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## INVESTIGATING L2-L1 TRANSFER AMONG BILINGUAL STUDENTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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### Abstract

Language constitutes an indispensable facet of human existence. It facilitates communication and perspective-sharing while allowing us to mould it to fit our unique needs. Foreign language proficiency adds an additional layer of such skills. Thus, people have been motivated to learn another language since time immemorial. As cultures and languages have intertwined and exposure to multimedia in different languages has grown, the number of bilinguals has grown, and with that, the opportunities for language transfer, as well.

Language learners in North Macedonia, especially the ones who learn English have been becoming increasingly more proficient. This progress has been so substantial that educators have observed cases of influence from the second language (L2) to the first language (L1). Educators have noted various instances where this influence occurs such as: capitalizing certain words that aren't meant to be capitalized in Macedonian, using English abbreviations incorrectly, mixing collocations, and atypical code-switching.

Using observation during non-English classes and breaks, this small-scale study aimed to qualitatively investigate and interpret the L2-L1 transfer patterns in primary school students, and discuss them in a wider context using additional electronic resources. The results highlighted the numerous instances of such interlanguage influence i.e., mistakes that students make when using their mother tongue due to English.

**Keywords:** Language transfer, L2-L1, English language, Macedonian language.

### 1. Introduction

Bilingualism as a phenomenon has been around for a long time, but contemporary bilingualism supported by modern technology is a more recent occurrence. First of all, we need to distinguish between the terms "multilingualism" and "bilingualism". Multilingualism is the use of several languages by a single speaker, while bilingualism is the person or people's ability to use two languages simultaneously, with no linguistic preference for one of them. Thanks to modern technology, the availability of languages (especially English) is at a very high level, so, with a few clicks online, you can get much information about any language and learn it, even at home. For this reason, the number of bilingual and multilingual people is constantly growing, especially in the last 20 years.

A bilingual person is one who has the linguistic ability to use two languages. Regarding the acquisition of a foreign language, it is essential to point out that children adapt more easily to the learning process and quickly acquire new knowledge.

Language transfer, a complex linguistic phenomenon, occupies a significant space in bilingual contexts, where individuals proficient in a second language (L2) navigate its interaction with their native language (L1). This transfer also referred to as "cross-linguistic influence", defined as the influence of one language on the acquisition of another, is an interesting area of research as it focuses on how two languages intertwine. And an even more interesting area of research is the influence of the non-native languages, on the native ones, in countries where the non-native language isn't part of the official everyday use, such as North Macedonia.

### ***1.1. English-Macedonian Bilingualism in North Macedonia***

Depending on how bilingualism is defined and categorized, in the context of North Macedonia, one could argue that all students could be considered early bilinguals. This is primarily due to the fact that students in N. Macedonia start learning English as a mandatory subject in the very first year of education. Alongside this institutional bilingualism applicable to all students, some of them can further be classified as early simultaneous bilinguals, as well. These students, mostly due to the influence of modern technology, have essentially acquired English alongside their native Macedonian language. Thus, they've developed advanced language skills and are capable of communicating seamlessly in both Macedonian and English, demonstrating a comparable level of proficiency.

As these young speakers learn both languages simultaneously, they develop language skills in both, and they strive to understand and implement the differing language systems. Since they are essentially learning two languages at the same time, a certain interference is bound to happen. Researchers usually focus on L1 to L2 influence, since often, it is the native language that influences the second one, but in this case, the two languages are comparable and thus L2 (non-native) influence on L1 (native) can be discussed.

### ***1.2. Language Transfer***

Language transfer is a bidirectional phenomenon, which includes not only forward transfer but also backward transfer. Language transfer, however, is usually studied in the L1-L2 context. It is said that when individuals learn a second language, they often carry over linguistic features, habits, or structures from their native language, which can either facilitate or hinder second language acquisition.

It is important to note, however, that language transfer can occur in the opposite way, and can even be discussed in an L3 learning scenario. For instance, one could study the influence of Macedonian on the second language – English – acquisition, and then the joint influence on the acquisition of a third foreign language such as German. Regardless of the direction of the transfer, according to Oldin (1993), such cross-language transfer can be discussed in terms of positive transfer, which facilitates language acquisition, and negative transfer, which hinders language acquisition. In any case, this interference can manifest in various linguistic aspects, including pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and idiomatic expressions. Some common examples of this include mispronunciation of certain words and letters, problematic word order, and incorrect, literal translations from one language to the other.

