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GREEK STUDENTS ERRORS AND CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS

[ΛΕΥΚΗ ΣΕΛΙΔΑ]

1. The purpose of the present article<sup>1</sup> is two-fold: a) to analyze a sample of errors made by Greek students of English and, mainly, present the results of the analysis; and b) to make a case for the weakness of contrastive analysis in predicting errors in the light both of what has been written on the subject recently and of the evidence, however inadequate, of the errors analyzed. Some implications for the teacher are also included.

2. It has been said<sup>2</sup> that because we do not know how to teach foreign languages, we grab at any new technique in the hope that it might be the magic key to unlock the gift of tongues. The same has been true with the way errors made by students of languages have been explained. It was thought that the only reason why students committed errors in foreign languages was that they were conditioned to thinking and behaving in the way they had been used to in the mother tongue. So mother tongue interference was believed to be the sole root of all ill-constructed sentences in the new language. The effort was concentrated on all those areas, called «learning burdens» by Lado,<sup>3</sup> which get in the way of the learner. Charles Fries has written that «the most effective materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner». <sup>4</sup> Tied to the pattern of stimulus-response, teachers in all good faith were told to become keener and keener on impressing the structures of the new language into the pupils' habits through the mimicry-memorization procedure (Fries, Lado) in error-free lessons in order to impose the new language skills exactly over the area which otherwise would undermine the teacher's task. The students should be exposed to the new language so much that in a way the new habit became another second nature. Especially

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1. This article is the main part, not revised, of the writer's project on error analysis carried out at the University of Lancaster during the session 1971-1972 as one of his Practical Studies options which counted as partial fulfillment for the degree of M. A. in Linguistics for English Language Teaching.

2. B. SPOLSKY, Reference 21.

3. R. LADO, Reference 12, p. 64.

4. C. C. FRIES, Reference 6, p. 9.

no time should be given to the students to begin to think in their mother tongue, for this would contaminate their learning with abominable interference. Errors should not be nipped in the bud: that was not enough. The seeds of errors should not be allowed to be sown.

The tenets were also intended for course writers. Fries, Lado and even M. A. K. Halliday and als.<sup>5</sup> considered contrastive analysis based materials as solving nearly all problems of interference in foreign language teaching. But recent studies, especially in psycholinguistics, have shifted the attention not to the ways of teaching but to the ways of learning,<sup>6</sup> to «understanding how the person deals with the syntactic and semantic aspects of language».<sup>7</sup> The learner is no longer a machine storing up himself with sentences but a thinking being who processes his knowledge through induction and hypothesizing.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly enough, learners' errors are not looked upon as sin any more, but, if properly studied by teachers, as guides as to what directions the students' mental powers take in processing the new data fed into them as foreign language teaching.

The postulates proposed are that in moving towards the target, mastery of the new language, the student develops intermediate stages of grammar which at a given moment constitute his «transitional competence»,<sup>9</sup> or his «interlanguage»<sup>10</sup> or his «idiosyncratic dialect».<sup>11</sup> So the cause of errors is not to be found only in the carry-over of rules of his mother tongue into the foreign language, a process called «transfer» and in error-causing «interference», but mainly in the wrong hypotheses the student makes at each stage regarding the nature of the grammar he is now acquiring.

Having examined a small corpus of materials at his disposal, the writer of this paper has found that mother tongue interference is not such an important factor in causing errors. The tables at the end are supposed to be speaking more convincingly and lend support to recent findings by others, who are more competent and have carried out more detailed and rigid research.

## II. THE CORPUS

1. The materials on which the analysis of errors in the present study is ba-

5. M. A. K. HALLIDAY & als: Reference 8, p. 118.

6. S. P. CORDER, Reference 4.

7. G. MILLER, Reference 14, p. 94.

8. J. CAROLL, Reference 1.

9. S. P. CORDER, Reference 4.

10. L. SELINKER, Reference 20.

11. S. P. CORDER, Reference 3.

sed are the answers to questions set to a group of six Greek students in Athens. They are all of about the same age, between 15 and 17, with about the same linguistic background in both their native language, Modern Greek, and English. They took no lessons of English in their schools but had all attended a school of English in the afternoons, three or four periods a week, for about four years. Their sociocultural setting is similar. They all belong to the lower middle class and have attended the same kind of schools. There is no difference in the way they use and perceive their mother tongue, that is no diglossia difference existed which could account for the errors they made.

