



# Italian – Spanish: Difficulties in Learning. A Survey of Literature

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## *Abstract:*

Italian and Spanish are two languages with a very high degree of similarity. The aim of this article is to define what are the main difficulties that learners of both languages experience in learning the opposite foreign language. Transfer is one of the main causes of errors found in interlanguages, but it is crucial to analyze its effects specifically and understand that it is not the sole cause. The perceived closeness can have both positive and negative implications depending on the various stages of learning, which does not seem to have a constant increasing trend, and the initial confidence tends to disappear over time. The role of the first language is crucial in learning related languages that cannot avoid undergoing Contrastive Analysis, since learners must activate comparison with their own linguistic heritage in an effort to reduce the risk of error fossilization.

**Keywords:** *Contrastive Analysis, Fossilization, Interlanguage, Second Language Acquisition, Transfer*

## *1. Introduction*

It is impossible to deny the similarity between Italian and Spanish, since all languages that derive from Latin share words and structures, in a more or less marked way, but the relationship between them is very close. The fact that both belong to the group of Romance languages simplifies classification and recognition of the many similarities that exist in both in the lexicon and syntax of Italian and Spanish. Without a doubt, this aspect which on the one hand constitutes a positive factor for learning, represents at the same time a dissuasive element that generally does not encourage learners to go on discovering the differences that exist between the two languages. However, this is very important because understanding the differences means deepening the knowledge of languages.

The perception of familiarity in oral comprehension is due to the almost perfect equivalence of the vowel systems: the absence of

complex phonemes (such as the nasal vowels of French) allows you to identify words from the first contact with the new language. Structural correspondences and the significant amount of lexical coincidences also draw attention, so the speaker has the immediate sensation of understanding the other language and of being able to speak it without great efforts. The Romance origin that unites them and their diachronic development justifies this similarity. However, gradually the contact deepens and unexpected difficulties appear: affinities often mask subtle differences.

Both the easiness and the traps have become commonplace: due to the positive effects of similarity, many learners do not find it necessary to undertake a serious study to acquire satisfactory communicative competence. These seem to be the main causes for which only a small part of the learning in students of the two languages will reach an advanced level. The learning of Spanish by Italians, and vice versa, is seen as an easy and not unnecessary thing, given that in extreme cases mutual understanding is obtained by speaking each one's own language but when contact with the other language is more prolonged, the feeling of "false friends" dominates (Bailini 2016).

The alleged ease turns into a paradox and, in fact, half a century ago the linguist Carlo Tagliavini (1947: 261) stated that Spanish is for an Italian speaker one of the most difficult language to learn correctly. According to his observations, those who start studying Spanish and German at the same time, within a year will have ten times more knowledge of Spanish, but the distance will be canceled soon and after five years at the latest the student will master German better than Spanish.

There is no scientific evidence to support Tagliavini's paradox in its quantitative terms; moreover, the linguist was mainly referring to translation ability, which today is far from being considered the main intention of second language (L2) proficiency. However, it is true that teachers' experience leads to similar conclusions. On the other hand, however, the study of Spanish in Italy is influenced by the prejudice of the futility of in-depth study; with the result that Italians know it little and poorly and hardly know the language, even at an academic level. Tagliavini himself showed little interest in further study of the language and focused mainly on literary topics.

## 2. *The Action of transfer*

The perception of closeness can be a source of mistakes due to the transposition of sounds, forms and structures belonging to the mother language and it becomes a dangerous affinity as the apparent simplicity converts itself in the greatest difficulty. During the first year of study, students assimilate divergences and develop a feeling of confidence at the same time. They achieve quick results at first, but in the long run they are less likely to truly master the foreign language. In fact, these languages are the easiest to learn in a wrong way, which means that it is common for learners to make mistakes. Italian and Spanish sound reciprocally understandable, as the structure of their words is similar and sometimes almost equal, or identical. The mistakes caused by the transposition are the effects of the linguistic transfer, which consists in the transfer of the habits that have been consolidated in their native language into the L2, sometimes it promotes the learning of the Second Language, but more frequently it disturbs it. Generally, the transfer tends to occur when the learner recognizes some similarity between the first language (L1) and the second language (L2) and thus formulates assumptions about the function of the L2 that are based on this similarity.

The first definitions of this concept are related to the Structuralism and the Contrastive Analysis (CA) which believed that the mother language (LM) influenced the learning of a second

language (SL). The behaviorists thought that every learning was conditioned by the previous ones and learners tend to transfer in the new language their native language structures (Lado 1957). With the development of the innatistic theories, the CA is attacked and consequently the theory of transfer is discredited (James 1980). For many years this thought was neglected and transfer is still considered as an inconsistent concept. Moreover, the theory was easily attacked considering that CA had focused on transfer as a linguistic “product” and had as its goal to find out where negative action would occur, while at the same time admitting the existence of positive transfer. In the Eighties, instead, there was a change of perspective: transfer began to be considered as a “process”, or as a set of strategies for learning and production. Transfer is not only a use of linguistic habits, as it was in the past, but a set of cognitive mechanisms involved in every aspect of language: pronunciation, morphosyntax, vocabulary, etc.

