

Language Interference and Transfer: Towards an "Algerian English"?

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Introduction

In the present paper, I would like to raise a current issue which refers to the use of spoken English based on the native speaker's communicative mechanisms. As we know, language is culture-bound. Each language has its own cultural norms and its proper mechanisms. One can never communicate in a target language simply by translating from one's own native language, or simply by applying one's native language mechanisms to the language one is learning.

This is a reality which is obvious to the bulk of our students, but a considerable number of the learners fail to use the target language without copying on the pattern of their native language, especially as far as communicating orally is concerned. Our interest in exploring this field stems from the very fact that this phenomenon gives birth to serious misunderstandings

Language and Culture

Language and culture are “inseparable twins”. We all agree that this is a universal truth. But how far is this fact obvious to our students of English? Who, among us teachers of oral expression in English, has not heard, or has not corrected incoherent, and most of the time,

unintelligible sentences produced by our students who spontaneously communicate in what we commonly consider as “Algerian English.” The problem is that we cannot accept this students’ language (which is often the result of the students’ transfer of L1 to L2)

There has been a lot of literature so far in terms of “language and culture.” We learn: “language vehicles culture”, “language is the mirror of culture”, or simply “language is culture». There is no doubt that communication reflects culture just as a mirror reflects a picture. But how can we make this evidence always present in the minds of our students? How can we make them respect this code?

Language Interference and Transfer

As I have already hinted at, the problem of misunderstanding that stems from the communicative strategies used by our students of English is more widespread and complex in the oral skill. This strategy of translating (word for word) is, of course, a very easy task which almost always produces an “Algerian English”, which is, evidently, meaningful and communicative solely to the student who produces it.

A native speaker of English, for example would definitely fail to understand the message behind the following statements:

1. She brought twins. (She gave birth to twins)
2. Take off your clothes and come to the kitchen.
(Put off your school/work clothes and come to help me in the kitchen).
3. He plays with money. (He is very rich).

His culture being different, he has to be acquainted with all the dialectal expressions in use (not only the old ones, but the new ones as well), which is, of course, impossible. Naturally, this native speaker of English, or even, most of the time, any speaker of English (even a Maghrebi or an Algerian one) will not catch the message and will have to recourse to tedious guessing as a result of this ambiguous communication.

So, here we are facing a case of misunderstanding in communication which is in fact a serious obstacle to communication mainly in a cross-cultural environment. In this case two cultures would be clashing: the culture of the native speaker whose language is being used in another culture, and the culture of the non-native speaker whose efforts to communicate in a target language are usually wrongly geared. As we have just mentioned it, this phenomenon is very widespread in oral expression.

Dalila Temim sums up this strategy of transfer widely used by our students as follows:

“ Nous assistons en Algérie à la cohabitation de diverses pratiques linguistiques où s'entremêlent Français, Arabe littéraire ainsi que de nombreux parlers locaux qui ne vont pas sans avoir de considérables conséquences dans le domaine de l'enseignement, qui s'en ressent inévitablement, et en vient à accuser une réelle régression tant à l'écrit qu'à l'oral.” (D. Temim, p.210)

Referring to the students' strategy of translating from L1 to L2 when communicating in a foreign language, she convincingly states:

“ Pourvus d'une compétence rudimentaire en langue étrangère, certains apprenants ont recours à la traduction pour tenter d'exprimer leur pensée en L2. Cependant, malgré tous les efforts, leur traduction rend compte d'incohérence due justement au fait qu'ils fonctionnent à l'aide de leurs substrats linguistiques et culturels en langue maternelle, ce qui donne lieu parfois à l'émergence de transferts négatifs, à des calques, et parfois même à des stratégies d'évitement afin de contourner la difficulté...”(D. Temim, p.214)

A brief list of examples (based on the negative transfer and inappropriate use of calque) will enlighten the point made here:

1. Pass her.

فتها

2. I'm speaking, no?

رانی نهدر ألا؟

3. Change the wife.

بدل المرة

4. I work allday to earn bread.

نخدم كامل النهار بش نصور الكسرة

5. He is the son of his mother.

ولد منه

6. Give me my ring and go far.

مدلي خاتمي أوبعد

7. I want to eat from your hands.

نبغي نكل من يديك

8. Cook or stay, I'm not hungry.

طبيي ولا قعدني مرانيش جيغنة

9. I'll give you money to examine your mother.

نعطيك الدراء باش تقوت على أمك

10. His speech neither takes nor brings.

هدرته ماتدي ما تحيب

The examples above mean:

1. Ignore her.
2. Don't interrupt me while speaking.
3. Take another wife.
4. I am poor.
5. He is cunning.
6. Give me my ring back and go away. (I am breaking the engagement).
7. I like your cooking. (Your cuisine).
8. I am not expecting you (or asking you) to cook anything since I am not hungry.
9. I will give you money to take your mother to the doctor's.
10. His speech is not important.

Referring to translation as a communicative strategy (which is far from being a rewarding experience, as a result of the negative transfer and wrong use of calque), Nacéra Boubenider writes:

“Dans le cours de langue étrangère, les apprenants ont toujours et de façon involontaire, recours à la traduction dans leurs esprits, ils utilisent d'eux-mêmes, au cours de l'apprentissage, des mots nouvellement

introduits dans des relations en analogie avec la langue arabe... “(p. 222-223)

Language and Communication

Culture is transmitted through language and other means of communication i.e. non-verbal means, and behaviour in general. As we have pointed out throughout this paper, Algerian culture is transmitted through a widespread strategy used by our students, i.e. translation. This systematic translation usually leads to a deep gap between “speaking English” and “communicating in English.”. This “spontaneous translation” of course gives rise to serious problems of misunderstanding that occur even in cases when both students and teachers share the same culture.

Our students are far from being aware of the serious problems of misunderstanding that result from this « automatic » translation that gives birth to what we have already referred to as « Algerian English ». Referring to this strategy of translating from one’s mother tongue, in terms of the written form of English, our Moroccan colleague, Abdelali Bentahila, in his article :” Moroccan content, English medium : A look at some Moroccan English correspondence “, concludes :

“I think we need to make our students more aware that there is far more to successful communication than merely expressing any kind of content in any grammatically and lexically correct form.” (Abdelali Bentahila , p.65)

As we have already stressed it, the situation is worse as far as the oral form is concerned. In this case, the students translates from his own dialect, (almost word

for word), into an “Algerian English” which is neither grammatically nor semantically or syntactically correct. Not surprisingly, this « by-product » needs to be retranslated, word for word, by the interlocutor to catch the message behind this communication.

Even students who have been exposed to sociolinguistics courses fail to follow the code of addresser/ addressee, i.e. to respect the rules of what Hymes refers to as “the code of communicative conduct.” Hymes (quoted in N. Labed) speaks about four sections of the code of communicative behaviour: “possible grammatical use, feasibility, appropriateness, and accepted use.” Of course, this code of "communicative conduct" is not utterly alien to our students (especially those students who have had some sociolinguistics knowledge), but is not respected at all when communicating orally.

This is the obvious result of the impact of L1 on L2. Some examples of the transfer from L1 to L2 will enlighten the point here:

1. Tell her to sell her gold
2. She is blue in cooking
3. I will bring you one of the new
4. Money makes a road in the sea
5. You have two faces
6. Don't get tired on coffee
7. All we are ill
8. Cook or stay

Probably the best message to give to our students (who always burst out laughing when they are told that

their transfer produces incoherence, cultural misunderstanding, and even unintelligibility) is:

“Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.” (Grice: 1975 : 45. Quoted N. Labed)

Conclusion

The concluding remarks we can make from these sociolinguistic observations are that language is “culturally conditioned” and that no language is readily translatable in any other. Each language has its own passport (or identity card) which bears its own stamp: culture.

References

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