Do L2 French or L2 English learners write better L3 German texts? The influence of prior foreign language study on L3 German writing skills: the GaE/F Project[1]

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Abstract: Many learners of German as a foreign language (L3) are learning English or French as L2 before commencing their study of German, especially students from countries where English or French is, among other languages, the second official language or a common language in the educational system. For example: Among the approximately 219.000 non-German students who, in 2014, studied at German universities 38.000 were from China or India (L2 English) and 11.000 were from Cameroon or Morocco (L2 French) (DAAD 2015: 14-15). University-level German instructors at the Technische Universität Darmstadt have reported a higher level of competence in producing German texts by students who have learned French as L2 before German than those who have learned English as L2.

Multilingualism researchers have investigated the impact of prior foreign language study on the learning of other languages. These influences include the learner's personal experiences while learning a foreign language, the development of individual learning strategies and the ability to self-motivate. Just as important, however, are the structural and cultural aspects that affect the learning of additional foreign languages, namely the structural differences between the languages to be studied compared to already mastered languages, the teaching and learning culture and, last but not least, the intercultural differences in the norms governing the production of text types (cf. e.g. Herdina & Jessner 2002; Hufeisen 2002, 2010; Jessner 2006; Mißler 2000).

On this basis, the project "German as a foreign language after English or French" (GaE/F) [Deutsch als Fremdsprache nach Englisch oder Französisch (DaFnE/F)] was initiated to investigate how the learning of L2 English or L2 French may affect the learning of L3 German, and, in particular, how it influences the production of appropriate German language texts as assessed by native speakers. It will investigate which linguistic features can be found in such written language and how their occurrence can be explained. Finally the aim is to examine the issue whether the prior learning of French or English, respectively, is more useful for developing German writing skills.

For several years the Division of Linguistics and Multilingualism at the Technische Universität Darmstadt and preparatory course instructors have been collecting a corpus of authentic university-level written texts that, at present, consists of approximately 160 samples. Because the project is currently at its very beginning, a pilot study has to be carried out to identify possibly significant features for the comparison of written texts (i.e. connectors, parataxis/hypotaxis, word formation, sentence structure etc.) and to develop research tools for future investigations.

Viele Menschen, die Deutsch als Zweit- oder Fremdsprache lernen, haben bereits Englisch oder Französisch als Vorfremdsprache erlernt. Dies gilt insbesondere für Studierende aus Ländern, in denen neben anderen Sprachen Englisch oder Französisch Amtssprachen bzw. Unterrichtssprachen sind. So kamen z.B. 2014 von den rund 219.000 nichtdeutschen Studierenden an deutschen

Hochschulen rund 38.000 aus China oder Indien (L2 Englisch) und 11.000 aus Kamerun oder Marokko (L2 Französisch) (vgl. DAAD 2015: 14-15). DaF/DaZ-Lehrkräfte der Technischen Universität Darmstadt berichten von ihrer Erfahrung, dass Studierende mit Französisch als Vorfremdsprache vor Deutsch bessere deutschsprachige Texte schreiben als ihre Kommiliton/innen mit Englisch vor Deutsch.

Die Mehrsprachigkeitsforschung hat den Einfluss vorher erlernter Fremdsprachen auf das Erlernen weiterer Sprachen in vielerlei Hinsicht erforscht. Hier spielen einerseits Aspekte auf individueller Ebene eine Rolle: das Sammeln von Erfahrungen, die Entwicklung individueller Lernstrategien und die Entstehung persönlicher Motivation. Andererseits beeinflussen Aspekte auf sprachlich-struktureller bzw. sprachlich-kultureller Ebene das Lernen weiterer Sprachen: die strukturelle Nähe der zu lernenden Sprache mit bereits bekannten Sprachen, die Sprachvermittlungskultur und auch die unterschiedlichen Text(sorten)normen in verschiedenen Sprachen.

