

## The Importance of the Transfer in Italian-Spanish Learning

*Deborah Cappelli*

Università degli Studi di Firenze (<[deborah.cappelli@unifi.it](mailto:deborah.cappelli@unifi.it)>)

*Abstract:*

This article analyzes the differences and similarities between Italian and Spanish and attempts to identify the most problematic areas. The mistakes appear where they are not expected and it is interesting to investigate the reasons for this. Most of these errors are due to the transfer phenomena which interest all levels of analysis, from lexicon to morphosyntax passing through phonology but in different ways. The continuity does not necessarily facilitate learning, particularly when many elements intervene such as the context, the type of learning and the learner's motivation. The linguistic transfer is a transfer of the habits that have been consolidated in their native language in the L2, it is also one of the most active mechanisms in the learning of a similar language. Contrastive Analysis is useful, not for a purely predictive purpose as it was in the past, because excluding the use of the L1 from didactics is not sufficient to prevent possible interference. The learner must have the possibility to access their linguistic heritage and activate the comparison. The transfer appears no more as a passive process over the learner but as an active process, or rather as a cognitive and communicative strategy.

Keywords: *Contrastive Analysis, Interlanguage, Mother Language and Second Language, Transfer*

It is known that Italian and Spanish are two very similar linguistic systems and this is a dangerous affinity. The apparent simplicity is the biggest difficulty that can be found in the learning of these languages. Furthermore, these languages are the ones that are the easiest easy to learn wrongly meaning that it is common for learners to have errors; moreover, they are the most difficult to master competently. Italian and Spanish seem reciprocally understandable, as the structure of their words are similar and sometimes almost equal, or identical. The perception of closeness can sometimes be a source

of mistakes that are caused by the transposition of sounds, forms and structures belonging to Spanish and Italian. These are the effects of the linguistic transfer, which consists of the linguistic transfer of the habits that have been consolidated in their native language in the L2, which can sometimes promote the learning of the Second Language, but more frequently disturb it. Generally, the interference tends to occur when the learner recognizes some similarity between the L1 and the L2 and thus formulates assumptions about the function of the L2 that are based on this similarity.

This article analyzes the differences and similarities between the two languages, identifying the most problematic areas and attempts to understand the causes. Most errors are produced in phonetics, syntax, and lexicon, while morphology tends to be spared. Some phenomena arouse curiosity because they are produced in seemingly harmless areas of the L2, where the correspondence with the L1 is almost perfect. The importance of the type of learning chosen is emphasized, in the case of spontaneous learning as it is more likely to rely on their knowledge than if a guided learning production is more controlled. It is important to highlight the error from the beginning to reflect the learner who will tend to choose words that are more distant from Italian. Equally fundamental are the motivation and social context of the learner, linked to communicative functions, which can favour or hold back the learning. The transfer is seen as an active process, in particular as a cognitive-type strategy, when the L1 is used not only as a source of hypothesis on the L2, but also as a communicative type.

### *1. The concept of Transfer*

The transfer is one of the most relevant issues in the debate on learning and studying and specifically where similar languages are concerned. Kellerman and Sharwood-Smith (1986) propose a broader definition of transfer than the traditional one: Cross linguistic influence or rather “interlingual influence”.

The first definitions of the concept are related to Structuralism and Contrastive Analysis (CA) which believed that the mother language (ML) influenced the learning of a second language (SL). The Behaviorists thought that every learning was conditioned by the previous ones meaning that the learner tends to transfer in the new language the structures of their native language (Lado 1957).

With the development of the innatistic theories; instead, the CA is attacked and consequently the theory of the transfer is discredited (James 1980). For many years this thought was neglected and continues to consider transfer as an inconsistent concept. It was easy to attack considering that the CA had focused on interference as a linguistic product and it wanted to find out where the negative action would have occurred, even though it admitted the existence of a positive transfer. The novelty that in the Eighties puts

everything at risk is the change of perspective: it began to be considered as a “process”, or as a set of strategies for learning and production.

The transfer is not a transfer of linguistic habits, as it was in the past, but a group of cognitive mechanisms that intervene in each aspect of language: pronunciation, morphosyntax, vocabulary, etc. On the basis of this, the CA should be able to understand that interlinguistic contrasts can potentially create more barriers than remove them (Odlin 1989: 30). There is a fundamental need to highlight that it is not true; indeed, the differences are more problematic than the similarities are. This 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. This aspect is very important given that there is usually only the opportunity to study Spanish after having already learned other languages, such as English and French.

