

# The interdependencies of bilingual behaviour. Psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic profile of Hungarian-Romanian bilinguals

Erika-Mária Tódor\*

*Faculty of Economic and Human Sciences, Sapientia University, Piața Libertății 1, 530104 Miercurea Ciuc, Romania*

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## Abstract

This paper presents the specific features of a school population in Romania for whom Romanian is a non-native language, their mother tongue being Hungarian. The first part of the study offers a description of the main characteristics of the verbal behaviour of this bilingual population. The first subheading will discuss, on the one hand, the linguistic profile of the subjects (linguistic interference, linguistic pseudo-creativity etc.) and, on the other hand, it will present the main aspects of the socio-affective dimension of verbal behaviour (such as communicational anguish, displacement of communicational intention, linguistic code switching etc.). Practically, these features can be followed in the case of other bi(multi)lingual speakers as well. The second part of the paper presents certain lexical and semantic interference and vocabulary activating habits in the case of bilingual persons, relating them to the linguistic context and the linguistic landscape.

The formulated data and observations represent a synthesis of empirical research carried out between 2000–2013 through different methods, such as: observation, case studies (within the context of the data referring to the profile of language behaviour), structured interviews and questionnaires (employed in the study of the linguistic landscape). The main aim of this study is to offer a socio- and psycholinguistic profile of Hungarian-Romanian bilingualism set in a holistic context.

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## 1. Introduction

The present paper aims to redefine verbal behaviour taking into consideration the internal and external factors of bilingualism in a very specific context, namely the Hungarian school population in Romania. The premises upon which the present study is based give reasons to re-read and re-define the elements that build up the psycholinguistic profile of a bilingual speaker.

So far, studies (Ádám, 1993; Hazy, 1999) dealing with Hungarian and Romanian language contact, have mainly focused on the structural dimension of linguistic interaction, organization of language systems and contrastive analyses of linguistic performance and activities. Studies adopting a historical perspective (Gafton, 2001; Pál, 2014) provide etymological analyses of Hungarian borrowings in the Romanian translations of some religious texts (14<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries). However, there are only a few studies (Horváth, 2008) that focus both on the structural and non-structural factors of language interaction and which deal with the micro- and macro-social interaction of individuals. I strongly believe that bilingual language behaviour has to be described adopting a holistic perspective, by taking into consideration the relation and interdependence between structural and non-structural language factors, and by adopting both a linguistic and extra-linguistic perspective. There is a need to study how individuals EXIST and LIVE with and within their languages to obtain a more detailed and clear picture of the bilingual speaker. Linguistic interactions, interferences, language contact inherent in cross-cultural contexts can best be

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\*Email address: [todor.erika@yahoo.com](mailto:todor.erika@yahoo.com).

understood and interpreted only “in a broad psychological and socio-cultural setting” (Weinreich, 2013, p. 5.)

Moreover, language contact phenomena, which can be discussed and interpreted only within their cross-cultural context, have to be treated as *dynamic* and related to the “spirit of the era” (a term coined by Lovinescu). Zafu (2010) reflects upon some linguistic phenomena of the present time, such as the democratization of writing, the spread of electronic communication, faster writing, the use of abbreviations, fragmented reading, the omnipresence of colloquial and argotic forms, English borrowings, calques, no respect for forms, broken language and *general carelessness*. Actually, we are facing a shift from communist slogans to present day ones, and dominant socio-cultural tendencies—common in the case of both languages discussed here—highly influence the verbal behaviour of bi- or multilingual individuals regardless of the language chosen to express themselves. Thus, it can be said that the “spirit of the era” has a shaping effect not only on the individual as speaker and listener, but also on the cross-linguistic influence and interference phenomena. This means that certain types of interferences can prevail in a time period or a certain phase in the language acquisition process but they might become less important or might even disappear, while others (such as stylistic interference, or L3 interference etc.) can take their place.

