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## **INTERFERENCES AND MULTICULTURALISM IN LANGUAGE BIOGRAPHIES**

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### ***Abstract***

*In this article we want to follow the linguistic and cultural particularities of language biographies. Starting from their importance in didactics, sociology and genre analysis, we selected those linguistic elements that showed us the communication strategies used by students, but also the most relevant cultural aspects. The research was carried out in two steps: the first step was the recording of interviews and questionnaires, followed by their transcription, and finally the identification and classification of linguistic and cultural elements. The results of the research showed us the communication strategies the students use in conveying their message and the image they create of Romania.*

**Keywords:** language biographies; language interference; culture shock; language learning; Romanian as a foreign language.

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### ***1. Introduction***

In this paper we would like to present some aspects concerning linguistic biography, but from a new perspective, the cultural one. In this approach, we start from the already existing theoretical framework of the use of linguistic biography in didactics, as a method of evaluation, and in sociology, for the research of migration and immigrant communities, also recalling the importance of BL for the narrative genre. Thus, this paper will be divided into three parts, the first part being dedicated to the theoretical framework, the second to linguistic interference, and the third to the phenomenon of multiculturalism in terms of culture shock. At the end of the paper, we will find the conclusions and the bibliography consulted in the writing of the paper.

### ***2. Language biography – fields of research***

As previously said, this part focuses on some theories regarding LB (language biography from a didactic, sociolinguistic, and narrative approach.

#### ***2.1. Didactic approach***

BL manifests itself mostly as linguistic autobiography, as a person discusses their learning journey. From a teaching point of view, BL is an important tool for the development of communicative skills

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and lends itself to dual use. Firstly, for learners, it is an opportunity for reflective feedback, self-assessment of language level and, at the same time, awareness of language mistakes and can lead to their subsequent correction. Secondly, for the teacher, they are a tool for understanding the needs of each student, improving teaching methods and, at the same time, helping to adapt methods and activities to the students' educational needs. Finally, they are a way of observing how students use the language repertoire.

BLs do not have a fixed structure, although they can be written according to several criteria. Thus, EAQUALS/ALTE propose to produce the biographies in four parts, providing for each of them the necessary guidance and explanations to carry out the activity:

1. Objectives in the language learning process, which will include the reason for learning a foreign language and the components considered important

2. Written language experiences in chronological order

All known languages should be included here, regardless of the level reached or the mode of acquisition. The purpose of this section is to create a clear overview of the language knowledge acquired up to the time of writing.

3. The most significant linguistic and intercultural experiences

When discussing intercultural experience, it is necessary to focus on the most important cultural differences, all experiences, whatever their nature. Equally important and worth mentioning are any misunderstandings or difficulties encountered due to culture shock. At the end, it is also important for the student to reflect on the changes and influences caused by the experience described.

4. Current language priorities, including assessment of each level achieved

Each of the four sections can be continually supplemented according to linguistic development and integration into the different environments that make up the intercultural experience. The linguistic biographies described in the European Passport are exclusively a single text, representing a written communication activity, but can be a useful formative assessment alternative in the form of a portfolio which can include several texts, set by the teacher, and obviously can be a more informal activity in which students can also include photos from their travels, funny stories or descriptions of places visited. Of course, before writing the actual text, oral communication activities can be carried out in class.

The authors Simon and Thamin (2002) consider language biography to be very useful in teaching, as it is a research method based on written or oral responses, carried out through surveys in the form of interviews. These surveys are also useful to the respondent, as they allow them to take a critical look at their progress and level and are a method of evaluation.

Another linguist who talks about LB is Molinié who considers that this evolving form of linguistic biography allows the narrator to take a reflective view of the whole learning process. The individual or collective reflexive instance ensures the heterogeneous character of the speaker (continuous expansion of the linguistic baggage and clear perception of one's own values) (Molinié, 2006).

The relevance of biographies is embedded in the field of education, an approach that offers insights into learning through the experience of acquiring new knowledge (using texts or writing workshops, for example). This initiative joins the epistemological orientation of constructivist and socio-historical learning. Linguistic biography is treated as a school for the training system, and activities focus on linguistic diversity. It is used as teaching material, allowing the recognition of bicultilingualism of many pupils in the school environment.