The acquisition sequences are one of the most accredited criticisms of the transfer; it would be the same in the L1 as in the L2. Zobl (1980) believes that the L1 can probably inhibit as well as accelerate the passage, since interlinguistic convergence promotes the development of Interlanguage while differences would delay it, facilitating the fossilization. Trying to identify the linguistic characteristics of the L1 that create difficulties in the L2, together with the concept of “markedness” is fundamental, and understood in terms of complexity, low frequency, low productivity, less semantic transparency, or the estrangement from the basic structures of a language. Eckaman (1977) affirms that there are some predictable aspects; for example, the more marked the differences are linguistically between the L2 and the L1 the greater the difficulties may be. Instead, when the linguistic aspects of the L2 are different from the L1, but not noticeably; nonetheless there are fewer complexities. These could be valid and diverging explanations for many learning issues and for the mistakes that are made by learner's, however, there are some other doubts that need to be clarified such as the possibility to transfer marked structures where the concept of transferability can facilitate learning.

The perceived distance is understood as the hypothesis formulated concerning the typological proximity between the L1 and the L2, which is experienced by learners, and it is one of the main mechanisms that activates the transfer even if the typological similarities do not guarantee the positive transfer. In order to predict the hypothetical effects of 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.

The transferability, within certain limits, is determined by the L1 independently of the L2, but some structures are so specific to the L1 that these

may be neutral, therefore transferable. 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. The hypothesis of closeness allows native Italian speakers to transfer into Spanish even the most marked forms, so theoretically these are not loanwords. These processes are not constant in the course of learning; they evolve concurrently with numerous factors, such as the level of the learner's performance and their metalinguistic awareness. Kellerman (1983) maintains that 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 would subsequently tend to be more cautious. However, 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 Italian-speaking language 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 distance themselves from the problematic L2 and try to avoid the transfer, but the habit to resort to it will return, also for marked structures. The tendency to mix the two languages is quite common even at the most advanced levels (Bizzoni and De Fina 1992).

Recently, Selinker and Lakshmanan (1992) have shown that the transfer is one of the main causes of fossilization. This is also based on the reality of similar languages learners: often, the rapid initial progress is followed by fossilization and, unfortunately, the negative effects of the transfer are extremely difficult to eradicate. Considering the similarities between the two languages, the fossilization of interference does not inhibit communication decisively and the learner prefers to remain at the level attained.

In sum, in the specific case of learning similar languages it is necessary to underline the importance of the initial knowledge, the resources and of the use of different learning strategies based on the comparison between the L1 and L2. Furthermore, the variability of the distance perception determines oscillations between the moving towards and away from the language, as well as the rapid evolution during the first phases which is followed by a consequent tendency of braking.

## *2. Italian-Spanish: language comparison*

The language habits associated with the L1 interfere with the learning of the L2 and they are therefore considered responsible for the quality of the production of the L2. Such use of behaviors already learned in the past are automatic and subconscious and 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; hence, the executions are correct because it is only necessary to transfer the known behavior to the new situation. Instead, the negative transference gives rise to improper executions, because the behavior to which the learner is accustomed differs from that which is to be acquired. Of course, there are incorrect executions not deriving from the language habits of the L1 and therefore not treatable in terms of transference (Baldi and Savoia 2018).

The relationship between the transfer and the other processes involved in the acquisition of the L2 has only been clarified partially. In fact, there are also present different mechanisms and the individual variations make any prediction uncertain. In didactics, it is necessary to take into account the most conspicuous manifestations and the most elusive effects, namely the avoidance or the overproduction of certain structures. Thanks to the discoveries made by the sociolinguists and the cognitive sciences, the transfer no longer appears only as a passive phenomenon, undergone by the learner, but also as an active process, otherwise as a cognitive-type strategy, when the L1 is used as a source of hypothesis on the L2, or as a communicative type (Santos Gargallo 1993: 147).

The 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 find any particular difficulties, but the phonetic differences can cause persistent interferences that clearly identify the learner's ML. While in French the phenomenon of nasalization multiplies the number of vocalic sounds as there are 16 phonemes, while Italian presents has seven and Spanish has only five phonemes. Given that the distinctive opposition between the two degrees of openness of /e/ and /o/, present in the Tuscan variant of Italian, has little functional performance and tends to disappear in the standard language, it could be argued that on a phonological level the vocalic systems of the two Languages coincides. However, not all pronunciation difficulties depend on the L1; among the new sounds for the learner, some of these are more difficult than others. Spanish does not contain many phonemes that do not exist in Italian, but phonetically there are numerous new concepts, and they are often sounds that are unknown in the main European languages, as they are not present; although the Italian native speaker as a learner could know these, as they exist in Italian. As in the case of fricatives variants of the voiced phonemes /b d g/ and the distinction between open and closed variants of /e/ and /o/ exists in both Spanish and Italian, but with different distributions. Other obstacles come from the different correspondence between pronunciation and spelling, as well as the specific interference of the

Italian regional variants, an element that has to be into account considering the peculiar Italian linguistic configuration (Barone 1993: 79).

