., 1997, p. 14). Moreover, there is plenty of evidence that seems to suggest the existence of important similarities between L1 and L2 patterns of lexical acquisition so much so that there appears to be “a universal core of semantic information accessible to all learners and which may aid in the acquisition of new vocabulary” (Odlin, 1989, p. 80). Nevertheless, it seems that the role of vocabulary has often been undervalued.

In addition, the impact of proficiency or the acquisition of real knowledge of the language on metalinguistic awareness -learners’ perceptions of meaning, and L1-L2 meaning similarity and distance- will be central for the purposes of our analysis.

We resort to intuitional data and tap metalinguistic intuitions via grammaticality judgements<sup>3</sup>. Even though metalinguistic awareness has been defined in different ways, the factor underlying most of the definitions is that they refer to some ability on the part of the learner that enables him/her “to manipulate language as an object” (Fowles and Glanz, 1977, p. 432 in Gass, 1983, p. 275). Grammaticality judgments which can, for example, involve word games, identifying mistakes and correcting them, translations, are crucial to determine this “ability related to a greater facility with the language” (*ibidem*) and play an important part in our study.

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<sup>3</sup> Two hundred and seventy-three participants took part in the experiment: one hundred and sixty-three in Stage one (seventy-one native speakers of English and ninety-two non-native speakers) and one hundred and ten in Stage two, all of them non-native speakers of English (fifty-four beginners and fifty-six upper intermediate and advanced students).

# FIRST PART



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