According to the previous affirmation we can suppose that the CA should be able to understand that interlinguistic contrasts can often create barriers rather than removing them (Odlin 1989: 30). Anyway, it is fundamental to highlight that this is not true since differences are more problematic than similarities. It is due to the fact that the learning difficulties are not always directly proportional to the differences between the languages. In addition, the transfer does not only occur between the ML and the SL, but from any other linguistic knowledge to the new language. In fact, Italian we can observe it also in students that study Spanish after having already learned other languages, such as English and French. However, excluding terminological questions, they share the belief that transfer is only an aspect of progress in a new language (Calvi 1999).

Another key point in the learning of similar languages is the Perception of Distance, or the hypothesis formulated by the speaker on the typological closeness between the L1 and the L2 because it promotes transfer. We are dealing with a psycholinguistic criteria, centered on the learning and complexity of the phenomena involved and not only on actual similarity and linguistic relations. As Eckman suggests in his Theory of Evidence (1977) the ability to transfer elements of one language to another one does not depend only on the linguistic contrast but also on how the speaker perceives this contrast. This explains the reason for which some particularly marked structures, in general poorly transferable, can be transferred to nearby languages and not to distant ones. Thus, in trying to identify L1 language features that create difficulties in L2, the concept of markedness is crucial. It represents complexity, low frequency, low productivity, low semantic transparency or deviation from the basic structures of a language. The perceived distance experienced by learners is one of the main mechanisms that activate transfer even if the typological similarities do not guarantee the positive one. In order to predict the hypothetical effects of the contact between the L1 and the L2, the notion of distance must be integrated with the concept of transferability based on the learner’s perception of the structures of the L1. As Kellerman (1983) suggests, the degree of transferability of a linguistic element is inversely proportional to the degree of markedness in a psycholinguistic sense.

### *2.1. The relation between transfer and other processes*

The studies in the field of second language acquisition claim that the initial development sequences of the interlanguage (IL) are the same in all learners, regardless of their L1. The markedness represents an important concept for the analysis of the interlanguages of related languages, understood as what is perceived as difficult to learn. The only model for analyzing IL of related languages that exists today is that of Schmid (1994), who approaches the topic from a cognitive perspective, considering on one hand the influence of perceptions of similar-

ties and differences between the L1 and the L2, as explained above, and on the other hand the possibility that confidence in the previous language skills is linked to some kind of universal preferences in language development. Schmid elaborates his model starting from the theory of Natural Morphology, whose parameters provide a theoretical basis for the relationships of markedness through a series of morphological naturalness principles, both universal and specific to the pair of languages in analysis, which are: biunivocity, the morphotactic transparency, morphosemantic transparency and diagrammaticity.

Starting from these principles, Schmid (1977) elaborates the theory of Naturalness Differential Hypothesis, which makes it possible to predict that when Spanish learners of Italian as a foreign language—and the same is true for Italian learners of Spanish as a foreign language—perceive similarities between the L1 and the L2 and make assumptions about the morphological structure of the latter, these will be based on their mental representations of their L1. On the other hand, they will experience difficulties when they try to assimilate in their IL elements different from their L1 and less natural, since any analysis of the IL cannot be separated from the analysis of errors.

In other words, some particularly marked forms can be transferred to a close language, while other poorly marked structures may be non-transferable in a language that is very distant from the L1 of the learner. The hypothesis of closeness allows native Italian speakers to transfer into Spanish even the most marked forms, so theoretically these are not loanwords.

However, transfer processes are not constant in the course of learning; they concurrently evolve according to numerous factors, such as the level of learners' performance and their metalinguistic awareness (Calvi 1995):

- the beginners tend to transfer even the marked forms in the L2, based on the interlinguistic similarities;
- intermediate-level students are more aware of the actual differences between the two languages and they are disappointed by their mistakes and they would subsequently tend to be more careful;
- at the advanced stages of learning, learners would again be inclined to transfer.

This procedure is called U-shaped and it is clearly observable in the Italian learners, who approach the new language with confidence, thanks to the similarities, and reach the first results in a short time. It is followed by a critical phase during which they try to keep distance from the problematic L2 and try to avoid transfer, but the habit of recurring will return, even in marked structures. The tendency to mix the two languages is quite common even at the most advanced levels (Bizzoni and De Fina 1992).

The linguistic habits associated to the L1 interfere with the L2 learning and they are therefore considered responsible for the quality in production of the L2. This use of behaviors, already learned in the past, is automatic and subconscious and it can be distinguished as being either positive or negative:

- positive transfer occurs in cases where the structure to be learned does not differ from that one already acquired in the L1 so, the execution is correct because it is only necessary to transfer the known behavior to the new situation;
- negative transfer leads to improper performance, because the behavior to which the learner is used to is different from the one to be acquired and he or she will tend to misuse it.

Of course, there are also incorrect executions which do not come from the L1 habits and therefore they are not treatable in terms of transfer (Baldi and Savoia 2018: 65). When there is an actual parallelism between the two linguistic systems, the transfer is positive; Moreover, the negative side is not reduced to simple transfer, but includes other phenomena such as the inclination to avoid complex structures or to use easier ones (Odlin 1989). This case is very common between Italian and Spanish, since often the two languages do not diverge in the structures but in the frequencies of them at both discursive and pragmatic level.

## *2.2 Negative transfer and the fossilization phenomena*

Recently, Selinker and Lakshmanan (1992) have shown that transfer is one of the main causes of fossilization. This is also based on the reality of learners of similar languages: often, the rapid initial progress is followed by fossilization and, unfortunately, the negative effects of transfer are extremely difficult to eradicate. Considering the similarities between the two languages, the fossilization of transfer does not inhibit communication decisively and the learner prefers to remain at the level attained. For this reason, the motivation is fundamental in learning because it helps students to improve their L2 level.