Language biography encourages the learner/student to observe what he/she can express in the different languages he/she knows, stimulates the development of knowledge acquired in the informal environment. The biography can also be carried out with the aim of developing the learner's competence in one or more languages.

## 2.2. Sociolinguistic approach

Sociolinguistics is one of the fields in which BL is treated and defined and is important in the study of multilingualism and migration. One of the researchers who talk about linguistic biographies is Brohy (1992). The survey conducted between 1983 and 1986 on the language practices of twenty bilingual/multilingual couples and families in and around Freiburg aimed to complete and differentiate the answers to the closed questions of three questionnaires (sociolinguistic practices and identities, skills, attitudes). Quantitative research was used in order to obtain as many research-relevant answers as possible.

Another researcher who addresses the topic of linguistic biographies is Anna Verschik (2002) in her study *Linguistic biographies of Yiddish speakers in Estonia* based on the study of a community of Jews living in Estonia. Part of the study is also devoted to the mother tongue, which cannot be ignored when dealing with multilingual communities. Yiddish is a language used by the Jewish people of central and eastern Europe before the Holocaust. Its origin is a dialect of German, with words from Hebrew and other languages spoken in Europe. The number of Yiddish speakers in European countries varied, but all Baltic states had cultural and educational autonomy for minorities, thus providing conditions for the preservation of the national identity of Jews using Yiddish and Hebrew. In this study, the author defines linguistic biography as an empirical term that designates the dynamics of language choice, preferences, and language skills of a multilingual individual. The author also mentions that the term mother tongue cannot be used in the case of the speakers of the community chosen by her in the study cited above. Anna Verschik (2002) characterizes mother tongue based on four criteria: origin, identification, language competences, and function. Her study demonstrates that BL are tools that belong to sociological research on migration. They highlight the characteristics of the communities studied through the descriptions given by the speakers. At the same time, BLs provide all the necessary tools through which researchers understand the mechanisms of each community studied.

Another study by Jiri Nekvapil (2003), called *Language biographies and the analysis of language situations: on the life of the German community in the Czech Republic*, discusses the language biographies of German-speaking inhabitants of the Czech Republic. According to this author, a language biography is a biographical account in which the subject of the narrative is/are the language(s) learned throughout life and the way of using it/them by the person under investigation, whom Nekvapil calls the narrator.

In his research, to obtain the corpus, he applies the interview method, noting that the origin of the researcher influenced the answers given by the respondents. This is carefully analyzed by Nekvapil, as the origin of the interviewer raises the question of whether the interviews would be conducted by a person who belongs to a majority community in the Czech Republic or is a member of the community to which the respondent belongs.

## 2.3. Narrative approach

From a narrative point of view, BL offers a research tool in oral analysis. The analysis model applied to BL is the one proposed by Sophie Moirand, in the article *Quelles catégories descriptives pour la mise au jour des genres du discours?* (2003), which involves analysis on three levels of textualization: micro (linguistic marks), “meso” or median, for the textual sequential units (narrative, descriptive, argumentative, meta-/epilinguistic, cultural) constituting the macro (generic) level. For this type of analysis, each text must be sectioned in sequences, following the linguistic marks of each sequence type. After this first step, we must count each word affiliated to the sequences. The last step is to determine which one is predominant, giving the type of text we have (narrative, descriptive or argumentative). In Simina-Suciu’s PhD thesis, entitled *Language Biographies. Generic and cultural approach*, we analyse LB from this generic point of view, proving that these texts can be considered narrative. We use the model mentioned in the analysis of ninety-two texts and conclude that the narrative sequence is predominant and postulated by our foreign speakers.

### 3. Linguistic interferences

Linguistic interference is defined as any form in which the speaker uses linguistic phenomena taken from one language, with which he/she feels more familiar, in another language is called linguistic transfer. The purpose of the phenomenon is to communicate and convey the message, and in the absence of appropriate background, the speaker resorts to this form of communication. Often, linguistic interference occurs very naturally and is not noticed by the speaker as 'intruding' into the target language. Language interference, also called language transfer, occurs in bilinguals, and refers to the application of linguistic concepts from the L1 to the target language. (Weinreich, 1953) Language transfer can occur in all aspects of the language, lexis, grammar, word pronunciation or spelling rules. Being a widespread phenomenon, it is studied in several research fields, such as sociolinguistics, psychology, and linguistics.

