

A COMPARISON OF SELECTED PHONETIC, GRAMMATICAL AND LEXICAL FEATURES AND EQUIVALENTS IN CONTEMPORARY GERMAN AND ENGLISH

Peter Halasz, Hana Vancova

Faculty of Education, Trnava University in Trnava, Priemyselna 4, 918 43 Trnava, Slovakia

Abstract

The aim of the authors of the submitted paper is to compare selected phonetic, morphosyntactic and lexical features of the contemporary German and English, and on the basis of the detected congruence, partial congruence and difference to outline linguodidactic possibilities of raising effectiveness in the process of acquisition of German or English as the target languages. Compared features showing congruence or partial congruence provide the possible reinforcement of positive transfer in learning. Mother tongue (e. g. Slovak) does not have to represent the most suitable source language. A related Germanic language appears to be more effective – the previously chosen English or German. This pluralistic approach could possibly be reflected in the future also in the process of creation of national German or English textbook as the target languages in language acquisition.

Key words: English, German, target language, phonetics, morphology, syntax, lexicology

INTRODUCTION

Proximity of English and German has been described and analysed in many research studies. The similarities and differences can help the learners of one of these two languages successfully acquire the other one. For the learners of these languages, it is important to learn the similarities and differences in order to either avoid the most common mistakes in communication, or to capitalize on the previous knowledge. The submitted study contrasts selected linguistic issues in the contemporary German and English on phonetic, morphological and syntactic level.

1. PHONETIC LEVEL

The correct pronunciation is the basis of all verbal communication. On the level of individual segments, it can be said that the vocalic inventories of both languages differ – some of the phonemes do not exist in one of the languages, but they do exist in the other one; some phonemes have the same quality, and some of the phonemes may be in allophonic relation – they may be position variants of the same sound. On the level of suprasegmental phonology, the most distinguishing suprasegmental features of German and English are the assimilation and the word stress.

1.1 Assimilation

Assimilation, mostly occurring at higher rate in connected speech, can be classified as the loss of a characteristic feature of a phoneme and gaining the quality of the preceding (progressive assimilation; also called coalescence, coalescent assimilation) or the following phoneme (regressive assimilation).

In English, both types of assimilation are possible, but in general, assimilation in English is not considered by Roach (2009) as the key characteristics of English pronunciation for the foreign learners to learn and recognize.

The consonants change in English (Roach, 2009):

1. *according to place of articulation* – if an alveolar consonant is followed by a non-alveolar consonant (e. g. **that** person – t changes to p)
2. *according to manner of pronunciation* – phonemes change to the easier sound (e. g. final plosive can become fricative or nasal – **good** night) connected to saving speaker's energy by making the least obstruction of the air flow

3. *assimilation of voice* – only found at the word boundaries, the only one important for the foreign learner. The lenis (voiced) consonants can become fortis (voiceless) e. g. **have** to – v can change to f, but never the other way round.

The characteristic attribute of the phonetic structure of the contemporary German is the voicelessness of the pronounced consonants. This rule applies exclusively to voiced graphemes at the end of syllables and words, pronunciation of which is changed to voiceless in these positions, e. g. in words: **ab**, **und**, **Burg**, **Genitiv**, **objektiv**, **subjektiv**, and they have to remain equally voiceless also in cases, when they are being followed by a voiced consonant or a vowel, e. g. *jedes Mal*, *das Auto*, *das Malen* etc. The given examples lead to conclusion that the regressive assimilation to voiced sounds does not exist in the contemporary German. Also in the process of acquisition of German, the described voicelessness must be always stressed and instructed to pronounce in order to avoid assimilation of voiceless consonants in front of the voiced ones, which could be the case of the source language, e. g. Slovak. The unwanted negative transfer (interference) appears here in the process of acquisition which can only be eliminated by the perfect pronunciation example by the teacher and the following imitation by the students, i. e. the application of the audio-lingual method. In German only the progressive assimilation can be observed, and that is exclusively to voicelessness. The aforementioned feature of the phonetic structure of German can be illustrated on the following examples: *mit **dem** Ball*, *auf **Wieder**sehen*; the graphemes in bold are assimilated to their voiceless variants in the phonetic realization. The described voicelessness in the phonetic realization of German is its natural attribute. Equally, there is a rule that voiced consonants in initial positions are pronounced in relatively less voiced manner, almost voiceless: e. g. ***Burg***, ***baden***, ***danke***, ***ganz*** etc. (Höppnerová, 1997). In some regional variants of German, this rule applies also in the case of the grapheme “s” at the beginning of a syllable or a word in front of the vowel, e. g. ***sehr***, ***sehen*** etc., so in the phonetic realization there is not the voiced, but the voiceless variant [s].