The consonant sounds are a similar, but more articulated and there is a substantial affinity on a phonological level, among the few phonemes excluded from the Spanish there are the unvoiced fricative /x/ and the unvoiced interdental /θ/, and the numerous phonetic contrasts that create persistent interferences at a productive level as well as the acquisitive difficulties. Conversely to the vocalic system, the French consonants show less novelty than the Spanish ones, among the major difficulties that could be encountered with the phoneme voiced fricative alveopalatal /ʒ/, which exists in the Tuscan Italian. Hence, it can be deduced that if for an Italian the Spanish appears less distant than the French, it is due to the absence of “abnormal” vocalic phonemes, such as the anterior labial vowels, the nasal vowels, the indistinct vowels, which instead exist in French (Mazzotta 1984: 174). Thanks to this affinity, many Spanish words are recognizable to an Italian and the distance perceived at this level of contact is minimal, the L2 appears like a subsystem of the L1 rather than an autonomous system.

With regard to morphosyntax, it is more difficult to distinguish the transfer effects to those related to learning in general, the studies which tried to deny the evidence of the transfer concentrated on this subject. Some scholars believe that the transfer of inflectional morphemes, such as prefixes, suffix, etc., from the L1 to L2, are rare and irrelevant (Klein 1986: 27) while others affirm that the pronounced formal similarities make it possible (Odlin 1989: 85). The word order is very flexible in both languages, the similarities between their negative and interrogative constructions should allow a positive transfer, contrary to other areas of the syntax where the Italians experience difficulties due to specific constructions of Spanish, as the auxiliary forms and the verbal periphrases are complex. Influences from other second languages may also be detected, and from this perspective, Spanish offers native Italian speakers’ numerous advantages from the initial contact, considering that the word order in the sentences is similar, 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 graphical signs of the question. It is rare that with a few elements learned the learner is able to construct a certain number of sentences, in any learning situation and with any method of study, it does not occur with any other language. However, this initial confidence is followed by a phase of discouragement in which progress is slower and interference is fossilized. The frustration depends not only on the deceptive affinity, but largely derives from the comparison with the structural difficulties of the Spanish, 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 by divergences.

The student's mind, which is now discouraged by the differences, it is vital to consider the influences that other languages, which are previously learned, can have on the learner. A significant example concerns the system of denial, which has a great parallelism between Italian and Spanish, and many differences between these two languages and French or English. In addition to the type of prevailing negation (Neg. + verb), Italian and Spanish share an intermediate position between the so-called *negation perméable* and the *negation imperméable*, for example the phrase *No ha venido nadie* and *Nadie ha Venido* in Italian becomes *non è venuto nessuno* and *Nessuno è venuto*. Positive transfer is expected from Italian to Spanish, but many students often have the conviction that "two dining affirm", tend to suppress one even in Spanish, pronouncing sentence such as: \* *Tengo ni frío ni calor*, \* *Nadie Sabe Algo* (Calvi 1982a: 17).

As far as lexicon is concerned, the beneficial effect of interlinguistic similarities is known, but the fact that lexical relationships involve negative interference in cases where 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, can be found in some special dictionaries and also some manuals which contain a more or less full list. For the beginner students it is nice 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 learning, in some cases in fact the same word belongs to completely different contexts in the two languages so, once you pass the first approach, they are easily recognizable. However, the same cannot be said of terms which are similar also at the level of meaning because it creates a dense network of relations between the two languages that could create confusion at every level of learning, including bilingualism. These are some examples:

- Synonymousness or quasi-equivalence of signifier and meanings: the two languages share a large number of words that give the impression of an easy compression from initial contact. This favours the idea of closeness that will fail at the first production attempts. One example is the word *profesor* that for an Italian native speaker will tend to become \* professor and the word *farmacia* that is pronounced as in Italian, omitting the emphasis on the "I".
- Equivalence or strong formal similarity, with differences in meaning: which cause the first instances of disappointment in the learner because



the illusion of an easy comprehension is disproved by the facts, for example the adjective *embarazada* would be too easy to translate with the Italian *imbarazzata* (“embarrassed”) while the real meaning in Italian is “pregnant”.

- Lexematicaffinity and morphological differences: this difference relates to verbs with prefixes or suffixes. An Italian native speaker tends to transfer the suffixes when conjugating verbs in Spanish, because of the perception of affinity, in fact, it is common to add the “o” instead of “a” in the endings of the Imperfect indicative (\* *Amabo*, if not \* *amavo*, instead of *Amaba*).
- Complete divergence: In addition to the problematic cases listed above, however, there are also others that underline the actual distance between the two languages, thus allowing the learner to pay more attention. A sentence such as «*a la izquierda de la alfombra hay una butaca de terciopelo*» («to the left of the carpet there is a velvet armchair») does not allow one to imagine the meaning leaning on Italian, to be able to translate this it is necessary to know the new language (Calvi 1995: 87).

