

LINGUISTIC INTERFERENCE: THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT, ITS CURRENT INTERPRETATION, AND ITS CORRELATION WITH RELATED NOTIONS

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Abstract:

This article examines the multifaceted concept of linguistic interference, tracing its historical evolution, surveying current interpretations, and analyzing its relationship to adjacent notions such as borrowing, cross-linguistic influence, and contact-induced change. Drawing on a range of key scholarly contributions—from foundational works by U. Weinreich to more recent studies by Zh. Bagana and others—the discussion highlights the ongoing lack of consensus regarding both the scope and the precise definition of interference. Furthermore, the paper investigates how various terminological proposals, intended to clarify or replace “interference,” have often introduced additional ambiguities. In light of this complexity, the author advocates for an umbrella definition of interference—one that encompasses diverse processes (phonetic, phonological, syntactic, lexical, and semantic) occurring in any direction (from the first language to the second and vice versa) and at multiple levels (speech- vs. language-level interference). The argument is that adopting such a broader framework allows for a more nuanced analysis of how languages mutually affect each other in contact situations, whether among entire speech communities or in individual bilingual speakers.

Keywords: Linguistic interference; borrowing; cross-linguistic influence; contact linguistics; bilingualism; speech-level interference; language-level interference; multidirectional influence.

Introduction

In an era defined by rapid globalization and the intensification of language contact, the phenomenon of linguistic interference has attained renewed significance. First systematically treated by Uriel Weinreich in the mid-twentieth century, interference has since been explored by numerous linguists who have offered divergent interpretations and theoretical positions on its nature and scope. Despite the wealth of scholarly attention, a consistent and universally accepted definition remains elusive, with researchers variously subsuming interference under broader or narrower frameworks. Some, following Weinreich’s expansive approach, regard all contact-induced changes—whether phonetic, lexical, or grammatical—as manifestations of interference. Others make more explicit distinctions between interference and other processes such as borrowing, convergence, or cross-linguistic influence.



This divergence of perspectives arises partly from the complexity inherent in bilingual and multilingual contexts, where languages can exert influence on each other in multiple, often overlapping ways. For instance, structural and semantic changes in one language may result from sustained contact with another, but the precise mechanisms—be they intentional or unintentional, individual or collective—are not always clearly delineated. Such debates are further complicated by the introduction of competing terminologies, which, rather than resolving ambiguities, may amplify them. Scholars like D. Winford and C. Myers-Scotton, for example, propose “contact-induced change” or “contact phenomena” as alternatives to the notion of “interference,” arguing that these terms might better capture the breadth of interlingual processes. Yet many others—Zh. Bagana, E. A. Baklanova, L. I. Barannikova, among others—continue to highlight the utility of “interference” as an overarching label, while calling for greater clarity in its usage.

Against this backdrop, the present article aims to (1) map the various definitions and theoretical perspectives on interference; (2) clarify the relationship between interference and related concepts, especially borrowing; and (3) propose a broad, multidimensional conception of interference capable of accommodating multiple directions and levels of language influence. Embracing a wide range of scholarship—from foundational works to contemporary studies—this discussion argues that an umbrella approach to interference is not only theoretically coherent but also empirically robust. Recognizing both speech-level and language-level interference, as well as the potential for mutual influence from a second language back onto the first, is essential for capturing the true complexity of language contact scenarios. In doing so, this article endeavors to offer a refined perspective that underscores the continued relevance of interference as a pivotal construct in contact linguistics.

In today’s world, the processes of interaction and mutual influence among various cultures and languages have significantly intensified, lending particular importance and relevance to the study of language contact and the phenomenon of interference that emerges in its course. The issue of interference is one of the most critical in discussions of language contacts. As L. I. Barannikova aptly notes, investigating the principles and patterns of language interaction is impossible without examining interference [Barannikova, 1972].

Numerous scholarly works have been devoted to the study of interference and interference-induced changes, including those by U. Weinreich (1953/1979), Yu. A. Zhluktenko (1962, 1974), T. P. Ilyashenko (1963, 1970), L. I. Barannikova (1966, 1972), M. Vereshchagina (1968, 1969), N. A. Baskakova (1972), E. Haugen (1972), V. Yu. Rozentsveig (1972), L. V. Shcherba (1974), G. M. Burdenyuk (1978), Yu. Yu. Deshirieva (1981), A. E. Karlinsky (1980, 1990, 2011), Yu. L. Blagonravova (1983), N. B. Mechkovskaya (1983), V. A. Vinogradov (1983, 1990), S. Thomason and T. Kaufman (1988), Van Coetsem (1988, 2000), T. Odlin (1989), C. Myers-Scotton (2002, 2006), A. Yu. Rusakova (2003), L. P. Krysina (1974), D. Winford (2002, 2003, 2010), A. Aikhenvald (2002, 2007), V. V. Alimova (2003, 2004, 2005), Zh. Bagana (2004, 2006, 2008, 2009), B. Heine and T. Kuteva (2005), E. A. Baklanova (2009), R. I. Khashimova (2019), among others.

