

## **Contrastive Linguistics and Analysis of Errors in Spanish Teaching to Students Whose Native Language is German**

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### **Abstract**

*This study is situated within the framework of a contrastive investigation about the interlanguage of students that learn Spanish as a foreign language. The study analyzes some grammatical units in which Austrian students of Level C1 repeatedly commit errors. These students come from different group of language compared to Spanish: German. The aim of the present study is to exhibit the origin of the difficulties that appear when these students intend to learn some grammar units, and also to determine whether there is any coherence between these difficulties and their distant native language. It will also be intended to define the fossilized errors and show some examples that the students make in the given exams.*

**Key Words:** Contrastive Linguistics, interlanguage, fossilized errors, German, Spanish.

### **1. Introduction**

The aim of this study is to identify the difficulties in learning Spanish as a foreign language (SFL) that the students from different mother language faces. For this purpose we have selected a language coming from a different linguistic family and also its native speakers to analyze the most repeated errors while learning Spanish. In the present study it has been examined the effects of an occidental Germanic language (German) as native language (L1) while learning SFL and it has been encountered some differences in the phonetics and also in the orthography of both languages. German is not a Romance language, so its native speakers frequently commit errors while learning Spanish and these seem to be fossilized errors. The analysis has been realized with the exam results which were given to Austrian students of Level C1 (Advanced) of The Cervantes Institute in Vienna (Austria)<sup>1</sup>.

The mentioned exam included six grammar parts and two parts of translation. The objective of this exam was to detect the weakest points of the mentioned student group while learning Spanish as a foreign language (SFL). In the following we will focus on analyzing the errors that we believe that the Austrian students commit because of the effect of their native language. The mentioned errors which also seem fossilized happened to be in these grammar units: the definite, the indefinite article and the zero article, the demonstrative adjectives, time expressions, the gerund, the use of the past tenses, the use of the prepositions, the verb "gustar", the hour, the date, the verbal phrases, the use of the capital letters and numbers. The first reason of these errors seems to be the difference of the grammar rules of their native language with the targeted language. The students settle an erroneous relation between two languages and this ends by fossilized errors. Firstly, we will expose some examples to explain this theory and later observe the percentages of the errors.

As a conclusion we will try to make some suggestions to facilitate the learning of Spanish for the German-speaking students. First of all it will be convenient to explain the fossilization of the errors in language learning process.

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## 2. The Fossilized Errors

Error analysis (EA), based on the generative theories, adopts from Noam Chomsky, and from the first publications of Corder (1967), is a very concrete vision of creative activity. In the studies of the 70's dedicated to the field of the second languages, as Liceras also mentions (1991), the L2 assumes an important role in the field of the cognitive sciences of the language learning. From then on a more determined approach is aimed in the study of the targeted language (TL), and also the detriment of the learner's L1 in their committing errors. The contrastive analysis model (CA) is also based on the psychological behaviourism which is seen in the studies of Fries (1945) and Lado (1957). This approximation departs from the hypothesis that the students tend to transfer the linguistic structures of their native language (L1) to the language that they are in the learning process.

In this case we can refer to the fossilization of the SFL students' errors. In the beginning it will be reasonable to expect the errors to be transitory. But if an error transforms into a permanent problem, it's called "fossilized" and in this case it will be necessary to think over the existing learning strategies. As suggests Vázquez (1999: 42), the question would be if it will be continued taking as a reference the native language (L1) or if there are some rules of the second language (L2) that still can't be learned or wrongly applied.

### 2.1. Some examples of fossilized errors

The native language can interfere in the interlanguage<sup>2</sup> causing some resistant errors. This can be seen especially when there is an opposition between L1 and L2 (Schachter, 1974).

The fossilized errors seen in the exams of the Austrian students are various. One of the problems among them is the use of the verb "gustar" (like). It's interesting that although German has the same verb and its function is the same, the students commit different types of errors with this verb.

(German) Mir gefällt die Blume. (A mí me gusta la flor)  
 Mir gefallen die Blumen. (A mí me gustan las flores.)  
 Uns gefällt das Pferd. (A nosotros nos gusta el caballo.)  
 Uns gefallen die Pferde. (A nosotros nos gustan los caballos.)

In the exams, the Austrian students didn't make any mistake in translating the verb "gustar" from German to Spanish. But it is seen that they construct the sentence according to their native language's word order, in this case it's German. This occurs when 80 % of the Austrian students traduce a sentence with verb "gustar" with the syntax of German: instead of saying "A la chica le gusta el libro" they answer as "El libro le gusta a la chica". The reason is that in their mother tongue the sentence is built in this order ("Das buch gefällt dem Mädchen"). This type of error seems to be fossilized as a very high percentage of Austrian students make it repeatedly.

