

FROM ALMOST 0 TO ALMOST 100: SOME ASPECTS OF THE INTERLANGUAGE CONTINUUM

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The publication in the early seventies of several papers on the nature of second language (SL) learner output and its importance for developing and testing theories about second language acquisition (SLA) marked a fundamental departure from earlier contrastive analysis (CA) approaches to errors in SL production. Drawing on behavioural psychology notions, such as 'interference' and 'transfer', Lado (1957) states that the level of grammatical similarity between a learner's first language (L1) and his target language (TL) will determine the degree of ease or difficulty he encounters in acquiring that second language. Interference, the CA hypothesis insists, is the result of unfamiliarity with the rules of a TL and psychological causes, such as inadequate learning (Duskova, 1969). Grammatical structures difficult to learn will be those that are very different in the mother-tongue and the second language being learnt (Lado, 1957: 58-59). 'Transfer' can be positive or negative: linguistic features of the L1 that are similar to those of the TL will facilitate learning (positive transfer); those aspects of the L1 that are different to the TL grammatical and phonological system will hinder SLA and cause the learner to make numerous production errors (negative transfer). According to behaviourist theory, both types of transfer are the outcome of automatic and subconscious use of old habits in new learning situations (Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982). CA would predict, therefore, that learners of English as a second language (ESL) with Spanish as their L1, for example, will be more successful in acquiring English than native speakers of Thai. Armed with information from a CA study of Thai and English, the ESL teacher was to become aware of the errors likely to be produced by his Thai students, be prepared to predict learning difficulties, and discourage the production of such errors through constant correction and drilling of problematic TL structures: The role of the L2 teacher, then, was to insure, as far as possible, 'bad' L1 habits were replaced by the desired 'good' TL habits.

As SLA investigators began to be influenced by mentalist L1 ideas (eg. Chomsky 1959, 1965; Brown, 1973), error analysis (the study of TL erroneous performance) was used as a tool for gaining insights into the cognitive/developmental processes of SLA (e.g. Corder, 1967, 1971, 1981; Duskova, 1969; Richards, 1974a, 1974b; Williams, 1972; Krashen & Pon, 1975). Writing in 1978, Corder reminds the reader that not too many years ago dialect speakers were considered uneducated because they spoke what many treated as a substandard version of their native tongue; furthermore, Corder adds (p.71):

It is even more recent still that some people have prepared to consider the language of the second language learner as other than defective, distorted, or incorrect from the language they are learning ... Only by treating language learners' language as a phenomenon to be studied in its own right can we hope to develop an understanding of the processes of second language acquisition.

Corder then goes on to suggest that variability is to be found in what he calls 'language-learner language', as in any other human language (p.72), The learner's second language (SL) production is referred to as his 'transitional competence' (Corder, 1971). Corder (1978) adopts Selinker's (1972) term, 'interlanguage' (IL), to describe the linguistic system he has previously named language-learner language, and what Nemser (1971) describes as 'approximate systems' of L2 learners. Selinker (1972) feels justified, even "compelled", to hypothesise the existence of interlanguage (observable TL output of the learner while attempting the production of TL norms) because the utterances most learners" of a SL produce are not identical to those a native speaker would have produced had he intended to express the same meaning as the learner (p.214).

If interlanguage is to be treated as a linguistic system worthy of study in its own right, it would be illogical to refer to differences between interlanguage production and a related second language (other than obvious false starts, slips of the tongue, etc.) as errors (Corder, 1978:73). Corder sees interlanguage as a "dynamic system" (p.73). The language of SL acquirers, like the language of children learning their first language, undergoes constant change along an interlanguage 'continuum'. Selinker (1972) imagines this interlanguage continuum to be one involving progressive restructuring. Successful SLA "involves, to a large extent, the reorganization of linguistic material from an IL to identify with a particular TL" (p.224). Corder, on the other hand, views the process, of SLA as one of increasing complexification of the language of children acquiring their mother-tongue. Like L1 acquirers, TL learners make hypotheses about the language they are learning and the errors they commit are evidence of this mental process, theorises Corder (1967). Equipped with a 'built-in syllabus' (Corder, 1967, 1978), all L2 learners display similarities in the manner their interlanguage grammars are acquired at various stages of the developmental continuum, despite individual learner differences. Selinker writes that native-like TL proficiency can be achieved after puberty, but this must be done by successfully reactivating the 'latent language structure' (Lenneberg's term to describe what Chomsky calls the 'language acquisition device'). A "mere 5%" of all learners can do this, however, estimates Selinker (1972:230). The majority of adults attempting to acquire a second language rely instead on their general cognitive powers: the 'latent psychological structure' (p.230).