The present study aims to draw attention, from a rather new perspective, on the bilingual individual under the influence of globalization and tries to offer a holistic approach regarding this specific type of bilingualism. The paper presents the general characteristics of a bi- or multilingual individual, bringing examples and illustrating some aspects from the context of Romanian-Hungarian bilingualism.

## 2. General characteristics

The meeting of different minds, the contact among several different language universes, and the dynamics of these have major effect on each language and culture in contact. A natural consequence of language contact is linguistic interference. Interference occurs when a bilingual speaker identifies a language item or structure of a secondary system with one in the primary system, transferring it and integrating it into the activated language system (Weinreich, 2013). Interference phenomena—observes Gafton (2010, p. 78)—“does not refer to linguistic or conceptual levels exclusively, but it may include even some functional rules of a language system”.

Each type of interference is determined by a number of factors such as context of language acquisition, age, previous linguistic experiences of an individual, context of language use, related cognitive experiences, language learning motivation etc. Knowledge of these types of interferences and of the ways they can appear in a speaker’s verbal behaviour can help to define and understand the state of being in a certain language mode. Thus, I believe that beyond the general characteristics of linguistic and cultural interferences, their manifestations and real-life occurrences become even more important.

## 3. Research methods of verbal behaviour

The main methods of describing cross-linguistic influences were conducting observations of *bilingual speakers* during their communication activities and examining speakers’ dual language (cultural) mode communications. When in contact with another language, the speaker gets to know the elements of a new language system together with its functions, rules and with the mentality it conveys and promotes (Gafton, 2010, p. 82). However, cross-linguistic influence and interferences are not conscious, they are rather natural tendencies to activate those language elements and structures that are at hand and easy to access with the purpose to understand the other and to make oneself understood.

In what follows the study will focus on the two languages mentioned previously (a native and a non-native<sup>1</sup> language) and it will refer only briefly to the fact that the subjects examined study other foreign

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<sup>1</sup>By the term *non-native language* I wish to express the status of the language and by it I understand a language acquired after the mother-tongue being more or less present in the socio-cultural context where the individual lives (as is a state language).

languages at the same time. The major *aim* of the paper is to create a list of those *linguistic patterns* that occur in the speech of the research sample and that may certainly reoccur in the communication of other bilinguals as well.

According to previous socio-linguistic research done in this specific bilingual context (Horváth, 2008), we can distinguish among the following types of bilingualism: a) symmetrical bilingualism, b) asymmetrical bilingualism, and c) subtractive bilingualism. These forms of bilingualism constitute the starting point for further observations and discussions. The data presented in the paper were selected from several empirical studies carried out earlier (between 2000 and 2013) using different research methods such as observation, case study (data regarding verbal behaviour), structured interviews and questionnaires (regarding linguistic landscape).

#### 4. Speech and interference

By the term interference I understand the *negative transfer* of fixed language structures usually from a base language (native language) occurring as a tendency to identify and integrate a fixed linguistic element into another language system. In the case of Hungarian-Romanian bilingualism we face the contact of two very different language structures, namely an agglutinative language and an analytic language. Interference appears on all language levels, in other words its presence can be traced on a phonetic, morphological, syntactic, lexical, semantic, and even on a stylistic level and results in a wide range of cross-linguistics errors. According to a previous study (Tódor, 2005, p. 137–148), the most frequent errors of students learning in a public school with Hungarian language of instruction were found in the following language areas: agreement, use of personal and reflexive pronouns, prepositions, pronunciation and stress, lexical and semantic mistakes.

Without aiming for a complete presentation, below I will introduce a few examples of the error types mentioned previously:

- (a) *Phonetic interference*: the pronunciation of the sounds [ǎ], [î (â)] using Hungarians sounds with a similar pronunciation [ö], [ü]; post-palatal pronunciation of the following sounds [ḳ], [g̣], [ç], [ç̣], or the pronunciation of diphthongs and triphthongs separately, etc.