Die eingangs beschriebenen Beobachtungen der Lehrkräfte näher zu untersuchen, ist das Ziel des Projektes DaFnE/F (Deutsch als Fremdsprache nach Englisch oder Französisch). Es soll ermitteln, wie sich das vorherige Erlernen konkret der englischen bzw. französischen Sprache auf das Erlernen der Fremdsprache Deutsch auswirkt – und hier insbesondere auf die Produktion von nach Maßstäben deutscher Rezipient/innen als gut erscheinenden Texten. Neben der Frage, in welchen sprachlich-schriftlichen Bereichen hier Phänomene feststellbar sind, ist die Frage von Bedeutung, womit sie zusammenhängen (z.B. Struktur der Sprachen Englisch oder Französisch, unterschiedliche Lernpraktiken bzw. Lern-Traditionen im Unterricht Französisch als Fremdsprache bzw. Englisch als Fremdsprache usw.).

Seit einigen Jahren wird am Fachgebiet Mehrsprachigkeit der TU Darmstadt und am Studienkolleg ein Textkorpus aus momentan rund 160 authentischen universitären Texten zusammengestellt, anhand dessen eine Pilotierungsuntersuchung für mögliche weitere Untersuchungen durchgeführt werden soll.

Keywords: German after English, German after French, text linguistics, contrastive rhetorics**;** Deutsch nach Englisch, Deutsch nach Französisch, Textlinguistik, Kulturspezifik von Texten.

1. Introduction

The surprising finding from many years of practical experience in teaching German as a foreign language is that foundation course students who are learning German as their L3 write "better", that is, more coherent and more comprehensible, academic texts if they have learned French as their L2, but more sub-standard texts if English was their L2 (regardless of their L1) (cf. Fischer & Hufeisen 2010, 2012). The aim of the project described here is to examine these findings from a linguistic perspective. The project poses the question what the reasons for differing levels of text competence in German by L3 learners of the language are. They could, for example, include the language structures and interrelationships between the languages in question, the culturally prescribed characteristics of text types, different ways of teaching and learning the L2 languages, or differing social learning environments.

A few words on the terminology and the numbering used for the languages examined: We define L2 as the foreign language (English and/or French) learned – in each case in chronological terms – *prior* to German as the L3. What matters is the chronological sequence – namely that English and/or French were learned *prior* to learning German as a foreign language.

The project is therefore positioned at the interface between two areas of linguistic research which have already delivered significant results with regard to the subject of this project: 1. Research in multilingualism with findings on the relevance of previous languages studied for the learning of German as a second or further foreign language (cf. e.g. Mißler 2000); 2. Text linguistics and contrastive rhetorics with findings on the cultural characteristics of academic text types and the language-specific structures of texts, and research in texts and text types for textuality criteria and intelligibility (cf. e.g. Eßer 2000; Hufeisen 2002). However, text linguistics research has not as yet looked at German-language texts written by non-native-speaker students who are experienced in using foreign languages and could perform speech acts in another foreign language before beginning to study German; furthermore, research in multilingualism – still a very new area of research – has not yet turned the spotlight on texts, their cultural characteristics and the associated writing traditions.

The project can therefore innovatively link these two different directions in a new and complex area of research in which transfer processes between foreign languages are examined from the point of view of both text linguistics and language-biographical issues: The results of text linguistics processes and analyses are examined in relation to findings from research into multilingualism: to be more precise, the strategies used to create meaning in texts are examined to determine whether their characteristics can be attributed to the peculiarities of the writers' language biographies which involve English or French as L2. This study will offer new insights for teaching German as a foreign language (GFL) – possibly also for the teaching of English and French as a foreign language (EFL/FFL) – and will contribute to an understanding of the cultural characteristics of academic writing and text routines.

2. State of the research

2.1. Research in multilingualism

After sporadic and somewhat random beginnings, systematic research on multilingualism began to gather pace in the 1990s. Weinreich (1977), Juhasz (1970) and Wandruszka (1979), for example, drew attention to the fact that the majority of learners has more than just their L1 (their first language/mother tongue) and one L2 (the target foreign language) available to them, and postulated that there might not only be the transfer and interferences between L1 and L2 to be accounted for, as well as between L1 and L3, but also between L2 and L3. Since then, there have been numerous studies in the areas of psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and applied linguistics and also in language teaching and learning research (Cenoz, Hufeisen & Jessner 2000, 2001a, b, c, 2003) that have examined social and individual multilingualism, for example, in children growing up with three or more languages, and that have explored individual learning processes. In most cases these have been studies in the acquisition and learning of second and further foreign languages (Hufeisen & Jessner 2009), and have paid less attention to the issue of text competence, let alone the cultural characteristics of texts. The research methodology has used traditional research in language acquisition (L1 and L2) as its starting point, but it has also pursued new ways of examining multilingual phenomena (cf. Aronin & Hufeisen 2009; Hufeisen 2011) with the help of a corpus of the written material that is currently being compiled.