Most adults will stop short of the end of the interlanguage continuum because of the phenomenon Selinker calls 'fossilization'. This occurs when a learner stops his TL acquisition efforts because he is satisfied with the efficacy of his interlanguage for effective communication, or when age impedes the successful operation of the latent psychological structure (Selinker & Lamendella, 1978).

Selinker (1972) introduces the concept of 'backsliding'. This may happen when a learner is focused on meaning and produces a previously learnt interlanguage form. Backsliding and fossilisation are not clearly related phenomena, reasons Adjemian (1976). She makes a distinction between the two. Whereas in the case of a fossilised form or rule it is assumed that no alternative form or rule of the TL is available to the learner (lack of L2 competence), in the case of backsliding, the opposite is true, but due to various emotional or contextual factors, the learner fails to use the correct alternative rule as required by the situation in which he must perform. Thus, Adjemian hypothesises, in the case of backsliding (p.317):

the speaker should have intuitions about the correct rule or form, whereas in the case of fossilization he may not ... This seems to me to imply that backsliding is evidence of a function in IL which has almost lost its permeability.

As defined by Adjemian, interlanguage, like all other natural languages, is permeable, i.e. at different IL developmental stages the knowledge a TL learner possesses is subject to change. Fossilisation, viewed in this light, may signal the "relative total loss" of permeability in one or more interlanguage functions preventing the acquisition of native speaker competence (p.317).

Schumann (1978) presents the theory that sociological distance can result in the pidginisation of a learner's interlanguage, not unusually in the case of lower social class adult immigrants in a host country. When language and culture shock prevents the L2 learner from attempting assimilation with the social norms and values of the IL native speakers, communication between the former and the latter is likely to be severely restricted. The consequence of this psychological distance, whether real or perceived as such by the learner, will be an interlanguage system that is functionally restricted and, therefore, one that can be expected to "pidginize" (p.91). How to predict and measure psychological distance is an issue Schumann does not deal with very convincingly, however. He himself doubts the reliability of questionnaires designed to elicit a research subject's true feelings about the host society, the tendency being to reply with a statement the learner believes will be favourably received by the researcher.

Selinker (1972) lists five distinct processes which he suggests are central to SLA (p.229): 1) language transfer; 2) transfer of training; 3) strategies of L2 learning; 4) strategies of L2 communication; and 5) overgeneralisation. We shall discuss processes 3, 4 and 5 in the section dealing with language learning strategies further on in this article. Transfer of training, the second process listed by Selinker, refers to the grammatical knowledge acquired by the learner through the medium of instruction. The first process, language transfer, plays a role whose influence on SLA not all researchers in the field are agreed upon. Corder (1978:77), for example, believes that the strong version of his built-in syllabus hypothesis (that all learners, irrespective of their L1 will follow a similar acquisition sequence of a given TL) can be maintained in regard to syntax: the recreation continuum. The weaker version (that learners with a particular L1 will follow a similar L2 acquisition sequence in a chosen L2: the restructuring continuum) might be accepted in relation to the acquisition of the target language phonological system. Still on this theme, a review by Dulay, Hernandez-Chavez & Burt (1978) of the literature on child SLA studies ends with the following conclusions: 1) as time passes, children stop relying less on their first language in order to process the sound system of the new language, gradually increasing their reliance on the TL phonological system so that traces of the L1 accent largely or entirely disappear; 2) most adults, however, never cease to rely on their L1 sound system. If these findings are accepted, they would appear to support Corder's presentation of the weak hypothesis. The strong hypothesis (recreation continuum) is backed up by results from numerous child and adult L2 syntax and morphology acquisition studies. Dulay & Burt (1974a), for instance, report that less than 5% of the 500 grammatical errors made by 179 children (Spanish native language) learning English in the USA reflected their L1. A low incidence of interlingual errors by children of various language backgrounds learning different second languages was also reported by Boyd (1975), and Wode (1976).

Research on the oral and written production of adult L2 learners shows that the greater part of non-phonological errors (between 8% to 23%) that adults make are not interlingual (LoCoco, 1975, 1976, White, 1977). Contrary to the CA hypothesis, there seems to be a lack of positive transfer in the interlanguage of adult TL learners (e.g. Richards, 1971: LoCoco, 1975, 1976). The data clearly shows that grammatical errors made could have been avoided had learners relied on their L1 rules.

