Chapter 2

Different Types of Cross-linguistic Similarities

Similarity, Contrast and Zero Relations

Similarity is basic, difference secondary. The search for similarities is an essential process in learning. The natural procedure in learning something new is to establish a relation between a new proposition or task and what already exists in the mind. Chronologically, perception of similarity, something positive, comes first, differences, something negative, come into the picture only if similarities cannot be established. Noordman-Vonk (1979: 51): also has a relevant comment: ‘When subjects have to judge whether a certain relation between concepts exists, they first try to find positive evidence for that relation. If this cannot be found, they will try to find evidence that falsifies the relation’. Semantic similarity is thus judged at an earlier stage of the process than semantic difference. Schachter (1983: 102) agrees: ‘Normal adults ... tend to look for verification of their hypotheses, not disconfirmation’. We do not establish negative relations until we are sure a positive relation does not exist. However, in order to establish meaningful differences there must be an underlying similarity. As Corder (1973: 234) says, ‘In order to compare anything the dimensions or categories used must be applicable to both objects’. James (1980: 169) makes the same point: ‘It is only against a background of sameness that differences are significant’. Making use of perceived cross-linguistic as well as intralinguistic similarities facilitates the learning task.

As in all semantic matters, there is no sharp borderline between difference and similarity. They are in different positions on a continuum, where we can discern three cross-linguistic similarity relations: (1) a similarity relation, (2) a contrast relation, and (3) a zero relation.

The similarity relation means that an item or pattern in the TL is perceived as formally and/or functionally similar to a form or pattern in L1 or some other language known to the learner. A natural tendency in learners, especially at early stages of learning, is trying to establish a one-to-one relationship with a unit in another language, usually the L1. ‘Word usage in a second language was shown to be strongly influenced by a
The semantic equivalence hypothesis which presumes that conceptual patterns and linguistic coding practices in the L1 provide the essential criteria for those in the L2 (Ijaz, 1986: 448; see also, for example, Biskup, 1992; Hasselgren, 1994). Across related languages there will be cognates similar in both form and meaning. Full-scale cross-linguistic similarity of both form and function is, however, rare, except for very closely related languages such as Swedish and Norwegian, which in principle are mutually comprehensible. If there is grammatical congruence, this means fewer problems for the learner. An English learner will find that the noun morphology of Swedish works in much the same way as in his L1: there are only two cases, nominative and genitive. Establishing cross-linguistic similarity relations is particularly relevant for the comprehension of a new language. When both formal and functional similarities can be established, this makes for positive transfer.

Germanic and Romance languages do not generally stand in either a similarity or a zero relation to each other: they tend to have contrast relations. In a contrast relation (cf. James, 1998: 179) the learner perceives a TL item or pattern as in important ways differing from an L1 form or pattern, though there is also an underlying similarity between them. The English learner who is used to a specific third-person ending of the present tense of verbs will notice that German has a host of other personal endings for the verb as well. This means that there are problems for the learner in producing correct verb forms, but the learner is basically aware of the existence of a system and does not have to expend great effort on learning to understand the functions of endings. Native speakers of English learning a Germanic or Romance target language will encounter both similarities and differences in varying proportions. In other words, there is both positive and negative transfer, but only negative transfer is immediately visible to the researcher. Exactly how differences relate to underlying similarities and to what extent their effect is facilitative or inhibitive is a complex question that needs to be worked out for each individual language relation. As Dusko (1984: 113) says, factors other than merely linguistic ones are also relevant here.

The zero relation does not mean that the learner finds nothing at all that is relevant to L1 as the learning progresses. There are, after all, some linguistic universals common to all languages. But the level of abstraction in these universals is so high that an average language learner cannot easily notice features that a totally different TL has in common with L1. The zero relation merely means that items and patterns in the TL at early stages of learning appear to have little or no perceptible relation to the L1 or any other language the learner knows. The learner’s L1 may lack the concepts necessary to perceive fundamental distinctions in the TL. For one thing, it
takes time to understand the details of a totally different TL writing system. The learner starts learning from a platform considerably lower than the starting point for a learner who can relate at least some basic features to elements in L1. A learner who knows only Indo-European languages and starts learning Chinese will find it difficult to relate anything to his previous linguistic knowledge. The zero, or near-zero, relation of Chinese to English poses great difficulties at the early stages of learning. As Singley and Anderson say (1989: 114), ‘the worst possible transfer situation is when there is no overlap between two sets of productions, in which case transfer is zero, not negative.’ The learner has to spend considerable time figuring out how the new language really works. The magnitude of the learning task ‘largely corresponds to the formal linguistic relatedness of the languages in question to the mother tongue’ (Corder, 1979: 28). A non-Indo-European language, even if it is using the Roman alphabet, also poses initial problems, as clear similarities are not very easy to notice. Even if a closer inspection may reveal a few parallels (such as the existence of loanwords), lexical similarities tend to refer to low-frequency words not encountered at early stages of learning. Where structural similarities can be found across wholly unrelated languages, they normally need to be pointed out to the learner in an explicit way.