As it has already been observed, the perception of proximity and transfer condition the learning process of Spanish by Italian native speakers in each of the phases and in every linguistic sector, or more generally the acquisition of affinity languages. Therefore, the problem related to transfer are the psycholinguistic aspects of the acquisition of second languages more relevant for the teaching of Spanish to Italian speakers and Transfer means a diversified process and not only a negative mechanism that causes production errors known as interference of the LM.

Considering the ways in which the Spanish is perceived by the learners who are Italian native speakers, it emerges that the feeling of familiarity experienced initially does not remain constant over time and it does not apply equally to all aspects of the language. Proceeding in the study, the beginners abandons the initial illusion of being able to learner without any effort: the affinities have deceptive implications and the structural differences are higher than expected. The sense of distance strengthens, but the diversification are often subtle, and hidden by the similarity.

### 3. *Types of learning*

The type of learning chosen represents a decisive element, in case of spontaneous learning, there is more of an inclination to confide in one’s knowledge and then fall into this kind of traps. Conversely, if it is a guided learning, although there is still a tendency to make these errors, the production is more controlled and highlighting errors from the initial phases pushes



the learner to the reflection and therefore he tries to be suspicious of what “it seems so easy”. The learner will end up to choose words more distant from the Italian so as to not create confusion, for example between the *Comenzar* and *Empezar* verbs (begin) the choice will fall on the second one because it is different from the Italian *Cominciare*. Obviously, not even here can be excluded influences different than those related to L1, for example the wrong use of the verb *Jugar* in the English significance of playing (to play means both playing a guitar and playing football but not in Italian).

Undoubtedly, the aspect of discourse is the most delicate in terms of contrastive analysis, considering the difficult interaction of structural and pragmatic factors. This kind of comparison is particularly useful, in fact it has been observed that the violation of certain norms during the conversation in a particular language can be more prejudicial for the communicative purposes than grammatical errors or pronunciation (Odlin 1989: 48). The obvious cultural affinities between Italy and Spain reduce the serious misunderstandings, in the majority of cases, the positive transfer of discursive strategies favors the communicative exchange. In addition to the aspects already discussed, the SL learning involves a series of pragmatic and cultural factors and the methodology adopted by the teacher is decisive because a rigidly structuralist approach delays the direct contact with the Target language. In contrast, the so-called traditional methods promote cultural aspects, even though literary ones have precedence. On the basis of communicative approaches, however, there is a more social concept of culture, which includes the pragmatic implications of linguistic acts. However, despite the emergence of these methodologies, the acquisition of adequate communicative competence is still hampered by other factors such as a proper contrastive focus on the pragmatic regularity typical, which is of the languages in question (Ciliberti 1991: 45). It could be interesting to extend the CA from the phrase to the structure of discourse and to the sociocultural levels.

The possibility that an Italian native speaker acquiring a satisfactory communicative competence in Spanish and a rather large vision of the Spanish or Hispanic-American cultural reality, depends on the type of courses, in addition to the teacher's commitment and opportunities to have contact with native speakers or to stay in the Spanish-speaking countries. In any case, the learner will store various pieces of information of a pragmatic and cultural nature and come to formulate hypotheses of confrontation between their own culture and the foreign one. Especially in the first contacts with the Spanish language/culture, the student tends to perceive and interpret the new reality based on his conceptual type (Widdowson 1983) and the feeling of closeness can be stronger at the cultural level than at the linguistic one. The Italians perceive in the Hispanic world an affinity with their own and the whole is accentuated by the ease with which they manage to communi-

cate with the natives, contrary to other countries. Once again, there is the risk that the perception of closeness, true or presumed, prevents the recognition of differences, thereby reinforcing the weight of cultural stereotypes.

The subject of the Diaphasic variants, or the adoption of styles and registers adapted to the contextual variants, are particularly difficult for an Italian native speaker, and they are rarely addressed in the didactic activities. Mastering an SL which Eugenio Coseriu (1988: 180) defines as "*Saber Expresivo*" and understood as the ability to adopt the expressive style most suited to the communicative situation, is a task that requires prolonged exposure to the language. In this case the difficulties of Spanish for an Italian native speaker are certainly not less than those in any other SL. Many researchers agree that the entire linguistic experience of learning intervenes in the formation of Interlanguage, so if the learner knows more than one language, their approach to learning a third or a fourth one can be influenced. A multilingual education facilitates the formation of linguistic-cognitive strategies enriched by the comparison between the different systems (Titone 1981: 359), but the psychological consequences of knowing many languages are not entirely clear because, in addition to the doubts about the acquisitive processes there are also the individual variants. The idea of closeness explains, at least in part, the greater or lesser transferability of the different elements of the student's linguistic heritage: the didactic experience together with some research confirm that in the Italophones Spanish the interferences of the French are greater than those of other SLs; English is less transferable and German is most definitely not (Calvi 1982a). Even at a cognitive level, nothing prevents thinking that the learner uses the both L1 and any other linguistic knowledge as a starting point in formulating assumptions about the new language.

