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## LANGUAGE TRANSFER, COGNATES AND PRODUCTIVE DERIVATIONAL KNOWLEDGE OF SERBIAN EFL LEARNERS

The paper reports the results of a study which investigated whether receptive/productive knowledge of Serbian-English cognates in Serbian has any effect on Serbian L1 learners' productive knowledge of English derivational morphology by correlating Serbian L1 learners' knowledge of lexemes in English which have cognates in Serbian with learners' knowledge of lexemes in English which have no cognates in Serbian by means of a derivative word forms test. They support the claim that learners might not be making the most of their L1 knowledge when acquiring L2, and that instruction in cognate vocabulary is needed to facilitate this process.

**Key words:** language transfer, cognates, productive derivational knowledge

### ***Introduction***

#### ***1.1. Language transfer***

Learning another language can, like learning something new in general, be facilitated by prior knowledge of L1, especially if L2 is closely related to L1 (Ausubel, 1968; Neuner, 1992). As Ringbom (2007: 1) points out “presence or absence of cross-linguistic similarities accounts for the differences in effort and time existing between learning a language close to the L1 and learning a totally unrelated language”. The use of cross-linguistic similarities, that is, *transfer*, has mostly been discussed in SLA literature in relation to *Error Analysis* which focused on deviant forms of the target language, and not on the possible facilitative effect of L1 knowledge in the process of L2 acquisition. Furthermore, language transfer has long been a controversial issue among linguists and language teachers alike, on whose nature and significance no consensus has been reached so far (Odlin, 1989). A distinction is usually made between *negative* and

*positive transfer - negative transfer* or *interference* implies divergences from the norm in the target language, while *positive transfer* denotes “the facilitating influence of cognate vocabulary or any other similarities between the native and target languages” (Odlin, 1989: 26).

Morphological transfer is as likely as any other kind of transfer, and the existence of general lexical similarities between two languages will doubtless determine how much transfer of bound morphemes (prefixes and suffixes) will occur (Ibid.). Serbian and English have similar rules for combining morphemes – they are linked linearly (e.g. un + forget + ful + ness/ne + zaborav + nost) so transfer of bound morphemes can be expected as a result of their contact (Craighead and Nemeroff, 2002). In addition to this, Serbian has borrowed a number of words from English and other languages, and according to Mochizuki and Aizawa (2000) knowledge of loan words is one part of learners’ L1 competence which can be transferred to L2.

## 1.2. Cognates

Cognates can be defined as “historically related, formally similar words, whose meanings may be identical, similar, partly different, or, occasionally, even wholly different” (Ringbom, 2007: 73). Scientific and technical terminology in Western and many other languages presents a case of internationalisms whose meaning is transparent, which, in turn, makes these cognates easy to learn as their Latin or Greek origin is generally preserved in their form.

While cognates can, undoubtedly, facilitate L2 comprehension (Nagy et al., 1992; Carroll, 1992; Ringbom, 2007), where the use of context clues is particularly important for drawing inferences, they can also lead to inappropriate use in language production since frequency and stylistic registers of L2 words may differ from the corresponding L1 words.

Researchers now agree that cognates can aid learning but without proper instruction in terms of the recognition and the formation of cognates, learners may not take advantage of their L1 knowledge. Most notably, this applies to the acquisition of more distantly related languages, as is the case with English and Serbian, because learners as a rule do not expect to come across formal similarities between such languages and these can further be obscured by the differences in scripts or phonological systems.

Foreign suffixes in Serbian mainly stem from Latin and Greek, as well as French, English, German, Italian and many other modern languages; they are mostly attached to bases of foreign origin, that is, the borrowing of foreign suffixes includes the borrowing of foreign phonology and morphology too (Klajn, 2003). As Laufer (1990) points out, the

relative ease of learning a new word in L2 stems not only from its identity or close similarity to L1 in form and meaning, but also from similarity in derivation of the words in two languages. The question which imposes itself is whether in the case of cognates, all of these similarities automatically facilitate the production of derivatives for Serbian EFL learners.