## **2. Broader research context**

Language transfer can be observed in different scenarios and some authors like Zhang (2023) claim that age has little effect on language transfer and is only one of the factors that can influence it, rather than the crucial, main factor.

As the world is becoming increasingly more bilingual, and even multilingual, the issue of language transfer is becoming ever more prominent, and thus, the interest of researchers from around the globe increases. In a Macedonian context, Minova-Gjurkova (2003) emphasizes the influence of English on the Macedonian lexicon. Her findings show that numerous loanwords from English are present in a large number of areas and these loans penetrate into the journalistic style and from there into everyday interactions between people. Some examples that she mentions include: bestseller, rocker etc.

Furthermore, Gjurkova (2006) and Pandeva (2011) analyze the spelling patterns in various advertisements and find numerous mistakes in the use of capital letters, which they claim are the result of the influence of the English language. Gjurkova (2008) also notes the influence of English in mixed use of Cyrillic and Latin letters, and mid-sentence code-switching as in „Монитор со најбрз **Response time** во светот“ [Monitor with the fastest **response time** in the world]. She also notes the formation of new verb forms, that are based on English verbs, by adding the suffix -из(ира)/-iz(ira), as in: connect → конектира (konekt + ira), target → таргетира (target + ira), etc.

Similarly, Karapejovski (2011) investigates the use of English-like constructions (or collocations) that are literally translated into Macedonian, such as the collocation “to make money”.



He notes that many use the phrase "He makes money" as such, directly translated into Macedonian, instead of using another verb-noun collocation that would be more in line with the Macedonian rules and language policies, like "earning money".

Janusheva (2021) also investigates the English-on-Macedonian influence in the context of scientific research in higher education institutions in North Macedonia. She has found that English influences the use of Macedonian on almost all linguistic levels, due to the extensive use of literature in English by researchers who work on papers and insufficient knowledge of the Macedonian language system.

Aljović & Grubešić (2016) also study linguistic transfer in a Balkan context. They point out that most language transfer studies focus on the influence that L1 may have on the comprehension and production of L2. Noticing this research gap, they investigate whether cross-linguistic influence or language transfer occurs when L2 is rendered into L1, i.e., to what extent L2 can influence the production of L1.

Similarly, on a global level, Chen (2006) focuses on the issue of language transfer in an L2 environment. While he also discusses the forward L1-L2 transfer, he also studies backward transfer and states that (negative) backward transfer due to English, occurs in Chinese learners' L1 writing at the sentence level, mainly in the word order and in the use of prepositions. Dlugosz (2021) investigates L2 (English) effects on L1 (Polish) grammar. Dlugosz's study focuses on two grammatical phenomena: anaphoric object pronouns, which depend on the context and the speaker's intention, and verb placement in wh-questions, which follows fixed rules. He finds that multilingual learners tend to accept overt anaphoric object pronouns in Polish more often than monolingual speakers, suggesting that L2 does indeed influence L1 at the syntax-pragmatics level.

Overall, these studies show that L2 significantly influences L1, even in non-bilingual settings. Despite the wealth of research on language transfer, there are still gaps in our understanding, particularly in specific linguistic contexts, such as the limited availability of studies exploring L2-L1 transfer in young bilinguals in North Macedonia – a research gap that we are trying to address.

### 3. Methods

To investigate and describe L2-L1 transfer in North Macedonia, this study employed the qualitative paradigm and the observation method for data collection. Students from the primary school of "KrumoVolnarski" in Topolchani, were observed during non-English classes and breaks to determine interlanguage patterns and English-to-Macedonian influence.

Unstructured observation was employed, to allow participants to behave naturally without predetermined categories or guidelines, facilitating the identification of genuine interlanguage patterns. Participants' spontaneous behavior was then observed in their natural environment, to ensure that their behaviors and language use were reflective of their typical interactions and communication patterns. Collected observational data was then subjected to thematic analysis. This process involved identifying recurring patterns, themes, and trends related to L2-L1 transfer. The noted mistakes due to such transfer were then put in a wider context and additional resources such as media titles and webpages were consulted. All examples originally in Macedonian were translated into English by the authors.

Ethical considerations were adhered to, as participant confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. As for the limitations, the study only focused on a single school, which may restrict the extent to which the findings of this study can be generalized across broader educational contexts. In addition, capturing all instances of language transfer within the classroom environment, might not have been feasible during such limited time. Future research endeavors could consider expanding the study's scope to encompass a wider range of schools to provide a more comprehensive understanding of L2-L1 language transfer in North Macedonia.

