

# CROSS-LINGUISTIC TRANSFER IN ORAL L2 PRODUCTION OF CROATIAN L1 SPEAKERS LEARNING ITALIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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**Abstract:** The acquisition process of the target language is characterized by the complexity of linguistic rules in learner's L1 and linguistic purposes of that particular language. This process accomplishes a system called interlanguage (Selinker, 1972). In this system the linguistic transfer, especially a negative one, often causes a large number of cross-linguistic deviations in the target language. (Medved Krajnović, 2010). Previous research on L1 interference in the acquisition and production of Italian as a foreign language has shown that many different linguistic transfers take place at lexical, phonological, grammatical and morphological levels (Alujević Jukić & Brešan, 2010; Sironić Bonefačić, 1990). In this paper we focus on the negative transfer of lexical elements from L1 Croatian to L2 Italian by analyzing the most frequent errors occurred in the oral productions of a group of intermediate (CEFR levels B1-B2) Croatian-speaking learners (approximately 40 students). Our analysis shows that the Croatian L1 significantly affects the choice of lexical structures and words in Italian L2. Indeed, during the oral production in L2 language, we noticed that errors are mostly calques, substitutions and use of lexical structures based on L1 linguistic model. The examination of the negative transfer reveals useful to draw both didactic and learning suggestions, which can be beneficial for the whole language learning process. For learners, the implication is the possibility of developing and strengthening a strategy to memorize lexical words and structures. In doing so, they can be helped by different activities during the lesson, such as contrastive demonstrations of errors in both the languages involved, cloze tests, as well as presentations of the texts that are being studied. We therefore suggest that teachers should model their didactic approach by focusing more on systemic errors related to the structures already learnt by the student (Cattana Nesci, 2004).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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Second language acquisition is a complex process because of many interrelated factors (age, cognition, input, educational background, motivation...) and codes of native language and target language. During this process the learner creates an *interlanguage (IL)* (Selinker, 1972), i.e. a dynamic linguistic system that contains variable elements and structures of both native and target language, which learners use and develop during different stages of second language acquisition. During the early stage of of this complex process, though the native language elements tend to prevail, the interlanguage system develops simultaneously with the learner's linguistic improvement. However, incorrect target language structures often become a rooted habit and can easily fossilize in any developmental stage of language acquisition. All language elements, rules and subsystems are liable to fossilization irrespective of and the age or the length of instructions received by the learner had in the target language. The fossilized structures remain even when it seems that they have been completely removed (Selinker: 1972:215).

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## 2. THEORETICAL ISSUES ON NEGATIVE TRANSFER

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Any interlanguage presents several characteristics: fluctuation, fragmentation, as well as simplicity in form and function (Vrhovac, 2001). Simplicity of IL refers to the use of less complex grammatical rules and limited vocabulary, which means that IL is the system with its own language rules (Medved Krajnović, 2010). Since an IL is a dynamic linguistic system, it is liable to changes caused by development of learner language knowledge. According to Selinker (1972) there are five different processes that are involved in developing of learners IL: language transfer, overgeneralization of TL linguistic elements, transfer of training, strategies of second language learning, and strategies of second language communication.

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According to Richards (1974), errors could be classified into two categories: interlingual errors, and intralingual and developmental errors. Interlingual errors are influenced by native languages, which interfere with the target language learning process. Intralingual and developmental errors are caused by the target language itself, and they occur during the learning process.

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Actually, the language transfer is the one that causes a large number of errors from the target language. According to Odlin (1993:27), transfer can be defined as "influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired." It refers to transfer from one language to another, and this transfer can be either positive or negative. If the elements common to both the learner's mother and target languages are similar, then a positive transfer occurs. On the other hand, if there are differences between both languages, and some elements proper of the mother language obstruct the acquisition of the target language structures, then the transfer is negative (Medved Krajnović, 2010; Odlin, 1993).