There are many extralinguistic factors, linked to individual variations (personality, age and attitudes of the speakers) or social (interactive contexts, prestige of the different linguistic codes) as well as the context of learning, which intervene in the transfer activation (Odlin 1989). The specific case of Spanish teaching in Italy, in institutional environments, means there is some decisive constant which for learning purposes have to be emphasized, such as the choice of Spanish as a second or third language, placing it in a subordinate position in relation to other languages. The choice can be dictated by the "ease" of the language, the personal taste, the pleasantness of the sounds and the sympathy of the speakers. All this accentuates the action of the transfer, both as recognition of affinities and as a barrier of interference. Exploiting the linguistic relationship can be an "economic" learning strategy for Italian native speakers, who are satisfied with the initial results and with the level achieved without feeling the need to improve it.

The other type of learning is the spontaneous one linked to the interaction with native speakers, this offers a privileged field to study the strategies

that elaborates the person to interact with the linguistic and cultural reality in which it is immersed. In the case of similar languages, the use of the transfer of structures or lexes of the L1 in the L2 is considered a highly productive strategy from a communicative point of view: the more the learner succeeds in developing hypotheses on the L2, the faster and cheaper the learning process will be. Interlinguistic similarities help the processes of understanding messages in the L2, it will be sufficient to elaborate a simple system of rules to communicate with the native speakers. The level of performance depends on different individual and social factors, but the immersion in the reality of the foreign country can facilitate the result. The use of these strategies cannot be accepted on a didactic level considering that the exposure to the language is not sufficient and, consequently, the passage between the various stages of the Interlanguage is slower and moreover, the transfer involves the negative implication of the Interference that the teaching must undertake to restrict.

Thanks to the studies of Meo Zilio (1993a: 559), it emerges that the contact resistance follows a descending order: phonemes-*semantemi*-morphemes-syntagmas, and that the phonetics and graphics formal similarity is the most decisive criterion. The phenomena of hybridisation involve the phonetic, morphosyntactic, lexical and stylistic plan, at the same time. They are inversely proportional to the degree of awareness of the L1 and directly proportional to the pressure of the L2. On a lexical level all the different forms of contamination are recorded: loans, casts, false etymology and hybrids. In other words, in countries where immigrants are a homogeneous group tending to preserve their identity with respect to the local environment, the L1 does not undergo any significant variations, even accepting influences from the L2. If the awareness of belonging to a well-defined group is lacking, the phenomena of contamination takes field, and if the similarities between the two linguistic systems are strong, there is the risk that the speaker could mix them. It could be concluded that in the reception of Spanish linguistic-cultural reality by Italian native speakers distance and closeness are combined, generating reactions of sympathy: "the new culture is not so equal to its own to be boring, nor so distant from discourage any effort made to approach to" (Calvi, 1995: 95).

In summary, although it is impossible to draw a precise map of interlinguistic influences on discourse, it is justified to think that the transfer of discursive structures interacts with the action of other subsets, in particular with the Syntax and Semantics (Odlin 1989). In conclusion, the active use of the transfer as a communicative strategy is particularly relevant in the contexts of spontaneous acquisition. In institutionalized teaching it is necessary to control the acquisitive process in order to avoid the fossilization of interlanguages particularly contaminated by L1, but it is useful to reinforce the cognitive strategies activated by the Learner in a spontaneous way.

#### 4. *Examples of interference errors in English L2 learning in Spanish-speaking speakers*

Clearly, the first impact with the Spanish phonic chain causes an immediate sensation of familiarity, thanks to the substantial coincidence of the vocalic systems, although in theory the Italian vocalic phonemes in a tonic position are seven against the Spanish five. Consonantism is also similar, but the question appears to be a little more complex. First of all, the Spanish consonantic phonemes are less than the Italian ones (18 versus 21), there are also some phonemes that exist in Italian and not in Spanish such as the two alveolar affricates /tʃ/ and /dʒ/, and the voiced palatal affricate /dʒ/.

These gaps create numerous errors that derive from the difficulty of articulating non-existent sounds in Spanish. It is precisely in the phonetic facts that the influence of the native language is more tangible, and the phenomenon of the most widespread interference. It happens for two reasons: firstly, because the phonological aspects of two languages, even though they are different, always have areas of partial overlap in which true or presumed similarities can be apparent; secondly because, even in the case of similar languages, there will always be elements of divergence that are able to mislead the learners.