On the basis of the previous description it can be said, that the only type of assimilation which is equally important in both, English and German, is the assimilation of voice, which is always only regressive and only to voiceless sounds. This congruence in both languages can be reinforced in learners by suitable didactic methods (especially the audio-lingual method) when teaching both of the languages, English and German.

1.2 Word Stress

Another significant phonetic feature in the process of acquisition of English or German is the word stress. Giving the accent to the stressed syllable is realized more emphatically in German or English than in some Slavic languages, such as Slovak. The weakening of unstressed syllables is related to that, e. g. in case of the final “e” down to its almost complete fading, as a results of which also the number of syllables in given word is being reduced (-1), while in the orthographical transcription the reduced “e” is being substituted by an apostrophe. Examples: *ich **musst**'* (instead of *ich musste*), *ich **hab**'* (instead of *ich habe*), *Was **gibt**'s?* (instead of *Was gibt es?*) etc. From the linguodidactic point of view, in relation to German as the target language, the localization of the stressed syllable (syllable as the syllabic phoneme) appears to be more problematic. Its position in the first syllable is not the only type of this phonetic topology of an accent. Inseparable prefixes in German are unstressed, while the accent is moved to the following syllable: ***bestraf**en*, ***genie**ßen*, ***entschuld**igen*, ***verschie**ben*, ***erlern**en*, ***zerstör**en* etc. The word stress of lexical items loaned to German from other languages is localised primarily on the penultimate or the final syllable, e. g.: ***Phonetik***, ***Phonologie***, ***Institution***, ***Graphem***, ***Pluralismus***, ***Demokratie***, ***Diktatur*** etc. The rhythmical flow typical for spoken German is created by alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables, which, together with the abovementioned voicelessness, gives the German its characteristic phonetic “hardness”.

In English, the word stress is one of the suprasegmental features which has the ability to change the meaning of the word, and is one of the most important characteristics which a foreign learner has to learn and recognize.

The placement of stress in English is not fixed – the primary word stress moves in English. It is an individual property of each word that has to be learned together with the correct spelling and pronunciation of a word.

Roach (2009) listed several criteria identifying the pattern in English word stress placement:

- a) the number of syllables
- b) the phonological structure of syllables – (strong or weak syllables)
- c) the morphological structure of word (a simple, compound or a complex word) – some suffixes have the ability to take the primary stress, some do not change the stress pattern in a word and some of them shift primary stress within the word stem
- d) grammatical category the word – nouns and adjectives have general tendency to be stressed towards the beginning of words, verbs towards the end of words

In English, the so called word class pairs are also being recognized – the words with the same spelling and similar meaning, but belonging to different word category. Therefore, the stress pattern of the word changes depending on the word category and also influences the pronunciation of the word, e. g.

conduct /kən'dʌkt/ V /'kɒndʌkt/ N

contract /kən'trækt/ V /'kɒntrækt/ N

The description of word stress placement in English and German does not show any recognizable similarities, therefore the learners of both languages must learn these patterns independently and the patterns of one of the languages should not interfere into the other language.

2. MORPHOLOGICAL LEVEL

2.1 *The Cases of Substantive Inflection*

While contrastive analysing the German and English, the grammatical category of German substantives, namely the grammatical case (inflection), should not be forgotten. The contemporary German operates with singular and plural with following inflectional cases:

1. Nominative representing the basic form of a word, in which the substantive takes over the syntactic function of a subject in declarative sentence. The subjective predicate can be realized by the Nominative.
2. Genitive expresses possession. This grammatical case takes either the function of a Genitive attribute, or, in German sentence models, also in the position of indirect object in the declarative sentence.
3. Dative is the case of syntactic object with sentence-semantic function of the addressee of the predicate action. Besides the constitutive sentence element, the Dative in German also takes the wide scale of secondary syntactic functions.
4. By means of the Accusative, the direct object with sentence-semantic function is realised in active voice.