The questions were given as part of an internal examination in the school. There were three subjects on one of which they should write a short essay. Then there were the subjects of three simple letters with commercial content. Each student wrote an essay of about 270 words and a letter of about 80 words, that is a total of about 350 words each.

There were 91 error spots in all the corpus, including nonce errors and clusters of errors. That is when an error occurred once, let us say within a word, is was counted as one but when the same error occurred in a sentence together with other errors, the figure counted as one and was added to the one counted elsewhere in the corpus. In this way we got the total of 91. But if we analyse them into instances of errors, by counting each one separately, we get the total number of 160 errors, and that is the figure which will be our basis and to which we shall now refer.

2. Proceeding a little further we find some interesting points in this «arithmetic» of errors. Fifty six of them occurred in isolation while the remaining 104 were in sentences each of which contained an average of three. In other words, in 35 sentences we had a total of 104 errors. In the light of the literature dealing with psycholinguistics and error analysis, there seem to be two interpretations of this phenomenon closely related to each other. First, that once the first mistake is made, the student is bound to make a second either because he subconsciously understands that there is something wrong with what he has written and he becomes prone to continue making more mistakes; or there may be some internal logic in the constructions he uses, and once an error is committed, more of them will follow «logically». The second interpretation is that quite often the student is too ambitious and attempts a sentence which involves the use of structures and lexis which he has not fully assimilated so he is unable to manipulate. Also he sometimes carries over from his language whole expressions which are not used in English at all.

## III. KINDS OF ERRORS

1. The tables at the end contain some examples of errors and some statistics on their kinds, causes and areas. By kinds we mean the levels of grammar, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and lexis. We have also included orthography for cases where it was evidently not a matter of morphology but simply one of not applying the conventional rules of spelling. However, in certain cases there seem to be strong phonetic, if not phonological, reasons for the mis-spelling of particular words. For example the word 'society', spelled 'sociaty', reflects the possible way in which the particular student pronounces the word. As in Greek there is no schwa /ə/, some people hear it more like /a/ than like /e/ and so they may be tempted to spell it that way if they cannot recall its conventional orthography. The same is true for the word 'humble', mis-spelled 'humple'. The /b/ and /mb/ sounds in Greek are represented by the letters mp, and, as phonology blurs into morphology, many people would say that /mp/ = /mb/, so why not spell 'humple', as it can be represented in Greek transliteration if the correct spelling cannot be remembered.

2. But few phonological errors can be traced in written material, so we labelled errors like the above «orthographic», and concentrated more on the other levels. Errors due to failure to form the plural correctly, or to put the 3rd person singular marker in the Simple Present Tense, or to use the marker correctly, were allocated to morphology. Difficulties arise here too, and if one does not make some taxonomic decisions, to which there may be some objections, no classification is possible. The word «sadness», entered into a syntagmatic relation with «joys», conveys the impression that its user cannot form the plural well, apart from the error at another level. But, again, one might argue that the student perhaps imagined that the second 's' is a plural marker. Or, that he might have imagined that, since abstract nouns usually have no plural form, by being related syntagmatically to a noun in the plural they automatically take on the semantic notion of plurality. For economy and convenience we classified it under morphology.

3. The classification under «syntax» includes all errors of cases in which the student betrays inability to combine the elements in a sentence correctly, from misuse of the passive to word order. Prepositions wrongly used were labelled syntactic errors, since, as Chomsky says<sup>12</sup> «the distributional restrictions of lexical items are determined by contextual features listed in lexical entries» and «these contextual features are regarded as defining certain substitution transformations». That is, rules of syntax provide that certain pre-

12. N. CHOMSKY, Reference 2, p. 113.

positions can fill some slots but others cannot. In this way, the error of the phrase «on the other hand» written as «in the other hand», is a syntactic one.

4. Those errors in which the student attributes a wrong semantic distribution to an item and gives it another cognitive meaning have been labelled «semantic». For example, if the word 'goods' is used instead of 'quantity', that is considered as an error in semantics. Lexical errors are often very close to semantic ones, but involve items which can exchange themselves with others of about the same meaning, especially in conjunction with what caused the error. For example, the student has overgeneralized that the verbs of «doing» are «do» and «make» and so he can use them interchangeably. This results in his production of the sentence «New methods do learning casier». The error can be a syntactic one, too, but since the student seems to know both the rules of syntax and the meaning of the words, his error involves only the choice of one particular lexical item for which there is another with close synonymy. That kind of error has been termed lexical although others would have it under syntax or even under semantics.