As demonstrated in numerous studies, the two first foreign languages English and French do greatly influence the learning of German as a second foreign language (Cenoz et al. 2000, 2001a, b, c, 2003; Hufeisen 1991) and the way of dealing with texts in German. This influence affects both the reception of texts (that is, how texts are read and understood, cf. Marx 2005) and the production of texts (that is, how texts are planned and written, cf. Kärchner-Ober 2009). This influence can have negative consequences, for example, if a German-language text follows an English or French-language text model that does not exist in German (cf. Hufeisen 2002). In extreme cases, such a German text can then be either difficult or impossible for German-speaking readers to understand. The influence arising from the previously acquired foreign language is, however, as a rule likely to be helpful to the learner: this is because, for one thing, the learner will be familiar with certain text-decoding methods from having learned English or French and can apply them successfully to reading German texts. Moreover, strategies and techniques specific to the second foreign language that are familiar from the learning process in the first foreign language can be successfully transferred to the second foreign language, in this case German (cf. Jessner 2006).

In view of the crucial role played by English or French as the prior foreign language acquired in individual language biographies, the degree to which transfer processes are taking place with English and French must be examined, as well as how they might be used for more rapid learning of the German as an academic language. The M-factor of the Dynamic Model of Multilingualism (Herdina & Jessner 2002) describing the development of metalinguistic and cross-linguistic awareness while learning multiple languages and the foreign-language specific factors of the Factor Model (Hufeisen 2010) provide the theoretical basis.

Having access to texts written by introductory-course students at the Technische Universität Darmstadt gives us the opportunity to collect a large quantity of texts which we can analyse to provide answers to our research questions; and also, potentially, in a second follow-up project at a later date, to interview students in these courses and ask them about their attitudes to their text competence in their second foreign language and the way in which their first foreign language was taught.

2.2. Research in intercultural text linguistics and academic language research

Kaplan (1977), Clyne (1981, 1991) and Galtung (1983) were the first researchers whose observations and findings on the cultural characteristics of text types, the interculturality of the writing process and the influence of the first language on the target language writing process led to larger research projects and studies. In particular, they pointed out the differences in the structuring of English and German academic texts and were able to demonstrate, for example, that texts written in German have a less linear structure and contain more excursuses than texts written in English (Clyne 1991).

In the meantime, numerous research papers have been published on academic writing in German which not only take account of its cultural dependency, but examine also the specific characteristics of the writing processes and writing products resulting from different domains, technical terms, disciplines, levels of expertise and media. As a result, the following volumes, in particular, have brought together important, mainly empirical, studies on academic writing (Auer & Baßler 2007; Jakobs & Knorr 1997), teaching and learning academic writing (Ehlich & Steets 2003; Levy-Tödter & Meer 2009) as well as the monograph by Steinhoff (2007), the writing and text routines used by students (Feilke & Lehnen 2012) and the digital formats for academic communication and writing in an electronic environment (Gloning & Fritz 2011; Knorr & Jakobs 1997). For the purposes of this project, other papers that would seem to be of prime importance are those dealing with the assessment of text quality (for "Abitur"/higher education entrance qualification-level texts in particular, see Janich 2004, 2006; Nussbaumer 1991; Sieber 1998), as well as papers that formulate the general requirements for text intelligibility (Göpferich 2002; Sauer 2001). For research specifically on

academic texts, various contributions in Göpferich & Engberg (2004) are instructive.