Besides the above mentioned four cases of inflection, the prepositional cases also have to be taken into consideration in German. The prepositional cases take either the syntactic functions of adverbials or they constitute the prepositional object to their relevant predicative verb. The valence as a bonding grammatical feature is typical for full meaning verbs, in this case only the:

- a) verbs with direct object (in Accusative), e. g. *besuchen/visit, zerstören/damage*
- b) verbs with Genitive object, e. g. *anklagen/sue*
- c) verbs with object in Dative (e. g. *folgen/follow, begegnen/meet*), occasionally in combination with direct object (e. g. *sagen/say, mitteilen/arrange*)

d) verbs with prepositional object (e. g. *warten/wait, herrschen/reing, grenzen/border*)

English has similar principles of case use and the use of sentence elements (comp. Huddleston and Pullum, 2005). We may conclude that some syntactic principles are universal across all languages, some may differ. There is a group of verbs with the same preposition, but there is also a large group of verbs in the source language combining with other preposition than in the target language (e. g. *sich freuen auf/look forward to*; Fischer, 1997).

This means that the congruent features must be reinforced and the differences must be contrasted and trained by means of an appropriate didactic method.

2.2 Gradation of Adjectives and Adverbs

Another morphological feature paid attention to in contrast of German with English is the comparison of adjectives and adverbs. In both languages, three degrees of comparison are recognized (the positive – the comparative – the superlative; Biber, 2002) and also the system of use of suffixes and a definite article is applied when comparing the adjectives. The most significant difference is that the English takes into consideration also the number of syllables of the compared adjective when creating the 2nd and 3rd level grade of comparison. In German, the compared adjective must also be correctly inflected when in adverbial position, following the rules applied for inflection of German adjectives in the 1st degree and mentioned in the following section.

The first degree of comparison in English is expressed by means of the words “as...as” – *Roses are as pretty as violets*. The first German grammatical rule presented in the linguodidactic practice is the rule of using the “wie” in the first level of gradation, and “als” in the second grade. Examples: *Hans ist so groß wie sein Bruder. Aber Hans schwimmt schneller als sein Bruder*. In English, comparing is expressed by means of the use of the word “than” – e. g. *John is taller than Mary./Roses are more beautiful than violets*.

The second degree of comparison (comparative) of German adjectives and adverbs is created by adding the morpheme {-er} to the word stem of the adjective/adverb. In English, the relatively short adjective (up to two syllables) takes the suffix *-er* comparatively to German (e. g. *pretty – prettier*). Words consisting of more than two syllables must be used with a word “more” in front of the adjective and no suffix is added to the graded adjective (e. g. *more beautiful*).

In German, adjectival or adverbial word stems containing vowels [a], [o], [u] are umlauted to the phonemic form [ä], [ö], [ü]. Examples: *alt – älter, groß – größer, jung – jünger*. On the level of comparison, the compared adjective in English changes the *-y* at the end of the word changes to *-i* (*pretty – prettier*), or if the adjective consists of only one syllable, the final consonant is doubled (e. g. *big – bigger*).

While comparing the adjectives on the third, the highest, degree (the superlative), the German morpheme {- (e)st -} is added to the word stem of the adjective/adverb. The adjective in the adverbial is accompanied with the definite article and the compared adjective in the positive. Superlative of adverbs contains suffix *-en* and is being preceded by its preposition blended with the article into the word **am**. Examples: *Er springt am höchsten. Linda singt am schönsten von allen*. In English, the third degree, the superlative, is made by means of adding the suffix *-est* and the use of the definite article in short words (e. g. *the prettiest*) or by the use of the definite article and the word “most” in front of the compared adjective. Examples: *John is the tallest of all. /Roses are the most beautiful flowers*.