#### IV. CAUSES OF ERRORS

##### 1. *Categories*

Errors are caused by interference of the mother tongue, transfer of training (R. Politzer, 1965) and what Selinker (1969) called Interlanguage, which was elaborated on by Corder (1971). J. Richards used the word interlanguage to mean interference from the learner's native language. But the classification used in this paper is Interference, Transfer of Training, Performance and Interlanguage, according to the meaning given the fourth term by Selinker and Corder.

##### 2. *Interference*

Interference is the cause of errors as a result of transfer. Selinker (1969) defines transfer in language as «the carry-over of structural patterns of one's native language into a foreign language». There are more points at which the languages are similar than at which they differ. The similar ones must constitute a help to the learning of the second language, but the different ones interfere with that learning and prevent the new patterns from being assimilated. But «it is not yet clear whether surface features or deep structure features are the more relevant comparisons for assessing the operation of transfer effects». <sup>13</sup>

13. L. JAKOBOVITS, Reference 9, p. 112.

On the assumption that interference was the only cause of errors, contrastive analysis concentrated all efforts on preventing errors.

As the tables at the end show, out of the 160 errors analyzed during the preparation of this paper, interference is responsible for only 48 of them, that is 30%, less than one third. All possible care has been taken to see whether they fit there or not. But all cases appear to be direct carryovers from Greek into English. In the main they are syntactic (77%). Prepositions have a large claim on them and that the influence of Greek is immediate can be seen quite easily.

In using «from» for the agent in the passive, the student simply «transfers» the Modern Greek rule.

They have been admired *from* the people who lived before us.

He was deeply influenced *from* them.

So does he with the preposition «for», which in Greek covers the area from «for» to «about», and cannot reconcile himself to the idea that it is possible to have «in» after «interest».

We have the same interests *for* many things.

We have the same ideas *for* life.

As there is no equivalent preposition for «since» in Greek, «from» finds its way into the sentence and makes it a «Greek» one in at least two ways.

I *know* her *from* the first years in high school.

The Greek verb for «depend» is followed by the preposition equivalent to «from» and this is carried over too.

A traveller (i.e. a travelling salesman) depends *from* his firm.

Another area where interference has a strong hold on is verb tenses. There being but slight correspondence between the two tense systems, that of Greek is often used in the English sentence. As in French or in German, the Present is used for a case of the English Present Perfect:

I *know* her *from* the first year in high school.

Also the so-called Imperfect Tense in Greek covers the area of the English Past Progressive and that of the Simple Past = used to. This results in sentences like the following:

He *was going* to school every evening.

But the mother tongue is sometimes a cause of perplexity for the student and this is reflected in the sentences he produces. He wants to use the Present Tense as the Greek sentence goes. But incidentally, the verb he deals with is idiosyncratic in Modern Greek: it has the same form in the first person plural in both the Present and the Past, i.e. «imaste» means «we are» or «we were». <sup>14</sup>

14. In Katharevousa there is a distinction in spelling.



He chooses the second one while he meant the first, which would give a Greek sentence. So he now writes

Since then we *were* always together.

One might be tempted to term it «transfer of training», but since it is due, though indirectly, to language transfer, it comes under interference too.

The articles also have a strong tendency to be transferred from Greek into the foreign language. No indefinite one is used is Greek before nouns and after the copula. This gives cases like the following:

Such human being.

He is doctor.

She is courageous woman.

At the same time, the definite one is used even in cases of generic meaning or abstract nouns. So we have:

His aim was to search in *the* nature.

I have seen how good and how bad *the* people are.

She knows the difficulties of *the* life.

The fact that Greek moves towards agglutination, in addition to inflections, accounts for the carry over in the passives, which, unlike in the analytical languages, is formed with only a change of a morpheme inside the verb. In this way Greek students produced the following sentences. In each case there is one word for the passive in their tongue and they carry the same phenomenon into English:

He was the only man who deeply influenced by them.

