

# Interlanguage And Interlanguage Continuum

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*"Viewing the approximative systems of language learners not as pathologies to be eradicated but as necessary stages in the gradual acquisition of the target system may result in a deeper understanding of language in general and a more humane approach to language teaching." Richards & Sampson, 1974b:17-8)*

## 1. Introduction

Out of his interest in analysing learners' errors, and of his dissatisfaction with the then very popular method of Contrastive Analysis in dealing with learners' errors Corder (1967) wrote an article entitled "The Significance of learners' Errors," in which he proposed that at least some of the strategies employed by the second language learner are the same as those by which a first language is acquired. He further maintained that both first and second language learners make errors in order to test out certain hypotheses about the nature of the language they are learning. To him, then, the making of errors is, as opposed to the view adopted by the Contrastive Analysis Theory, a strategy used both by children acquiring their first language and by those learning a second language.

Furthermore, Corder advocated the study of learners' language, which, borrowing from Chomsky's terminology, he called **transitional competence**. This concept of language learners' language as a linguistic system in its own right was then taken up by researchers working in the field of second language acquisition. These studies of learner language developed very rapidly through out the 1970s, and grew into what is now commonly known as **inter language studies** or **interlanguage theory**. According to this theory,

"second language speech rarely conforms to what one expects native speakers of the target language to produce, that it is not an exact translation of the native language, that it differs from the target language in systematic ways, and that the forms of utterances produced in the second language by a learner are not random. This interlanguage hypothesis proposes that the relevant data of a theory of second language learning must be the speech forms which result from the attempted expression of meaning in a second language" (Selinker et. al., 1975:140).

This theory has now developed to such an extent that as Stern (1983,354) observes, "it is the most theoretically developed and at the same time the most empirically investigated approach to the study of second language proficiency."

It is not the aim of this article, however, to trace the development of interlanguage studies. It will instead attempt to examine the basic concepts underlying the notion of interlanguage and its related aspects, that is interlanguage continuum and fossilisation. It will be obvious in the course of the discussion that attention will be focused on the interlanguage continuum, the ways in which second language learners progress along it, and why at any one stage in this continuum a learner may fossilise.

## 2. Interlanguage

The term **interlanguage** was first used by Selinker (1972) to refer to a separate linguistic system whose exist-

ence we are compelled to hypothesise, based upon the observed output which results from the second language learner's attempted production of a target language norm. In this sense the learner's language system is a mixed or intermediate one in that "the learner's language will show systematic features both of the target language and of other languages he may know, most obviously of his mother tongue" (Corder, 1981:67).

Apart from this widely accepted term, various other terms have also been used. Corder, for example, refers to **transitional competence** (1967) and **idiosyncratic dialect** (1971). Nemser (1971) refers to **approximative systems**. All these terms refer to the same phenomenon, that is the language-learners' language. Each, however, draws attention to different aspects of the phenomenon. The term **transitional competence** emphasises that the learner possesses a certain body of knowledge which is constantly developing and which underlies the utterances he makes, whereas **idiosyncratic dialect** refers to the fact that the learner operates at any given time a self-contained language variety or dialect. On the other hand, the term **approximative systems** stresses the structural aspects of the learner language which "approximates more or less closely to the target language system" (Littlewood, 1984:33). This term has the advantage of implying the developmental nature of language learning.

In one way or another Selinker (1972) raised three principal features of interlanguage, that is systematicity, dynamism and permeability. These three formal characteristics of interlanguage were then taken up by other researchers in their subsequent discussions of interlanguage.