Other fossilized error of the same group of students is forgetting to use the indirect object two times in a Spanish sentence. When they translate from L1 to Spanish, instead of writing "La profesora les pregunta a los estudiantes", they don't see the necessity to use "les" and intend to write only "a los estudiantes" as its use in their native language. But in Spanish the indirect object is also used for a second time in a sentence, with the preposition "a". In the given exams it has been seen that the 97 % of the Austrian students does not use it for the second time.

## 3. The Errors That Native Speakers of German Commit While Learning Spanish

In this part we will intend to determine the difficulties that the German speakers as native language face while they are learning Spanish grammar.

### 3.1. The Article

The article is a category that exists in German. Undoubtedly, a student with a native language of German easily realizes the absence of the article in a sentence. Because in German exist the articles *der*, *die*, *das* and also the

<sup>2</sup> Selinker (1972) aims to reach a precise identification of the phenomena that he refers to as "the linguistic aspects of the psychology of second language learning". Following Lenneberg he hypothesizes a "latent psychological structure" in the brain which is activated when one tries to learn a second language after having acquired "meanings" in a first language. He defends that the utterances which will be produced will not be identical to those produced by native speakers of the targeted language (TL), nor will they be exact "translations" from the native language of the learners. Rather, a new, separate system will develop. Selinker calls this system as *interlanguage*.

indefinite articles. For this reason, an Austrian student commits less errors in this category than many other students with different native languages. If we analyze some grammar rules of German, we can reveal the reason that makes the Austrian students commit errors while using the article. Even if there is the use of article in German, it is different from Spanish. For example the names of the materials aren't used with an article, meanwhile in Spanish the same materials can be used with definite articles. Here is an example:

- Gold und Silber sind Edelmetalle.
- *El oro y la plata* son metales preciosos.

For this reason the Austrian students tend to say *oro* or *plata* without using any articles. One of each four Austrian students decided in the omission of the article in this sentence. Something similar occurred with the days of the week: in German a definite article is not used with them, but in Spanish it's contrary. In these type of sentences we observe the learner's indecision and the easy way for them to avoid an error is to use a demonstrative adjective. They prefer to say "este viernes" instead of "el viernes". One of each four Austrian students completed the blanks as it's seen in the example: "Vale, hasta ...**este**... viernes a ....**las**.... once en punto."

### 3.2. The Adjectives

The use of the adjectives in Spanish involves some problems for the native speakers of German related to their language structure.

#### 3.2.1. The graduation of some adjectives: *joven/jung* and *viejo/alt*

The use of the adjectives *joven/jung* and *viejo/alt* deserves a special comment, as they function in Spanish and in German in a very different way. In German there are some comparative forms that are not referred to the positive grade of the adjective, but to its own antonym (Piñel, 1994: 124). As Helbig and Buscha indicate (1975: 274) the hierarchy of the ages in German is like the given examples :

- ein junger Mann (between 15-30)
- ein jüngerer Mann (between 30-45)
- ein älterer Mann (between 50-65)
- ein alter Mann (older than 70)

According to this, *ein junger Mann* is younger than *ein jüngerer Mann*, but *ein älterer Mann* is not old (*alt*), instead of this it simply expresses that he is younger (*jünger*) than *ein alter Mann*. In Spanish doesn't exist a similar graduation system? The significant use can be the expressions as:

- eine ältere Dame = an elderly woman
- ein jüngerer Herr = a relatively young man

This difference in the graduation of the adjectives explaining the age causes confusions in the students which are not native.

#### 3.2.2. The Demonstrative Adjectives

In the use of the demonstrative adjectives, the students reached to a bigger number of errors. The error is generally committed by the use of "este" (this) for "aquel" (that) and an interference of the native language seems to be the most possible reason. "...**Aquel**... invierno fuimos a Roma. Yo hasta entonces nunca había visto ..**aquel**... lugar." The first blank was filled by the 47% of the Austrians with the demonstratives "este/ ese" and the 82% filled the second blank also with "este/ese". "Me dije que ....**aquella**...sería una experiencia terrible, pero todo pasó muy bien." The 63% of the Austrians answered this with "esta" (this). "No me interesaba nada hacer deporte en ...**aquel**... tiempo." The 72% of the Austrian students used "este".

Sonsoles Fernández López (1997: 100, 224, 225) also detected this inclination of committing this type of errors in her German students group and she observed that this group couldn't show any progress in the use of the demonstrative adjectives.