However, the negative transfer action is not limited to the different sounds between the L1 and the L2, but it often affects shared fono. The difficulty, therefore, would lie in the greater complexity of the system of affricates in Italian compared to Spanish, a complexity that generates errors of confusion before that interference, as often happens when moving from a simple system to a more articulated one. Similar errors are also found in the transcription of the phonic sequences, which often reveal a low or partial assimilation of the phonetic and graphematic system of an L2. Languages are made up of habits and rules that may constitute a hindrance where the learner extends them beyond their scope, or he applies them with the same criteria with which he would employ them in the L1.

A useful example to support this theory is that presented by Andrea De Benedetti (2006), based on his personal experience as a teacher of Italian at the University of Granada, about how to teach the language to different types of students. The data collected refer in particular to students of two faculties: Translation and interpretation and letters and philosophy. Some examples of errors made by Spanish speakers who study Italian are:

- The use of the graphic accent on paroxytons and proparoxytons: ex. *prática, linguística, philología*, etc.
- The graphic decomposition of derivatives of -che: ex. *per che, giàche, cosiche*, etc.;
- The improper use of articles and adjectives: ex. *Il specchio, un studio*, etc.;

- The graphic decomposition of some compounds: ex. *cio è, sopra tutto*, etc.;
- The omission of initial “e” before “s” (hypercorretism): ex. *scluso, sisprime, all’sterno*, etc.;
- The addition of initial “h” or at the body of word: ex. *igiene, hipotesi, technologie* (in this case there is maybe an interference of another L2, probably the French), etc.;
- The realization of impossible phonetic sequences in Italian: ex. *accantto, vincci, calzzone*, etc.;
- The reduction of infrequent consonant links such as -ct, -pt, -nst, -nm, -mn, -ns: ex. *prodocto, roptura, istituto, alumni, messaggi, immaturo*, etc.;
- The disortography in the transcription of geminate consonants: ex. *necessarie, imagine, ufici, professori, problemma, datto*, etc.;
- The disortography in the transcription of vowels, most of which seem to be more related to reasons of lexical and phonetic interference: ex. *maraviglioso, patientia, migliore, popularità, enviado, riconoscere, circolare*, etc. (De Benedetti 2006: 210).

If the learning of the sound of an L2 is significantly affected by the assimilated and consolidated habits in one’s native language, the morphology seems to be an area less subject to transfer episodes, and not only between distant languages. Morphology is the identity of a language and therefore represents the area in which the distance between two languages is most felt, especially among those that in all other respects are quite similar. Some examples related to the transfer are:

- The dissolution of articulated prepositions: ex. *a la, in la, su la*, etc.
- The failure to appear the suffix -isc in the third conjugation verbs: ex. *si proibisce, quando finisce la lezione?*, etc.;
- The use of the ending in -a for the first person of the imperfect: ex. *io andava, io dormiva*, etc.;
- The use of the thematic vowel “a” instead of “e” for the future and the conditional simple in the first conjugation verbs: ex. *comincerò, amarò, comincerai*, etc.;
- The use of the verb *piacere* in the first person of the conditional simple and composed: ex. *mi piacerei andare al cinema, mi sarei piaciuto mangiare un gelato*, etc.;
- The use of the auxiliary *avere* in compound times: ex. *ho andato, si hanno approfittato*, etc.;
- The use of the perfect simple *essere* for the verb *andare*: ex. *l’anno scorso fu in vacanza in Italia*;

- The plural declination of the indeterminate *un/una*: ex. *avrei bisogno di uni consigli*, etc.;
- The use of *suo* in place of *loro* as possessive of third person plural: ex. *Marco e Lidia sono venuti con i suoi figli*;
- The use of *ogni* and *qualche* at the plural: ex. *ogni persone, qualche volte*, etc.;
- The use of *qualcuno* as an indefinite adjective: ex. *qualcune sveglie, qualcuno computer*, etc. (De Benedetti 2006: 212).

It is interesting to dwell on some of these phenomena because some of which have also a lexical interference, such as the use of the perfect simple to be for the verb *andare*. The agreement of the verb *piacere* with the first person of the simple and composed conditional is particular relevant. It is a quite curious fact, because the Spanish equivalent *gustar* presents the same type of Italian construction, in which the logical subject (“I”) is in the dative case, while the complement plays the role of the grammatical subject. Therefore, it is a construction, which is different from that envisaged in English for the verb “to like”, in which the logical and grammatical subject coincide (1):

- (1) a. Mi piace il gelato  
 b. Me gusta el Helado  
 c. I like ice cream. (De Benedetti 2006: 212)

In Spanish, the first and third persons of the conditional are the same in all three conjugations, presenting the same ending in –ía which is applied to the verb root: therefore, the first and third persons of *gustar* are also equal, and for Hispanophones this alters the perception of their own language, persuading them that the verb *gustar* functions as to like and that its subject is actually a first person, thus, they will produce an incorrect form in Italian.