An interesting study, conducted by Alessandro Vietti (2006) on the learning of Italian by Peruvian hispanophones immigrated to Italy, is very useful to emphasize that the proximity between languages can actually constitute an obstacle rather than an advantage in learning. The aspect which immediately attracts attention is the presence, in different degrees and forms, of the Spanish language in sentences that were supposed to be Italian in the communicative intention of the speakers. In other words, in speaking Italian, Peruvians rely heavily on their L1, that is, they transfer part of the Spanish lexicon and grammar into Italian. This transfer of Spanish into Italian affects different levels of the language (phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon) with different intensity and in several ways.

Italian spoken by Peruvians will have a communicative success that will exert a force in the opposite direction to the goal of learning L2 Italian correctly. Simply because this variety of Italian actually works, in the sense that it ensures mutual understanding, this acts as a brake on learners' motivation to further develop their IL. In a sense, this variety is functional to the immigrant's primary communication needs; obviously, by diversifying the needs and social relationships, the Peruvian's Italian will move in the proper direction.

The relationship between transfer and the other processes involved in the acquisition of a L2 has only been clarified partially. In fact, different mechanisms are also present and the individual variations make any prediction uncertain. In didactic teaching, it is necessary to consider the most obvious manifestations and the most elusive effects, namely the overproduction or avoidance of certain structures. Thanks to the studies made by the sociolinguists and the cognitive sciences, transfer is no longer appearing only as a passive phenomenon, suffered by the learner, but also as an active process, otherwise as a cognitive strategy, when the L1 is used as a source of hypotheses about the L2, or a communicative one.

Transfer manifests itself in all aspects of the language, even though it may be in a different way, where they combine themselves with other mechanisms linked to the acquisition sequences and the linguistic universals.

- In the phonetic and phonological field, the influence of the L1 is more evident than in other areas. In fact, the comparison of Italian and Spanish phonological systems does not involve any particular difficulties, but the phonetic differences can cause persistent transfer that clearly identify the learner's ML.

- With regard to morphosyntax, it is more difficult to distinguish the transfer effects from errors related to learning in general and there are divergent points of views, for example, some students believe that the transfer of inflectional morphemes, such as prefixes, suffix, etc., from the L1 to L2, are rare and irrelevant (Klein 1986) while others affirm that the pronounced formal similarities make it possible (Odlin 1989). The word order is very flexible in both languages and the similarities between their negative and interrogative constructions should allow a positive transfer, it is not necessary to apply particular rules for the negative form or for the interrogative one. Therefore, simple demand-response interactions do not require acquisitive efforts, the only difference is the graphic mark of the question. However, there are also some structural difficulties in Spanish language that could discourage the Italian learner (for example the use of *Ser* and *Estar*, the choice between the indicative and the gerund and the numerous verbal periphrases). The approach to these structural contrasts increases the sensation of distance; the errors do not depend on the affinity between the two systems but rather on divergences. It is unlikely that just from a few elements already acquired the learner will be able to construct a certain number of sentences, it does not occur with any other language, in any learning situation and with any method of study.
- As far as lexicon is concerned, the beneficial effect of interlinguistic similarities is known, but the fact that lexical relationships involve negative transfer when formal similarities correspond to semantic or a different frequency in the use of similar words must not be underestimated. A key concept regarding the “false friends”, or words that are formally close but dissimilar in meaning; for the beginner students it is fun to discover that in Spanish the word *burro* means “donkey” whereas *burro* in Italian means “butter”, and that *aceite* means “oil” in Spanish and “vinegar” in Italian. But not all the false friends constitute an obstacle to the learning, in some cases in fact the same word belongs to completely different contexts in the two languages so, once you go over the first approach, they are easily recognizable.

The notion of transfer and the perception of distance are useful in focusing on the learning of related languages, even if these processes take place unconsciously and there is no tangible evidence of their development. Of course, the only data available are the linguistic productions, in particular the analysis of errors which helps us to deduce the cognitive mechanisms that come into play. In this regard, it is necessary to remind the change of perspective introduced by Corder's (1981) considerations about the meaning of the errors of the students of L2. He introduced a new positive vision of the error in which it constitutes a creative procedure process in the formulation of hypotheses on the new language. The perception of proximity and transfer condition the learning process of Spanish by Italian native speakers in each phase of learning and in every linguistic sector, or more generally in the acquisition of affinity languages.

### 3. *The construction of the interlanguage*

The problem related to transfer lies within the psycholinguistic aspects of the acquisition of second languages and it's even more relevant in the teaching of Spanish to Italian speakers. The transfer means a diversified process and not only a negative mechanism that causes errors in production.

This concept is based on the Chomskian approach, according to which the learner does not merely imitate patterns, but acquires the rules of language through complex cognitive processes. According to studies on analysis errors, learning a language follows structured systems; the student sets them through mental processes that originate an intermediate linguistic system

between L1 and L2. This intermediate system is the interlanguage, or a temporary linguistic system, in continuous evolution, which the learner elaborates through hypotheses to be verified on the functioning of the second language and in which elements of the ML are also found. In other words, it is a constantly evolving linguistic system that proceeds, through the various stages of learning, moving away from the ML rules to get closer to the second language ones.

