

Summary

This handbook is designed to help teachers facilitate their German lessons for native Russian speakers, but can also help Russians to systematically eliminate errors they typically make in German.² Thus, the book is suitable both for language teachers and learners.

The handbook begins with the observation that inaccurate expressions of foreign language learners are very often not coincidental but follow a certain logic: a lot of them are based on the transfer of habits and linguistic practices which are typical for their native language into the target language. Such ‘interlingual errors’ are predictable by a contrastive study of the structure of both languages involved. The knowledge of the „typically Russian“ flaws, resulting from specific differences of both languages, then gives both teachers and learners a better basis for tackling and controlling them.

The production of this handbook was initiated by Professor Jochen Rehbein to accompany the seminar ‘Sprachstrukturkurs’ (structural language course) aimed at German teachers of Russian students at the Hamburg University.

Just as in the ‘Strukturkurs Russisch’ (Russian structure course), held on a number of occasions, the book initially makes a short comparison of Russian and German grammar, covering all categories. In addition, the most prominent interlingual errors are presented.

The appendix contains texts by Russian-speaking learners of German. They include excerpts from a relatively extensive collection of material taken from oral and written statements by adult Russian learners of German with different levels of learning at the time of the study. The levels range from beginners to advanced learners, and even students whose German is proficient enough for them to write their diploma thesis in German. Incidentally, the statements are made exclusively by adult learners.

How does foreign language acquisition function?

The main theory underlying this book is that foreign language acquisition is based to a large extent on the native language. During the learning process, instead of an entire linguistic structure being generated, the structure evolves rather from complex intellectual processes, in which the phonetic sound and alphabetic character or a series of sounds and their meaning – in other words the formal and functional elements – are combined. Obviously, this process does not occur within the daily use of the native language: there are no constant new associations of this kind. On the contrary, structures seem to be generated automatically, not just on the level of the word, but also on the level of the sentence or even text.

2 This handbook is part of a dissertation examining how individual processes trigger transfer functions (www.sub.uni-hamburg.de/opus/). It does not present the analysis, but rather the results, in a compact form.

However, even in the case of native speakers we are not dealing with pure automatisms, or a mechanical use of language. The different forms of expression are a result of common practice, so ingrained that it is not necessary to consciously activate the required mental coordination. One only needs to think of the motor skills and intellectual coordination required to change gears when driving a car. Beginners always do this consciously and in two separate actions; press clutch pedal, change gear. Experienced drivers often don't even know which gear they are in: they simply change gears. However, the action is still a coordination task.

This also seems to be the case with the process of automation underlying native language use: native speakers already have the patterns for certain thoughts or particular functions of speech at their disposal. The fact that a native speaker sometimes still struggles to find a word as with the phenomenon 'it's on the tip of my tongue' proves that constant associations must be made between form and function, between a sound and a letter, between a word and its meaning, both in everyday use and when learning a language.

The most frequent causes of error

Today we often use the term 'negative transfer' for errors arising from the transfer of structures from the native language into the target language; in the past linguists often used the term 'interference.' Negative transfer is based on the use of a very simple principle: conclusion by analogy. It is the counterpart of positive transfer, in which learners are able to successfully make use of the similarities between two languages. Negative transfer can be divided into different sub-categories: interlingual false analogy, the use of calques, and substitution. Common to all kinds of negative transfer is that the learner, on encountering similarities between phonetics, alphabetic characters and words in the native and the target languages, then assumes that, instead of being partially identical, they are completely identical.

Other regular kinds of error, though not so frequent, are the two derivatives 'hypercorrection' and 'avoidance'. In the first case errors arise when the learner tries to avoid transfer errors he or she is familiar with and begins to overcompensate, and in the latter where – for different reasons – certain structures in the target language are consciously avoided.