Furthermore, concerning judgments of grammatical correctness, two studies by Schachter, Tyson & Diffley (1976) and Ioup & Kruse (1977), the latter cited in Dulay et al. (1982), show that a student's L1 had no influence on his judgments about the correctness of English sentence types. Ioup & Kruse are quoted as expressing the belief that sentence type, not native language background as stated by the CA hypothesis, is the most reliable predictor of TL errors (p.106). We may note in passing, however, that an outright rejection of the partial validity of CA studies in predicting L2 errors is not advocated by some scholars. Duskova (1969), for example, found that the result of her analysis of grammatical and lexical errors in papers written by fifty Czech postgraduate students, all fairly proficient in spoken and written scientific English, showed that the absence of the article system in Czech did not facilitate comprehension and mastery of its use (p.18). This is something a CA of English and Czech would predict. In answer to the question whether CA of the source language and the IL can be replaced by error analysis, Duskova concludes that (p.29):

The present findings do not seem to justify such a procedure. They rather suggest that contrastive analysis might be profitably supplemented by the results of error-based analyses, particularly in the preparation of teaching materials.

Having made reference to Duskova's partial defence of the validity of CA, we must emphasise that the results of her study are taken as further proof that interlanguage errors are, for the most part, not due to interference from the first language, especially errors in bound morphology. Duskova found that only 19 out of 166 morphological errors could be assessed as examples of Czech interference (p.23). Rather than attributing the cause of morphological errors to L1 interference, Duskova proposes that such errors are produced due to interference between "other terms of the English subsystem in question" (p.21). These errors are made even when English forms are analogous to corresponding Czech forms (p.21).

With the realisation that L1 interference appeared to have considerably less influence in the acquisition of a TL than had been previously hypothesised by followers of the behavioural school, SLA researchers began looking for empirical evidence to support the view of interlanguage as a creative construction continuum. Morpheme studies in L1 acquisition (Brown, 1973; de Villiers & de Villiers, 1973) showed that -ing and plural -s morphemes were acquired by children learning English as a native language earlier than the third person singular -s, for instance. A natural order of acquisition appeared to be followed by children acquiring certain grammatical features of English. This natural order of acquisition, Brown (1973:105-106) remarks, is not influenced by the input in the child's mother-tongue linguistic environment, in the sense that the child attempts to make his speech conform with the adult model. Instead, Brown adds, the child makes hypotheses about the language he hears, passing from levels of lesser to greater complexity because he is programmed to do so by operating on linguistic input at certain periods in his life. Spurred on by the desire to determine whether a similar L2 acquisition order existed, Dulay & Burt (1973, 1974b) used the Bilingual Syntax Measure to elicit naturalistic speech from Spanish and Chinese speaking children learning English as a second language in bilingual (Spanish/English) and monolingual (English) schools in the USA, in order to investigate the acquisition sequences for eleven grammatical morphemes. Dulay & Burt observed a striking similarity in the acquisition sequence obtained from all the different groups in their studies. The two researchers concluded that irrespective of the children's first language background, morpheme acquisition sequences were the same; furthermore, the greatest number of L2 errors were developmental, rather than the result of interference from the L1 of the learner. In their second study (1974b), Dulay & Burt adopted the Ordering-Theoretical Method for data analysis that yielded acquisition 'hierarchies' instead of sequences (Figure 2.1). Items in Group 1 are acquired before the items in the three groups below. Items in Group 2 are

acquired next, and so on. Items acquired in Group 4 imply that all the other items in 3, 2 and 1 have already been acquired by an L2 learner.

Table 1
Study Summary: Dulay & Burt (1974b) in
Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982: 208

Acquisition Hierarchy for 13 English Grammatical Morphemes for Spanish-Speaking and Cantonese-Speaking Children	
GROUP I	
CASE (Nominative/Accusative)	WORD ORDER (In simple declarative sentences)
GROUP II	
SINGULAR COPULA ('s/is) PLURAL AUXILIARY (are)	SINGULAR AUXILIARY ('s/is) PROGRESSIVE (-ing)
GROUP III	
PAST IRREGULAR POSSESSIVE (-s) 3rd PERSON SINGULAR (-s)	CONDITIONAL AUXILIARY (would) LONG PLURAL (-es)
GROUP IV	
PERFECT AUXILIARY (have)	PAST PARTICIPLE (-en)

Using different research instruments, Fathman (1975) and Kessler Stet Idar (1977) replicated the finding that certain English morphemes are acquired in a predictable order by children with Korean, Vietnamese, Spanish and Japanese as their L1. These studies also included longitudinal data and lent credence to the hypothesis that children of distinct L1 backgrounds, in a variety of host country environments, follow a similar order in the acquisition of eleven grammatical morphemes. Critics point out that the morpheme studies produced only a possible accuracy order, which the above researchers equate with an order of acquisition (e.g. Littlewood, 1984).