The research received no external funding and the authors declare no conflict of interest that may obstruct objectivity and validity.

### 4. Analysis, results and discussion

During our observation, several L2-L1 transfer instances were noted:

#### 4.1. Capital Letter for Months/Days

A notable instance of the L2-L1 transfer, observed during this research, involves the capitalization of months and days. In Macedonian, months and days are conventionally spelled in lowercase, while in English, these nouns are capitalized. It was thus observed that due to the influence of English, students have begun to apply this capitalization in their Macedonian writing as well, spelling “Јуни/June” and “Среда/Wednesday” like so in their notebooks.

This shift highlights the impact of English language exposure on students' native language use and shows the intricate ways in which linguistic systems intersect and evolve within the dynamic realm of bilingualism. In this case, the students' exposure to English has led to the transfer of English language conventions into their Macedonian writing. This transfer can manifest in various linguistic aspects, including grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and, as observed, capitalization. The observed shift in capitalization norms indicates the impact of English language exposure on the students' native language proficiency. While bilingualism can undoubtedly provide cognitive benefits, it can also lead to linguistic interference. In this case, the students may be more likely to make capitalization errors in Macedonian due to their exposure to English.

The influence of English on Macedonian writing, particularly on capitalization, extends beyond the classroom and into broader society. Media outlets, like individuals, inadvertently incorporate English language conventions into their content. Thus, a number of similar mistakes are noted in different media outlets in North Macedonia, for instance:

1. Оваа година на 8ми и 9ти Септември, во резортот Porto Karas во Халкидики, Грција, ќе се одржи петтиот по ред турнир на голферите од Македонија [*This year, on the 8th and 9th September, in the Porto Karas resort in Halkidiki, Greece, the 5th tournament of the Macedonian golfers will be held*] (GFM, 5.9.2023).

This shows the direct influence of English on Macedonian as the month in this title has been spelled with a capital “S”, although the Macedonian orthography rules state that months are to be spelled in lowercase (Orthography of the Macedonian Language, 2017: 52).

#### 4.2. Issues with Abbreviations

Another interesting phenomenon to note was the use of abbreviations like “OMG/Oh, My God” while communicating in Macedonian. This abbreviation, in particular, is used to denote surprise or shock, though sometimes it can also be used as an interjection, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

On 3 occasions during our observation, students used “OMГ/OMG” when communicating in Macedonian, pronouncing it as /o m g/ instead of /əv'ɛm'dʒi/. This is interesting to note as students didn't simply code-switch and use the English IPA pronunciation, but they used the “Macedonian” phonetic pronunciation of the three letters that make the abbreviation.

The students' pronunciation of “OMG” reflects a significant level of phonetic adaptation. Instead of using the English phonetic transcription /əv'ɛm'dʒi/ for *OMG*, they have chosen to utilize the Macedonian phonetic equivalents for each letter. This adaptation demonstrates a keen awareness of the Macedonian phonological system and a deliberate effort to align the borrowed English abbreviation with the sounds of their native language. This may also underscore the hybrid nature of the students' language use as it shows how bilinguals such as them can create a linguistic blend that incorporates elements from both languages, they are proficient in.

Some issues with abbreviations in Macedonian due to English can be seen outside of the primary educational context. For instance, many higher education institutions use the abbreviation for “Assistant”. However, they tend to spell it like it is spelled in English, with a double consonant – Ass.

The Macedonian word for “Assistant” – „Асистент“ isn't spelled with double “S”. Yet, numerous reputable institutions use the transcription of the English abbreviation and spell it as “Acc./Ass.”

#### 4.3. Mid-Sentence Code-Switching

Code-switching, the practice of alternating between two or more languages or dialects within a single discourse, is a linguistic phenomenon that occurs across the globe and has thus been the subject of extensive research. In the case of the observed young English-Macedonian bilingual

students, this code-switching is particularly noteworthy as it takes place in a monolingual environment, in non-English classes, and during breaks – times when English is rarely used.

The students that were observed during our study seemed to often code-switch – they incorporated single English words into their Macedonian speech, often transitioning from one language to the other mid-sentence. What adds another interesting dimension to this practice is the adaptation of some of the English words to Macedonian linguistic norms. This process, which we dubbed as "Macedonification" involves applying Macedonian inflections for plurals and affixes for derivation to English words. For example, an English word like "computer" might become „компјутери“ (pronounced as “kompjuteri”) with the Macedonian plural suffix **-и/-и** added at the end.