The interlanguage theory also helps to reevaluate the role of the L1 in the new language learning, as an inevitable reference point in the process. Comparing acquired knowledge with new knowledge is a universal cognitive process that should not be undone in the case of language learning. The investigations in different sectors of the language sciences underline numerous peculiarities of the process of learning similar languages but there is a clear evidence of speakers' tendency to use specific cognitive strategies as soon as they perceive closeness.

It is also necessary to highlight the need to reinforce the comparative activities spontaneously carried out by the speakers. It helps them to distinguish similarities and differences, regularity and irregularity; in other words, to strengthen the IL exploration strategies (Dabène 1996). In this way, they will be able to control interference and at the same time to take advantage of proximity. Hispanophones are one of the most studied linguistic groups, especially in situations of contact with English, while little attention has been paid to the acquisition of related languages, which have peculiar features. Therefore IL, like all natural languages, contains a system of rules and basic elements (lexical, phonological, grammatical, etc.) whose organization constitutes a functional and coherent whole, which is characterized by being systematic, in the sense that some structures recur constantly in IL.

Starting from this premise, Adjemian (1976) argues that before stating that the recurrence of an output that does not reflect the rules of L2 is due to a transfer process, it would be necessary to study how often and in which linguistic contexts it appears in order to understand if it is the result of the internal consistency of a given IL or of a transfer process. According to the author, the aspect that differentiates IL from a natural language is permeability, in many cases coming from the infiltration of rules extraneous to the IL, which contaminates internal systematicity, or from a hypergeneralization or distortion of a rule of one's own IL. IL becomes permeable when the pupil tries to communicate in L2 using structures he has not yet organized in his IL: in other words, the use of hypergeneralization or simplification strategies violates the internal systematic nature of IL and makes it permeable. In this perspective, Adjemian (1976) believes that the notion of stability of the IL should refer only to those parts of the system that have lost their permeability: therefore, we must not focus exclusively on the presence or absence of correct or incorrect forms but rather on their persistence.

This is what makes them stable and recurrent allowing them to be considered IL rules; but, since they are the result of consolidated infiltrations, they are considered as fossilizations. According to Adjemian, fossilization and backsliding are other exclusive features of IL which differentiate it from natural languages. Fossilization of a component or subcomponent of an IL can be the result of one of these three processes (1976: 97-99):

- the generalization of an element of the L2 with respect to the L2 itself;
- a loan from the L1 in the IL;
- the correct reproduction of an element of the L2 in the IL.

Adjemian argues that while in the case of fossilization it may happen that the learner is not aware of the mistake, in the case of regression, however, the speaker should be able to formulate hypotheses on the correct rule or form.

Tarone (1982), who analyzes the IL variability from a sociolinguistic perspective, considers IL as the product of a continuum of styles that depend on the context of use. He affirms that each learner of a L2 elaborates a series of different ILs ranging from a meticulous style, in which the speaker pays particular attention to the form, to a less scrupulous one in which he focuses more on the content than on the form. Tarone believes that the more meticulous style, despite being the result of greater attention to the form, is less stable, therefore more variable, than the less scrupulous style, which is less permeable to infiltrations from the L1. Tarone defines the IL as a capability continuum and binds its development to the degree of attention that the learner is able to activate in his own productions and to the ability to effectively use the linguistic knowledge at the time of implementation: both elements are bound to the acquired competence, which is configured as the average term between linguistic knowledge and its implementation.

### *3.1 The fossilization in the interlanguage*

Selinker identifies five basic processes present in the latent psychological structure that intervenes in the construction of the IL and also introduces the notions of fossilization and backsliding or regression, defining the first as those items, rules and linguistic subsystems that the speakers of a particular L1 tend to keep in their IL in relation to a given object language (OL), regardless of the age of the student or how much training they have received in the OL (1972) and the second as the manifestation in the IL of erroneous forms of the OL that already seemed eradicated and that arise when the pupil expresses in the OL new concepts that imply a greater attention to the content than to the form or in situations where the affective filter prevents him from controlling his own productions or, to a lesser extent, in case of tiredness and / or maximum relaxation. According to Selinker (1972), the most interesting phenomena to be studied in IL as a product are the fossilizable elements with respect to the following five processes:

- 1) If they are the result of the influence of L1, we may speak of linguistic transfer;
- 2) If they are due to phenomena attributable to teaching techniques, we speak of transfer in education;
- 3) If they are connected to the pupil's ability in front of the L2 material to be learned, we talk about learning strategies;
- 4) If they are the result of the way the pupil tries to communicate with L2 native speakers, it is about communication strategies;
- 5) If they are the result of hypergeneralization of the linguistic input of the L2, we talk about learner attempts.

Selinker also reports the difficulty of irrefutably identifying which of the five processes mentioned are attributable to some interlinguistic productions, given that sometimes the latter are the result of a set of factors, and also the difficulty in predicting what the fossilizable elements will be. Subsequently, Selinker and Lamendella (1978) consider fossilization as the cessation of learning before the L2 rules are assimilated and that it can manifest itself at all linguistic levels and in all areas of speech, despite the motivation and the possibility of exposing oneself to the L2.