Large boxes of soap will send to you.

She wants very much to love by her pupils.

These people continue to admire by all human beings.

She born in Athens.

The above are some of the errors clearly caused by interference which, as has been seen, is not as negligible as it is supposed (Richards, 1970), but not as important as it was believed.

### 3. *Interlanguage*

The term is used in the sense Selinker (1969) introduced and Corder (1971) repeated. It is the cause reflecting the student's competence in the new language at a particular stage (transitional competence, Corder 1967) or his transitional dialect (Corder, 1971) in his strategies from his mother tongue to the target language. We also use the word as a cover term for what Richards (1970) includes under intralingual and developmental errors, such as overgeneral-

zation, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules and false concept hypothesizing, but over-generalization differs from Jakobovits' generalization. In Richards' words these errors «reflect the learner's competence at a particular stage, illustrate some of the general characteristics of language acquisition and are representative of the sort of errors we might expect from anyone learning English as a second language». The errors we analysed here fall by far under this category (54.12%) and this points to the conviction that after all language learning presents difficulties independent of previous language background or whether the language is first or second. It is open to research to find which areas cause the greatest difficulties.

Some of the errors caused by interlanguage are exactly like some recorded by Duskova.<sup>15</sup> They are in the omission of the -s in the third person singular or wrong insertion in the 3rd person plural. In the first case the students overgeneralize what they have been told, that verbs in English have almost no inflections; in the second they misapply the rule of -s ending. These errors might be attributed to mere performance if the student were found to be able to correct them himself, or if the teacher could otherwise establish that the mistakes are not made systematically. All the same, the truth is that at the time of writing he overgeneralized or misapplied a rule. Overgeneralization is also responsible for errors in the use of prepositions, as the sentences in which the errors occur have marked different constructions in Greek, so they are not due to interference. In the following examples, the students hypothesize that the prepositions 'to' and 'in' are in free variation.

His aim was to search *to* nature.

She gives the correct answer *in* everybody.

She belongs *in* the minority.

In other cases, it is not quite clear what paths their reasoning took to arrive at the way in which they used prepositions. Probably, the greater frequency of occurrence of the preposition 'in' (in the room, in reality, in fact, in detail, in high spirits) and since in their way of thinking this may appear more «logical», led them to the use of 'in' in these:

*In* the other hand.

*In* very good prices.

He is a boy *in* my age.

In the area of verbs, supposing that -ing is a sufficient marker of a progressive tense produced the sentence

We waiting for a letter.

15. L. DUSKOVA, Reference 5.

Also, the student's obvious assumption that learn = inform leads him to the sentence

We were pleased to *inform* that you are well.

In a similar manner, overgeneralizing from the use of an adjective as a noun (The rich must help the poor, for example) made him produce

There are people who have worked for the human and sacrificed themselves.

#### 4. *Performance*

Errors of performance are those that betray lapses made inadvertently and their criterion often is that they can be corrected by those who made them (Corder 1967, 1971), or that later on in the particular student's writing the mistake appears correct, sometimes more than once. The teacher's knowledge of his class is also a great help in deciding whether an error is a performance one or a more systematic one due to insufficient assimilation of rules. In the sentence

«She is free to give her opinion to everybody except  
*during the hours of teaches*»,

the student obviously was about to decide that after 'during' he ought to say either

during the hours when she teaches

or

during the hours of teaching.

He decided on the latter but with the former still in his mind and with the fact that the last words in both cases have the same stem, he wrote the latter but with the form of the last word as it is in the former.

#### 5. *Transfer of training*

The errors under «Transfer of Training» are those caused by the application of rules intended for some cases to cases outside their domain. However, we have widened the term used by R. Politzer (1965) still more to include cases of hypercorrection or those due to systematic drilling and reminding, as some of the categories he deals with would fit better under our «Interlanguage». The student has been told repeatedly that in business letters it is better to use «let us know» and not «inform» and this results in the sentence

In reply to your letter, we let us know that we are sending you...

or, the teacher insisted that for past habitual actions the students should use «used to» and not Simple Past (I used to go there, I used to smoke). This in-

sistence, often inappropriate, made the student «transfer» the expression to the Present and write

Now we use to study together when the weather is cold.