A similar phenomenon is also produced in the case of the error concerning the agreement of *ogni* and *qualche* with plural nouns. Even in this circumstance the Spanish reason according to logic and not according to grammar, combining a morphologically singular indefinite to a plural noun, and this in spite of the Spanish counterpart (*cada*) requires the agreement to the singular exactly like *ogni*. However, as it is known, the affinities between Italian and Spanish do not concern only the common romance origin, but it also belong to the same family from a typological point of view. In fact, in both languages there is the relative stability of the SVO sequence (Subject-Verb-object).

Compared to Spanish, however, Italian seems to allow greater flexibility in this scheme, especially in speech, where there are a lot of marked constructions, and where the intonation can compensate for the total or partial alteration of the order natural. In addition, the Italian has a different mobility of adverbs and focalizes. To this is the fact that the Spanish speakers

tend to place some adverbs as *già*, (*non*) *mai* and (*non*) *ancora* at the beginning or at the end of the sentence instead of between the auxiliary and the participle as in Italian.

As to the reciprocal order in the clitic clusters the reversal distribution between accusative and dative clitics shows up in Italian and Spanish should be reported: in Spanish, the reflexive pronoun precedes the indirect one, whereas in Italian the opposite happens, this may cause confusion.

In general, however, the transfer at a syntactic level is widely linked to some elements of the *consecution temporum*, certain verbal reactions, the national and/or legal restrictions imposed by certain verbs, and especially the presence or not of the article in some specific cases. Concerning the redundant use of the subject pronoun, the frequency of the phenomenon is not justified by the Italian norm, which, like Spanish, is a pro-drop language and delegates to the morphology of the verb the identification of the person. In this case it is not an interference, but an error common to all the acquisition sequences of the Italian: the subject pronoun, in fact, is present in the early stages of learning with substitute function compared to a verbal morphology still absent or imperfect.

Another remark concerns the errors in the use of the article, mistakes that do not fully belong to the syntax, but the combination of words. As Muñiz (1982) observes, article zero in Italian prefers hyper-determined expressions such as days of the week, or certain phrases such as *a casa* or *a scuola*, whose references are clearly identifiable without needing the article as an additional label of specificity. In Spanish, however, the article zero is less widespread and in Italian this determines, in most cases, an over-use of the article.

Turning to the frequently asked question: "is learning similar languages easier?" It can be said that the common belonging of L1 and L2 to a linguistic type (morphological or syntactic) certainly favours the learning of some grammatical categories. Italian and Spanish derive both from Latin and this justifies the significant amount of romance vocabulary that there is in common. This implies that the two languages do not only have a similar ways of constructing words and phrases or of expressing the same grammatical categories, but also a lexical material that is very similar if not even identical. Once established what we mean by similar languages, we can therefore observe that the Hispanic speaker is facilitated in learning because they start from a more advanced level than speakers with a different L1. The Hispanophone avoids the pre-basic variety phase and starts at the basic and the post-basic one due to the possibility of establishing strong connection between the native language and the one they want to learn (Schmid 1994).

The traditional point of view born at the end of the years '50 with the work of Robert Lado (1957) is that of the Contrastive Analysis. According to him, it was possible to predict the difficulties of learning by comparing the grammars of the L1 and the L2 and identifying the critical areas, those



in which the differences were more considerable. This hypothesis did not hold because where there were difficulties anticipated in the learning in reality these were not always present. The problem of the L1 role in learning is, in fact, much more complex than the Contrastive Analysis affirms and it includes factors of psychological, social and linguistic order.

First of all, it may be argued that the basic mechanisms of the interference are presided over by a single activity that acts below the speaker awareness, which Weinreich (1974) defines as the ability of the bilingual individual to establish interlinguistic identifications. This capability allows the boundaries of languages to be bypassed and for connections between them to be established on the basis of perceived affinities between forms and contents. This is possible because it is possible to identify the two meanings of the words in English and in Italian, thus uniting the two forms. It is equally possible that the identification also occurs on the basis of the form. Considering that when discussing languages, when a new one is learned, there is an attempt to hark back to the previous linguistic knowledge, searching to find similarities in the lexicon or in the grammar. This activity of identification pushes towards a unification of the linguistic systems or towards a reduction of the cognitive load, as Weinreich (1974) would argue. An opposing view of the cause of interference, leads one to think of another one that is completely different and maintains that the two linguistic systems should be kept separate.

The mechanisms that descend from this identification activity and which can be attributed to the recognition of a congruence between the L1 and the L2 (L1 = L2) are the ones which mean there may be more or less regular correspondence between the L1 and the L2 (L1 → L2) (Schmid 1994).