Nakuma (1998) summarizes the four main hypotheses regarding fossilization: the first is the one proposed by Weinrich which considers fossilization as a 'permanent transfer' without taking into account other possible causes; the second is the one introduced by Nemser (1971) who considers the IL as a "permanent intermediate system" and denies the possibility that an adult



learner may speak an LS in the way a native speaker does; the third comes from Hale in 1988, which considers fossilization as the ‘manifestation of a difficulty in recomposing the L2 parameters’ and, finally, the fourth is that of Selinker and Lakshamanan (1993) which is considered the result of the Multiple Effects Principle (MEP). Since we still do not know why some structures fossilize and others do not, these authors believe that fossilization is the result of a stabilization of interlinguistic forms that occurs when one or more factors of the acquisition of a L2 interact. This is what they call MEP, in which there is a weak form, where transfer is a co-factor for the determination of the multiple effect, and a strong form, where transfer is the fundamental factor in determining the multiple effect. Selinker and Lakshamanan go as far as saying that when MEP is active, it is not possible to de-fossilize fossilized structures through language acquisition strategies.

Not everyone agrees with this point of view and they prefer to share with Durão the belief that, at least in the case of related languages, ‘fossilization can be undone’ given that (2007: 55):

el mantenimiento de ciertos errores puede estar más relacionado con factores personales que con una incapacidad para interiorizar datos lingüísticos correctamente [...] y entendemos que si la motivación lleva a los aprendientes a aprender una LE jugando, por tanto, un papel activo, procesando, generando hipótesis, comprobándolas y refinándolas, son los propios aprendientes quienes determinarán el nivel lingüístico que su interlengua va a alcanzar y no, meramente, las circunstancias de aprendizaje.

As Nakuma (1998) argues and as Durão points out, since there is no agreement between scholars or empirical evidence that the principles of Universal Grammar are totally or partially available or whether they are at all. Nakuma argues that one of the causes of fossilization could be the learner’s deliberate decision not to learn some forms of L2 being confident in having already mastered them. In other words, fossilization would be the result of the learner’s perception that a form of L2 has an exact correspondent in L1: according to the principle of the economy of language, the learner avoids learning a structure that he considers useless. This theory attributes the cause of the fossilization entirely to the transfer and states that, until the student becomes aware of his erroneous perception, any attempt to correct the fossilization will be useless. Nakuma adds that, since fossilization depends on transfer of L1 or other known languages, it is also necessary to take into account the possibility of positive fossilization, in other words what occurs when the perception of correspondence between L1 or others known languages and L2 is correct. The same author claims that ‘negative fossils’ are usually combined with other errors that help identify them. Therefore, they should not be considered “permanent errors” but rather unacknowledged forms of L2 and, from here, we may start demonstrating the false perceptions that generated them. Durão (2007) concludes by saying that fossilization consists in the presence of a characteristic feature of a precise stage of language learning in another but also in the weakening of the development of the IL in a certain stage of language learning, which can be modified and associates the phenomenon with various factors, among which: the need to compose sentences with elements that are not yet fully mastered; the insufficient amount of input received, the lack of opportunities to practice L2 and the excessive generosity of some L2 native interlocutors who, upon understanding the statements produced by the learners, do not give a significant feedback from the learning point of view.

#### *4. The Contrastive Analysis*

The first researches on L2 teaching / learning were based on the Contrastive Analysis of languages, which assumed that the learner’s mistakes in a foreign language were due to the

differences between the mother language and the foreign one and to the transfer of L1 in the use of L2. The mother and second language systems were investigated and compared in their lexical, morphological, syntactic and phonological structures to highlight the student's potential errors and to individuate the possible obstacle (with the pedagogical intention of helping to overcome the habits related to the mother language).

The study of the linguistic behavior of the learners showed the extreme weakness of the line of studies focused on Contrastive Analysis in fact, there were errors in contexts of identity or similarity between the two linguistic systems. It became evident that other factors played a decisive role. In fact, the behaviorist model ignored the creative aspect of language, focusing almost exclusively on context influence. A huge part of this research has been interested in spontaneous L2 acquisition, which, due to the high exposure to foreign language and low impact of control activities typical of school settings, is more suitable for the study of the mental mechanisms involved.

Comparison is a universal cognitive strategy. In the spontaneous L2 acquisition context, the speakers lean towards the observation of the new language but, at the same time, they experience contrasting procedures, particularly productive in case of marked analogies between L1 and L2. When the perception of distance between L1 and L2 is minimal, the learning process develops in a peculiar way, with a high initial ease of understanding but with a strong tendency towards contamination phenomena (particularly evident in natural contexts). In the following phases, there is a tendency towards distancing, characteristic of guided learning.

In summary, the teaching of L2 cannot refuse the contrast, which is particularly recommended when the distance is reduced and perceived. Of course, talking about contrastivity does not mean returning to the old hypotheses of the Contrastive Analysis but adopting a more dynamic approach characterized by an explicit contrastive reflection. Among the main implications of contrast, we can highlight:

- identification of the psycholinguistic aspects related to language acquisition by teachers for the students, they must be aware of the typological relationship between L1 and L2 and the repercussions on the pupil's behavior while facing the new language;
- linguistic comparison between the systems concerned as provided by the traditional Contrastive Analysis but extended to the phonetic, morphosyntactic and lexical aspects and to the pragmatic and cultural ones.
- explicit contrastive reflection, according to the current pedagogical orientation that supports the development of adequate metalinguistic knowledge, that is, an understanding of system functioning. Once it is ascertained that the student spontaneously tends to compare L2 with L1, it is advisable to strengthen the comparison strategies.