### 3.3. The Use of the Past Tenses

The use of the past tenses in Spanish involves some problems for the native speakers of German related to the different uses in both languages.

#### 3.3.1. The Formation of the Past Tenses with the verb *haber*

In Spanish some uses of the past tenses as in German are formed with an auxiliary verb: "haber + participio". Nevertheless, if we compare the order of the construction of the verbal negation we can see the differences

between German and Spanish. As we have observed before, in German the negative word is located between the verb *haber* and *the participle*, but in Spanish the negation comes before the distant parts of the verb. This difference is also the reason of some committed errors. For example:

Juan **no** trabaja. Juan arbeitet **nicht**.  
 Juan **no** ha trabajado. Juan hat **nicht** arbeitet.  
 Juan **no** va a trabajar. Juan wird **nicht** arbeiten.

If we observe the total errors committed in the translation of the sentence “Juan no trabaja nunca”, the numbers reach the 24%.

### 3.3.2. The Present Perfect Tense / The Simple Past Tense: “he comido” vs “comí”

For the Austrian students it's very common to use the Simple Past (Präteritum) instead of the Present Perfect. It's very normal that they use it in reiterative structures with the adverbs of frequency (Luque Toro, 1990: 130). In our case, the majority preferred the second version of these sentences, although it's more adequate to use the present perfect when a time indicator expresses a recent moment in the past <sup>3</sup> (Barros, 2003: 60):

- ¡Te lo **he dicho** varias veces y todavía no lo **has hecho**! → ¡Te lo *dije* varias veces y todavía no lo *hiciste*!

### 3.3.3. The Imperfect Tense

The Austrian students present so many difficulties while learning the Past Tenses in Spanish, especially in learning the Imperfect as they don't have this verbal time in their native language. For this reason, it's observed that the Austrian students can't see the difference between the descriptions and the incidents of a narration. As Fernández López also indicates, this type of error can be defined as fossilized among the native speakers of German (1997: 138, 157). According to the results of Lopez's study with the students of different levels, she observed that this type of errors cannot be corrected even if the students' Spanish level rises. Barros (2003: 65) also emphasises this type of errors as fossilized for the German speakers and gives various examples in her study:

√ La cabaña **era** de madera y **estaba** abandonada.

× La cabaña **fue** de madera y **estuvo** abandonada.

√ Hacía bastante frío, aunque **era** septiembre.

× Hacía bastante frío aunque **fue** septiembre.

In the example below the 28% of the Austrians use the Simple Past Tense instead of the Imperfect, and it can be defined as a high number:

√ Antes a Lucía le ...**encantaba**... (encantar) ir al teatro.

× Antes a Lucía le ..**encantó**.. ir al teatro.

But if we observe all of the questions in our grammar exam, the incorrect use of the Simple Past Tense instead of the Imperfect Tense appear as the 37% among the native German speakers. Here are some examples showing it:

√ Siempre ...**iban**.... juntos a visitar a su tía. Le ....**llevaban**.... una tarta de fresas.

× Siempre ...**fuieron**... juntos a visitar a su tía. Le ....**llevaron**.... una tarta de fresas.

√ Llamaron a la puerta cuando yo.... **leía**.... una novela en mi habitación.

× Llamaron a la puerta cuando yo ...**leí**... una novela en mi habitación.

### 3.4. The Prepositions

The omission of the preposition before the use of the direct object of a person is the most frequent error among Austrian students. They forget to use it as it can be seen in the following sentences: “Conocimos ..... estudiantes nuevos”. “Llamamos ..... Sr. Ibáñez”. “Normalmente se bautiza ..... un niño”. “Ya he visto ..... mi novio”.

"Cada noche Carmen **llama a** su novio por teléfono, pero ayer no lo hizo." In this last example the 35% of the students forgot to use the preposition “a”. "Ayer me encontré **con** mis viejos amigos." The 36% of the students forgot to use the preposition ‘con’.

<sup>3</sup> It is known that there are some differences in using the simple past tense and the present perfect tense in Spanish in different regions of Spain and in some Latin American countries. In some parts of Spain and the majority of the Latin American countries it is widely used the Simple Past Tense instead of the Present Perfect (Barros, 2003: 59). But according to the Castilian Spanish (which we take as our grammatical base) there is a difference between the usage of the Present Perfect and the Simple Past Tense.

Fernández López, in her study also encountered a high number of errors of this type in the German student group. But she considers it as transitory, not a fossilized type of error (1994: 372). In our study it's found also a high number of errors in the use of *de* which is a part of the expression “después de”. The majority of the Austrian students forget to use this part of the preposition as it can be seen in the following examples: "**Después de** la jubilación de su marido, ellos se trasladaron a París." An interference with their native language can possibly be the reason for this common error.