Interlanguage is assumed to be systematic, that is, it is governed by rules. It is systematic, according to Corder (1971), because it has its own rules. That is, learners' language is to be analysed in its own right as a kind of exotic language which has systematic rules. Corder pro-

poses that interlanguage should be viewed not only as systematic, but also unstable (i.e. changing over time) and creative (i.e. with rules unique to itself, not just borrowed from the native language). In spite of the variability of interlanguage (for further detail on interlanguage variability, see Ellis 1985a, 1985b and Tarone, 1988), we can detect the systematic nature of the learner's use of the second language. The learner selects from his store of interlanguage rules in more or less predictable ways. His performance is based on his existing rule system in much the same way as the native speaker bases his performance on his internalised knowledge of the first language system.

Another feature which characterises interlanguage is that interlanguage is a dynamic system which is constantly changing by the incorporation of new rules and words, and by the revision of existing rules. This process of constant revision and extension of rules is a feature of the inherent instability of interlanguage and its built-in propensity for change (Ellis, 1985b:50). Moreover, it is an essential aspect of interlanguage in the context of foreign language teaching (Faerch et al., 1984:274).

The second language learner's interlanguage system is also said to be permeable. That is, the learner is ready to amend the rules that make up his knowledge of the second language at any one stage. This means that his rules are not fixed, but are open to new rules. Permeability of the learner's cognitive representation of his interlanguage is a prerequisite for second language learning to take place (Faerch et al., 1984:192). Permeability, however, is in fact characteristic of all language systems (Ellis, 1985b). What differentiates an interlanguage system from other language systems is the degree of permeability, and, in the case of fossilisation, the loss of permeability that prevents most learners to achieve native-speaker competence (Adjemian, 1976).

Those are the formal characteristics of interlanguage, which have to do with interlanguage seen as a linguistic system. We should note, however, that when we look at interlanguage as a linguistic system in its own right, it seems contradictory to talk about errors produced by second language learners. The concept of error implies the presence of a linguistic norm, whereas interlanguage sets its own norms. But we should clearly characterise parts of interlanguage system as erroneous relative to an educationally-defined norm by reason of the fact that norms play an essential part in education. In spite of the fact that the concept of error is thus not consistent with the internal logic of the interlanguage system, the analysis of errors serves an important function when interlanguage is described within specific, norm-oriented situations (Faerch et al., 1984).

Apart from these formal features, interlanguage also has some functional characteristics which specify how the interlanguage system is put to communicative use. For most learners interlanguage is typically used for some restricted purposes of communication in certain types of event. In this way, interlanguage communication is comparable to communication in pidgin languages, which are typically used for restricted commercial transaction (Todd, 1974). The reason for this reduction in interlanguage communication is that interlanguage users may have difficulty in achieving their communication goals due to limitations in their communicative resources. Another functional feature, which is also similar to that of pidgin languages, is that as distinct from the native language, interlanguage is not used as a means of creating group identity because it is not used for communicative purposes within social groups of the same native language.

### 3. Interlanguage Continuum

As mentioned earlier, one of the formal features of interlanguage is that it is

a dynamic system. The language learner's system is continually being modified as new elements are incorporated throughout the learning process. It gradually moves from one stage to another towards the target language system. In this way we can conceive of interlanguage as a continuum. As a matter of fact, this concept of interlanguage as being a continuum is already implicit in the works of Selinker (1972) and Nemser (1971).

However, early studies of interlanguage (eg. Corder 1967, 1971; Nemser, 1971; Selinker, 1972; and Richards, 1971) viewed interlanguage continuum as stretching from the learner's mother tongue to the target language at the same level of complexity. In their view, the learner is seen as gradually replacing features of his native language as he acquires features of the target language. In other words, they thought of the continuum as "a restructuring of the learner's system from the native language to the target language at the same level of complexity" (Corder, 1981:88). Corder (1978, 1981) refers to this as a restructuring continuum.