**Perceived and ‘Objective’ Similarity**

Kellerman stated in his seminal 1977 paper that cross-linguistic similarity relates to what the learner perceives to be similar between the target language and another language, usually the L1. It is not the same as ‘objective’ similarity. Two attempts to define objective cross-linguistic similarity theoretically are Ard & Homburg (1983: 165ff.), where parameters of form and meaning are set out, and Ellegård, 1978. The criteria used for this have varied, and none of the suggested definitions has made a visible impact on SLA research. Still, it might be possible to arrive at a generally accepted procedure to measure language similarity. If such objective cross-linguistic similarity could be established, it would be symmetrical. Perceived similarity, on the other hand, is not necessarily symmetrical, i.e. going both ways, and in this respect it behaves like the related concept of intelligibility. Speakers of language X may find it easier to understand language Y than speakers of language Y to understand language X. Perceived similarity is a fuzzy concept, which may be elucidated if the various ways and the various circumstances in which it is manifested are studied. It is broader in scope and has more variation compared with the similarity analysed by the linguist. It is also more difficult to grasp, as it brings in the dimension of
individual learner variation. The term psychotypology has been applied to the perception of proximity/distance between languages, but there are certainly problems when it comes ‘to make precise what the criteria are for determining similarity or equivalence’ (Eckman, 2004: 517).

It is obvious that a target language related to L1 is perceived to be at least in some respects similar, while an unrelated language provides little concrete material for tentative cross-linguistic identification. Hall & Ecke (2005) studied the attitudes of multilingual learners who knew English and Spanish and were studying German and French. More than 80% judged English to be easier for a Spanish speaker and more than 90% thought German was easier to learn than Spanish for an English speaker. Genetic relatedness overlaps with perceived similarity, though in principle the two concepts should be distinguished. It is possible to perceive at least some similarities also across wholly unrelated languages, and all aspects of a related target language can hardly be perceived to be similar. From a purely practical point of view, however, similar means much the same as related.

**Formal and Functional/Semantic Similarity**

Cross-linguistic similarity is most obviously perceived on the basis of formally similar or identical individual items or words. The similarities may also be functional or semantic, in grammatical categories and semantic units, where no formal similarity is at hand. Grammatical similarities occur even across wholly unrelated languages. This was pointed out by Seppänen (1998), who listed seven grammatical correspondences between Finnish and English (basic word order, system of tenses, grammatical gender, possessive pronouns, marking of the genitive, the singular/plural contrast and the structure many/moni + noun). Several of these parallels occur also between Finnish and other Germanic languages. Seppänen’s paper is written from a linguist’s perspective, and we may assume that Finnish learners of English as well as English learners of Finnish would need proper guidance in order to make efficient use of these correspondences. Later in this book (pp. 79f. and Appendix 2), I show that structural similarities between Finnish and Swahili facilitated at least one learner’s task.

In grammar, functional cross-linguistic similarity is what matters. How easily the learner can establish working one-to-one correspondences between grammatical elements largely depends on the degree of congruence, the similarity of the functions of grammatical categories (see below, pp. 68ff.). To establish such functional similarities, consciously or not, is essential, and an understanding of basic linguistic structures in the TL is a
prerequisite for understanding and learning lexical items. Learners of closely related languages already have at least most of this basic understanding built in, while learners of wholly different languages have to put in considerable effort to acquire knowledge of what the different structures entail. In lexis, formal similarity to an existing L1 word is perceived first, in that getting the word form precedes getting the word meaning. If formal similarity can be established, it provides the basis for a subsequent assumption of an associated translation equivalence (cf. Zimmermann, 1987). Formal correspondences arouse hopes of semantic or functional equivalence. Such hopes are often fulfilled in related languages, where formal cross-linguistic similarity normally goes together with some semantic similarity, though not always semantic identity. After meeting a word that is formally and semantically similar to the L1 word, the learner does not need to expend much effort on storing it in his mental lexicon. What is needed is merely a mental note ‘this word in a similar form works in L2, too’. See further the section on cognates below.

Notes

1. Ard and Homburg’s (1983) treatment of differences in test-taking results between Spanish and Arabic learners of English in the US is narrowly focused on the linguistic differences between Spanish- and Arabic-speaking university students, without consideration of the highly relevant factor of cultural and educational differences between the two groups. Their mapping of the lexical similarities between English and Spanish is, however, valuable.