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During the Fifties and Sixties, under the influence of contrastive analyses, most language errors among learners' IL were thought to be triggered by the influence of the mother tongue. Although many researches belie this claim, it is a retained opinion that mother tongue indeed is a contributing factor in the acquisition of the foreign language (Prebeg-Vilke, 1991). Odlin (1993) states that negative transfer is relatively easy to identify and that,

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according to cross-linguistic similarities and differences, we can differentiate four consequences stemming from a given negative transfer: underproduction, overproduction, production errors (substitutions, calques, alternations of structures) and misinterpretations. ▲

If a learner is able to produce a small number of examples when using a target language, then **underproduction occurs**. This may be caused by either the inability to produce examples of target language, or by a mechanism of avoidance, i.e. when the structures in the target language appear to be significantly different from those in the target language. Practical analyses of Chinese learners' essays have confirmed that simple sentences in written English are used because there are no complex sentence patterns in Chinese (Wang & Liu, 2013). On the other hand, if learners tend to excessively use the structures of a target language in a wrong way (e.g. they use many simple sentences instead of adopting more complex ones), this results in an **overproduction**. According to Wang and Liu (2013), Chinese learners of ESL often overproduce patterns when using paragraph introductory structures, e.g. *firstly, secondly, thirdly, finally* or *with the development of*. When observing the mechanisms of error production, Odlin (1993) differentiates substitutions, calques and alternations of structures. **Substitutions** refer to the choice of replacing one language element with another, usually a use of native language form in the target language (e.g. *serioso* → *serious*, Calvo Cortés, 2005). **Calques** represent given elements of syntactic structures that usually get literally translated from a native language (e.g. He tenido mi pelo cortado → I have had my hair cut, Calvo Cortés, 2005). **Alternations of structures** very often occur in case of a cross-linguistic influence, and may be observed in hypercorrections. According to Odlin (1993:38), **hypercorrections** are "overreactions to particular influence from the native language." Particularly, Odlin (1993) refers to spelling errors that involve substitutions of the letter *b* for the letter *p* (e.g. blaying VS playing), made by Arabic learners of ESL. Finally, **misinterpretations** refer to any wrong interpretation of the messages expressed in the target language.

In this study we will focus on the lexical errors of Croatian learners of Italian as foreign language. Since IL is a separate transitional linguistic system that involves linguistic elements of both native and target language, changes could be observed in the IL used by Croatian learners of Italian as a foreign language at all levels, i.e. phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics (Jelaska, 2005). According to previous research (Sironić Bonefačić, 1990; Županović Filipin & Mardešić, 2013), the most frequent phonological errors encompass the pronunciation of vocals, the use of double consonants or the insertion of sounds in accordance with the phonology of Croatian words (e.g. Croatian learners will often pronounce Italian words such as *meccanico* or *psicologo* by uttering them according to the Croatian phonological system, i.e. *meħaničar*; *psiholog*). Errors at the morphological level usually occur with the highest frequency, e.g. omission of definite and indefinite articles before a noun, wrong choice of prepositions, wrong grammatical gender, word order, using of Italian verbs *giocare, tornare, ridere* as reflexive verbal forms due to the influence of Croatian verbs *igrati se, vratiti se, smijati se* etc. Both the choice of word order as well as the discrepancy in noun's number and gender may be seen as among the most problematic errors at the syntactic level. ▲

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### 3. AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to determine the negative transfer of lexical elements from L1 Croatian to L2 Italian, by analyzing the most frequent errors occurred in the oral performances of a group of intermediate (CEFR levels B1-B2) Croatian-speaking learners.

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### 4. METHODOLOGY

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#### 4.1 Subjects

The study was conducted among a sample of 40 learners attending ABC, a foreign language school based in Zagreb, Croatia, which specifically deals with courses of Italian language and culture. All of the participants are native Croatian speakers and have studied Italian as a foreign language at intermediate levels (B1 and B2). Lessons take place in a stimulating working atmosphere, in which an emphasis is put on developing communicative competence. The average age of the participants is between 19 and 60 years old, and the majority of them has had a formal education in Italian language for 4 to 6 years, though some of them have learned the language for 1 to 3 years. For all of them, Italian is the second (or third) foreign language acquired in an educational context, with English always being the first foreign language studied. In this project, we focus on the negative transfer in lexical context and how it is reflected in practical examples.

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#### 4.2 Data Collection

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The errors caused by negative transfer have been collected during regular classes of Italian as a foreign language. Teacher has created a record encompassing the most frequent errors occurred in the oral performances of a group of intermediate (B1-B2) Croatian-speaking learners. Their oral production has been partly recorded, but mostly transcribed or written down by the students or by the teachers.