Errors as these, 7 altogether in our corpus, could very well go under «interlanguage» as they often involve overgeneralization or wrong hypothesizing. We have set them separately to lay more stress on where undue emphasis on an item can lead.

## V. A LOOK AT STATISTICS

As the study is not an extensive one, it does not claim to have «proved» anything conclusively. The tables at the end<sup>16</sup> do not set about asserting that these are the figures on the basis of which we can predict the areas, the causes and kinds of errors that Greek learners of the kind we described often make. The study is an attempt to analyze a sampling. J.Y.K. Kerr's «Common Errors in Written English» states on the cover that it is an analysis based on essays by Greek students. It is a lengthy list of errors based on 1000 essays written by Greek students and constitutes a valuable help to practical teachers. But no effort has been made at making clear the levels at which the errors were made or their causes. Although we feel that a more systematic and rigorous study than the present one, requiring, more space both in time and on paper, is necessary, one can, however, see some indications here as to how causes, areas and levels of errors correlate.

a) If we consider that the 21 orthographic errors are insignificant for our study, we see that the Interlanguage errors (which, with the orthographic ones, are 85 or 54.12%) are 64 or 40% of the total. 14.11% of them are morphological, 43.52% syntactic, 9.41% semantic, 10.58% lexical and the remaining other categories.

b) Interlanguage affects mainly verbs (29.41%), nouns (28.32%), prepositions (15.29%) and adjectives (8.23%). Interlanguage does not seem to cause errors in the use of articles.

c) Interference from the mother tongue caused 48 errors or 30%. 37 of them (77.08%) were syntactic, 6 (12.50%) semantic, 2 (4.16%) lexical and the remaining other categories.

d) Interference affects mainly verbs (29.16%), articles (22.92%), prepositions (20.85%) and nouns and adjectives (4.16% each). Morphology and orthography do not appear to be affected at all by Interference. This was to be

16. For reasons of economy of space the tables are not published here.

expected since Greek uses a different alphabet and spelling system from any of the languages employing the Latin alphabet.

e) Altogether there are 17 performance errors (10.62%), which is an indication that about one-tenth of the errors are due to moments of inattention, lapses of memory and so on.

f) Transfer of training accounts for 7 errors, or 4.36%.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In the light of the figures above one can see that after all Interference is not the major causer of errors. Only less than one third of them (30%) were caused by interference. So contrastive analysis based teaching does not constitute the answer to the prevention of errors. Although it has not been looked into in this study, the problem of phonetic transfer is felt to be strong, stronger than all other elements. So far contrastive analysis believers have imagined the learner as a bilingual who tended to transfer nearly all levels except lexis and morphology, so that, instead of following straight lines in producing a sentence in the new language, he went across and utilized systems of his mother tongue as in chart 1.

So we come to the case we wanted to make at the beginning that, as our sampling has shown, however thorough the contrastive analysis between Greek and English might have been it would not have been able to predict more than 30% of the errors. Recent studies show on the contrary that even this predictability is questionable. John W. Oller (1971) points out that «Contrastive analysis as a method for predicting certain errors and points of difficulty is probably best regarded, at least for the present, as an experimental basis for research rather than as a pedagogical panacea. However, even as a research technique, contrastive analysis has some significant limitations». He further stresses that it «does *not* predict some of the errors which do occur and *does* forecast some which never seem to materialize». One could say at this point, even anecdotally, that, as Greek is a language with a free word order, one would expect that there would be several errors in that area. Yet there were only 2 out of 160. But it is doubtful whether we must agree entirely with Oller when he says that «Contrastive analysis by itself is quite inadequate as a foundation for language teaching; it is in fact entirely inappropriate». But one thing is certain and one cannot help agreeing with his remark that «the pedagogical usefulness of contrastive analysis has probably been overestimated».

On the contrary, as the errors in the sampling indicate, there are other important causes of errors, mainly interlanguage and performance, and this

carries implications for the teacher. His daily contact with his students reveals how they hypothesize and what strategies they adopt in their efforts to master the foreign language. But apart from that what would be greatly advantageous is a system of fairly frequent examinations to be administered to the students. However, it is the careful correction of their papers, the tracing of the sources of errors and the trends prevailing in comparison with previous examinations that will be the real benefit. On the basis of these examinations and in the light of the persistent errors the teacher will be able to deal with particular cases and focus his attention on specific topics, yet without deviating very much from the syllabus imposed upon him. In this way the teacher will be able to find that many errors are common among members of different classes he is teaching, and thus adapt his teaching strategies accordingly, knowing where he can go more rapidly and where to lay more stress.