However, it needs to be emphasized that in case of phonetic interference there are certain aspects, according to my observations, that can diminish if the child starts learning English at an early age. This is the case of the *e* sound, which is pronounced more open in certain words (e.g., *citește*, *ce*, etc.) by Hungarian speakers, but under the influence of the third language this phonetic interference becomes less visible. Moreover, the context of language acquisition can also bring about certain types of interferences. For example, when Romanian pronunciation is mainly learned from books there is a greater confusion between the [i], [î] sounds (e.g., *împărat/împărat*), in contrast with the situation when pronunciation is acquired through communication and listening.

- (b) *Interference in writing*: Can be traced in the case of certain letters ([c], [s], [j]), which have other phonetic correspondents in the children's native language and this might also cause confusion.
- (c) *Interference in stress*: Since stress in Hungarian always falls on the first syllable, Hungarian learners of Romanian often tend to stress the first syllable in case of Romanian words as well.
- (d) *Morphologic and syntactic interference*: This is the level of language where most interference occur, such as: missing agreement between nouns and adjectives in gender, number and case (e.g., *case mare* instead of *case mari*) or missing agreement between subject and verb (e.g., *Ea învăț* instead of *Ea învață*); inadequate use of the stressed and unstressed forms of Romanian personal and reflexive pronouns (e.g., „*El găndește*”, „*A inserat*”), mistakes in expressing action–object of action relationships (e.g., *Am dat pentru Ana*), etc. This last example can be explained by the fact that Hungarian language

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“...It is the *second language* from the perspective of the order in which the child learns the language and it is not identical with the language of instruction... or the *first language* from a socio-political point of view” (Pamfil, 2000, p. 12).

uses suffixes and postpositions, while Romanian language uses prepositions and thus the different structure of these languages may lead to such specific interferences. So, for example, if Hungarian speakers wish to express that someone is “in love with somebody”, they may say “se îndrăgostește *în cineva*” not “*de cineva*”.

Interferences in language structure represent a more persistent and predictable phenomenon, and because of this such mistakes and errors can be easily detected, prevented and even diminished.

## 5. Lexical and semantic interferences

Al. Graur considers vocabulary as “the most dynamic part of a language, as it is closely related to social development” (Graur, 1968, p. 271), and lexical semantics is “more driven by thoughts and is less constrained by formal restrictions” (Gafton, 2010, p. 81). Therefore, lexical and semantic interference has to be considered as a more complex and dynamic phenomena, because on the one hand “total” interlingual synonymy is a rare phenomenon and, on the other hand, linguistic relativity (the structure of a language affects the ways in which its respective speakers conceptualize their world) entails specific formulations and expressions. Let us look at some examples. In Hungarian (Hazy, 1999, p. 38), the starting point to name some subspecies of trees is *fruit* + the word *fa* ‘tree’, while in Romanian the name of the fruit is logically and grammatically derived from the name of the tree: *nuc-nucă, păr-pară*, and expressions like *pom de păr* or *lemn de nucă* do not exist. When looking for correspondences in the two languages, it might happen that a concept (Szilágyi, 1996)—such as the Romanian word for *white beet* ‘*sfeclă de zahăr*’ (lat. *Beta vulgaris*) and its Hungarian correspondent *cukorrépa*—appears in different genus-species relation in the two languages.

At the same time, words for kinship may represent a more limited or a more general concept in the two languages. For example, in Hungarian there are two words for the concept of brother ‘frate’: (1) *öccs* (little brother), and (2) *bátya* (big brother); and for the Romanian word *sister* ‘soră’, in Hungarian there is again a difference which marks age, *hug* (little sister), *néne* (older sister).

Hazy (1999, p. 37) distinguishes between total and partial interlingual synonymy. The first refers to situations when words of A and B language have identical semantic and morphemic structure, while having a different sound representation. For example: *udvar-curte* (courtyard), *vin-bor* (wine). Partial synonymy refers to situations when a word in language A can have another semantic field different from language B. As the above mentioned author emphasizes, for example the Hungarian word *süt* (bake, grill, fry) is not a “perfect” synonym of either words in Romanian such as *a coace* (bake), *a frige* (grill), *a prăji* (fry), instead it encompasses all the senses expressed by the Romanian words. Another example is the Hungarian verb *mérni* (measure, weigh), which denotes both *a măsura* (measure) and *a cântări* (weigh). Therefore, it might occur that a beginner speaker of Romanian might find the sentence “Te rog să măsoari fructele!” (Can you measure the fruit, please) to be correct.