Transfer in pronunciation

One of the first tasks of foreign language learning is audio comprehension, the distinction between phonetic elements. Yet it is a frequent occurrence that existing differences in acoustics or articulation are ignored because the learner perceives these through the filter of his or her native language. One phenomenon typical of Russian learners of German is that they apply the Russian medium-length vowel articulation to the short and long German vowels. Because the use of short or long

vowel sounds in German can influence the function of differentiating meaning, this can result in expressions being misunderstood or used incorrectly. Russian learners of German frequently pronounce vowels very differently to German native speakers due to the acoustic qualities of the individual vowels : For example, Russian learners of German frequently pronounce ü-sounds [y] like u-sounds [u], and ö-sounds [ø] like o-sounds [o]. The extent to which the phenomenon negative transfer has an effect on individual pronunciation greatly depends on how well the auditory differences between the mother tongue and the second language are perceived. The first supportive measure is the heightening of the learner's awareness of the acoustic characteristics of the respective target language sounds. The second is the indication of the frequent differences in meaning and function. In a third measure, articulatory skills can be improved with the help of exercises, and if necessary with the use of visual aids. This handbook provides a few exercises for especially difficult points.

Transfer in reading and writing

Not only are acoustic signals used to access meaning when learning foreign languages, but character systems are also used, i.e. the characters of the alphabet.

As long as the learner is not yet familiar with the alphabetical strings typical of the second language, he or she reads letter for letter. Hence visual input initially only takes place in the context of the category phonetic sounds, but not yet on a conceptual level. Each letter in the target language is allocated to a phonetic sound in the target language, whereby when alphabetic characters are identical or similar, the learner will often pronounce them as they would in their native language, e.g. Russian-speaking learners of German read *Bayer* (German for Bavarian, pronounced [baɪɐ̯] as [bauɐ̯] (German for farmer, pronounced [bauɐ̯]), because the Russian letter <y> represents the sound [u].

As soon as the learner automatically reads the foreign word as a complete word, the negative transfer no longer takes place. From now on negative transfer only occurs in the case of unfamiliar words. Through regular reading, the learner gradually becomes familiar with the alphabetic strings typical of the second language and is able to read even unknown morphemes and words fluently. Generally mistakes through negative transfers when reading tend to become less frequent after only a few months. A suitable method for tackling these interlingual difficulties when teaching the alphabet is to highlight the letters that have a similar form but a different function and to constantly draw attention to these alphabetic characters throughout the course.

Compared to reading, writing – with its graphical output – is characterised by a further skill: motor skills must be developed and trained. Also in the case of writing, those German alphabetic characters which are completely unknown to Russian-speaking learners of German cause less problems than the groups of letters

that already exist in Russian, but which have a different phonetic or phonemic function: e.g. the German letter <u> would sound like an [i] in Russian. A typical mistake made by Russians learning German, is to write *Butte* instead of *Bitte*. In this case, familiar motoric writing habits have precedence over the newly – acquired knowledge – as is documented by the frequent occurrence of self-correction in the texts collected (cf. attachment). Even further advanced learners still make the mistake of automatically inserting the wrong letters based on their native language, especially when under stress or when alternating quickly between the two languages. Here again, extra attention given in the lessons to the ‘critical candidates’ in the target language can be of great benefit. A suitable exercise can be found at the end of the corresponding chapter.

Transfer in grammar

On a grammatical level, the interlinking with the levels of orthography and phonology takes on a new, superordinate meaning. On this level, not only are differentiating semantics (namely phoneme and alphabetic characters) coded and de-coded, but also – through the morphemes – units that transport meaning. These specific morphological, lexical and grammatical functions interconnect on the level of syntax to create a more intelligible context. These structures are stored according to psycholinguistic detection in the form of characteristic configurations. These units made up of formal and functional characteristics are adopted from the first language when the learner tries to express certain morphological and syntactical functions in the second language.

One difference between German and Russian is that Russian has a more strictly-defined formal system. Other differences are that the Russian language includes the verbal category of aspects, the noun category of animacy, as well as the double negation and a larger flexibility of word order in syntax. While on the formal level phenomena arise often as direct adoptions from the Russian system, when the learner writes or speaks German, errors in syntax can interfere within the entire sentence.

A typical result of transfer is when Russian speakers of German omit the German articles (e.g. **Ich gehe in Bibliothek* „I go to library“). What causes this? The German language uses a system of articles completely alien to the Russian language. In the Russian language there are no articles, neither definite articles (*der, die, das*) nor indefinite articles (*ein, eine*).