These essentially text-linguistic approaches have to be supplemented with research papers on academic language, in particular on the "wissenschaftliche Alltagssprache" ("everyday academic language") postulated by Ehlich (1993), which is particularly difficult for non-native speakers to learn. We are not (yet) talking here about the terminology specific to the discipline in question, but rather about "umfunktionalisierte Alltagssprache" (Steinhoff 2007) – everyday language which has undergone a change in function – which leads to words, phrasemes or connectors such as "*einerseits/andererseits*" (on the one hand/on the other hand), assuming specific meanings or providing text-structuring elements for the "academic text" domains (cf. also Graefen 2003 on connectors as "Spuren des Denkens" – traces of thought). The ability to produce well-written texts presupposes a high level of everyday linguistic skills, supplemented by the knowledge of the communications requirements of one's discipline (Efing & Janich 2007; Engberg & Janich 2007). Students must thus not only familiarise themselves with the different characteristics of various text types (cf. Gruber 2004 or Bachmann-Stein & Stein 2009 on the specific difficulties of dealing with the text type "seminar paper" and its argumentational and eristic qualities) and acquire the text routines in question (cf. Graefen 2004; Lehnen 2012), but must also learn to master the everyday academic language (see Graefen 2009; on the foreseeable problems related to this, see Pohl 2004, 2007; Steinhoff 2007 on processes of appropriation) before or as they familiarise themselves with writing processes specific to their discipline.

In all these papers, student-writing in the STEM (in German MINT: Mathematics, IT, Natural Sciences, Technology; certain exceptions in Ehlich 1993) disciplines is under-represented; the focus of research up until now has been more in the area of text production in the social sciences and humanities. But the fact that written production is an equally integral component of technical and natural science university courses is demonstrated by Poe, Lerner & Craig (2010), for example, in the case of a US university.

To address the genuinely text-linguistic questions in this project will require the integration of the numerous detailed findings in the above-mentioned papers on the individual features of academic texts, in particular, those written by students. These papers are more often than not qualitative rather than quantitative in their approach, and also always very selective in their focus. The findings will need to be looked at in relation to each other, so as to create a basis for comparison between the expected/desired linguistic features and the actually found features in the students' texts, and to be able to examine them empirically from a perspective of corpus linguistics. It is expected that some features with a potentially high relevance to the subject will be identified in the pilot study. Importance is attached here to an inclusive and multidimensional perspective, i.e. setting the linguistic features (grammar, lexis) in relation to their respective textual-pragmatical function (such as creating coherence, economising or ensuring intersubjectivity) and to their textual consequences for the text content.

The sample of test subjects is composed entirely of introductory-course students who, prior to being admitted to their course of study, had passed their assessment examination in the fields of study of history, German philology and the social sciences. They fall into three groups of similar levels:

- Group A: Introductory-course students having any language as their mother tongue (X), but with French as L2 in their language repertoire and no knowledge of English: XL1, FL2, GL3;

- Group B: Introductory-course students having any language as their mother tongue but English as L2 in their language repertoire but no knowledge of French: XL1, EL2, GL3;

- Group C: Introductory-course students having any language as their mother tongue with both English and French in their language repertoire: XL1, E/FL2, GL3.

3. The project

3.1. Research questions

The **key objective** of this research is to assess the role text played by competence in the L2 English and L2 French foreign languages in German-language L3 text production. In particular, the objective is to examine whether the impressions gained "in the field" – which are a reason for conducting this project – can be confirmed or, where applicable, rejected: namely, that for the competent production of German-language academic texts, French is a "more suitable" prior foreign language than English; that is, that it contributes towards a higher level of German-language text competence in GFL writers, with the result that they are able to compose more coherent and thus more intelligible texts.

The **aim of the project**, accordingly, is to better understand the transfer processes between foreign languages in the sphere of

academic language use, with a focus on text linguistics and culture specific differences. On this basis, a clearer picture should emerge of (culturally specific?) learning objectives resulting in academic text competence and thus a linguistic foundation for improved research into the teaching and learning of GFL and German writing.

3.2. Design and methodology

In order to approach the key aims and objectives of the project as it is proposed by Fischer & Hufeisen (2010, 2012), a pilot study will be carried out first to establish which areas are suitable starting points for the main study.