In adjectival lexical word stock of German, irregular adjectives/adverbs can also be found.. The category of irregular adjectives is also recognized in English and they cover the same concepts. (e. g. *gut – besser – der beste/am besten, = good – better – the best etc.*).

2.3 Inflection of Adjectives in Attribute

One of the most difficult morphological features in German and one of the most different from English is the category of inflection of adjectives in attribute.

The inflection of adjectives in the attributive position is governed by strict rules, which are applied to inflection of adjectives on all its degrees. According to the level of the declined adjective, the following inflection suffixes are being added to it (to the form for the 1., 2., or 3. degree). The three different inflection types are presented in the following tables with examples:

	M	F	N	Pl.
N	-e	-e	-e	-en
G	-en	-en	-en	-en
D	-en	-en	-en	-en
A	-en	-e	-e	-en

Table 1 Inflection of adjectives after the definite article – Type A

Examples:

- N. ***Der** fleißige Erasmus-Student kommt aus Polen.*
- G. *Die Leistungen **des** fleißigen Erasmus-Studenten sind bewundernswert.*
- D. *Man teilt **dem** fleißigen Erasmus-Studenten mit, dass er die Prüfung bestanden hat.*
- A. *Wir müssen noch **den** fleißigen Erasmus-Studenten aus Polen fragen.*

	M	F	N	Pl.
N	-er	-e	-es	-e
G	-en	-er	-en	-er
D	-em	-er	-em	-en
A	-en	-e	-es	-e

Table 2 Inflection of adjectives after zero article - Type B

Examples:M

N. *schwarzer Tee*

G. *schwarzen Tees*

D. *schwarzem Tee*

A. *schwarzen Tee*

F

frische Milch

frischer Milch

frischer Milch

frische Milch

N

frisch gebackenes Brötchen

frisch gebackenen Brötchens

frisch gebackenem Brötchen

frisch gebackenes Brötchen

	M	F	N	Pl. After possessive pronouns
N	-er	-e	-es	-en
G	-en	-en	-en	-en
D	-en	-en	-en	-en
A	-en	-e	-es	-en

Table 3 Inflection of the adjectives after the indefinite article - Type C

Examples:

Sg. (M)

- N. mein fleißigster Schüler
- G. meines fleißigsten Schülers
- D. meinem fleißigsten Schüler
- A. meinen fleißigsten Schüler

Pl. (M)

meine fleißigsten Schüler
meiner fleißigsten Schüler
meinen fleißigsten Schülern
meine fleißigsten Schüler

The prerequisite for the correct inflection of adjectives in German is the knowledge of the grammatical gender of the defined substantive.

In English, there are not suffixes added to the declined adjectives, irrespective of the gender and the use of article.

I have a German friend.

This is a book of my German friend.

I am going to meet my German friend.

I bought this for my German friend.

The given examples demonstrate the significant differences between English and German in adjectives inflection, pointing at the more complex structure of the German inflection, which must be properly explained and practiced in the language training.

3. MORPHO-SYNTACTIC, SYNTACTIC LEVEL

3.1 Passive Voice (Passive)

The frequency of the use of the continuous passive in both, English and German is relatively high and can be found particularly in texts of academic style (see Quirk, 1985).

In German it acts in concurrence with the active voice with the general subject *man*, even in the sentence utterances expressed by an agent. In the structure of the German passive voice, two different forms of the passive voice must be frequently stressed: the continuous form (*Die E-Mail wird von Georg geschrieben*) and the static form (*Die E-Mail ist von Georg geschrieben*). The English counterpart of the German “werden” is the auxiliary verb “to be”, which can be declined to various forms and the past participle of the lexical verb (e. g. *The letter was sent by John./The letter is sent by John./ The letter will be sent by John.*).

