

The importance of contrastive analysis in foreign language learning with specific reference to Zulu-speaking learners of German

A B S T R A C T Teaching German to learners from a non-Germanic language background has its pitfalls and challenges. In the South African context, knowledge of English plays a significant part, but can also be counter-productive, especially if the lexical similarities are overemphasised and transferred into structural characteristics such as syntax. Creating an awareness of the similarities between German and Zulu specifically in the areas of noun classification and congruence, early on in the learning process should result in positive transfer of Zulu while curbing overuse of English as a crutch.

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1. Contrastive analysis and transfer

Contrastive analysis as a research method underlying and supporting the teaching and learning of foreign languages has been elevated to the position of panacea and reviled as an oversimplified solution to a complex problem in the decades since its introduction into the language teaching scene (Brown, 1994). The answer most probably lies somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. Research by Sabourin *et al.* (2006), for example, suggests that transfer from the L1 (first language) can play quite a significant role in learning the Dutch grammatical gender system. Comparing German-, French- and English-speaking learners' use of grammatical gender revealed a marked difference between those whose L1 does have a grammatical gender system and those whose L1 does not. The authors differentiate between surface transfer and deep transfer, the former being transfer between languages (here Dutch and German) having morphologically similar gender marking systems, the latter, transfer between languages (Dutch and French) that share more abstract features.

This study intends to discover what value, if any, contrastive analysis of Zulu and German may have for the Zulu-speaking learner, who is trying to work out how to master the concord and gender system of German. This will be achieved by looking at ways in which transfer of the Zulu concord and noun classification system may aid these learners. Since the noun class systems of German and Zulu are not morphologically similar, the effect of transfer is not expected to be as dramatic as it proved to be for German speakers learning Dutch as seen in Sabourin's study, but hopefully significant enough to warrant further research and implementation in the classroom and textbooks.

Complicating factors that have to be considered in the South African context are perceived similarity or dissimilarity of the L1 and the TL (target language), 'language constellation' (Sprachenkonstellation, Missler, 1999), language status of the L1, L2, L3 (Webb, 2002), metalinguistic and language awareness of the teachers and learners, competence in the LoLT (language of learning and teaching) of learners and teachers (Webb, 2002) and perceived usefulness of the TL coupled with motivation for acquiring the TL and level of competence aimed for in the TL. These issues are not mentioned in the study by Sabourin *et al*, which was conducted in a European context, where the languages under consideration were all high status national languages, but are essential to consider in the South African context. The factors that are particularly pertinent for this study are perceived language similarity or language distance, language and metalinguistic awareness, competence in LoL and level of competence aimed for in the TL.

2. Perceived language distance

Perceived distance between the L1 and the TL as a complicating factor should not be underestimated (Kellerman, quoted by Gass & Selinker, 1994:100). Missler's study (1999) on the effect of dissimilarity and similarity between L1, L2 and TL on language learning success, provides much needed insight into the South African situation and her conclusions are borne out by the preliminary results of this study, namely that the influence of L2 on the TL is stronger when L2 and L3 (here TL) are similar, but L1 is dissimilar to both L2 and L3 (TL). Add (in)competence in LoLT to that mix in South Africa, a country where languages are not only unequal in status, but also highly politicised, and the complications increase considerably.

Emphasising the similarities between German and Zulu and also creating a heightened metalinguistic awareness in the minds of the Zulu-speaking learners can make an important contribution to the success of these learners. If they are consciously made aware of the fact that their L1 has benefits for learning German that English does not have, it may well result in improved acquisition. Traoré (2004) points out the benefits of conscious perceiving (*bewusste Wahrnehmung*) in the language learning process, while De Graaff (1997) emphasises the effects of explicit instruction on second-language acquisition. Keeping these studies in mind, the following contrastive analysis of the noun classification systems of German and Zulu and the congruence that results from them, has been undertaken with a view to solving some of the problems Zulu-speaking learners of German are experiencing.

