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CROSS-LINGUISTIC INFLUENCE IN MODAL VERB ACQUISITION: IDENTIFYING AND ADDRESSING CHALLENGES FACED BY LEARNERS WITH DIFFERENT L1 BACKGROUNDS

Abstract: Modal verbs are crucial for expressing nuanced meanings related to possibility, necessity, obligation, and permission. However, their acquisition poses significant challenges for second language (L2) learners, particularly due to cross-linguistic influence (CLI) from their first language (L1). This article explores the multifaceted impact of CLI on modal verb acquisition, examining how learners with diverse L1 backgrounds transfer existing linguistic knowledge, leading to both positive and negative transfer. By analyzing common errors and identifying specific challenges associated with different L1s, this article proposes linguodidactic strategies and pedagogical interventions to mitigate negative CLI and facilitate accurate and fluent modal verb usage in L2 speech production.

Keywords: Cross-linguistic Influence (CLI), Modal Verbs, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), First Language (L1), Second Language (L2), Error Analysis, Linguodidactics, Pedagogical Interventions, Transfer.

Introduction. Second language acquisition (SLA) is a complex process shaped by various factors, including the learner's age, motivation, learning environment, and, crucially, their prior linguistic knowledge. Cross-linguistic influence (CLI), also known as language transfer, plays a significant role in this process. CLI refers to the impact of a learner's first language (L1) on their acquisition of a second language (L2). While CLI can facilitate learning by providing learners with a foundation of linguistic concepts and structures, it can also hinder progress by leading to errors based on L1-specific patterns that do not align with the L2. Modal verbs, a closed class of auxiliary verbs that express modality (e.g., possibility, necessity, obligation, permission), are notoriously difficult for L2 learners. Their semantic complexity, syntactic constraints, and varied pragmatic functions make them particularly susceptible to the effects of CLI. This article delves into the intricacies of CLI in modal verb acquisition, focusing on how learners with different L1 backgrounds transfer their existing linguistic knowledge to the L2 and how this transfer manifests in both positive and negative ways. By understanding the specific challenges associated with various L1-L2 pairings, we can develop more targeted and effective linguodidactic strategies to support L2 learners in achieving accurate and fluent modal verb usage.

Cross-linguistic influence and second language acquisition. The concept of CLI has evolved significantly over time. Early behaviorist theories viewed L1 as primarily a source of interference, leading to errors in the L2. However, subsequent research has revealed a more nuanced picture, recognizing that L1 can also facilitate L2 learning. Modern perspectives on CLI acknowledge the dynamic and multifaceted nature of language transfer, considering both positive and negative effects. Positive transfer occurs when L1 and L2 share similar features, allowing learners to leverage their existing knowledge to accelerate acquisition. For example, if both L1 and L2 employ modal verbs

with similar semantic functions and syntactic structures, learners may readily transfer their understanding of these features to the L2. Negative transfer (Interference) arises when L1 and L2 differ significantly, leading learners to apply L1 rules or patterns to the L2, resulting in errors. This is particularly common when L2 structures are more complex or have subtle nuances that are not present in the L1.

The type and extent of CLI depend on several factors:

- Linguistic distance: The structural and typological similarity between L1 and L2. Closer linguistic distance tends to result in more positive transfer.
- Learner proficiency: Learners with higher L2 proficiency are generally better able to differentiate between L1

and L2 patterns and avoid negative transfer.

- Learner awareness: Learners who are consciously aware of potential differences between L1 and L2 are more likely to monitor their output and correct errors.
- Teaching methodology: Explicit instruction that highlights differences between L1 and L2 can help learners overcome negative transfer.

Challenges in modal verb acquisition due to cross-linguistic influence. Modal verbs present various challenges for L2 learners, and CLI can exacerbate these difficulties. Common areas of difficulty include: **Semantic Range:** Modal verbs often have multiple meanings and nuances that are not always directly translatable across languages. For instance, the English modal verb "may" can express both possibility and permission, while some languages may use different verbs to convey these meanings. **Syntactic Constraints:** Modal verbs typically have specific syntactic requirements, such as being followed by a bare infinitive (e.g., "He must go"). L1s with different syntactic structures may lead to errors such as using a full infinitive ("He must to go"). **Pragmatic Functions:** The pragmatic functions of modal verbs, such as expressing politeness, indirectness, or hedging, can vary across cultures and languages. Learners may struggle to use modal verbs appropriately in different social contexts. **Morphological Inflection:** Some languages have modal verbs that inflect for tense, person, or number, while others do not. This difference can lead to errors in agreement and tense marking. **Absence of Equivalent Forms:** Some languages may lack a direct equivalent for certain modal verbs in the L2, forcing learners to find alternative ways to express the intended meaning or to overgeneralize the use of existing verbs.