According to the first process, the congruence one, the speaker would perceive the L2 structures as similar to those of its own language, with the consequence of transferring elements of this one in the L2. There may be some real Spanish-language pieces used as if they were Italians in the form as in the case of identification /v/ with [β] in “laβorare” at the place of *lavorare*; and in the meaning, as in the case of preposition “a” that transfers the Spanish function on the basis of the form.

The mechanism of correspondence tries to economize the cost of learning by constructing some rules of correspondence, that allow for the translation translate, or rather the transformation of Spanish constructions into Italian. This mechanism is particularly used in the case of neighbouring systems as in situations of geographical contiguity between one dialect and another one. Weinreich (1974: 5) affirms that there is one in particular, which is frequently present among genetically linked systems, which could enunciate with an automatic conversion formula and as long as these conversions are regular, they diminish the distance between the various dialects and simplify the problem of bilingualism, but if they are irregular they can be misleading.

The main difference between the two mechanisms is that in the congruence the speaker interprets the L2 as if it were the L1, thus cancelling the differences between the two languages, while in the case of correspondence the L2 is understood as distinct from the L1 and is then connected with the last one through matching rules. The effects that congruence and correspondence processes cause in the language that undergoes them are mainly of three types: the loss of traits without substitution, the introduction of new traits in the grammar of the L2 and the substitution of pieces of the L2 because of interference (Thomason 2001).

Being mostly homogeneous languages, it is not easy to find the traits radically unknown to the two languages or able to produce striking deviations following the contact. It is more probable that when considering the historical and typological contiguity between the two systems, the three effects are established as a kind of continuum, and as three similar and not distinctly separate categories.

In summary, it has been observed that among Spanish-speaking students who are studying Italian there is transfer that is a clear and indisputable phenomenon, which manifests itself in a more evident way in the errors of interference. Most of these are produced in phonetics, syntax and lexicon, while the morphology is generally spared, because it is the principal depository of the distinctive characters of a language. For this reason, the morphological errors are due to factors related to the Interlanguage and to the acquisition sequences.

Moreover, some phenomenons are interesting because they are produced in seemingly innocuous areas of the L2, where the correspondence with the L1 is almost perfect. This calls into question the perception that the Hispanophones have of their own language: an often erroneous perception and "logically" acceptable, as in the case of the agreement of the verb *piacere* with the first person of the conditional.

The case of over-use of the determiner article, extended even where in Italian we use the article-zero, or for words hyper-determined as the days of the week. It would seem to reveal a discrepancy not only linguistically but, in a certain sense, a semantic-anthropological one between Italian and Spanish, which manifests itself in the form of errors that are not always predictable or easy to explain.

### 5. Conclusion

From what has been said it can be deduced that transfer is one of the most active mechanisms in the learning of a similar language. The perception of little distance between the two idioms facilitates the transfer of lexemes and structures from the L1 to the L2. The Contrastive Analysis reacquires strength in a glottodidactic perspective but this does not mean restoring the

CA as it was in the fifties, or for a purely predictive purpose. Excluding the use of the L1 from didactics is not sufficient to prevent possible interference. The learner must have the possibility to access their linguistic heritage and activate the comparison, but we need caution in strengthening the spontaneous strategies of active transfer, because they favour the hybridization and fossilization phenomenon, especially when the interlinguistic similarity is more pronounced. The transfer appears no more as a passive process over the learner but as an active process, or rather as a cognitive and communicative strategy.

It is opportune to adopt a contrastive approach as support in learning, given that only an appropriate metalinguistic reflection helps to exploit the positive aspects of the transfer and allows us to limit its negative effects, namely the interferences. The Contrastive Analysis for teaching is based on the systematic comparison between the L1 and the L2 and it 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 to vocabulary and speech. This goal is still far from being achieved in the case of Italian and Spanish, even putting together the partial works available, the aspects that still need to be clarified are substantial. There is a need for an ensemble work able to examine the teaching/learning process in an effective way.

Trying to answer the question if there are constraints to the interference of one language on another, it may be argued that the interference manifests itself at all levels of the language (phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics). It acts according to a research process of similar aspects that is divided into the two congruency mechanisms (L1 = L2) and correspondence (L1 → L2). Furthermore, the interference can have three major types of effects on the language that undergoes the interference: the loss, introduction and substitution of linguistic traits.

In conclusion, it is believed that the social context in which immigrants find themselves is the first cause to determine the intensity and vastness of the interference process between two languages. It is vital not to forget that the central role is always played by the speakers, by what they want and what they can do in their social environment. The Hispanophones will reach a level of Italian knowledge more quickly that satisfies the communicative functions necessary using the similarity between the two languages, as a learning resource. However, their comprehensibility and their communicative fluidity act as a limitation in the learning of a less Hispanic variety, closer to Italian. Obviously, this interrupts the braking action, because there are no more the sociolinguistic conditions that created that variety of Hispanic Italian.

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