### 1.3. Productive derivational knowledge

Morphological transfer from L1 to L2 is not only restricted to free morphemes, it may include bound morphemes as well, as has already been pointed out. Adjemian (1983) considers learners' hypotheses about L2 lexical rules and word formation processes to be constrained by L1 rules and processes. Moreover, Laufer-Dvorkin (1991) provides a detailed exploration of the causative link between shape similarity and lexical errors EFL learners are prone to make in lexical production and comprehension (imaginative/imaginary, industrial/industrious, credulous/credible, etc.), yet little is known whether such similarity between forms in English and Serbian (*organization - organizacija, abnormal - abnormalan*) can foster the acquisition of L2 vocabulary items and improve productive knowledge of morphological derivatives in Serbian EFL learners. Bauer and Nation (1993) have suggested that in a graded syllabus designed to facilitate acquisition of English derivational morphology, the order in which particular affixes are covered should be determined by the amount of learning effort required, which itself is a function of affix productivity, frequency, regularity and predictability. Since their framework does not factor in the existence of cognate suffixes (e.g. *nervous-nervozan, glamorous-glamurozan; patriotism-patriotizam, terrorism-terorizam; immunity-imunitet, sterility-sterilitet; racist-rasist, violinist-violinist; modernize-modernizovati, symbolize-simbolizovati*) I devised an instrument to test the possible facilitative effect of cognates and cognate suffixes on the productive derivational knowledge of Serbian EFL learners. The aim of the study was to reveal whether using knowledge of derivational suffixes which appear in nativized loanwords in Serbian can facilitate the derivational word formation process in English, that is, whether students can make use of obvious cognate relationships. Additionally, the results should determine if cognate recognition is an issue which deserves to be brought to learners' attention more explicitly, possibly leading to improvement in instructional practices regarding derivational morphology in English since Dimitrijević and Danilović (forthcoming) maintain that its mastery can be a problematic issue for Serbian EFL learners.

## **Methodology**

### **2.1. Participants**

The participants in the study were 74 native speakers of Serbian who had just enrolled in the first year of English Language and Literature program at the Faculty of Philology and Arts in Kragujevac, Serbia. Intentionally, the research instrument was administered before word formation in English was covered in any of the courses the respondents were taking; they were informed that the instrument they were asked to complete would not earn them any credits and that it would be used for research purposes only. Their level of proficiency was determined as B2 (CEFR).

### **2.2. Research instrument**

The research instrument tested learners' knowledge of six cognates and six non-cognates employing the same suffixes (-ous, -ise, -ation, -ism, -ist, -ity), which also occur in Serbian as the aforementioned examples show, in 60 contextualized sentences (five derivatives per each suffix) with blanks which were to be filled with appropriate derivatives. The prompt words, that is, the bases of the targeted derivatives, were provided in brackets, as was the word class of the target derivatives. The non-cognates were collected from various word formation sections of FCE (B2 CEFR) textbooks, as these were deemed a reliable source of words which might be found in learners' repertoire, while cognates were selected from Klajn (2003), the Dictionary of the Serbian language (Vujanić et al., 2007) and Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (1996).

### **2.3. Procedure and scoring**

Participants' responses were marked with 1 for correct derivative forms and 0 for incorrect ones and non-responses. Bearing in mind that participants had not had instructions on graphemic alterations caused by word formation processes, misspellings were not discounted (e.g. \**nerveous* or \**symbolize*); neither were inappropriately used inflected verb forms (e.g. *minimize* instead of *minimized*) as the focus of the study was not on inflectional forms.