When it comes to sentence semantics of the continuous passive voice of the German verbs, the congruence may be equally stated in both, the source and the target languages. In other words, the passive voice constructions are used in morpho-syntactic construction of such predicative events, in

which it is not important to name the agent (which is in German expressed by means of prepositional phrase *von* + *D* in case of semantic attribute [+ animate, resp. human] or *durch* + *A*, resp. *mit* + *D* when the performer of the event is an inanimate entity – an object, a tool etc. In English, both animate and inanimate agents are being expressed by means of the preposition “by” + the agent (e. g. *The letter was sent by John./The letter was sent by the insurance company.*). The most important is the oblique case is, in the passive voice, the patient of the verbal tense, on which is the focus of the transitive verb. This sentence-semantic function is becoming the grammatical subject in the continuous passive (in German always realized on the surface of the language as the nominative), which in certain form of the auxiliary verb *werden* enters the verb phrase (Helbig and Buscha, 2001). Its grammatical attribute is the congruence in the subject and the number between the subject and the auxiliary verb *werden*, which (in contrast to the verb *sein*) expresses the continuity in the process of the predicative event. The semantic part of the predicate (participle past, passive) at the same time in the main declarative sentence takes the rhematic position at the end of the sentence utterance.

Above mentioned differences have, in the contrast with their equivalents in the source languages, an inferential influence. Audio-visual teaching method could be helpful while eliminating this undue negative transfer. It requires, though, a persistent continuity in its application, in order to avoid the unnatural elimination of this form in the study of the source language for the learners.

3.2 Word Order in the Main Declarative Sentence

In the composition of the main simple declarative sentence with the possibility of its linear development by other sentence elements we follow in the contemporary German according to the following syntactic rules:

1. The definite verbal form – in the present and Präteritum identical with lexical predicative verb – it stands in an isolated sentence always at the constant second place, also in the case when the sentence is started by other sentence element than the subject. The subject is therefore always on the first or the third (**never the second**) position in such sentence.

2. For the German main declarative sentence, in the typical, characteristic syntactic construction on the left there is a definite verbal form and on the right is the semantic part (of the compound) predicate, consisting of rhematic part of the sentence utterance. To these final parts of sentence utterance also belong separable predicative (verbal) prefixes, infinitives, resp. (past) passives surrounding the main sentence from the right. This obligatory syntactic topology is applied also in case of accumulation of other adjuncts. The sentence frame must not be disrupted. Example: *Ich - rufe - dich - heute in einer Woche - in der Sache - an.* In an empathetic word order, the definite verb form **stays** constantly on the **second** place: *In der Sache - rufe - ich - dich - heute in einer Woche - an.* *Heute in einer Woche - rufe - ich - dich - in der Sache - an.*

The word order in English is different to German word order – usually, on the first position is the subject followed by the predicate followed by the rest of the sentence. This word order remains the same even if some of the sentence elements are fronted – *Wilson his name is.* (Greenbaum, 1985, p. 408). The fronting is demanding the information, putting the emphasis on it, so it moves to the front of the sentence.

3.3 Word Order in Subordinate Clause

The word order in the German dependant/subordinate clause has following form: subjunctive – subject – other sentence elements – semantic part of the predicate (separable prefix of the lexical predicative verb, infinitives resp. passive participles) – and at the end of the relative clause enters inflected form of the predicative verb. This is the way the sentence frame for the relative clause is coined, e. g. ..., *dass - er - schon gestern - in Berlin - angekommen war.* Or: ..., *weil - du - dich - bei ihr - noch nicht - entschuldigt hast.*

Superordinate sentence does not change the word order in English.

The difference between English and German is that the subordination does not change the word order in the subordinate/dependant clause – because you have not apologized to her./that he arrived in Berlin yesterday already.

4. LEXICAL LEVEL

4.1 Related Lexical Items

The relation between German and English as the target Germanic languages can be linguo-didactically applied while reinforcing of the positive transfer frequently while working with word stock. The effective, even if not often used positive result of the transfer, appears to be the acquisition of the selected word stock in German as the second target language, equivalents of which were primarily acquired in English. In this respect we mean the articulate move of explosive (stopping) consonants [p] [t] [k] to [pf], [ts] and after that to fricative consonants [f], [s], [ch] in the course of historical development of the official German (Pappsonová, 1999), separated from the common Germanic language base, such as illustrated in the following table:

EN			DE
[p]	apple	<u>Apfel</u>	[pf]
	sleep	<u>schlafen</u>	[f]
	open	<u>offen (öffnen)</u>	
[t]	ten	<u>zehn</u>	[ts]
	eat	<u>essen</u>	[s]
	white	<u>weiß</u>	
[k]	make	<u>machen</u>	[ch]
	<i>etc.</i>		

Table 4 Phonetic changes in vocabulary

The prerequisite of the reinforcement of the positive transfer in language acquisition are also the illustrated similarities in the modern English and German, the knowledge of which should be a natural part of the knowledgeable profile of the teacher of both of these target languages.