As the linguist Zh. Bagana emphasizes, when working with the concept of interference, one encounters the problem of a lack of unified and widely accepted terminology—a problem



compounded by the relative insufficiency of research dedicated to this issue [Bagana, 2008; Bagana, Khapilina, 2016].

The Term “Interference”: In Search of Alternatives

It should be noted that in recent years, several foreign researchers have avoided using the term “interference,” arguing that it lacks a clear definition and carries, in their view, a connotation of “intentionality” in English. At the same time, various alternative terms have been proposed, though these terms themselves also lack precise definitions and further exacerbate terminological inconsistency.

For instance, D. Winford replaces the term “interference” with “contact-induced change” and “cross-linguistic influence (CLI)” as general labels that can include all possible “forms of one language’s impact on another” [Winford, 2003, p. 13]. In recent years, these terms have been widely adopted by foreign linguists.

Moreover, since the late twentieth century, some scholars of second language acquisition (e.g., D. I. Slobin, 1985; E. Kellerman & M. Sharwood Smith, 1986; G. Zobl, 1984; Y. G. Butler, 2013) have used the term “cross-linguistic influence” instead of “interference.” F. Van Coetsem (1988, 2000) employs the term “transfer,” distinguishing two types: borrowing and imposition. However, as L. Ortega notes, terms such as “interference” and “transfer” have become less popular because their use implies that cross-linguistic influence “hinders foreign language learning” [Ortega, 2019, p. 415].

B. Heine and T. Kuteva employ the term “contact-induced influence,” similarly interpreting it broadly as the transfer “of linguistic material from one language to another (form, meaning, the simultaneous transfer of form and meaning, syntactic relations, or any combination thereof)” [Heine, Kuteva, 2005, pp. 2, 7]. At the same time, they acknowledge that “interference” is a universal term, encompassing all processes driven by language contact [ibid.].

According to C. Myers-Scotton, in English the term “interference” implies intentionality, and she therefore proposes using “contact phenomena” instead. As Myers-Scotton points out, contact phenomena can manifest in various forms, whose essence lies in the joint use of elements from two languages in a certain way or in the influence of one language’s grammar on another [Myers-Scotton, 2006, p. 234].

Additionally, a number of scholars view interference-related phenomena as manifestations of “convergence.” Foreign linguists differ in how they define and employ this term. A. Aikhenvald, for example, interprets convergence in a very broad sense, arguing that languages in contact gradually become more similar to each other [Aikhenvald, 2007]. C. Myers-Scotton, however, uses the term more narrowly and points out the asymmetry of sociopolitical relations among different countries and speakers of different languages. She considers convergence to be a phenomenon related to the ongoing processes of language attrition, language shift, language death, and the formation of creole languages, resulting in linguistic transformations in which morphemes come from one language while the corresponding abstract vocabulary is derived from another [Myers-Scotton, 2002; Myers-Scotton, 2006].

Nonetheless, a considerable number of foreign researchers continue to use the term “interference” (I. Mennen, 2004; J. Durlak, S. Szewczyk, M. Muszynski & Z. Wodniecka, 2016; P. Anat, T. Degani, S. Awawdy, R. Yassin & N. Koren, 2017; L. Newlin-Łukowicz, 2015; G.



Smith, 2002; D. Quinto-Pozos, 2008; S. Thomason, 2009, 2010, among others). In Russian, the term “интерференция” does not carry similar connotations, and the variety of alternative terms proposed by foreign authors lacks precision, only further complicating the terminological situation. There is no consensus among foreign linguists: they study (mutual) language influence under different labels and theoretical frameworks. One gets the impression that the numerous proposed substitutes for “interference” simply underscore certain aspects of the complex process of (mutual) language influence. Given these considerations, using “interference” as an umbrella term to denote the influence of languages on each other in contact situations seems justified, although its content requires clarification and more precise definition.