3. Noun classification in German and Zulu

German and Zulu both have a grammatical noun classification system. While German distinguishes three noun classes, Zulu is characterised by 17 classes in all (8 of which are plural

forms), that impact on the morphological structure of verbs, adjectives, personal pronouns, relative clauses, et cetera. The entire Zulu concord system manifests itself in the prefix affixed to the verb, adjective, personal pronoun, et cetera., while in German the noun classification, number and case affect the suffixes affixed to adjectives, as well as the form of the personal pronoun, relative pronoun, article and other determiners, as illustrated in the following examples:

1. Die kleinen Hunde fressen das Fleisch. (The small dogs are eating the meat.)
2. Izinja ezincane zidla inyama.
3. Ein kleiner Hund frisst das Fleisch. (A small dog is eating the meat.)
4. Inja encane idla inyama.
5. Ich sehe den kleinen Hund, der das Fleisch frisst. (I see the small dog that is eating the meat.)
6. Ngibona inja encane edla inyama.
7. Ich sehe die kleinen Hunde, die das Fleisch fressen. (I see the small dogs that are eating the meat.)
8. Ngibona izinja ezincane ezidla inyama.

The criteria for noun classification in German are mainly morphological, although semantic criteria, such as natural gender, among others, also play a part. In Zulu semantic and morphological criteria are central in noun classification, but natural gender is irrelevant. Consider the following examples:

German

- | | |
|------------------|--|
| 9. der Lehrer | the (male) teacher (Zulu: uthisha) |
| 10. die Lehrerin | the (female) teacher (Zulu: uthisha) |
| 11. das Mädchen | the girl (Zulu: intombi/intombazana) |
| 12. die Drohne | the male bee (Zulu: inyosi, no gender distinction) |

In example 9, semantic and morphological classification principles come into play.

The -er ending is typical of *der* words, as the occupation of teacher (as well as most other occupations) was originally reserved for men. The -in ending in example 10 is reserved for female living beings, while the -chen ending of example 11 and the -e morpheme of example 12 have no bearing on natural gender at all, but are purely morphological classification criteria.

Zulu

13. umuntu (class 1) a person
14. abantu (class 2) people
15. injja (class 9) dog
16. izinja (class 10) dogs

Examples 13 and 14 belong to the so-called 'human' classes, while examples 15 and 16 form part of the 'animal' classes. Natural gender does not feature in noun classification in Zulu at all, and the particular noun category is marked by prefixes instead of a definite article as in German. Even though these examples are by no means completely representative of the noun classification systems of German and Zulu, they give an indication of the types of criteria that generally govern the practice of noun classification in each language. There are more differences than similarities in the actual classification systems of the languages under consideration. However, the effect of noun classification on other grammatical phenomena in German and Zulu shows useful similarities.

Equally important for both German and Zulu is the principle of congruence, whereby the class to which each noun belongs determines how it relates to other parts of the sentence that are syntactically related to the noun. The manifestation of this principle is different and much more extensive in Zulu than in German. Transfer should be possible, especially if the learners are made aware of the similarities and the principle governing both languages under consideration. Examples 1 to 8 above could be used to explain that classifying the noun 'dog' in the 'der' class in German is just as important for the correctness of the sentence it is embedded in as the classification of 'dog' in the 'in'-class and 'dogs' in the 'izin'-class in Zulu is for the correctness of the Zulu sentence.

3.1 Subject-verb agreement in German

In German, subject agreement of nouns and personal pronouns with verbs has to do with the subject being singular or plural. The suffix added to a verb stem relating to a singular noun is -t, while a noun in the plural will result in the suffix -en being added to the verb stem:

17. Der Junge verstehtt die Lehrerin. (The boy understands the teacher.)
18. Die Jungen verstehen die Lehrerin. (The boys understand the teacher.)

A noun in the singular can also affect the verb stem in German. The verb stems of some German verbs, called irregular or strong verbs, change in the present tense singular, for example the verb essen changes to isst (eat), fahren changes to fährt (ride/drive), lesen changes to liest (read), stoßen changes to stößt (bump), et cetera. This is a remnant of the Old High German Ablaut and/or Umlaut. Regular or so-called weak verbs do not change the stem, but like the irregular verbs, they have the suffixes -t, -st and -en. In German there is agreement between the subject noun, or personal pronoun and the verb. Since German and English exhibit a very similar pattern with respect to subject and verb agreement, knowledge of English could facilitate the acquisition of this particular phenomenon. An error analysis carried out as part of a doctoral thesis (Baker, 2006) reveals that Afrikaans-speaking learners, whose L1 does not exhibit this characteristic, have greater difficulty with congruence (i.e. subject and verb agreement) than the learners from the other language backgrounds that were considered.