Untranslatable structures, expressions or phrases represent yet another category in case of which speaker needs to look for and find the most suitable correspondents and equivalents. These structures are mainly to be found among proverbs and maxims, but are not restricted to this category, e.g., “*A tăia frunze la cîini*” (to waste time), “*Munca e blagoslovită, cu ea ții de pită*” (If you don’t work, you don’t eat).

Polysemantic words represent another category of special problems for language learners. For instance, there are words such as *a vedea* (to see), *a se uita* (to watch), or *a auzi* (to hear) and *a asculta* (to listen), *a iubi* (to love), *a-i plăcea* (to like), all having specific references in the two languages. If context is not given to grasp the actual meaning of the word, some interferences may occur like in the following examples: *eu văd televizorul* (I see the television) / *aud radioul* (I hear the radio) / *iubesc muzica populară* (I love folk music) / *cărțile care mă iubesc* (books that love me) instead of *cărțile care îmi plac* (books that I like), etc.

In this category of problematic words we can also mention lexical doublets and the proper context in which they are used. Some examples of lexical doublets are: *vreme/timp*; *nevastă/soție*; *a spune/a zice*,

etc. The adequate use of these lexical items requires a higher level of language knowledge, which already entails thinking in the respective target language (Hazy, 1999, p. 22).

Language acquisition also implies “knowing each other”, namely understanding the specific existential forms and cultural peculiarities of the Other. The partial penetration of these existential forms can lead to *cultural interferences*, which are also present within a bilingual speaker. In our specific context of Romanian-Hungarian bilingualism, we can illustrate this phenomenon by the greetings used at Easter. Hungarian speakers of Romanian usually say „Paște fericit” (Happy Easter), instead of „–Hristos a-nviat / –Adevărat a-nviat” (Christ has resurrected / Indeed, he has resurrected), due to the absence of such formulations in their own culture. Similar contexts and difficulties can appear in case of specific popular habits and traditions (singing carols, plugusorul etc.) in case of religious celebrations or rites of passage (baptism, marriage, and funeral) or in case of specific Romanian expressions such as *dor* (longing), *ie* (traditional Romanian blouse), *ispită* (temptation), etc. As Noica (1987) points out, these words “are the best in a language” because “in this sphere of the word, where communication might fail, there is still place for a more intimate understanding” (Noica, 1987, p. 208). I believe that identifying such linguistic aspects can provide substantial help in language acquisition planning.

## 6. “Words” and “non-words” – in search of the adequate word

Being productive and creating message in another language than your mother tongue represents, especially at the beginner and intermediate levels, a complex process of activating the individual’s mental lexicon (Gósy, 2005), and a process of lexical selection to express one’s intentions. The complexity of this selection process becomes evident in the approach provided by François Grosjean, according to whom “Bilinguals have two language networks which are both independent and interconnected...” (online), in the sense that during the process of word search and activation both languages are present, even if the presence of the language which is used for actual communication is more activated than the other (Grosjean, 1982).

Regarding verbalizing communicative intentions, psycholinguistic research (Levelt, 1989 *apud* Gósy, 2005) distinguish between *two main stages* in which speech is assembled for production: pre-verbal stage and articulation of the message, in other words choosing the right lexical and grammatical encoding. During processing and harmonizing the two stages some difficulties might appear in case of both native and nonnative speakers. The subjects of the present study show, at least at beginner levels, a slowdown in formulating messages (aspects presented in more detail in Tódor, 2009, p. 81), a pausing time (of thinking), some verbal tics, such as *hát* (Hungarian word for ‘well’), *deci* (‘so’), *apoi* (‘well’), etc. I believe these speech acts and verbal behaviour represent compensatory strategies and techniques to find the most appropriate word.