The Concepts of “Interference” and “Borrowing”

Researchers vary in their interpretations and understandings of the term “interference,” resulting in numerous views on what interference actually is. The existence of multiple approaches to interpreting this concept serves, on the one hand, as an indicator of its relevance and, on the other, highlights the insufficient methodological elaboration of the issue [Bagana, Xapilina, 2016]. Several approaches can be distinguished in how linguists understand and apply the term “interference,” as well as how they view the relationship between interference and borrowing. It must be acknowledged, however, that there is no clear consensus on what should be considered borrowing and what should be considered interference. One group of scholars employs a very broad interpretation of “interference,” effectively merging the notions of interference and borrowing:

U. Weinreich (1953), Yu. A. Zhluktenko (1974), S. V. Semchensky (1973), L. V. Shcherba (1958), R. M. Gule (1971), R. I. Khashimov (2019), R. I. Khashimov and E. A. Sotnikova (2021), among others. At the same time, some scholars view interference as a subtype of borrowing (A. Aikhenvald, 2002, 2007; L. Trask, 2000). Other researchers distinguish between the concepts of “interference” and “borrowing,” indicating their differences or even contrasting them: E. A. Baklanova (2009), J. Heath (1993), S. Thomason and T. Kaufman (1988), L. I. Barannikova (1972), Zh. Bagana (2008), E. A. Karlinsky (2011), among others.

Supporters of the broader interpretation view interference as encompassing all types of changes triggered by interlingual links and linguistic contact, including borrowing. U. Weinreich identifies two types of linguistic interference:

1. Borrowing or transfer of elements from one language into another.
2. Interlingual identification of elements from the two languages, wherein one element is modified under the influence of the corresponding element in the other language [Weinreich, 1979].

Yu. A. Zhluktenko likewise interprets “interference” very broadly, asserting that it includes all structural linguistic changes—any shifts in the meanings, properties, and composition of language units that emerge as a consequence of language contact [Zhluktenko, 1974]. He regards borrowing as one type of lexical interference.

On the other hand, A. Aikhenvald, following L. Trask (2000), defines borrowing as the “transfer of characteristics of any type from one language to another as a result of contact” [Aikhenvald, 2007, p. 4]. Both linguists believe that “interference” is an unintentional transfer of linguistic features from a first language into a second, noting that this relates primarily to second language



acquisition. Hence, in their view, interference is one variety of borrowing.

Zh. Bagana (2008), and Zh. Bagana and E. V. Khapilina (2016), in line with U. Weinreich, treat all contact-induced changes in a language system as “interference,” including lexical borrowing. At the same time, Zh. Bagana points out that the process of interference differs from that of borrowing. Borrowings may be occasional or singular, whereas interference implies intensive contact and large-scale borrowing. Borrowing requires a situation of language contact, but bilingualism is not always essential; borrowing can occur at a social rather than an individual level [Bagana, 2008].

S. Thomason and T. Kaufman define “interference” as any change in contacting languages and identify two types of interference: borrowing and language shift (substratum interference). They thereby address two different contact scenarios: the borrowing of foreign elements while preserving the language undergoing interference on the one hand, and language shift on the other [Thomason, Kaufman, 1988].

In his work *On the Concept of Language Mixing*, L. V. Shcherba distinguishes three types of interference effects:

1. Foreign borrowings,
2. Modifications in one language induced by another language,
3. Phenomena resulting from inadequate mastery of a given language [Shcherba, 1958, p. 41].

As E. A. Baklanova observes, the second type of interference singled out by L. V. Shcherba can likewise be considered with respect to the phenomenon of linguistic interference. According to Baklanova, interference in a language differs from borrowing in that, under borrowing, elements of the donor language system penetrate the recipient language system and become adapted to it, whereas under interference, it is the system of the borrowing language itself that undergoes modification [Baklanova, 2009].

J. Heath views “interference” as structural and/or semantic changes in the forms of one language under the influence of another, contrasting this with the direct borrowing of linguistic elements (morphemes, words, etc.) [Heath, 1989]. A. Backus similarly classifies as “borrowings” those elements (words or grammatical constructions) that have become part of another language, whereas “interference” (or “transfer”) involves the use of non-lexical material (grammatical models, semantic features, etc.) from one language in another [Backus, 2021].

L. I. Barannikova defines interference as “a change in the structure or structural elements of one language under the influence of another” [Barannikova, 1972, p. 88]. She considers interference and borrowing not only distinct phenomena but, in many respects, diametrically opposed, noting that differentiating borrowing from interference helps clarify the nature of interference. Barannikova also emphasizes that “when elements of one system penetrate another through borrowing, they undergo various forms of assimilation; under interference, however, it is the ‘receiving’ system that undergoes change due to the emergence of new units and new types of relationships among structural elements” [Barannikova, 1972, pp. 89–90].