To illustrate the impact of CLI, we will examine specific examples of challenges faced by learners with different L1 backgrounds when acquiring English modal verbs. Here are different groups of students with various language backgrounds. **Students of Romance Languages (e.g., Spanish, French, Italian):** Romance languages often use subjunctive mood to express possibility and uncertainty, whereas English relies more on modal verbs. This can lead to underuse of modal verbs or the incorrect use of subjunctive structures in English. Additionally, Romance languages often have a more direct correspondence between verb tenses and modal meanings, leading to errors in tense usage with English modal verbs. **Speakers of Slavic Languages (e.g., Russian, Polish, Czech):** Slavic languages may have different syntactic constraints on modal verb usage. For example, some Slavic languages allow for the omission of the infinitive marker ("to") after modal verbs, leading to errors in English such as "He can go shopping" instead of "He can go to the shop". The aspectual system in Slavic languages (perfective vs. imperfective) can also influence the interpretation of modal

meanings. Speakers of Asian Languages (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean): Many Asian languages lack a direct equivalent for modal verbs, instead relying on different grammatical structures or lexical items to express modality. This can lead to difficulty in recognizing and understanding the function of modal verbs in English. Speakers of these languages may also overuse certain modal verbs or resort to circumlocution to convey modal meanings. Speakers of Germanic Languages (e.g., German, Dutch): While Germanic languages share some similarities with English in terms of modal verb usage, there are also subtle differences that can cause interference. For example, the German modal verb "müssen" can express both necessity and obligation, while English differentiates between "must" (necessity) and "should" (obligation). This can lead to confusion and misuse of these verbs.

Linguodidactic strategies for addressing cross-linguistic influence. To mitigate the negative effects of CLI and promote accurate modal verb acquisition, linguodidactic interventions must be carefully designed to address the specific challenges faced by learners with different L1 backgrounds. Effective strategies include followings. **Explicit Instruction.** Provide explicit instruction on the meanings, functions, and syntactic constraints of English modal verbs, highlighting differences from the learners' L1. **Contrastive Analysis.** Conduct contrastive analysis between English and the learners' L1 to identify potential areas of interference and to raise learner awareness of these differences. **Error Analysis.** Analyze learner errors to identify common patterns and underlying causes related to CLI. Use this information to tailor instruction to address specific needs. **Meaning-Focused Activities.** Design activities that focus on the meaning and use of modal verbs in authentic contexts. Encourage learners to use modal verbs to express their own opinions, make predictions, and negotiate meanings. **Form-Focused Instruction.** Provide focused practice on the correct syntactic structures associated with modal verbs. Use controlled exercises, such as gap-fill activities and sentence transformation tasks, to reinforce correct usage. **Pragmatic Awareness Training.** Incorporate activities that raise learner awareness of the pragmatic functions of modal verbs in different social contexts. Use role-playing scenarios and authentic dialogues to provide opportunities for learners to practice using modal verbs appropriately. **Feedback and Error Correction.** Provide clear and constructive feedback on learner errors, focusing on both accuracy and fluency. Encourage learners to self-correct and to monitor their output for potential errors related to CLI. **Use of Technology.** Utilize technology-enhanced learning (TEL) tools, such as online quizzes, interactive exercises, and multimedia resources, to provide learners with engaging and personalized learning experiences.

Here are some practical examples of pedagogical interventions that can be used to address specific challenges related to CLI in modal verb acquisition:

- For Spanish speakers struggling with the subjunctive mood: Provide explicit instruction on the differences between the English modal verbs "may/might" and the Spanish subjunctive. Use contrastive exercises to highlight these differences and to provide opportunities for learners to practice using modal verbs in contexts where they would typically use the subjunctive in Spanish.
- For Russian speakers omitting the infinitive marker "to": Provide explicit instruction on the syntactic requirements of English modal verbs and the need to use a bare infinitive. Use controlled exercises that require learners to insert the infinitive marker "to" in the correct places.
- For Chinese speakers lacking direct equivalents for modal verbs: Introduce modal verbs gradually, starting with the most common and basic meanings. Use visual aids and realia to illustrate the meanings of modal verbs and to provide learners with concrete examples of their use.

- For German speakers confusing "must" and "should": Provide explicit instruction on the differences between the meanings of these two verbs. Use scenario-based activities that require learners to choose the appropriate verb to express the intended meaning.

Conclusion. Cross-linguistic influence is a pervasive factor in second language acquisition, and modal verb acquisition is particularly susceptible to its effects. By understanding the specific challenges faced by learners with different L1 backgrounds, we can develop more targeted and effective linguodidactic strategies to mitigate negative CLI and promote accurate and fluent modal verb usage. This article has provided a framework for analyzing CLI in modal verb acquisition, offering practical examples of challenges and pedagogical interventions. By embracing a learner-centered approach that considers the unique linguistic background of each individual, we can empower L2 learners to overcome the hurdles of modal verb acquisition and to achieve their full communicative potential.

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