3.2 Subject-verb agreement in Zulu

In Zulu the changes brought about by the subject noun are related to agreement morphemes and are much more extensive than in German. Almost every noun class has a different subject morpheme. Class 5 has the subject morpheme li-, class 6 has a-, class 7 has si-, class 11 has lu- and class 14 has bu-. Classes 1, 1a and 3 all have the subject morpheme u-, classes 2 and 2a have the subject morpheme ba-, classes 4 and 9 have the subject morpheme i-, classes 8 and 10 have zi-, and classes 15, 16 and 17 have the subject morpheme ku-. The verb forms are determined by the subject morpheme of each noun in the sense that appropriate morphemes have to be prefixed to the verb root, which, as opposed to the German verb stem, does not change its form, for example

19. Umfana ufunda incwadi. (The boy reads the book.)
20. Abafana hafunda incwadi. (The boys read the book.)
21. Inja idla ukudla. (The dog eats the food.)
22. Izinja zidla ukudla. (The dogs eat the food.)

In Zulu there is not only subject-verb agreement, but there can also be agreement between the object noun and the verb, which can be used as a kind of introduction to the German case system. The object agreement morpheme has an absolute position in the verb, namely immediately before the verb root. Consider the example below:

23. Ngimbona manje umfana. (I see him now [the boy].)

3.3 Pronoun and verb agreement in German

Both the nouns in the subject position and the personal pronouns affect the verb form. As with nouns in the subject position, both the verb stem and the suffix can be affected in German, for example

Singular

Ich komme nach Hause.
(I am coming home.)

Du kommst nach Hause.
(You are coming home.)

Er kommt nach Hause.
(He is coming home.)

Ich sehe die Kinder.
(I see the children.)

Du siehst die Kinder.
(You see the children.)

Er sieht die Kinder.
(He sees the children.)

Plural

Wir kommen nach Hause.
(We are coming home.)

Ihr kommt nach Hause.
(You are coming home.)

Sie kommen nach Hause.
(They are coming home.)

Wir sehen die Kinder.
(We see the children.)

Ihr seht die Kinder.
(You see the children.)

Sie sehen die Kinder.
(They see the children.)

3.4 Pronoun and subject morphemes and verb agreement in Zulu

When the first or second person is used as the subject, subject agreement is brought about by the appropriate subject agreement morpheme and not by adding an ending and/or changing the verb stem, as in German. Consider the following examples:

24. (Mina) Ngidla inyama./Ich esse das Fleisch. (I am eating the meat.)

25. (Thina) Sidla inyama./Wir essen das Fleisch. (We are eating the meat.)

26. (Wena) Udlia inyama./Du isst das Fleisch. (You are eating the meat.)

27. (Nina) Nidla inyama./Ihr esst das Fleisch. (You are eating the meat.)

The difference between German and Zulu is that in German one uses the personal pronouns ich, wir, du, and ihr that correspond to specific endings and in some cases to changes in the verb stem as shown in the paradigm in 3, whereas in Zulu one uses pronouns and subject morphemes, as in examples 24 – 27.

3.5 Pronoun and noun agreement in German

In German the agreement of the personal pronoun does not only pertain to humans and animals, but also to inanimate objects. German pronouns reflect the noun class of the noun to which they are referring, irrespective of whether the noun refers to a person or not, as is evident in examples 28 and 29 below.

28. Das ist der Tisch. Er ist sauber. (That is the table. [He] It is clean.)

29. Ich sehe die Tür. Sie ist geschlossen. (I see the door. [She] It is closed.)

3.6 Pronoun and noun agreement in Zulu

As in German, pronouns in Zulu are directly linked to the noun classification system. In the Zulu language system, personal pronouns are used in an emphatic or contrastive function or as a true pronoun. The fact that the Zulu system is more complex than the German system should facilitate the acquisition of the German phenomenon. At present this is not the case, which should motivate teachers to find a way to make this aspect of the German grammar system more comprehensible to the learners. It would be interesting to see whether raising awareness of the similarities between L1 and TL and eliminating the (generally misinterpreted English) link between natural gender and noun classification in German would have the desired effect. Currently the perceived dissimilarity between Zulu and German causes overemphasis of the natural gender link, which is strictly limited to people, but is transferred directly from the English system onto German in the minds of the learners. The lack of gender distinction in Zulu is a complicating factor, which also manifests itself in the English usage of personal pronouns of many Zulu speakers. Introducing the German system to Zulu-speaking learners using their L1 as a springboard rather than linking German and English, might facilitate the acquisition of the correct German pronouns. Creating a direct link between German and Zulu from the start might bring about a change. Consider the following paradigm, which gives insight into the Zulu system:

Class no.	noun	pronoun
Class 1/1a	umuntu	yena
Class 2/2a	abantu	bona
Class 3/3a	umuthi	wona
Class 4	imithi	yona
Class 5	i(li)tshe	lona
Class 6	amatshe	wona/ona
Class 7	isitsha	sona
Class 8	izitsha	zona
Class 9	inja	yona
Class 10	izinja	zona
Class 11	uluthi	lona
Class 14	ubuso	bona
Class 15/16/17	ukudla, phandle, ukunxele	kona/khona

4. Research project

In order to ascertain the extent to which these similarities and differences can affect the success or otherwise of Zulu-speaking teenage learners of German in South Africa, a research project is being carried out.

4.1 Research group

The research group consists of 55 Zulu-speaking learners of German as a foreign language at different stages in the learning process. Some only started learning German in 2008, while others in the same grade (grade 11) started in 2005, 2006 or 2007. The discrepancy in length of exposure does, however, not make a very big difference, except for those who only started in 2008 and have very limited knowledge. This seems to point to early fossilisation on the part of the learners with longer exposure (since 2005), but similar ability to those who only started in

2007. A factor that could potentially impact more on the results is the fact that there are two teachers, one black Zulu-speaking teacher and one white German-speaking teacher. For this reason the examples used in the error analysis were all taken from the work of the students of the Zulu-speaking teacher. The learners are all Zulu primary language speakers who are also studying Zulu as a subject at school, which will give them more awareness of the structure of their primary language than other Zulu primary language speakers would have. All the learners attend a township school near Durban, SA.

4.2 *The tasks*

The first task given to the learners comprised a short essay on the topic “My family” (with specific instruction to use personal pronouns in the essay), and was given to them before they were made aware of any similarity between their primary language and German. This essay was not written by all the candidates as had been requested, but only by 9 of those whom the teacher considered to be more capable.

The second task was carried out by all the learners, irrespective of perceived capability or length of exposure. It is a description of a cartoon strip depicting the story of a Dachshund that is running away from his bath and the efforts of the family to persuade him to comply. All the candidates had some input about some of the points of similarity between German and Zulu before this task was given.

In order to establish what effect the input had on the candidates and for the sake of eliminating the effects of different teachers and different length of exposure, only the work of the 9 candidates who wrote the essay and described the comic strip as well was taken into account when selecting the examples cited below. However, the pervasive influence of English is evident in all the work, regardless of length of exposure to German, or perceived capability. The errors of the learners are to a large extent due to perceived similarity between German and English and it is clear that most (if not all of the) learners write their essays in English first and then translate them into German word for word, making very extensive, albeit bad use of the dictionary. They focus almost purely on content. The following examples from the essay on the family illustrate this practice:

30. Wenn Medizin ricke nicht arbeit meine Familie nehmen ihn order er zu Krankenhaus.
[When medicine does {die Ricke = a doe} not work my family takes him or her to hospital.]
31. Wie respekt jeden anderen. [We respect each other.]
32. Sie ist ein groß Fächer von romantisch komödie Film. [She is a big fan of romantic comedy films.]
33. Das ist alle etwa mein Famile. [That is all about my family.]
34. Mein Vater ist arbeitet... [My father is working...]
35. Im mein Familie wie gern zu gehe zu stadt zusammen und essen jedending wie mangel to essen. [In my family we like to go to town together and eat everything we need to eat.]

Some examples of errors made by these same students in the second (picture story) task show the same tendencies, even though a very explicit explanation of the similarities between German and Zulu verb forms and noun classification had been given prior to the exercise:

36. Die Geschichte ist uber der Vater wer wollen die junge zu baden die hund aber die hund Abfall zu baden. [The story is about the father who wants the boy to bath the dog but the dog refuse (noun) to bath.]

37. Der Hund runnt weg. Der sohn fangen es und bringt es Rücken zu das Haus. [The dog runs away. The son brings it back (noun) to the house.]
38. Der vatter zieht sich aus zu schau der Hund das es müssen Bad. [The father undresses to show the dog that it must bath.]
39. Die Hund ist runnen und der Junge ist jagen es. [The dog is running and the boy is chasing it.]