Some researchers regard interference as a unidirectional process, focusing exclusively on interference from the first (native) language into the second (foreign) language. This perspective is reflected, for example, in the works of V. A. Vinogradov (1990), Z. Kh. Dzankhotova, E. I. Gorbulinskaya, and E. L. Kokova (2016), among others. By contrast, L. A. Jakobovits identifies two types of interference—“interference” and “backlash interference.” He uses U. F. Mackey’s



(1965) definition of interference as the use of elements of one language in speech in another language [Mackey, 1965], while “backlash interference” is characterized by “the infiltration of the foreign language being learned into the native language and the modification of the native language under the influence of the foreign language” [Jakobovits, 1968, p. 33]. Reverse interference is also discussed by N. Yu. Avina (2000), M. Ya. Glovinskaya (2001), M. A. Kalyuga and N. V. Ryan (2003), S. E. Kuzmina (2009), N. V. Matyushina (2015), L. P. Tarnaeva (2008), Zh. Bagana (2011), Yu. S. Blazhievich (2011), among others.

L. Johanson (2000) proposes the terms “adoption” and “imposition” depending on the direction of interference: in the first case, features move from the second (foreign) language to the first (native) language, while in the second they move in the opposite direction. V. V. Babushkina (2017) similarly distinguishes between first-order and second-order interference. Transfer of norms from the first language to the second is generally the most common, whereas norms of the second language are not always transferred to the first. Consequently, distinguishing “direct” and “reverse” interference appears justified, with the baseline direction being from the first language to the second.

A. E. Karlinsky (2011) takes a critical stance toward the broad interpretation of interference by U. Weinreich and his followers, arguing that it is overly “abstract and heterogeneous.” He also underscores the importance of considering the direction of language influence. Karlinsky restricts the term “interference” to deviations from the norm occurring in a bilingual’s speech in the second language under the influence of the native language. For deviations in a bilingual’s speech in the native language resulting from the second language, he uses the term “intercalation.” In his view, interference and intercalation are purely speech-based phenomena. However, a speech phenomenon may eventually become entrenched in the language. Second-language elements introduced through intercalation into the first language may become a key factor in language change. As Karlinsky notes, in intercalation, lexical items (words and phrases) predominantly penetrate the speech of the native language. Thus, this essentially involves lexical borrowings, which can also be described in the same terms as intercalation. In Karlinsky’s analysis, borrowing is the set of intercalation phenomena that lose their strictly individual-speech character and acquire broader social significance, eventually becoming elements of the language system. He proposes calling this incorporation of foreign elements through intercalated speech into the system of the first language “transcalation” [Karlinsky, 2011, p. 95]. Karlinsky uses the term “speech mutation” for the results of language contact at the speech level and “linguistic diffusion” for changes in the language system itself. At the speech mutation stage, Karlinsky distinguishes interference and intercalation, whereas at the linguistic diffusion stage he distinguishes transference and transcalation. The first stage refers to synchronous interaction that does not affect the language system itself, while the second stage involves changes in the language system caused by the infiltration of foreign elements (units and models), ultimately leading to its restructuring.

A. E. Karlinsky and many others stress the need to differentiate between speech-level interference and language-level interference (L. I. Barannikova, 1972; R. I. Khashimov, 2019; U. Weinreich, 1953, 1979). The broader term “linguistic interference” encompasses both speech-level and language-level interference. Interference on the speech level manifests in norms of speech, but cases of speech-level interference can develop into language-level interference,



producing corresponding shifts in the language system itself. From both social and linguistic perspectives, one can discern the following interference scenarios:

1. Interference arising from contact among language communities, speakers of a particular language or dialect.
2. Interference resulting from the interaction between the native (first) language and a foreign (second) language during the process of acquiring the latter [Barannikova, 1972].

Following U. Weinreich and Zh. Bagana, we also propose relying on a broad interpretation of the term “interference,” since the phenomenon is multifaceted and multidimensional. In our view, interference encompasses *all* types of changes (phonetic-phonological, syntactic, lexical-semantic, etc.) that emerge in languages in contact, in *any* direction (from the first language to the second and vice versa). At the same time, interference can be either speech-level or language-level. Building on the approaches of U. Weinreich, L. A. Jakobovits, E. A. Karlinsky, among others, we therefore conceive of “interference” in its broadest sense, while distinguishing between language-level and speech-level interference and also taking into account its direction.

CONCLUSION

The study of interference is among the most significant yet still insufficiently explored issues in the theory of language contact. Despite the central importance of interference in research on language interaction, there remains no unified position among linguists regarding this concept. Recently, a number of foreign scholars have proposed various alternative terms; however, these terms generally lack precision and, to some extent, exacerbate the existing terminological inconsistency. Consequently, employing the umbrella term “interference” to denote the mutual influence of languages in contact situations appears warranted.

We advocate a broad interpretation of “interference,” given the phenomenon’s multifaceted and multi-aspect nature. In our view, interference encompasses all types of changes—phonetic-phonological, syntactic, lexical-semantic, and so forth—that arise in contacting languages in any direction (from the first language to the second and vice versa) at both the level of speech norms and the level of the linguistic system.

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