### 3.5. The Passive Voice

In German the use of the passive voice is more frequent than in Spanish. For this reason a passive sentence cannot be translated literally with a passive sentence in Spanish (Roche y Webber, 1997: 24). The passive voice in German has two ways: The passive that indicates a state (passive with *sein*) and the passive that indicates an action (passive with *werden*). Another interesting point while using the passive voice is that the Austrian students commit errors related with the preposition "de", because in German "von" is generally used for to say "de" (from) but also in the passive voice, while in Spanish "por" it is being used. For this reason an Austrian student can use incorrectly *por* instead of *de* (Vazquez, 1999: 100). The correct use of a passive sentence should be like this: "Esta casa fue construida el año pasado **por** mi padre. "

A 56% of the Austrians used **de** instead of **por** in this sentence. Nearly the same percentages of errors can be observed in the following passive sentence: "La comida fue servida **por** mi hermano." A 52% of the students used **de** instead of **por** in this sentence. This error type can be fossilized by time.

### 3.6. The Verbal Periphrase

In German doesn't exist the verbal periphrase “estar + gerundio” [Vazquez, 1991: 153]. For this reason, to explain an action which is realizing in that moment they use present tense but with the word “now” which is “*ahora*”, (in German “*jetzt*”). As they don't have the use of this verbal periphrase in their native language, it's common that the native speakers of German use this incorrectly in Spanish. Fernández López gives us some examples of this type of errors basing on her German students (1997: 156): “Dicho y hecho... En la pista todo el mundo bajando como loco, las dos tribus estaban luchando una contra la otra, quitándose los bastones”. The majority of German students used “bajando” instead of the verbal periphrase “estaba bajando”.

### 3.7. The Gerund

The use of the gerund is another problematic grammar unit of Spanish for the Austrians. Here is an example of an error committed by many Austrian students. They answer as ‘subiendo’ instead of answering in Simple Past Tense as ‘subimos’. "En el último tramo dejamos los coches allí y .....**subiendo**..... andando". The 36% of the students committed error in using gerund. Fernández López also mentions in her study that the native German speakers while learning Spanish commit frequently this type of error (1997: 155).

### 3.8. The Capital Letters

It is worth to mention that the unnecessary intention of the Austrian students of using the capital letters is owing to their native language in which they are used to write the first letter of most of the names in capital letters. In the following we can observe a commonly committed error about the use of the capital letter while translating a sentence from German to Spanish. When the students translate the sentence “Ich habe meine Familie noch nicht gesehen” from German to Spanish, being native speakers of German they write “Todavía no he visto a mi Familia”. Esther Barros, in her book titled as *Dificultades del español para hablantes de alemán (Difficulties of Spanish for German speakers)*, gives some examples about similar errors (2003: 5). The errors that commit the German speakers are shown with bold: "Los **L**unes cierran los museos.", "En **O**toño hay castañas.", "Carlo y Pedro son **P**eruanos.", "El **E**spañol es una lengua románica."

### 3.9. The Numbers

To discuss the errors of German speaking students (L1) in reading numbers a separate comment is needed. Because they have (as in other Germanic languages like Dutch and Danish) had an inverse system of reading numbers comparing to Spanish. They read the numbers in the opposite way as they are written: “*sesenta y ocho*” (sixty-eight) can be written as “*ochoyoesenta*” by a native speaker of German.

When a four digit number is written by the same group of students, the year 1996 is generally transformed into “nueveydiez cientos seisynoventa”. This doesn't mean that in Spanish they read the numbers equally as they are in their native language, but they need to think about how to read the numbers in Spanish. And also in their fast

answers this difference between both languages may be the reason of their habitual errors (Mateos Ortega, 1998: 12). For this reason the level of the committed errors in the use of numbers is very high.

### 3.10. The Hour

If we leave to consider the differences of regional varieties, the standard German grammar is used in the 24 hour system. But in Spanish this use is restricted to the official language. The Austrians utilize this in their daily life, meanwhile in Spain using the 24 hour system in saying the hour suppose to talk always as on the information services of RENFE (Spanish National Railway Company) or as the News bulletin: it doesn't seem as an error, but it also doesn't respond to the Spanish speaking standards (Mateos Ortega, 1998: 13). All of the misunderstandings about the hour is because of the order of the day: *las cinco y media* (half past five) is in German "*media seis*", and *las seis y media* (half past six) is "*media siete*". Mateos (2000: 12) also emphasises this problem saying "Nobody should be astonished if a Spanish learner comes one hour before than expected because of confusing *las siete y media* (half past seven) with his *media siete*".