The object basis of study is the corpus of texts previously referred to, which demonstrates a high level of heterogeneity in their acceptability. Their length varies generally between approx. 200 and 500 words. They are therefore relatively short written pieces, the majority of which were required as homework in the introductory courses. The topics set (and thus, in part, the text types) are also very diverse. In addition to free-form compositions on pre-determined topics (like "Aims in life"), a fairly large proportion of the texts in the corpus are made up of descriptions and interpretations of diagrams and statistical surveys. Preparation for dealing with the topics, which were to a greater or lesser extent in the news at the time (e.g. carbon dioxide emissions, the size of families, time at the students' disposal etc.), included a prior discussion of the subject, sometimes using sample texts. The writing task was then to discuss the topic in one's own words, and to describe and interpret the statistical data presented as well as to reflect on their validity, and to relate the situation in Germany to the situation in one's country of origin. A further, fairly large proportion of the texts in the corpus is made up of descriptions of images or picture stories, in particular of the wordless picture stories from the series "Father and Son" by E.O. Plauen, which are very well known in Germany and frequently used in teaching. If phenomena could be found in both, academic and descriptive texts, this could be a hint for relevant features.

The texts were anonymised and supply information about the personal background of the writer, including gender, age, country of origin, language biography and self-assessment of his/her competence in German. The greatest consensus among the background variables were the writers' ages (mainly between 19 and 23 years) and the self-assessment of his/her competence in German (almost exclusively B2/CEFR, more rarely C1 and even more rarely B1). The other information varies greatly, in particular the data on the length of time that the languages named in the language biography – both the previously-learned foreign languages as well as L3 German – had been learned used and used.

In addition to the fairly significant heterogeneity of the corpus, an equally striking feature is the heavily imbalanced spread of subjects across the three subject groups. Most writers stated that they had learned English first and then German (group B); a few that they had prior knowledge of both English and French (group C). By comparison, the number of writers with knowledge of French but not English prior to learning German is very small (Group A). A valid study of texts across the three groups, all ideally written by speakers of the same L1, therefore appears not to be practicable for the analysis of this text corpus because the sample sizes vary so much. A method of analysis must therefore be found that allows the inclusion of the greatest possible number of texts from the corpus and at the same time delivers the most instructive and useful aspects for study and analysis.

A suitable basis for examining the texts appears to be the Zurich Text Analysis Grid (Nussbaumer & Sieber 1994), which allows a highly differentiated analysis of texts for the identification of specific individual characteristics (for analysing scientific texts using the Zurich Text Analysis Grid cf. Janich 2016). This grid, however, was not originally designed for the analysis of foreign language texts; consequently, particular attention must be paid to specific aspects and challenges of writing in a foreign language (surface phenomena in the text as well as, for instance, the creation of coherence) when using it; if applicable, the grid must be modified. In particular, a differentiated view must be taken of surface phenomena such as the occurrence of certain spelling or grammatical errors, or certain syntactic phenomena. Aspects such as the structuring of an argument or the build-up of coherence within the text against the background of differing linguistic and cultural norms and conventions also require differentiated treatment. Nussbaumer & Sieber themselves state that, depending on the nature of the texts to be analysed, the weighting within the grid should be changed (cf. Nussbaumer & Sieber 1994: 150). For example: Point B.1.5.2 of the original grid refers to "Kohäsionsmittel (Verweis-, Verknüpfungsmittel: Pronomen, Konjunktionen, Konjunktionaladverbien u.a.; textstrukturierende Mittel, Wortstellung)" (Nussbaumer & Sieber 1994: 154) [forms of cohesion (forms of reference, forms of linkage, pronouns, conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs etc. forms of text structuring, word order)]. That item on the grid is far too undifferentiated and therefore has to be specified in more detail. This requirement increases the field of potentially relevant features; thus it will be necessary to concentrate on a selection of features in the pilot study to keep it to a manageable size and to exclude those which do not seem to be relevant. The production of prepositional verbs in L3 German, for example, does not seem to be influenced by prior study of another language, an investigation by Gibson, Hufeisen & Libbens (2001) resulted in 78 % accuracy in the production of prepositional verbs by learners of German as L2 in comparison to 74 % by learners of German as L3/L4 (Gibson, Hufeisen & Libbens 2001: 143).