Corder refuses this formulation. He observes that they failed to recognise the continuum as having the property of increasing complexity or elaboration. He argues that the learner's interlanguage moves along the continuum in increasing complexity. He views the learner as gradually creating the rule system of the target language in a manner similar to the child's acquisition of the first language. Following the claim that learning a second language is more of a recreative than a restructuring process (Dulay & Burt, 1972, and 1977), he says further:

"the interlanguage continuum is not simply one of progressive restructuring of the mother tongue systems and that the errors made by learners are not largely transfer errors, but that their utterances show evidence of a dynamic system similar to that of a child acquiring his mother tongue and may, at least to some extent, follow the same sequence of stages" (Corder, 1981:89-90)

He refers to this continuum as a recreation or developmental continuum, and defines it as "a dynamic, goal-oriented language system of increasing complexity" (Corder, 1981:90). Corder maintains that interlanguage continuum should be distinguished from other developmental continua, i.e. the pre- and post-pidgin continua, in that the pre- and post-pidgin continua are both liable to stabilisation and institutionalisation, whereas interlanguage continuum is not. The reason for this is that second language learners do not normally use their interlanguage for communication among themselves. In addition, he also maintains that interlanguage continuum should further be distinguished from other, non-developmental or lectal continua (represented by dialectal chains, sociolectal continua, or the de-creolisation continuum) in that these continua are characterised not by progressive complexity but by equal complexity. Finally, he proposes that "in practice, second language learning in any particular individual is probably a mixture in varying proportion of restructuring and recreating" (Corder, 1981:93). The evidence he gives for restructuring is the occurrence of transfer errors, while that for recreating is the occurrence of developmental errors.

It is through such errors, in fact, that second language learners can be seen as gradually progressing along the continuum. In their attempt to study the development of second language learners' language, interlanguage researchers, following the mentalist account of first language acquisition, use the concept of **hypothesis-formation** and **hypothesis-testing**. Corder (1967) already suggested that second language learners, in much the same way as first language learners, make errors in order to test out certain hypotheses about the nature of the language they are learning. The making of errors by the learners is seen as a strategy of learning. In short, this mentalist notion of hypothesis-formation and hypothesis-testing is employed in interlanguage theory to account

for how second language learners progress along the interlanguage continuum.

In order to progress along their developing systems, second language learners apply certain strategies to establish interlanguage rules, and to achieve this, they are undergoing cognitive processes of hypothesis-formation and hypothesis-testing. According to Faerch & Kasper (1983, see also Faerch et al., 1984), second language learners may form hypotheses in three ways: (1) by inducing new rules from the input data they receive, (2) by using prior linguistic knowledge, i.e. knowledge of first language, existing second language knowledge, or knowledge of other languages, and (3) by a combination of (1) and (2). Once the learner has formed a hypothesis, he may test it out in a number of ways: (1) by attending to second language input, (i.e. receptively), (2) by producing second language utterances containing rules he has hypothesised and assessing their correctness against the feedback he receives, (i.e. productively), (3) by consulting a native speaker, a teacher, a dictionary, etc. (i.e. metalingually), and (4) by eliciting a repair from their interlocutor (i.e. interactionally).

On the basis of this concept, coupled with the method used in error analysis, interlanguage theorists have recognised a number of strategies second language learners use in developing their interlanguage systems. Selinker (1972), for example, suggested five processes or strategies which are assumed to be central to second language learning. These are: (1) language transfer (i.e. rules deriving from the native language), (2) transfer of training (i.e. fossilisable rules resulting from identifiable items in training procedures), (3) strategies of second language learning (i.e. rules occurring as a result of an identifiable approach by the learner to the material to be learned), (4) strategies of second language communication (i.e. rules resulting from an identifiable approach by the learner to communication with native speakers of the target lan-

guage), and (5) overgeneralisation (ie. rules deriving from a clear overgeneralisation of target language rules and semantic features). These five processes or errors are said to be subject to fossilisation. They make up the ways in which the learner tries to internalise the target language system.