Linguist Inna Negrescu-Babuş (2008, 2) explains this phenomenon as "a stage in the process of emergence of a certain structural peculiarity in the borrowing language system". From this definition, we can extrapolate to the idea that most borrowings from other languages result in two languages in contact, which can lead to enrichment of the target language's vocabulary. Borrowed words, which enter the language because of repeated use by speakers and will have the status of neologisms, end up influencing the structure of the language they enter. This is achieved by the fact that all borrowings, including linguistic stems, are assimilated by the language in which they are adopted and receive language-specific intonations or declensions.

Inna Negrescu-Babuş (2008, 102) considers interference as a "stage in the process of the emergence of an element or structural feature in the borrowing language system". As Negrescu-Babuş (2008, 102-103) notes, according to Haugen, the phenomenon occurs in three stages. For example, in the first stage, when the speaker tries to cope with new communicative situations, he or she opts to reproduce previously acquired linguistic patterns. In the second one, among the new structures that the speaker might have acquired are some that belong to a language other than the mother tongue. These might in turn be reproduced by the speaker. If the bilingual speaker reproduces new linguistic patterns in a context other than the one in which he or she acquired them, it can be said that he or she has 'borrowed' them from one language and introduced them into another. Following these steps, Haugen concludes that, in most cases, borrowing boils down to the idea of reproducing or imitating patterns encountered in one language, with which the speaker feels more familiar, in another language, where he lacks the lexical means to fulfil his communicative purposes.

Negrescu-Babuş (2008) reviews a classification of loan patterns described by Haugen (1964). Loanword is, in his opinion, the vaguest term of the group, since it can be used to name any of its categories. It is, however, usually limited to situations in which speakers borrow from a language both the meaning and the acoustic image of a word. Hybrid, the second type, is a term used to denote loanwords in which only part of the acoustic image has been taken over, the other being substituted with an indigenous portion. While the first case, loanword, was a phonemic substitution, the second is a partial morphemathical substitution.

Loan translation, called in French *calque*, defined as the literal translation of a word from one language into another, a possible extension of the phenomenon of hybridization when the speaker takes over the whole word or expression.

Semantic loan - Haugen sees this phenomenon as connected with linguistic computation. In this phenomenon, it is not the acoustic image of the word or expression that is imported into the target language, but its meaning. Basically, it is considered as attributing new meanings to a pre-existing word.

Immigrant communities, whose linguistic biographies are rich and interesting to follow and analyse, exhibit a wide variety of language interference or transfer. Speakers of these types of communities are

bilingual, and the language they learn and use within the community often exhibits hybrids between lexical elements taken from the native language of the community members and from the language of the country where they live. In this case, we are witnessing a dialect created and understood by some members of the community, which also has the status of a symbol of belonging, and not just a strictly formal, communicative role.

In the language biographies, we can observe these phenomena, as respondents are subjected to a communicative situation, often spontaneous, having to provide answers to questions, even if they do not have all the lexical elements necessary for the situation. The frequent use of the word "Romanian" instead of "Romanian" in structures such as "Romanian language" is noted. Another lexical confusion is the preference for the term "language" instead of "language". This is influenced by the mother tongue where the distinction between language and language is not conceptualized.

In the case of creating language biographies, the phenomena outlined above arise during communication out of the need to convey a message, to answer questions and to accomplish required tasks. What we observed from our interviews was that most of the time, students resorted to linguistic calculation when they wanted to express different things in Romanian but did not have the lexical means to convey their idea. Most of the time, the language used is English, as it is the first language of contact between the students and the teacher, also their experience in English is richer than in Romanian, which makes them more comfortable in using English, as it appears in the examples "Turkmen language", "limba arabic și ebric", "sunt arabic", "limba arabică", "slovenic limbi" (Interview 12). Also, another speaker inserts the word appearance in her speech, trying to compare Romanians and Ukrainians ("față și appearance"). Another translation we noticed was the one using the word "inglesă" after the Spanish word. The Spanish language was also copied in one of the interviews using the construction "a la tele" (instead of "la televizor") and the word "futbol".

