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The Phenomenon of Interlanguage in the Process of Second Language Acquisition

SUMMARY

This article discusses the phenomenon of interlanguage in the process of second language acquisition. A number of researchers claim that the interlanguage can be characterized by fundamental features like fossilization, systematicity and simplification. This article also addresses the problem of significant psycholinguistic processes which influence the evolution of interlanguage.

Key words: second language acquisition, interlanguage, fossilization

INTRODUCTION

The term *interlanguage*¹ introduced by Larry Selinker (1972) refers to the independent linguistic system which in the process of second / foreign language acquisition shows specific, idiosyncratic features related to the characteristics of the native language (L1) and the target language (L2).

Although the concept of interlanguage is related to the process of the second language acquisition, Selinker indirectly refers to the concept of Language Acquisition Device introduced by Noam Chomsky. This device, or a universal innate ability to acquire a language, allows children to construct grammatical structures based on the system of rules which derive from universal grammar (Chomsky 1964, 1965, 1975). Selinker also refers to the analogical concept of Eric Len-

¹ Selinker is the author of the term based on Uriel Weinreich's *interlingual* (1953), whereas the phenomenon itself was identified by Corder (1967) as *transitional competence*. Nemser used the term *approximative system*, emphasizing that the process of interlanguage evolution shifts towards the target language.

neberg's latent language structure (1967). In his Critical Period Hypothesis, Lenneberg states that unless the process of language acquisition commences before an individual reaches adolescence, the complete acquisition of a linguistic system at later age is not possible. At the "critical age" brain loses its high plasticity, a feature that characterises the developmental period². However, most researchers agree that as far as the process of the second language acquisition is concerned, there only exist the period of increased sensitivity to language, whereas age is barely one of many factors that have an impact on successful second language acquisition (Oyama 1976; Patkowski 1980).

According to Selinker, an adult who learns a second language develops a mechanism of latent psychological structure. This mechanism may be activated when a person makes an attempt to express something in a foreign language. According to Selinker, the differences between latent psychological structure and latent linguistic structure include:

1. latent linguistic structure is conditioned genetically, whereas its psychological equivalent is not an innate structure,
2. latent psychological structure does not have any point of reference in grammatical structures of a given language, thus it is not related to the existence of universal grammar, it may, however, refer to other mental structures,
3. finally, latent psychological structure cannot be activated, and what is more, may appear only in the interlanguage of a person studying a foreign language; this structure, therefore, is not present in the process of the first language acquisition.

Interlanguage can be perceived as a continuum between the poles defined by the native language (L1) and the target language (L2). The development of interlanguage is presented in the figure below³:

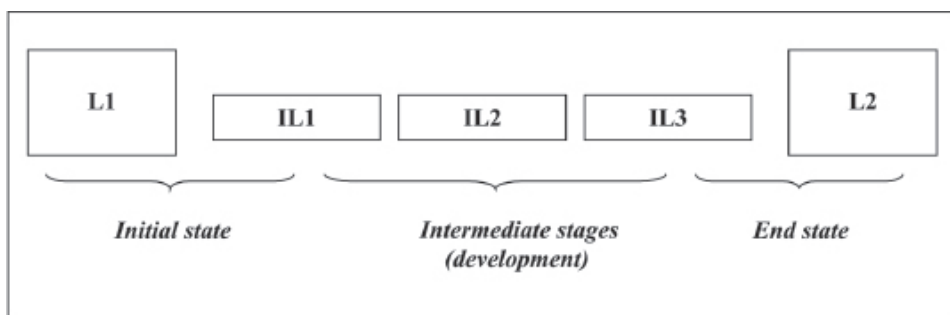


Fig. 1 The development of interlanguage. Source: Montrul, 2014.

² For both Lenneberg and the original authors of the "critical age" concept in language acquisition context (Penfield, Roberts 1959), it was also brain lateralisation that had a crucial role in the process of acquiring languages.

³ Montrul 2014, p. 79.

Intermediate stages are characterised by instability, which can indicate not only the progress of the development of interlanguage, but also its regress. The initial state is characterised by the increased transfer of native language elements into the source language. It should be noted that this tendency becomes weaker if the development of the interlanguage increases. Assuming that interlanguage is a specific system that undergoes constant reorganisation, it may be problematic to determine the end state of the development of interlanguage (Larsen-Freeman 2014).

According to the interlanguage researchers, this specific language exhibits certain basic features (which will be discussed further in the article) such as: fossilization, systematicity, and simplification. The article also discusses selected issues related to the existence of psycholinguistic processes which, according to Selinker (1972), significantly affect the development of interlanguage⁴.

FEATURES OF INTERLANGUAGE

The term fossilization, discussed by Selinker (1972/1983), refers to the situation when the acquisition of the second language is stopped before a person has reached the level of a native user. Many researchers claim that adults who learn a foreign language rarely reach native-like language competence. This constitutes a fundamental difference in the process of the second language acquisition between children and adults (Tarone 2006). The process of language development among children is nearly always successful, except for a low percentage of disorders. Selinker's observations confirm, however, that only approximately 5% of adults succeed in mastering the target language (Selinker 1972/1983).