The first two aspects refer to the didactic program and partially coincide with the traditional Contrastive Analysis, but only according to a cognitive approach and not to a conductive one.

Concerning the explicit reflection (rejected by the structuralism) we can add that activities of this type can occupy a space that varies according to the curriculum design chosen. For example, the reflection will be dominant in the case of university students of language and minimum in the case of children and adults with a poor cultural preparation. But none of this should be missing, considering that often the request for explanations comes from students in the first place. The previous reflections on the learning process also suggest the opportunity to adapt the teaching methodology to the characteristics of the different levels of competence:

- in the initial stages, the ease in understanding helps a rapid immersion in L2 but it is better to pay attention especially to the pronunciation, so that no transfer is established;
- further on, the student will need many reinforcement exercises to overcome the difficulties and achieve a satisfactory and productive ability;
- finally, when the competence is already consolidated, it is advisable to use techniques that enhance the learner's motivation and active participation, also in the treatment of contrasting difficulties, which can be addressed through specific tasks.

The Contrastive Analysis of different languages had to underline both similarities and differences in behavior, which represent an obstacle to language learning. This contrasting phase, with a clear behavioral matrix, insisted on the difference between L2 and L1 structures with the pedagogical intention of helping to overcome the habits related to the mother tongue. It is undeniable that, among Italians who learn Spanish, students at a higher level represent a minority, for the hierarchical position of this language among the L2 studied and the high possibilities of exploiting basic knowledge. In addition, data on the more advanced stages are seldom because the interest of researchers is concentrated in the early stages.

##### *5. The role of L1 in language learning*

The syntactic and lexical differences between languages represent the theoretical and methodological space in which the learning of L2 is inserted. The variation between languages can be reduced to a set of fundamental and universal principles and categories on which the knowledge of L1 and L2 are respectively constituted (Baldi 2019). The notion of parameter allows to clarify the relationship between Universal Grammar, L1 and L2: the parameters are different ways of lexicalizing, in different languages. As White (2003) notes, the theory of the Universal Grammar (UG) and of the parameter setting is not a true theory of the transition towards the acquisition of L2; the transition brings into play the ability to recognize and modify a parameter or the filtering effect that the grammar of L1 can have on L2 by inhibiting or facilitating the perception and recognition of the properties of L2.

The learning process is the transition from an initial state, in which knowledge of the L1 / L2 specification is absent, to that in which a certain degree of knowledge is reached. Regarding L1, the end point of the process is the steady state, substantially similar for all children exposed to the same language. For L2, the steady state varies from speaker to speaker according to the different factors that interact with learning, both in the case of speakers of the same L1 and of speakers with different L1 (White 2003: 241).

According to Berwick and Chomsky (2011: 37) it is the processes of externalization, that is the morphological and phonological means which convert syntactic objects into entities accessible to the sensorimotor system, to create linguistic differences. The parameters, in essence, are not other than the result of the outsourcing of the syntactic combinations by the lexical elements both of content and grammar.

If the variation between languages depends on the way the lexicon of a language cuts out the conceptual and phonetic space available for the language, we can ask ourselves if the acquisition of L2 is sensitive to the differences between L1 and L2. Here the question arises about how much the knowledge of L1 can influence, favoring or damaging, the structures of L2 (Cook 2008). The transfer theory (Selinker and Gass 1983) starts from the observation that the learner of L2 can be based on the properties of the lexical elements of L1 and on the structural organization in the L2 acquisition process. In this context, it is assumed that the linguistic habits associated

with L1 interfere with the learning of L2 and are therefore responsible for the quality of the productions in L2. Of course, we can expect the learner to use his linguistic knowledge in the L2 development process, as Cook recalls (2008: 13):

The first language helps learners when it has elements in common with the second language and hinders them when they differ. Spanish speakers may leave out the subject of the sentence when speaking English, saying 'Is raining' rather than 'It is raining', while French speakers do not. The explanation is that subjects may be omitted in Spanish, but they may not be left out in French. [...] Various aspects of L2 learning need to be investigated before it can be decided how and when the first language is involved in the learning of the second. Though transfer from the first language indeed turns out to be important, often in unexpected ways, its role needs to be established through properly balanced research rather than the first language taking the blame for everything that goes wrong in learning a second.

However, L1 is not the crucial factor; next to it there is the language faculty that returns to operate and, more generally, the individual's conceptual abilities. Giving an excessive weight to L1 is the result of structural methods based on Contrastive Analysis, inspired by methods and techniques for segmentation and classification of linguistic expressions which refers to the structuralist approach (Weinreich 1953, Lado 1957). The basic traits of structuralism, in turn, reflect and implement behaviorist approaches. The comparison between units and constructions of L1 and L2 brings into play, in fact, an essentially conventionalist consideration of linguistic devices, characterized by the correspondence to a particular labeling of objects and events in the conditions of communication. The teaching of L2 which is inspired by this method provides a gradual exposure of the structures of L2 that differ from those of L1. The aim is to reduce the effect that different structures between L1 and L2 could have on the learning process, blocking or damaging the structures of L2 (negative transfer). It is unclear why having a morpho-syntactic rule or property phonological in L1 should block or damage the learning of L2, since such properties simply would not have positive evidence in L2. They may, however, appear in L2 in form of imperfections or deviations from the norm (Baldi and Savoia 2018).