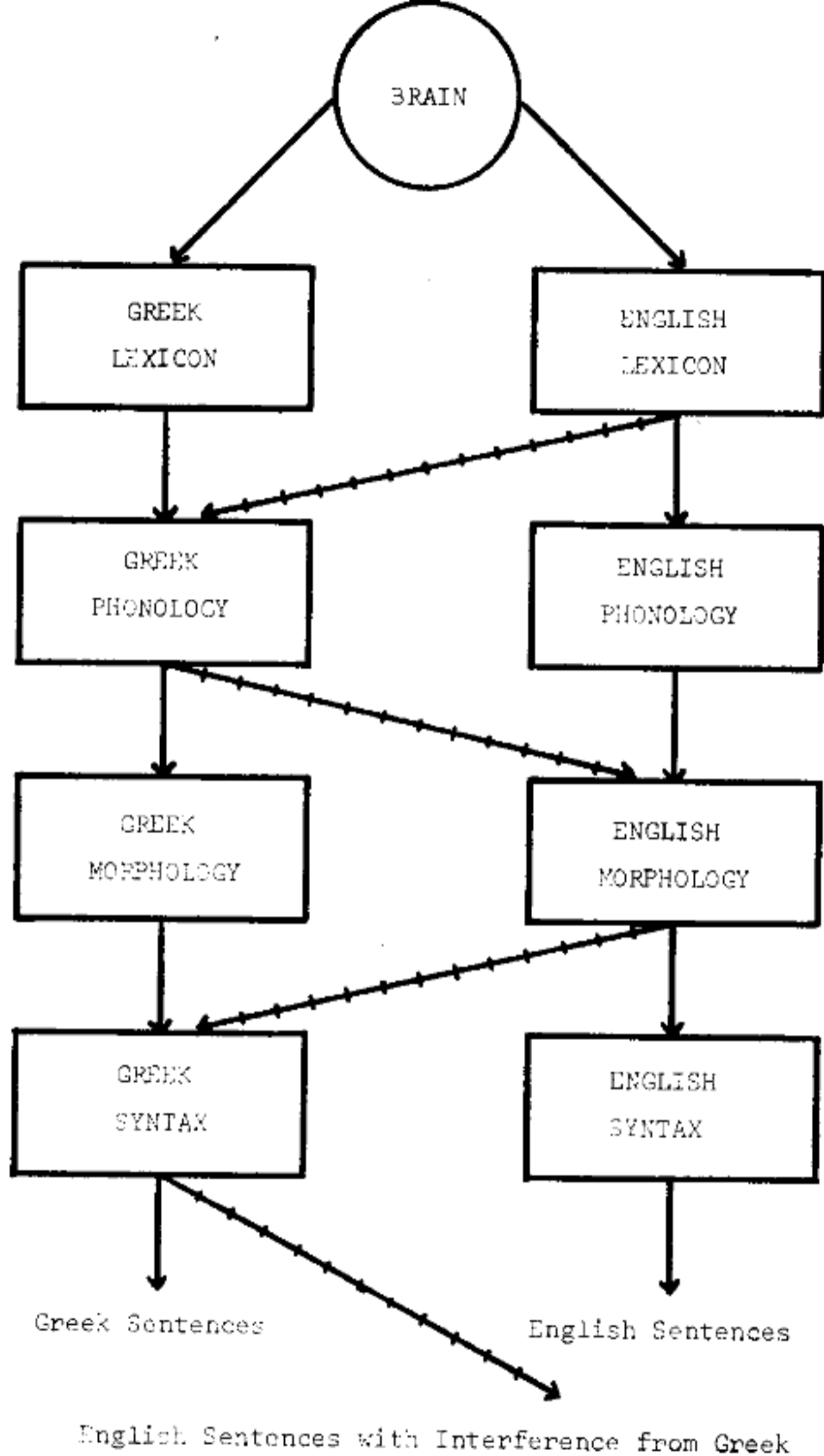


CHART 1

(Mentioned on page 83)

- Perfect Bilingual
- - - Bilingual with Interference from his mother tongue

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