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### 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to collected examples, the authors have decided to divide the lexical errors in five categories:

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**1) Calques occurred under the influence of mother tongue (L1)**  
Calques are errors that closely represent native language structure and they are usually the most frequent. According to Vinay (1995), calques are defined as "special kind of borrowing whereby a language borrows an expression form or another, but then translates literally each of its elements".

A given L2 word is the result of a literal translation from the L1. We refer here to what has been observed by Ringbom (2001), according to whom the calque is a type of lexical transfer of meaning occurring when there is awareness of the existing target language form, but not of

the semantic/collocational restrictions. It is very important to remove calques at an early stage, because later on they tend to fossilize. It is, for instance, quite hard to eliminate calques from a student's language usage if he or she have learned Italian in Italy without attending any relevant language course. In this case, his or her oral performances present many calques consisting in literal translations from Croatian language. Their fossilization makes the errors' removal very slow and sometimes almost impossible.

Furthermore, when using Italian words and phrases such as 'commenti', 'fare una domanda', 'stravagante', and 'non vedo l'ora', Croatian learners tend to rather adopt the literal translation from their native language, as summarised in the following table:

Correct form in Italian	Wrong production in Italian	Form in Croatian
<i>commenti</i>	<i>commentari</i>	<i>komentari</i>
<i>fare una domanda</i>	<i>chiedere una domanda</i>	<i>pitati pitanje</i>
<i>stravagante</i>	<i>estravagante</i>	<i>ekstravagantan</i>
<i>non vedo l'ora</i>	<i>non posso aspettare</i>	<i>ne mogu čekati / jedva čekam</i>

### 2) Calques occurred under the influence of English language

Though our main aim here is to focus on the mistakes that Croatian learners of Italian as L2 tend to make under the influence of their native language, it must be pointed out that this issue is also often influenced by a series of errors produced under the influence of English language. As already mentioned, for all participants English is the first foreign language, thus it is reasonable to expect that previously acquired foreign language may cause a number of interferences between languages. Lexical errors under the influence of English language are usually deceptive cognates, as illustrated by the following examples:

Correct form in Italian	Wrong production in Italian	Form in English
istruito	educato	educated
stampare	printare	to print
capire	realizzare	to realize
sostenere qualcuno	supportare qualcuno	to support someone
ti porto a casa	ti prendo a casa	I'll take you home
siamo molto legati	siamo molto collegati	we are very connected

### 3) Wrong usage of target structures

Some target structures are differently used in both Croatian and Italian languages; for example, among students there is a tendency to confuse the adjective *bravo*, which is used when someone is good at doing something, with the adjective *buono*, which in Italian identifies something that is good to eat (good), or of good quality (e.g. a good movie). In Italian, the sentence *sono bravi a correre* cannot be transformed as *sono buoni a correre*. Furthermore, the adverb *bene/male* can only be used with a verb, but not with the verb *to be* in this kind of sentence: it is not correct to say *il suo comportamento è male*, but *il suo*

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structures often works in a different way than those in the target language, so learner should be aware of and familiarize themselves with the relevant differences between languages.

In addition, our analysis has revealed that Croatian learners of Italian often use calques from English, this being a previously acquired language that learners master since a very young age. Not only have our examples confirmed that these types of interferences very frequently occur at a lexical level, but they also have demonstrated that learners avoid and simplify those structures that appear to be not so common or significantly different between Croatian and Italian languages; this can result in a mechanism of underproduction of given target language structures, as well as in the opposite process of overproduction, which appears to be often a consequence of underproduction (Wang & Liu, 2013).

In order to overcome errors in the target language, the teacher should prepare a set of different activities, such as contrastive demonstrations of the errors in both languages, cloze tests, and presentations of the texts that are being studied during the lesson. Indeed, teachers should model their didactic approach by focusing more on systemic errors related to the structures that have already been acquired by the students. Teachers should further encourage Croatian learners to use those elements and structures of Italian language that are not so common in oral production of Croatian (e.g. passive sentences). It is important to make learners aware of the recurrent errors, by adopting authentic texts that feature given problematic structures and elements, as well as by recurring to role plays in which learners are pushed to pay attention to specific elements of the target language. Finally, learners should also develop their own strategies for learning new and problematic elements and structures of target language. In this framework, a teacher's key action consists in making the students aware of the differences between linguistic structures, as well as always pointing out at the words used in both languages. If learners are able to notice those differences from the very beginning of their educational process, it may then be easier for them to adopt the correct structures of the target language.

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