As already seen, Selinker (1972) calls interlanguages the intermediate stages reached in the learning process with respect to the object language. In Corder's terms (1981: 90), the interlanguages tend to arrange themselves along an evolutionary axis that aligns systems of increasing complexity, dynamically oriented towards L2. In this vision, the interlanguages are not only the result of wrong acquisitions, that is, acquisitions only partially corresponding to L2 or totally inadequate which are temporary but internally incomplete. The observation that learning, in the same way as in the acquisition of L1, provides regularity in the order of acquisition of grammatical morphemes (Brown 1973, Dulay and Burt 1974) and, in general, in the development sequences of constructs, such as interrogation and denial agrees with the hypothesis that intermediate systems are not only the result of imitation and are structured on the basis of principles.

According to this approach, error analysis plays an important role, in particular because it contributes to highlight the types of errors that do not depend on transfer nor from an inadequate application of the properties of L2 (Eubank 1991). In the process of teaching and learning of L2, especially in the school context, the error is the "failure to achieve a didactic goal" (Cocchi et al. 1996). It corresponds, in any case, to the application of a rule or generalization not belonging to L2 or the failure or incomplete acquisition of the morpho-lexical properties of elements of a language. Language exercises, including formal ones, metalinguistic reflection and the verification tests aim to bring the learned language closer to L2, identifying the critical

stages of the process. The error typology clearly recalls that found in the acquisition process of L1, with the difference that the errors in L2 also depend on – or are mainly due to – the transfer of L1 on L2. So, it is interesting to distinguish evolutionary phenomena, similar to those that characterize the acquisition of L1, from those related to the transfer, which relate L1 rules to interlinguistic L2 rules. This is particularly important in the case of learning L2 in older children school, therefore still in the space of the critical period. If we consider learning L2 as a construction process based on principles of the faculty of language, we must ask ourselves what role the structures of L1 play on progressive learning over those of L2. It is evident that a part of the knowledge of L2 is influenced by morpho-syntactic, lexical and phonological properties of L1 (Cook 2008, Cook and Newson 2007, White 2003). This is even more valid if we assume, as already proposed, that the variation is ruled by lexical properties of the elements.

### *5.1 The Universal Grammar and L2 learning*

The issue of the access to the Universal Grammar in the acquisition process of a L2 is complicated. Indeed, following Chomsky (1986, 2002, 2005) we can consider the UG as the set of principles that is imposed on the primary data to which the child is exposed in the L1 acquisition process. It follows that the language faculty can be conceived as a state of mind / brain of the child from which it begins the acquisition, that is the training of knowledge of the particular language. The initial state therefore contains the general elementary properties of natural languages, the format of language possible. We will call this set of properties, principles and instructions, UG. The acquisition determines the development of subsequent states that implement parametric choices and a lexicon, until reaching adult linguistic knowledge, that is the complete set of instructions relating to the structures and lexical properties of a language, the particular internal language. Internal language represents the stable state, which coincides with the initial state fixed on a certain lexicon and on certain principles and structural properties (Cook and Newson 2007: 50). Stable state is achieved through a series of possible intermediate states that emerge, as is known, in the acquisition process of the child.

For L2, therefore, access to the initial state of L1 is no longer possible, given that the speaker has already set the UG properties on its language. Consequently, the development of L2 starts from the stable state of L1 and the instructions contained therein to obtain some knowledge in L2. The speaker consequently develops a language or handles UG instructions from the stable state of L1 or based only on L1. We will therefore have the following possibilities (Cook and Newson 2007: 232):

- the L2 learner has no UG;
- the L2 learner can access to a second copy of the Official Journal;
- the L2 learner can resort to UG as it is incorporated in the stable state of L1;
- the L2 learner can partially use UG.

The first hypothesis excludes the use of the UG, now incorporated in L1. It will be the properties of L1, together with cognitive and learning strategies, that will bring the speaker to master L2. There are elements in favor of this conclusion, including the following: knowledge of L2 never reaches a level equal to the native one; some languages are easier to be learned from others depending on the L1; L2 is subject to fossilization rather than progress to full native language level; learning L2 gives much more variable results if compared to the learning of L1. On the other hand, it is difficult to understand how learning of L2 can be accomplished without any

element of language faculty. The second hypothesis, Full Access Hypothesis can be linked to the often observed fact that the development of L2 is in many cases independent from L1 properties of the learner, as shown for example by the learning order of grammatical morphemes (Dulay and Burt 1973) up to the basic properties of grammars shared by speakers of different L1. Cook (1988), based on White (1986) and other experiences, he concludes that L1 significantly influences the learning of L2; however, access to the UG must remain open for the setting of the rules that differ from the mother tongue. The ability to leverage the UG would be demonstrated from the poverty of the topic stimulus: the acquisition of L1 in fact implies knowledge linguistics that the child cannot derive from the superficial properties of the sentences to which the child is exposed. This fact constitutes one of the fundamental proofs in favor of the existence of the language faculty as a genetically determined mental capacity. Similar phenomena also distinguish the learning of L2: to a learner of L2 some properties are known which may not have been acquired by the environment. The idea is that this knowledge comes, as in the case of the acquisition of L1, from general properties of the language faculty. All this leads Cook to rule out the possibility of “wild grammars”, that is arbitrary and random constructions, and to conclude that access to the UG is still available. In fact, the very notion of UG and of language faculty has changed compared to first formulations of the Chomskyan framework. If we assume that the UG is nothing but the initial state that will be changed by exposure to L1, we will necessarily have to predict a certain degree of transfer of L1 on L2, a phenomena observed in literature (Baldi and Savoia 2018). This leads to a less radical and more convincing hypothesis, according to which access to the UG would be mediated by the stable state (Schwarz and Sprous 1996).