During speech production, we can often encounter *lexical gaps* (“non-words”), which mean that the speaker does not know the required word, or is not sure about selecting the right word. In such cases, the most frequent mechanisms and techniques to fill the lexical gaps are the following:

- (a) Linguistic pseudo-creativity or analogies which represent situations when the speaker creates new words on the basis of the language structure and rules. For example: *reproducăm* instead of ‘reproducem’ (based on the rule *lucrăm, învățăm*, etc.), *succesuri* instead of ‘succese’ (based on *lucruri, gânduri*, etc).
- (b) Adopting and integrating a word from the native language (for example: *canal* used for ‘lingură’ based on a word which sounds similarly in Hungarian: *kanál*)
- (c) Linguistic calques, loan translation or “mimetic” translation (a term used by Nicolae & Dragomirescu, 2011, p. 31). For example: *băț de pescuit* ‘undiță’, according to the Hungarian *halászbot*, *merge afară* ‘iese’, according to the Hungarian *kimegy*.

Selecting and using the right word in the right context is yet another dimension of lexical selection and access. In this case it is very important to be aware of the semantic plurality of words; otherwise speakers

might find themselves in an uneasy, controversial situation. For example: “*ne uităm* (instead of *privim*) la operă de la o distanță”, “*cerere rejectată*” (instead of *respinsă*), “*audiez* (instead of *ascult*) radioul”.

The presence of linguistic calques / loan translations in the speech of our subjects results in pleonasm. This can be explained by the fact that the Hungarian mother tongue of these subjects expresses direction and coordinates by using prefixes which through loan translations are transferred into the target language. Thus, pleonasm such as *a coborî jos*, *a merge sus*, *a intra înăuntru*, etc. are mainly the result of loan translations from the mother tongue.

## 7. Verbal behaviour

Language acquisition does not only mean the acquisition of vocabulary or the norms of language use, but it also means to adopt a culture of communication which entails knowing the other and understating the ways to express yourself in the context of otherness.

Bilingual language behaviour is affected by learning/teaching strategies, the context of acquisition and by the activated language modes, therefore identifying these influences might help to self-monitoring and self-teaching of verbal behaviour. In what follows, I am going to present some examples of such bilingual language behaviour observed and identified in earlier studies (presented in Tódor, 2005, p. 156):

- (a) *Anxiety/ communicational anguish* is the fear of talking and making mistakes. Such verbal behaviour is often due to predominantly formal language teaching and learning situations (institutionalized bilingualism), to learning strategies focusing on form rather than communication. Anxiety can be observed, on the one hand, when individuals “retreat in silence” or, on the other hand, when they express their ideas and thoughts in a schematic, reduced way. These situations show evidence of learners’ “implicit errors” (Corder, 1981), the totality of untold words and thoughts, which, from the teachers’ perspective, can represent a set of clues and resource for teaching.
- (b) *Restructuring communicative intent according to the available lexical register*:  
 “...I wanted to tell a joke, but I couldn’t have... so I gave up” (student, 10<sup>th</sup> grade, 2001);  
 “For example, when I am talking on the phone I speak worse [Romanian]... but words related to administration, I know mostly in Romanian...” (secretary, 2014).

The above mentioned situations show that only some areas of vocabulary or certain registers are mastered sufficiently and properly while other registers imply difficulty and uncertainty. These situations are characteristic to asymmetrical and institutionalized bilingualism and show that linguistic registers are only “partially” used and exercised (predominantly formal registers are used). The context of acquisition proves to be one focusing on performance rather than on competence.

- (c) *Code-switching*

In case of our subjects, code-switching represents a form of bilingual language behaviour and means the activation and insertion of a language structure (in this case, Hungarian mother tongue) different from the target language (Romanian); for instance: “Am vrut să scriu despre *naplemente* [amurg]” (I wanted to write about *sunset*).