As far as students who do not know English are concerned, a case of interference occurs in the non-use of the verb "to be", which is motivated by the fact that in Russian this verb is not used in the copulative position. On the other hand, for English speakers, the interference phenomenon occurs in the use of the conditional in past forms, so that it is replaced by a form of the perfect compound: "if I was in Romania, it was a great help to me in learning this language", instead of "if I had been" and "it would have been". Also, in the case of English speakers, to express age, they use the English structure with the verb "to be" instead of the Romanian verb "to have".

We mention that the examples we chose are some of the numerous we found in the corpus we created for our PhD thesis, by recording interviews and collecting questionnaires from the students who were at that time studying Romanian as a foreign language in the Preparatory Year program, enrolled at Technical University and Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca.

#### **4. Cultural shock**

One factor that goes hand in hand with the learning of the Romanian language is the country's cultural differences compared to the countries students come from. This phenomenon is referred to in the literature as culture shock and manifests itself after individuals arrive to live for a period in the host country.

Culture shock is an experience that occurs when a person changes residence and moves to another country. It is a normal process influenced by the new culture and the differences between *home* and the new country where the person experiencing this phenomenon moved. One researcher who has studied this phenomenon is Kalervo Oberg (1960). According to him, culture shock develops in four stages.

The first stage is called the honeymoon stage by the researcher, in which the differences between one's own culture and the new one is viewed with admiration. For example, new dishes are



appreciated, the person is tempted to visit as many new places as possible, they make friends, everything seems close to perfection. This stage fades quite quickly. From our LB, we selected the following examples: *ca romanii sunt oamenii foarte destul de cișe / inteligenții și amabili; toți oamenii din romania se seamănă atât de mult cu Ai*”, *“deci comunic doar cu colegii și cu profesorii mei”*. The texts we placed in this phase belonged to students who were studying only online because of the pandemic, so they did not have a direct contact with Romania, their perspective of the country being the same as their teachers’.

The second stage, negotiation, occurs after about three months, turning excitement into anxiety. One of the causes of this can be the language barrier, which can cause communication problems, and the individual becomes lonely, which can lead to frustration: *“spun că sunt în europa și dacă albania este în europa cred că nu este / pentru că avem mentalitate mai închisă, “dar cred că nu n-aveți ăăă poate / la fel ăăă timp ăăă cu cu noi / ăăă în elveția / suntem întotdeauna la ora 3 e la 3 \ sau 10 minut înainte / dar aici e poate un sfert după”*. These statements belong to students who spent little time in Romania, so their point of view has not been fully shaped.

The third stage, adjustment, takes place between six and twelve months. Currently, the individual manages to adjust to the new culture, develops routines that they follow, providing a minimum of comfort. The language barrier begins to fade, and with it the feeling of loneliness. Getting used to daily routines and accepting cultural contrasts leads to the gradual elimination of frustration, which makes the individual communicate more with others and relate to other people. In this stage, we place speakers who spent a longer period in the country and they started to accept the differences between the cultures: *“în ceea ce privește mentalitatea / românii se nu numără printre oamenii care știu cum să trăiască în societate / nu sunt rasiști / popoare românească este ospitaliere | din cultura lor românii regândesc să-și dezvolte cultura prin aplicarea spiritului descartiv”, “nu știu dacă toți românii sunt la fel sau nu / dar în conformitate cu oameni pe care i-am cunoscut / sunt de ajutor și foarte respectuoși | în ceea ce privește gândirea lor sau mentalitatea lor / îmi va mai dura puțin să îmi fac o idee”*. The final stage is adaptation, when the individual feels part of the new culture and accepts it. In this case, we can also speak of the bicultural stage. For this stage, speakers in our LB were so used to our culture, that some of them considered it as their own: *“Of, este foarte o întrebare foarte grea. Trăind aici de mult, nu mai știu, care mentalitate am eu, românească sau japoneză. Este total diferită fața de cea japoneză. Dar acum stau între ele și nu am cum să comentez, din păcate.”, “acum patru ani după ce am întâlnit-o pe soția mea”, “mentalitatea este cum să spun/ latină romanică | asta e normal dacă te înțelegi cu un român / și vrei să stabilești un punct de întâlnire/ o oră de întâlnire / știi de la bun început că trebuie să exagerezi un pic/ în loc de ora 14 și jumătate | să spui mai bine la ora 15”*.