There is another group of words in lexical stock of English and German, meaning of which is significantly different in spite their similar orthography or pronunciation (false friends). Their meaning must be clearly distinguished in the process of learning of the second language in order to avoid creating errors in communication. Examples:

DE		EN	
die Ambulanz	a special vehicle used to take sick or injured people to hospital	ambulance	emergency room
bekommen	get	become	to start to be
der Chef	supervisor	chef	a trained cook who works in a restaurant, the most important cook
die Kauzion	deposit	caution	advice or a warning
die Direktion	headquarters, government	direction	the position towards which someone or something moves
das Gift	poison	gift	present
die Marke	brand	mark	a small area on the surface of something that is damaged, dirty, or different in some way
ich will	I want (1. sg.)	I will	<u>prediction</u> of future action (1. sg.)

Table 5 False friends - English/German

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the previous comparatives, the following conclusions and their use in didactics can be presented in the comprehensive table:

Phenomenon	Comparison English/German congruence + partial congruence 0, difference -	<u>Linguo</u> -didactic recommendation
1.1 Assimilation	Partial congruence (0)	The direct method/audio-lingual method
1.2 Word stress	Partial congruence (0)	The direct method/audio-lingual method
2.1 the cases of substantive inflection	Partial congruence (0)	Elimination of interference by application the direct or audio-lingual or audio-visual method, or by means of presence of the only language – the target language
2.2 gradation of adjectives and adverbs	Partial congruence (0)	To reinforce the positive transfer, e. g. by means of grammatical translation method, which would use the previously acquired German or English as the source language
2.3 declension of attributive adjectives	Difference (-)	To eliminate interference
3.1 the passive voice	Partial congruence (0)	To reinforce the positive transfer
3.2 word order in the main declarative sentence	Congruence (+)	To reinforce the positive transfer
3.3. the word order in related clause	Difference (-)	To eliminate interference
4.1 the related lexical items	Partial congruence (0)	To reinforce the positive transfer

Table 6 Conclusive comprehensible table

The Slovak market has been lacking the national version of foreign language textbook since the 1989. The textbooks of German and English used to be published in Czechoslovakia, but after the fall of Berlin Wall, the market has opened to textbooks published in the target language countries. This has had positive impact on both, teachers and students, when building motivation for foreign language studies. On one hand, the support of such didactic methods, which exclude the mother tongue in the process of learning (the direct, audio-lingual, audio-visual, communicative method, Neuner and Hunfeld, 2001), has to be appreciated, including methods using the concrete manifestation of the phonetic structure of the target language by native speakers – all these attributes of such textbooks are without the doubt positive. On the other hand these textbooks often disrupt the curricular continuity and interdisciplinary relations in national curriculums, disabling to understand the load of information in wider context, and most importantly, they represent the financial burden for the learners.

It would be ideal to reach a compromising situation, if the national textbooks reflected the positive attributes foreign language textbooks published in target countries, but also followed the national linguodidactic tradition – allow the curricular continuity, support interdisciplinary relations, the advantages of the grammar translation method comparing the target language with either previously acquired foreign language or with the mother tongue, cultivating of which has been very topical.

The use of such textbooks could lead to fulfilling the intercultural goals in education, which would help the students of foreign languages to be more tolerant to differences in other cultures, but at the same time to appreciate the values of their own culture. In this respect, the goal of this creative publication strategy, the advantages of which would be reflected in national economy after several years, when the linguistically competent graduates of high schools and universities will not stay abroad but after their return they will find their place in their home country, to restart its underused economic potential (the tourism in architectural gems in the former German Carpathian settlements Kremnica, Banská Štiavnica, Levoča, Kežmarok; Pöss, 2002) for the tourist from German speaking countries.

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