The German speaking students intend to say the word "hora-horas" after the corresponding digit as they do in German. For example:

√ Es ist 14.00 Uhr.      ✗ Son las 14.00 horas.

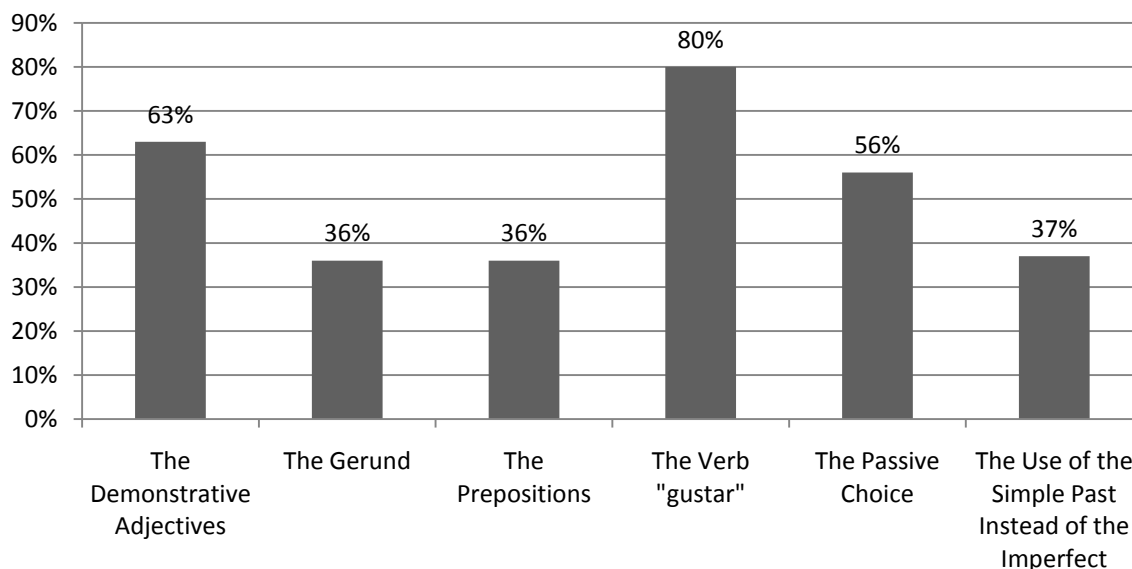
## 4. Conclusion

Analyzing the reasons of the errors committed by the Austrian students of SFL, we reached some specific conclusions. By the exams that we applied to hundred Austrian students of level C1 we obtained the following results:

The majority of the errors seem to be interlanguage errors. Among these, the concrete cause of error should be sought in the application of the native language's rules to the structures or contexts of the second language (L2) or the targeted language (TL). Nevertheless, if the learner perceives clearly that the two languages are not equal, then the errors get neutralized. In this study the most common errors originated in the native language's (L1) influence have been analyzed. These errors can be defined as fossilized.

In the following figure the Austrian students' tendency of committing errors in learning Spanish as a foreign language can be seen clearly:

Figure I



Some academics, as Fernández López, study the commonly committed errors in learning Spanish as a second language and come to a conclusion that there is an ambiguity in the usage of some grammar units of Spanish. López mentioned the majority of the errors while learning Spanish as listed below (1995: 150,151):

1. The opposition between the times in the past, above all between the *Present Perfect* and the *Imperfect*.
2. The use or the omission of the article.

3. The presence or the absence of the pronoun “se”.
4. The opposition between *ser/ estar + adjetivo*.

The same errors also appeared in the results of this study. Analyzing the results, it's been observed that the native language of the students, with all its grammatical rules interferes as an obstacle at the time of learning the second language (L2).

To be able to avoid these errors some solutions must be looked for. For example, the teachers should pay more attention to the Austrian students when they teach them the use of the article and the adjective or the prepositions, the gerund, the time, the date, some verbal periphrasis, the use of the capital letters and the numbers. The Austrian students have problems with the use of the articles, the pronoun "se" and the use of the past tenses in Spanish.

As a further research it will be intended to apply the same exam to another group of students, coming from a different language family (except Roman and Germanic languages) and learning Spanish also in level C1 as the Austrian student group. The objective of this further research will be to portray the fossilized errors of both groups and to compare their most committed errors. It will also be intended to reflect the advantages and disadvantages of their native languages.

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