In addition to this, Richards (1974c), working within the framework of Error Analysis, identified a number of similar strategies: overgeneralisation (the same as Selinker's fifth process), Ignorance of rule restrictions (ie. a failure to observe the restrictions of existing structures, or the application of rules to contexts where they do not apply), incomplete application of rules (ie. a failure to learn the more complex structures because the learner finds he can achieve effective communication by using relatively simple rules), and false concepts hypothesised (ie. errors deriving from faulty comprehension of distinctions in the target language).

This psycholinguistic type of errors provides information about the process of second language acquisition, and can be used as a guide to the inner workings of the language learning process. Such errors can further provide evidence, though not conclusively, for the development of second language learners' interlanguage. Strong evidence for the natural sequence of interlanguage development is supplied both by cross-sectional research and by longitudinal studies.

A number of cross-sectional studies have been made to examine the acquisition sequence of grammatical morphemes. Dulay and Burt (1973 and 1974) are two distinguished proponents of these studies. Their findings, supported by others in the same field of research, suggested that most of the errors produced by child second language learners were not subject to first language interference. They claimed that second language learners acquire grammatical morphemes in a natural sequence irrespective of their first language backgrounds, or their age.

Despite some doubts expressed about these cross-sectional studies, they provide evidence of a natural sequence of interlanguage development. Krashen (1982), for example, examined nine grammatical morphemes, and worked out the average acquisition order of these morphemes. He found that a group of morphemes are acquired first before others (see below).

- Group 1: present progressive **-ing** (as in **boy running**)  
Plural **-s** (as in **two books**)  
Copula 'to be' (as in **he is big**)
- Group 2: Auxiliary 'to be' (as in **he is running**)  
Articles **the** and **a**
- Group 3: Irregular past forms (as in **she went**)
- Group 4: Regular past **-ed** (as in **she climbed**)  
Third-person-singular **-s** (as in **she runs**)  
Possessive **-s** (as in **man's hat**)

In other words, there is evidence that second language learners have a tendency to acquire a set of English morphemes in a predictable order. They appear to progress along the interlanguage continuum in a very similar way. We should note, however, that there is also evidence for variation between learners, caused by the mother tongue or by individual factors.

Apart from these cross-sectional studies, a number of other studies have also been carried out longitudinally. As a matter of fact, it is from these studies that the strongest evidence for a natural sequence of development comes (Ellis, 1985b:58). In addition to examining the acquisition of grammatical morphemes, these studies have also investigated other aspects of interlanguage development. They have tried to account for the gradual growth of competence in terms of the strategies used by a learner at different developmental stages. In these studies much attention has been focused on what Dulay et al (1982) call 'transitional constructions', that is "the language forms learners use while they are

still learning the grammar of a language" (Dulay et al., 1982:121). These include, among others, negatives, interrogatives and relative clauses. The reason for studying these p73 constructions is that they "provide the best indicators of the progression which, according to interlanguage theory, is the basis of second language acquisition" (Ellis, 1985b:59).

These longitudinal studies suggested that the acquisition of target language syntax involves a series of transitional stages which are more or less universal. The learner progresses through a series of developmental stages on his way to target language competence. This gradual progression can be clearly seen, for example, in the acquisition of negatives, which involves four overlapping stages. In the first stage, the learner uses external negation in his negative utterances. The negative particle **no** is put before a declarative sentence, as in **No singing song**. In the next stage, the learner uses the negative particle **no** (sometimes **not** or **don't** as an unanalysed unit) inside the utterance, as in **They no have water**. The next stage involves the use of the negative particle after auxiliary verbs like **is** or **can**, as in **I can't go**. In the final stage the learner has reached the target language rules of negation, for example, **He doesn't know anything**.

As mentioned above, these stages are overlapping, with several forms existing together at any one time. The acquisition development involves the gradual reordering of early rules in favour of later ones. The studies suggested that this is also true for the acquisition of other transitional constructions. Again this shows a considerable degree of similarity in the natural sequence of development, although there is some variation due to individual factors as well as to the influence of the first language.