Apart from the stages defined by O. Kalervo, we also identified two intermediary stages. The first one is that between negotiation and adjustment, where the speakers gave very short answers concerning the traditions, those being the only things they noticed: *“cultura românească / mi se pare cum ciudată mai ales sărbătorirea anumitor festivaluri precum mărțișor și dragobete dar este bine și distractivă”, “adică eu vin de o regiune nu spun rustică / rurală | dar este ăăă destul de apropiată ca mentalitate ca ca felul fel felul de fel felul de viață / și ăăă eu mă găsesc tot bine în românia”*. Giving short answers that they could not explain shows that they did not have a complete picture of Romania, and they needed more time to notice more facts.

The second one, between adjustment and adaptation, when the person becomes more aware of the differences between his culture and the new one, giving more elaborate answers, focusing on what he/she perceives as new: *“este diferență foarte mare pentru că oamenii de la siria e de la altă religia / e închiși decât aici | e cultură diferită totul e diferit”; “Romani sunt oameni foarte prietenoși și marinitos (mai ales la mancare). In plus sunt mai simpli și dezorganizat. Sunt oameni cu inimii calde (nu știu dacă pot să spun așa...adică cineva cine e tare drag) [...]”*. For this stage, we notice longer answers, and the usage of comparisons for giving explanations.

An important factor delineated from the BL, through the question *Crezi că dacă ai locui în România te-ar ajuta să înveți mai bine limba?* is the importance of the learning environment. The students who were studying online said that it would be beneficial for them to be in Romania during the Preparatory Year program, for a better understanding a more frequent use of the language. For example, in one of the answers, the speaker says: “*desigur \ da \ dacă aș trai în românie aș învăț repede limbă românie vorbit cu oa oamie de acolo \*”. From this, we understand their need to communicate, but also their need to be exposed to language. However, for one of the students, who did his preparatory year studies in Romania, communication with people is an essential element for learning, as is clear from his statement: “*desigur / în mod normal dacă practicat ceva des / terminat învățarea lui \ aș trebui să vorbim limba română cu oamenii / și ne-ajută să învățăm cuvinte noi și să le găsim mai repede \*”.

It should be noted that cultural adaptability is a subjective factor and it is difficult to establish universal parameters to measure it. However, we believe that the time spent in direct contact with the new culture and its language determines how well one adapts. As we have also observed from the examples presented, those who have had indirect contact with the country, placed in the honeymoon stage, have an idyllic image of Romania, while those who have lived here have gone through several stages.

## 5. Conclusions

Language biographies are useful in many fields, including language teaching, where they make a major contribution to tracking student progress. In our article we presented linguistic biographies as a tool for linguistic and sociological research, beyond the didactic sphere, in foreign language acquisition. The article presents two elements, which we consider important, derived from the analyzed linguistic biographies, namely linguistic interference, and culture shock. Each of these aspects was illustrated by authentic examples, taken from preparatory year students from the Babeș-Bolyai and Technical Universities in Cluj-Napoca. Our article aimed to show those linguistic peculiarities that appear in spontaneous communication, as students have no time to prepare for the interviews, but also the image of Romania that they create while studying in the preparatory year. The linguistic interferences used in the cited examples arose to communicate. Thus, in the absence of a word in Romanian, our students resorted to phrases, either in their native languages or in English. Also, by producing a language biography, important cultural aspects such as the stages of culture shock can be revealed. Therefore, we used examples to show the six stages of culture shock. In addition to the six stages of culture shock already existing in the specialized literature, we extracted, from our corpus, two more intermediate stages, which leads us to the idea that there is no clear line between the stages, but a gradual evolution, different for everyone. Linguistic biographies are the best way to make a cultural analysis of an immigrant community. As we presented in our article, these texts show a variety of linguistics and cultural aspects and can be analysed, proving our initial hypothesis.

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