While it is true that striking features in a text product can indeed be determined by analysing the text with the Zurich Text Analysis Grid, one should be cautious about making assertions about the reasons behind their occurrence (cf. Nussbaumer & Sieber 1994: 150). In a first step, therefore, prominent aspects should merely be identified and, where appropriate, quantified in the

texts. An analysis of the causes for these prominent features and the determination of a direct correlation between their occurrence with the writer's language biography and the postulation of a possible influence by the previously learned foreign language(s) on the production of a German text can only follow in a subsequent step. For an understanding of these aspects, interviews with the writers will have to be carried out in the main investigation.

If striking aspects can indeed be plausibly identified as having been caused by the previously learned foreign language English or French, and appropriate research hypotheses have been formulated, they must then be analysed in closer detail in the main study. To do this, additional texts from persons with language biographies as similar as possible as the original ones should be analysed, and more emphasis should be put on structural data relating to the writers' L1 and L2. In addition to looking at purely structural properties of the languages already learned, their writing culture and text conventions should also be considered. Of continuing relevance to the investigation of the influence of English and French as previously-learned foreign languages are aspects of the corresponding language learning culture and practices in language teaching. Can fundamental differences between the teaching of English as a foreign language in comparison to teaching French as a foreign language be identified, for example, in terms of the scope and value attached to speech versus writing? Interviewing the writers can provide important insights into this issue, as well as an investigation of the writers' individual influences on the text, as mentioned in the previous paragraph.

4. Expected results

A number of GFL/GSL teachers have commented on the possible influence of a previously learned language on the production of German-language texts. A general look at the texts will unquestionably provide an indication at least of the aspects which could be considered relevant as having been influenced by a previously learned foreign language.

Examples of such influences might be the use of connectors and, indirectly linked to this, sentence construction. Is there a tendency to string short principal clauses together paratactically or do hypotactic sentence constructions also appear? Associated with this observation as to how prepared the writer is to take a "sprachlich-formales Wagnis" ("linguistic-formal risk", criterion B.2.1. of the Zurich Text Analysis Grid, cf. Nussbaumer & Sieber 1994: 155). A more complex, hypotactic sentence structure, for obvious reasons, presents a greater risk of making mistakes – particularly if the writer is not used to writing essays. The observation made that students who have learned French prior to German have fewer difficulties with German sentence structures and sentence construction, could also be a factor here.

Furthermore, the overall construction of the text, including the development of themes, reader guidance and the creation of coherence, can give pointers to the influence of a previously-learned foreign language – the writing and text culture play a particularly important role here. Differences between texts written in Romance and Germanic languages (and the resulting writing difficulties) have already been documented (cf. e.g. Eßer 2000). The frequently voiced and, to a greater or lesser extent, specific views of teachers along these lines, namely text construction by writers who had previously learned French as a foreign language "is, simply, different" must be examined and formulated in more concrete terms. The use of particular stylistic devices such as metaphors is important here. The comment should be made that the use of such devices may be perceived as appropriate or inappropriate, depending on the text type (and differences in text norms due to linguistic and cultural norms). On the one hand, therefore, the question is whether these devices are used more frequently in texts produced by writers who had learned French prior to German (which, at the very least, is a subjective impression). On the other hand, there is the question whether these stylistic devices are used appropriately for the context and for the German text norm applicable the text type in question.

At the word level, and in particular in the case of texts by writers who have only learned English as their L2, it is noticeable that there are clear interference errors stemming from English. In addition to the typical *false friends,* where words are confused with each other or incorrect use of prepositions or conjunctions occur frequently (e.g. "Als wir sehen können" instead of "Wie wir sehen können"). An analysis of whether this tendency to produce such errors is smaller amongst those who learned French prior to German would be useful here.

The examples of the issues presented here make it clear just how diverse the research aspects may be. It reflects the diversity of the impressions gathered to date on possible correlations between the linguistic phenomena occurring in texts written by learners of German as L3 and their previously learned foreign languages English or French. A clearer understanding of any actual correlations with previously learned foreign languages must come from the main study and probably further investigations.

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Notes:

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