#### 4. Fossilisation

In his 1972 seminal paper, Selinker noted that a large number of second language learners (perhaps amounting

to 95%) do not succeed in reaching the end of the interlanguage continuum. They fossilise when their interlanguage contains some different rules from those of the target language system. This Selinker referred to as **fossilisation**, ie. a mechanism whereby speakers of a particular native language will tend to keep certain linguistic items, rules, subsystems in their interlanguage, no matter what the age of the learners or amount of explanation and instruction they receive in the target language. (Later Selinker & Lamendella (1978:240) redefined it as "cessation of further systematic development in the interlanguage"). This implies that both adults and children may fossilise at some point in their attempt to master a second language, with adults being very likely to do so (Selinker & Lamendella, 1978:240-41). Selinker et al. (1975) suggested that under certain conditions the child's progress in a second language may be fossilised as an adult's. Certain rules, they maintained, may fossilise when the second language acquisition is non-simultaneous with the child's first language acquisition and also when it occurs without there being native speaking peers of the target language (Selinker et al., 1975:140).

Selinker (1972) further suggested that fossilised structures may be realised as errors or as correct target language forms. If a certain feature in the learner's interlanguage system has the same form as that in the target language system, then fossilisation of the correct form will occur. If, however, the feature does not have the same form as that in the target language system, then the fossilisation will be an error. He maintained that fossilisable structures tend to remain as potential performance, re-emerging in the production of an interlanguage when seemingly eradicated. Thus, the learner may on occasion regress or 'back slide' towards his interlanguage norm when his attention is focused on a new and difficult subject matter or when he is anxious or excited.

As regards the causes of fossilisation, Selinker & Lamendella (1978), drawing conclusions from the views of other scholars, argue that there are internal and external causes. Fossilisation can occur because of restriction of the operation of hypothesis-testing mechanisms as a result of a loss of brain plasticity associated with advancing age (ie. after puberty). This seems to be the same as saying that the learner's interlanguage system has lost its permeability. Another possible cause is that the learner realises he need not develop his interlanguage because the errors he produces do not hinder him in satisfying his communicative needs. That is, he can communicate effectively whatever he wants to, irrespective of his errors. A learner with a lack of communicative needs is more likely to stop progressing at an earlier stage than a learner with a fuller range of needs. In other words, a learner with a lack of social needs, ie. "the desire to use language which is socially acceptable and enables the learner to integrate satisfactorily with the second language community" (Littlewood, 1984:71), is likely to fossilise early in the interlanguage continuum, whereas a learner who has strong social needs may progress further along the developmental continuum.

## 5. Conclusion

As is obvious from the above discussion, this essay is just a simplified account of the concepts of interlanguage and interlanguage continuum, which so far have been studied extensively. Some outstanding issues are still to be resolved. Despite the many attempts scholars have made to investigate aspects of interlanguage, further studies seem to be indispensable to the resolution of problems related to interlanguage systematicity and variability, the origin of interlanguage and the many aspects of fossilisation as listed in Selinker & Lamendella (1978:245). Even the findings offered by error analysis, and cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, which

seem to have provided strong evidence for the natural sequence of interlanguage development, have to be supported by further research since each has its own inadequacy and weakness.

Nevertheless, we can for the present see that the shift of attitudes towards errors, from the one which views them as signs of inhibition to the other which gives importance to them as evidence of the learner's active contribution to second language acquisition, has aroused a great deal of interest among psycholinguists, applied linguists and even sociolinguists in studying language-learners' language as a linguistic system in its own right, and has shed new lights on how people learn languages, and how in particular second language learners develop their interlanguage. As a consequence, many great things have been uncovered to the benefit of second language learners as well as second language practitioners. In other words, studies of second language learning have, as McDonough (1986:129) says, "the potential of giving course writers and teachers direct evidence of how people learn languages, which ... can eventually lead to a systematic and rich account of the teaching-learning process to be embodied in new types of language course and thus result in more successful learners".

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## Tentang Penulis

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