This language phenomenon differs from language mixing (undifferentiated use of two language systems) firstly in frequency (Benő, 2008). Code-switching can appear on different language levels (affixes, lexemes, phrases, sentences, expressions etc.) and in case of language learners are mostly induced by lexical gaps or limited registers. During language instruction these code-switching phenomena could be creatively integrated and exploited as learning opportunities. Thus, it is very important that teacher training should focus on developing monitoring skills of teachers in order to be able to observe, identify and exploit such learning situations.

## 8. The double nature of cross-linguistic influence

Language contact—which represents only a part of a larger cultural contact—is not a process of uni-directional contact. Linguistic interference is the result of interdependence, of mutual influences and

its form and structure are shaped by the respective socio-economic, cultural and political context. In the course of preserving or changing cultural practices and language behaviour, the integration of such practices has a decisive role. It is crucial whether cultural and language practices are integrated or not into a coherent system of thoughts and feelings: the extent to which practice blends with other broader structural elements (Linton *apud* Weinreich, 2013, p. 7). Precisely because of this common practice and mutual influence, mentioned above, language contact elements are also present—obviously in a different measure—in the native language expressions of Hungarian speakers.

Research done in this field shows that using Romanian language in different communicational contexts (for example: different social contexts, workplace, school etc.) can lead to a significant increase of borrowed lexical items and language structures. In this case, retroactive or backward interference can be noticed on different language levels, as well as language adjustment, borrowing, lexical innovation and conveying other meaning to lexical items. Interference can be traced in accent, on the level of pronunciation (Romanian pronunciation of some Hungarian words) but it is also present on the level of topicality, grammatical structures etc. The explanation below provides a good example of backward interference: „If somebody is sympathetic to you, in Hungarian you say “I sympathize with him/her”, while in Romanian you say “I sympathize him/her”. So, if a Hungarian speaker says “I really sympathize this man” this is not a result of loan translation from Romanian into Hungarian, rather it is the result of the fact that he/she has been using Romanian language a lot...” (Szilágyi, 1996, p. 84) and that expression seems more natural for him/her.

Romanian language influence on Hungarian is more observable on the lexical level, where there are a great number of adapted and non-adapted lexical borrowings from Romanian. Some daily used Romanian borrowings are the following: *borkán*, *aragáz*, *kalorifer*, *punga*, *pix*, *abonament*, *telekománda*, *kalkulátor*, etc. These borrowings have resulted in lexical doublets and even if they have Hungarian correspondents, speakers prefer the use of borrowings in their everyday communication.

Our previous research (2012–2014), carried out in the field of linguistic landscape and language choice in case of bilinguals, prove that lexical items connected to official and administrative registers used mainly in Romanian language (such as: notification, receipt, invoice, permit, etc.) are also borrowed and used within Hungarian everyday speech. On the basis of our data we can point out that these Romanian borrowings are also used by people who do not master other registers of the Romanian language.

We give some examples below:

„Kértem egy **csertifikátot?**” / „Am cerut un **certificat?**” [I asked for a certificate]

„Kedden lesz **consiliu profesoral.**” / „Marți va fi **consiliu profesoral.**” [There is a teachers’ meeting on Tuesday]

The examples above show how the base language of the speakers is restructured due to Romanian language contact and due to some communication habits. When speakers feel uncertain about the existence of a Hungarian correspondent of a lexical item, they rather select and activate the words of their second language.

## 9. Conclusion

The present paper aimed to present several aspects of individual bilingualism and the ways of living with two languages. The presented phenomena were traced and observed in real-life practice and communication. The present study on linguistic interference focuses on the *bilingual speaker*.

I believe there was a need to present the main aspects of a bilingual individual because knowing the local characteristics might help a better and more in-depth understanding of the general phenomenon. I hope that by identifying the main elements of the bilingual individual’s (Romanian–Hungarian) profile, beyond its specific character, can help to describe and understand the profile of other bi- or multilingual individuals.

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