Four distinct such examples were observed:

1. Те **бејга** сигурно [*I'm sure he's baiting you*];
2. Видов имаше **сториња** дека биле кај \_\_\_ [*I saw on their stories that they were at \_\_\_'s place*];
3. Кај Стефан имаше **челинц** за \_\_\_ [*Stefan posted a challenge about \_\_\_*];
4. Се **логирав** ама не можеше нешто, ме **кикна**... [*I logged in, but it didn't work, it kicked me out*].

In the first example, students have added the Macedonian derivational affix **-а** to turn the English noun “bait” into a Macedonian-sounding verb. In the second example, the students used the inflectional affix for plural **-иња/-иња** to add a Macedonian affix to the English noun “story”. In the third example, no attempts to “Macedonify” the word were observed. Thus, the English noun “challenge” was added mid-sentence upon code-switching, as is. In the fourth example, the Macedonian derivational affix **-ира/-ира** plus the affix **-в/-в** for first person singular, past tense was added to either the English noun “log” or the English phrasal verb “log in”. The exact morphological process is difficult to determine with observation only. A similar notion is noted in the last word in the fourth example where students have added the derivational affix **-на/-на** to the English verb “kick”.

The code-switching observed in these young bilinguals may be attributed to linguistic interference, where features of one language influence the structure and vocabulary of another. This can be a natural outcome of bilingualism, especially among children who are in the process of acquiring language skills. Such code-switching can also serve certain pragmatic functions, such as emphasizing a point, filling gaps in vocabulary, or conveying a specific nuance (mostly to do with video games, technology, or social networks) that is better expressed in English over Macedonian.

A similar notion of mid-sentence code-switching is also seen in some marketing campaigns. For example, the chain of drugstores, DM (Drogerie Markt), often has campaigns that employ code-switching in the middle of the sentence/phrase:

1. Мојата **beauty** рутина е секогаш поволна [*My beauty routine is always affordable*] (DM, 2.9.2023).
2. Моите **must-haves**: Оптимизам, енергија и портокаловабоја [*My must-haves: Optimism, energy and the color orange*] (DM, 12.4.2023).
3. Мојот омилен **look**? Мирен, силен и виолетов! [*My favorite look? Calm, strong, and purple!*] (DM, 29.3.2023).

The use of such code-switching in marketing campaigns such as the ones above is often a deliberate strategy to appeal to a bilingual or multilingual audience. In addition, code-switching can serve as an attention-grabbing technique in advertising. When consumers encounter a mix of languages within a marketing message, it can pique their interest and encourage them to pay closer attention to the content.

## 5. Conclusion

The study of bilingualism unveils fascinating insights into the intricate interactions between languages and the evolving linguistic behaviors of individuals. In this research, we explored the impact of English language exposure on young English-Macedonian bilingual students in North Macedonia, revealing noteworthy instances of language transfer and code-switching. One prominent observation was the capitalization of months and days in Macedonian writing, influenced by English conventions. Abbreviations, our research found, such as the popular “OMG”, have also made their way into Macedonian speech, often accompanied by noteworthy phonetic adaptations that further

highlight the dynamic nature of language contact. Additionally, our research has identified instances of mid-sentence code-switching, both among students and in marketing campaigns.

We hope that insights from our research will extend beyond the confines of this study, as they can provide valuable information for teachers and can inform them how to effectively address transfer-related challenges in the classroom, and promote balanced language development in bilingual learners.

All in all, this, albeit small, study addresses the research gap in the availability of studies on L2-L1 transfer in young bilinguals in North Macedonia, and highlights the need for further research in this specific linguistic context.

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### Excerpts

- 29.3.2023. Мојот омилен look? Мирен, силен и виолетов! [My favorite look? Calm, strong, and purple!], DM: <https://shorturl.at/djyA2>.
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- 2.9.2023. Мојата beauty рутина е секогаш поволна [My beauty routine is always affordable]. DM, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=312337314785724&set=pcb.312340158118773>.
- 11.9.2023. Оваа година на 8ми и 9ти Септември, во резортот Porto Karas во Халкидики, Грција, ќе се одржи петтиот по ред турнир на голферите од Македонија. [This year, on the 8th and 9th September, in the Porto Karas resort in Halkidiki, Greece, the 5th tournament of the Macedonian golfers will be held]. GFM: <https://shorturl.at/cgFU9>.