## **Results and discussion**

The results (Table 1) show that the scores for the targeted cognate and non-cognate derivatives varied very slightly. The best known in the

cognates category were the derivatives with *-ise*, and the least known were those with *-ist*. Interestingly, among the non-cognates, the best known derivatives were those with *-ist*, while the least known were the ones with *-ism*. Cognate derivatives were not better known than non-cognate derivatives in all cases, as the data for *-ist* and *-ity* indicate, which could be interpreted as an argument in favor of the claim that L2 learners do not always take advantage of their L1 knowledge.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics results

Suffix	Minimum		Maximum		Mean		Standard deviation	
	C	NON	C	NON	C	NON	C	NON
<i>-ous</i>	2	1	5	5	4.73	4.26	.53	.94
<i>-ise</i>	3	3	5	5	4.86	4.69	.42	.49
<i>-ation</i>	4	3	5	5	4.70	4.77	.46	.48
<i>-ism</i>	0	0	5	5	4.78	2.41	.76	.86
<i>-ist</i>	2	3	5	5	4.01	4.86	.39	.38
<i>-ity</i>	1	3	5	5	4.22	4.77	.98	.45

C = cognates, NON = non-cognates

Further, to explore whether there is any connection between participants' knowledge of the targeted cognate and non-cognate derivatives employing the same suffix, correlation coefficients (Pearson's *r*) were calculated; these revealed a positive correlation for the suffixes *-ous* (Table 2) and *-ise* (Table 3). Since the mean value for *-ous* is 4.73 (C) and 4.26 (NON), it seems plausible that knowledge of this suffix in Serbian facilitates its use in English; the same goes for *-ise* (4.86 vs. 4.69) even though the difference in means is less striking here.

Table 2. Correlation between cognate and non-cognate derivatives employing *-ous*

		<i>-ous</i> (NON)	<i>-ous</i> (C)
<i>-ous</i> (NON)	Pearson correlation	1.000	.416
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	74	74
<i>-ous</i> (C)	Pearson correlation	.416	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	74	74

C = cognates, NON = non-cognates

Table 3. Correlation between cognate and non-cognate derivatives employing *-ise*

		<i>-ise</i> (NON)	<i>-ise</i> (C)
<i>-ise</i> (NON)	Pearson correlation	1.000	.326
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.005
	N	74	74
<i>-ise</i> (C)	Pearson correlation	.326	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005	
	N	74	74

However, the results of the test do not give us any indication as to whether the subjects actually resorted to their L1 knowledge when deriving the targeted words, noticing the connection between the cognate roots and suffixes in Serbian and English, recognizing the cognate suffix in English of the suffix in Serbian, and using it. They could well have been relying on their overall knowledge of English and their familiarity with the targeted words, or the basic skills of word-building in English.

### Conclusion

The study underscores the view (e.g. Hancin-Bhatt and Nagy, 1993) that L2 learners may not be taking full advantage of their L1 knowledge in the process of second language acquisition. Since cognates can facilitate L2 recognition, it makes sense to hypothesize about their facilitative role in L2 production, yet further research designed specifically to show what steps learners take when faced with tests of derivational morphology (e.g. tests followed by interviews) is needed before any conclusive evidence can be reached. The results of the study (derivatives with *-ist* being at the same time the best known in the non-cognates category and the least known in the cognates category, and a statistically significant correlation between cognate and non-cognate derivatives which employ the same suffix established in only two instances), nevertheless, clearly indicate that cognate lexemes and suffixes deserve a more prominent place in the English derivational morphology curricula.

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## ЈЕЗИЧКИ ТРАНСФЕР, СРОДНЕ РЕЧИ И ПРОДУКТИВНО ЗНАЊЕ ДЕРИВАЦИЈЕ УЧЕНИКА ЕНГЛЕСКОГ ЈЕЗИКА КАО СТРАНОГ

Резиме

У раду се излажу резултати истраживања које је имало циљ да испита да ли рецептивно/продуктивно знање српско-енглеских сродних речи у српском има утицаја на продуктивно знање деривације у енглеском језику, код ученика енглеског језика као страног, поредећи њихово знање енглеских лексема које имају сродне облике у српском са знањем енглеских лексема које немају сродне облике у српском, помоћу теста деривативних облика. Резултати потврђују хипотезу да ученици не препознају све контексте у којима би познавање матерњег језика могло да олакша усвајање лексике страног језика и да је, стога, неопходно укључити сродне речи у наставу.

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