

Commentary

In 'other' words: Some thoughts on the transferability of collocations

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In discussions of cross-linguistic influence (also known as language transfer), the focus is usually on the influence of a particular structure in a particular instance of language contact, for instance, the negative transfer of serial verbs by Vietnamese learners of English: *She has managed to rise the kite fly over the tallest building* (Helms-Park, 2003). Even so, as Helms-Park acknowledges, serial verb constructions can and do surface in contact situations besides the one she studied in Canada, and they can involve speakers of different languages. While serial verb constructions have unique syntactic traits, the same point about the transferability of multiword constructions in different contact settings is applicable in other instances and with collocations that can be viewed as unique in their lexical as well as syntactic characteristics. The following article considers such a case, based in part on my own teaching experience but also on transfer research from other settings as well. After a discussion of a collocation that I call the repeated *other* pattern found in different settings, I briefly consider other cases of transfer having lexical and syntactic peculiarities and appearing in more than one contact situation. There will also be some discussion of factors that transfer researchers and language teachers would do well to consider.

Some years ago I was teaching a course on academic and professional writing for nonnative speakers of English with students from a variety of lan-

guage backgrounds. One student was a native speaker of Greek whose final paper on bilingualism included the following paragraph:

In recent studies it is mutually consent that motivation shifts students' behaviors towards the language selection and learning, attitudes towards language lessons and cognitive development. Nevertheless, researchers adopt various models in order to perceive these behaviors. Many researchers were influenced by an early study . . . [bibliographical reference; henceforth BR] which suggested that there are numerous different attitudes that influence motivation. These attitudes are categorized in two specific constructs of motivation: integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. However, over the years there has been much discussion over the validity of the distinction between an integrative and an instrumental orientation to second language learning. Researchers argue that these set orientations eschewed several important variables such as social and identity issues. Therefore some studies attempted to define the characteristics of effective language learners [BR], while others have focused on social situations that help create motivated learners (characteristics of effective language learners versus social situations that motivate).

I have edited the text a little bit (e.g., omitting the bibliographical references used by the student writer), but the paragraph is quite close to the final version handed in by the student, whose actual name will not be given here and who will be called Irene. The paragraph had undergone a number of revisions, some of which resulted from discussions that Irene and I had about her work. The final sentence in the passage is of particular interest because of the repeated *other* pattern which had occurred in an earlier version of Irene's work: "*Therefore other [emphasis added] studies attempted to define the characteristics of effective language learners [BR], other [emphasis added] have focused on social situations that help create motivated learners [BR]."*

On my advice, Irene made the change of the first *other* to *some* and the second *other* to *others* (the conjunction *while* was likewise not used, but its absence is not germane). It should be noted that this sentence summarizes – both in the revised version and in the version with the repeated *other* pattern – a conclusion that Irene had come to regarding the different research perspectives on motivations for learning a language. The rhetorical function of this sentence will be considered in more detail further on in this article.

In our discussion of the sentence, I learned that Greek has a coordinating construction which can explain Irene's repeated uses of *other*. The Greek form (transliterated) *allos* occurs twice in many constructions where a suitable English translation would render the first as *some* and the second as *other* or *others*, depending on whether the form occurs as a pronoun (hence to be marked with plural -s) or as a determiner (with no plural marker). Although a repetition of the same form does violate the English convention, the *some . . . other* construction is com-

mon and forms part of a larger class of 'correlative' constructions that include other syntactic classes such as the correlative conjunction construction *either . . . or*.

The error that Irene produced seems clearly the result of cross-linguistic influence (also known as language transfer) from Greek. The changes needed were relatively small ones but the fact that they were needed shows that English and Greek differ somewhat in their collocational patterns (in the latter, the word *allos* 'other' can be used as Irene did, thus, *allos . . . allos*). Although her error was unique in that writing class (and indeed in my thirty-something years of teaching experience), similar transfer patterns have been noted in other contact settings. Among native speakers of Finnish there are cases such as *Weather moves quickly from the other kind to the other kind* (= 'Weather changes from one kind to another quickly,' with the collocation modeled on Finnish *toinen . . . toinen* 'other . . . other') (Ringbom 1987, p. 125). Ringbom's book often compares native speakers of Finnish and of Swedish in terms of characteristic errors, and he deems the *other* construction an error characteristic of native speakers of Finnish and not of speakers of Swedish. A quite similar example is seen in a discussion by Mesthrie (2004, p. 969) of Black South African English: *Others are for the proposal, others are against it* (= 'Some are for the proposal, others are against it'). While Mesthrie does not discuss any particular African language, Buthelezi (1995, p. 248) deems Zulu as a likely source, since it has a correlative construction *omunye . . . nomunye*, and offers both a literal gloss ('one . . . and one') and a more idiomatic translation ('the other and the other').