4.3 Error analysis

These few examples are just the tip of a huge iceberg of perceived language similarity between English and German leading to overuse, compounded by the perceived distance between German and Zulu. Some of the errors are indicative of a complete disregard of, for example, the parts of speech, in a desperate effort to find a translation that seems or sounds correct, or at least feasible. The focus on content, compounded by a lack of metalinguistic knowledge and linguistic knowledge of English as well as German, gives rise to the following kinds of errors:

4.3.1 Disregarding the parts of speech

Die Ricke, a noun in German, is used as a verb in example 30; *Abfall*, used as a verb in example 36; *Rücken* used as an adverb in example 37; *Bad* used as a verb in example 38. Disregarding the fact that nouns are capitalised in German is a very common error in the work of all 55 candidates. With a few exceptions, between 50% and 70% of all nouns used are not capitalised. Using a dictionary without paying attention to such a distinguishing mark of the German language wreaks havoc. In this particular instance at least part of the problem is that the teacher does not insist that the learners use nouns with the definite article in German and does not always correct errors of capitalisation, thus neglecting to focus the attention of the learners on the parts of speech.

Wie, an interrogative pronoun, is used as a personal pronoun in example 31. *We* and *wie* probably sound the same to them, resulting in *wir* and *wie* being used indiscriminately by some candidates.

4.3.2 Omitting articles and endings

Other errors due to English influence are found in example 32, omitting the adjective endings (*groß*, *romantisch*) and omitting the definite article in example 30.

4.3.3 Incorrect verb forms

The transferred use of the present continuous tense in examples 34 and 39, *ist arbeitet*, *ist runnen*, *ist jagen*, as well as the infinitives *zu gehen*, *zu baden*, *zu schau* in examples 35, 36 and 38 are prevalent. The tendency to use the present continuous tense in German sentences continued unabated in spite of very specific and explicit comparisons between English, German and Zulu. Using *ist* with the infinitive form of the verb is much easier than having to think of the correct endings and even verb stem changes in many cases, even if one knows that it is not correct. Mental sloth combined with bad habits is probably compounded by the (justified) belief that one can still communicate effectively, albeit on a very basic level, in this way.

4.3.4 Sentence structure

The incorrect positioning of verbs as a result of the direct translations that characterise the sentences is prevalent in all the work, regardless of length of exposure to German. According

to Ahukanna *et al* (1981:283) Igbo learners of French as a third language after English made the most errors in word order as a result of English interference. They attribute this to the high proportion of English-based semantic items rather than on “syntactic similarities between the target and base languages” (Ahukanna *et al.*, 1981:286). They base this argument on other studies, which restrict their investigations to syntax and have not demonstrated interference. It is possible that in this instance the focus on semantic similarities between English and German in the face of total (perceived) dissimilarity between Zulu and German has caused a distorted view of the extent of similarity between English and German, thus giving rise to the pervasiveness of the interference of English, extending even to syntax errors.

5. Some suggestions

Even though English is very useful because of the many lexical similarities with German, teachers must warn against the pitfalls in the syntactic and morphological realms. The learners need to be guided away from relying so heavily on English as a crutch early in the learning process, while showing them a way of utilising their first language in adopting a more intuitive approach to the TL. Even though one would expect some degree of a natural desire to find assistance in the mother tongue by way of looking for similarities, prior to having made them aware of the similarities that do exist, the learners participating in this study had no idea that there was any possible link between Zulu and German and had made no attempt at finding ways to use their L1 as a bridge. Even pointing out some of the similarities that do exist did not result in any visible changes in the short term, probably because of ingrained habits.

Using contrastive analysis of German and Zulu on a limited scale and focusing specifically on the similarities in the congruence systems of these two languages from the very beginning, would at least raise the language awareness of the learners before they succumb to a complete reliance on English. The fact that they do study Zulu as a subject at their school should facilitate the comparison of German and Zulu, especially if the German teachers seek the cooperation of the Zulu and English teachers in raising the language as well as the metalinguistic awareness of the learners.

6. Communication versus correctness

The communicative approach to language teaching coupled with a widespread disregard for correct language usage that is prevalent in schools today could be a major stumbling block. It may well be one of the main reasons why the intervention had no noticeable effect on the language usage of the learners. In response to a questionnaire, most of the learners indicated that they wanted to be able to communicate in German, as opposed to 20% who wanted to be able to use the language correctly. Many of the learners want to pursue high status careers such as medicine and engineering in Germany and are only interested in making themselves understood. Leaders in education need to be persuaded that communication is much more than just making oneself understood on the most basic level regardless of correct language usage. Mental sloth is a big enough scourge in our education system already. Educators do not need to encourage it.

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