Again, employing the Bilingual Syntax Measure as a research tool for eliciting natural speech, Bailey, Madden & Krashen (1974) reported that adult ESL learners with several different mother-tongues followed a natural order in the acquisition of eight grammatical morphemes. The difficulty order was similar to that evidenced by the child ESL learners in the Dulay & Burt studies. Neither could the L1 of adult learners be said to affect the interaction between internal factors and L2 input. Krashen, Butler, Birnbaum & Robertson (1978) reported that in studies with ESL university and high school learners from a background of fifteen different L1 's, the acquisition sequences and

hierarchies of some elicited structures in natural writing were, almost identical to those noted in speech production.

Larsen-Freeman (1975), however, did not find a natural order of acquisition with subjects who were given grammar tests in reading, writing and listening. Krashen attempts to account for this by stressing that the natural order can only be observed when the subjects are not monitoring their output and are relying, instead, on 'acquired' knowledge of the TL, rather than on 'learnt' knowledge (monitored output). When monitor-free performance is elicited, Krashen insists a natural order for grammatical morphemes, a difficulty order similar to that of the child studies, can be seen (1981: 52). Indeed, this was the case when Larsen-Freeman (1975) elicited speech and an imitation task using the Bilingual/Syntax Measure, a test Krashen classifies as 'monitor-free' (1981-52).

We have dwelt at length with the results of the morpheme studies as they appear to furnish some proof for the natural sequence of L2 development in SLA; regardless of mother-tongue background, second languages seem to be acquired in a similar order along the interlanguage reconstruction continuum. The studies, however, might be taken, at best, to indicate that the natural order of morpheme acquisition reported is an order of accuracy at any given point in the L2 learner's development. Furthermore, the studies were conducted with a methodology and statistical analysis questioned by more than one critic (e.g. Rosansky, 1976).

The strategies and internal processes of SLA have remained a mystery seldom investigated by language acquisition researchers. The literature on longitudinal studies is rich in empirical claims to the effect that L2 syntax acquisition follows relatively universal stages which are transitional. A representative sample of such work might include Schumann's studies on the acquisition of ESL negation and relative clauses (1978,1980), and studies of yes/no and Wh-questions by Gillis & Weber (1976) and Wode (1978). Unfortunately, problems exist with such longitudinal studies. Perhaps the most important, suggests Larsen-Freeman, is the lack of a reliable L2 language development index. It is inadvisable to rely on mean length of utterance in SLA studies as a large number of interlanguage utterances consist of memorised routines and patterns which are by no means indicative of the learner's second language competence. Individual L2 learner and language group variation, as Larsen-Freeman discovered in her study of speakers of four languages, makes it difficult to offer tenable generalisations regarding the exact path of interlanguage development. Many SLA studies fail to go beyond the exploration of syntax factors and are mainly preoccupied with product and a fairly small number of grammatical morphemes, a view expressed by Tarone, Swain & Fathman (1976). Even if interlanguage is accepted as something more than a hypothetical 'natural' language, proving that it exists may require new research approaches that cope with a wider range of cognitive and linguistic issues not investigated to date. Spolsky, (1979:183) states the same case:

A great deal of the difficulty.. arises out of first assuming an interlanguage, a presumably complete grammar that has been internalized by the learner, but attempting to establish its existence by using fairly limited tests of errors made with certain morphological elements. As a result of this sketchy sampling of a learner's knowledge, the picture that emerges remains as confused as some of the statements made about second language acquisition.

Perhaps one of the greatest weaknesses of studies of second language acquisition is that they still are concerned with too simple a view of the process.

Variability in interlanguage is a reality that must be accepted as a challenge for further SLA research, not as a nuisance factor. Interlanguage should not be seen as a blemish to 'the powerful suggestion that, like children acquiring their native tongue, L2 learners, irrespective of L1 background, follow a developmental sequence relatively similar to that observed in L1 longitudinal and cross-sectional acquisition studies. Child and adult L2 learners will vary in their method of approaching the TL learning situation. One crucial area in which this will be apparent is that where the individual interacts with his linguistic environment (i.e. other interlanguage speakers and native speakers of the TL being learnt) in order to obtain valuable L2 input. This is a phenomenon examined by Martinez (1988).

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