The repeated *other* pattern appears fairly rare if thought of in terms all the possible settings where English is in contact with another language. Even so, some speakers of Zulu, Finnish, and Greek seem to consider repeated *other* acceptable. Accordingly, it is most implausible to try to explain the pattern as a 'developmental' error, one to be expected in the attempts of any second language learner. Some errors do seem amenable to a developmental explanation, as with the widespread problems related to English *do* support evident in inaccurate verb phrases such as *didn't went* and *does thinks*, which are problems that teachers might encounter among speakers of many different language backgrounds (and as parents find among children acquiring English as their native language). Although the repeated *other* pattern occurs among speakers of more than one language background, its occurrence in the cases cited above can be linked to a very similar pattern in the native language of individuals using English as a second language. Accordingly, cross-linguistic influence seems the best explanation for its appearance even in very different language contact situations.

The repeated *other* pattern is not unique among transfer errors. A somewhat similar case is the use of *what* instead of *that* in certain relative clause constructions, for example *But same lady what he [Chaplin] meet come to policecar*

too (Odlin & Jarvis, 2004, p. 136), which was written by a native speaker of Finnish describing part of a Charlie Chaplin movie. Such errors are also found among native speakers of Polish; moreover, such uses of *what* as a relative pronoun occur in some nonstandard varieties of native speaker English such as Cockney. Despite the apparent interpretive problem (i.e., whether or not to ascribe the use of relative *what* to transfer from Finnish and Polish), there are good reasons to favor a transfer explanation, as considered in a recent analysis (Odlin, 2009). For example, the relative *what* pattern occurs only among some groups, as likewise seen in the repeated *other* pattern. Among speakers of Swedish, such uses of *what* are rare or nonexistent. Accordingly, it does not seem plausible to assign examples such as *The lady what he meet* to the category of developmental errors, as was done with many patterns a generation ago (e.g., Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982). Moreover, the existence of structures in Finnish and Polish parallel with an English one supports an analysis of relative *what* as a result of transfer.

The occurrence of the repeated *other* pattern is a little different from the relative *what* pattern in that it is a correlative construction, but just as significant as its formal pattern is its functional profile. That is, the repeated *other* pattern seems to have a special rhetorical use to compare individuals or points of view. Thus in Irene's paper, a contrast of perspective is foregrounded in the research topics compared (language learners versus social situations that motivate learners). Without the appropriate discourse context, Irene would probably not have tried to use the repeated *other* pattern. In the sense that her rhetorical aim was essentially the same as that of anyone who would use *some . . . other* in the same context, Irene experienced positive transfer from Greek: Only in the lexical difference of the actual collocation is there any negative transfer. The examples from Finland and South Africa likewise seem to involve contrasts (states of weather in the Finnish example, and people for or against a proposal in the South African).

The examples of the repeated *other* pattern and the relative *what* pattern strongly suggest that any case of lexical or grammatical transfer should be analyzed as a result of communicative needs in which particular kinds of meanings have priority. Formal details such as the nature of a correlative structure do matter, but such structures are at the service of meaning. The main pedagogical implication of this conclusion is that teachers of writing or speaking should do their best to ascertain just what a student believes a particular structure communicates and to encourage a revision which remains faithful to the communicative intention even while adjusting certain details of word choice. Such a pedagogical approach is nothing new: Experienced teachers will often have a good intuitive sense of the priority. Even so, it can help to be aware that some communicative intentions seem to be very similar even in geographically and culturally different areas such as those considered in this analysis.

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