The last hypothesis, according to which the L2 learner can partially use the UG, corresponds to the idea that once the stable state of L1 has been reached, the speaker can access the UG only partially, thus leading to the disposal of simplified or reduced structures, those which would precisely emerge in many initial states of L2. Examples are provided by the speakers who acquire Italian L2 by reducing the agreement morphology of the verb or noun. In general, it would be the functional morphology of a language that underwent the greatest limitations, as indeed happens in many language disorders.

We must consider that the learner builds language structures on the basis of principles of the faculty of language and, at the same time, taking into account the parameterization set in L1, which must be continuously related to the input in L2. In one of his latest articles Krashen (2020) emphasizes the importance of the quality of the input, which does not necessarily have to be captivating itself, since it is up to the teacher to make it so through teaching action. The motivation is provided by materials and not by the learner, since the learning based on the ‘need’ runs out rather quickly.

The learning process therefore involves intermediate stages, characterized by a more basic organization, which may tend to get closer and closer to the target language or to consolidate and fossilize. In this case, the learner, both in spontaneous and guided contexts, will tend to reproduce phonological and morphosyntactic fossilized solutions different from both L1 and L2. The construction of the various stages of these different language states is ruled by cognitive components internal to language, together with extralinguistic factors, related to communication needs. This is the base in which the communication methods operate and, in particular, on those oriented on the needs of the learner and his motivation. For the approaches of cognitivist type, executions diverging from L2 are not considered negatively as failure in learning, therefore unlike the assessment associated with the behavioral approaches, but as the manifestation of the elaboration phase grammar by the learner, useful for grading teaching (Baldi and Savoia 2018: 72).

The teaching of L2 that starts from this assumption uses teaching methods aimed to create linguistic contexts that are as rich as possible, capable of providing input linguistics sufficient to power the devices of the language faculty. Development of the internalized knowledge of L2, or of the specific linguistic competence, is the purpose of the acquisition process. In this context, the grammatical correctness of the sentence is seen as a secondary issue, insofar as it is not related to specialized levels of cognitive organization. Given these premises, correctness will be the result of an integrated process that combines different and appropriate communication contexts, diversified linguistic inputs, and any metalinguistic reflection components through dictations and written tests.

Returning to the frequently asked question: is learning nearby languages easier? We can say that the common belonging of L1 and L2 to a linguistic type (morphological or syntactic) obviously favors the learning of some grammatical categories. Italian and Spanish both derive from Latin and this justifies the significant amount of common novel lexicon. This implies that the two languages not only share similar ways of constructing words and sentences or expressing the same grammatical categories, but also a very similar if not identical lexical “material”. Once established what we mean by neighboring languages, we can therefore observe that the Hispanophone speakers are facilitated in learning in the sense that, in relation to speakers with other L1, they may start from a more advanced level. The Spanish speakers skip, so to speak, the phase of the prebasic variety and is placed between the basic and the postbasic by virtue of the possibility of establishing strong links between his source language and the one they want to learn (Schmid 1994).

## 6. Conclusion

Despite of the lack of specific experimental data, it is clear that the peculiarity of learning an L2 not far from L1 can be summarized in the following aspects:

- the availability of an initial knowledge platform;
- the use of some particularly productive learning strategies, based on the comparison between L1 and L2;
- the variation of the perception of distance, which determines oscillations between approach and departure;
- the rapid evolution of the interlanguage in the initial phase, with a subsequent tendency to stagnation and fossilization.

Considering that, it is necessary to adopt an appropriate pedagogical approach to take advantage of the closeness benefits and to control the negative aspects, at the same time. Contrastivity, in its distinct modalities, is one of the most advisable teaching strategies. In addition, there is a need to increase researches in the field of guided language learning, so that the teaching methodology can adapt more and more to the type of learner, according to the relationship of proximity between the languages involved.

The Contrastive Analysis for teaching (based on the systematic comparison between the L1 and the L2) tries to identify the areas of greatest difficulty. It plays an irreplaceable function and it should consider all the linguistic aspects, from phonetics to morphosyntax, vocabulary and speech. This goal is still far from being achieved in the case of Italian and Spanish, the aspects that still need to be clarified are substantial, even putting together the partial works available. There is a need for a cumulative work able to examine the teaching / learning process in an effective way.

The Contrastive Analysis reacquires strength in a glottodidactic perspective, it is useful not only for a purely predictive purpose as it was in the past and excluding the use of the L1 from didactics is not sufficient to prevent possible transfer. The learners must have the possibility to access their linguistic heritage activating the comparison. The transfer phenomena appears no more as a passive process for the learner but as an active process, or rather as a cognitive and communicative strategy. However, caution is necessary in strengthening the spontaneous strategies of active transfer, since they promote the hybridization and fossilization phenomena, especially when the interlinguistic similarity is more pronounced.

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