Therefore, the question concerning the access of an adult to universal grammar in the process of the second language acquisition is legitimate. In the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis, Bley-Vroman (1990) argues that adult learners very rarely reach native-like language competence. He also discusses various factors that differentiate the process of the second language acquisition from the process of the first language acquisition. The difference between the two processes stems, first of all, from the fact that adult learners do not have direct access to universal grammar. Another factor is the phenomenon of fossilization, which does not occur in the process of the first language acquisition by children.

According to many researchers (Liceras 1986; Flynn 1987; Felix 1988), universal grammar is accessible to adult learners only through their first language. Although fundamental changes are unlikely to occur at the level of the establishing of the parameters typical of a given first language, universal rules typical of all natural languages should still be accessible to adult learners (Liceras 1996).

⁴ Niestorowicz, 2014.

The research conducted by Johnson and Newport (1989) analysed negative correlation between age and the ability to achieve native-like, or nearly native-like competence in the second language. The authors studied correlation between the age at which linguistic immersion of immigrants from different walks of life in the United States commenced, and the successful acquisition of the English language. The authors claim that the earlier the immersion in second language occurs, the higher are the learner's chances for achieving native-like competence.

The majority of the studies focused on language competence in terms of morphosyntax; there are also analyses (Neufeld 1980; Flege 1984) that examine the importance of pronunciation in the process of the second language acquisition, as well as a given language's susceptibility to fossilization at the phonological level. The acquisition of native-like accent in a foreign language seems to be possible only if the process of learning begins already during childhood; this particular linguistic aspect has neurobiological foundations (Scovel, 1988).

Many researchers (White, Genesee 1996; DeKeyser 2000) do not consider age to be an important factor affecting successful second language acquisition. The findings of their research reveal that people who started learning a foreign language as adults may also develop native-like competence despite their limited access to universal grammar. The researchers point to other factors that play an important role in the process of the second language acquisition. Among other things, these factors include: the motivation of a learner, linguistic abilities (such as phonetic encoding, grammatical sensitivity), personality traits, learning strategies, and environmental aspects.

Discussing another feature of interlanguage – systematicity – Selinker claims that the existence of an independent linguistic system can be confirmed by the language production of foreign language learners. Nemser (1974: 55), who discusses the interlanguage structure, claims that the approximate system is a linguistic system that deviates from linguistic standards and emphasizes its structure (or a series of consecutive structures: $L_{a1} \dots L_n$) that is different from the native and target languages. Interlanguage shows the cohesion typical of a system, though it undergoes constant restructuring and frequent changes. The interlanguage's structural independence from native and target languages is manifested in the existence of elements that cannot be related to either of the two languages (for example the realisation of /θ/ phoneme as [fθ] or [sθ] by people who learn English)⁵.

Corder (1971, 1981, 14–18) approaches interlanguage as a special kind of a dialect. It is an idiosyncratic dialect that, in sociolinguistic terms, is not used by any community. However, it reflects specific and individual features of a transient language of a person learning a second language (the author uses this term referring to the language of children and the language of people suffering from apha-

⁵ Nemser, 1974, p. 58.

sia). According to Corder, the idiosyncratic dialect exhibits some typical systematic features: regularity, and characteristic grammar; it can be, therefore, described by rules. The author agrees with Nemser and claims that certain similarities can be found in the interlanguage of people learning a foreign language at elementary level and in an informal context.

Corder does not consider idiosyncratic dialect to be a system deviating from linguistic standards. He believes that it is as a correct system equipped with its own grammar, and which can be seen also among children who learn their first language. Richards (1974b, 88) shares this opinion, and he does not define interlanguage as a 'deviated system' unless it refers to 'transient deviation', as in the case of children's language:

The learner of any L2 has a propensity to construct for himself this interlingua, an act of linguistic creativity so natural that it would be unrealistic to expect learners to circumvent it and proceed directly from his L1 to the native speaker's version of the L2. (...) Accepting the interlingua, like accepting a child's non-standard speech, avoids the necessity to halt the communication process for the sake of the learning process.

Analysing another feature of interlanguage, that is simplification, Corder refers to the categories of simplified linguistic codes. They include, among others:

- simplified language registers used in specific communicative situations: talking to children, referred to as baby talk; or talking to foreigners, referred to as foreigner talk;

- languages of simplified structures, that is languages of a pidgin type (Hall 1966), which do not have native users and develop in communicative situations among groups that do not share a common linguistic system;

- finally, children's language, which develops during the process of the first language acquisition, and interlanguage, which develops during second language acquisition.

The simplified linguistic codes mentioned above share similar features such as⁶:

- at the morphosyntactic level: elimination of redundant morphemes (grammatical number and gender), simplified usage of articles and personal pronouns, usage of non-flectional forms instead of flectional ones, and simplified and unchangeable word order,

- at the lexical level: a limited number of lexical elements that are also characterized by strong polysemy.

Corder (1981, 82) claims that when referring to the process of the development of interlanguage as a linguistic code, characterised by simplification, one may observe the process of complication; this is the process of the development

⁶ Corder, 1981.

of interlanguage that resembles the process of transformation of a pidgin into a creole language.

PROCESSES INFLUENCING THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERLANGUAGE

Interlanguage is formed during five psycholinguistic processes, which Selinker (1972) associates with the existence of “latent psychological structure.” The processes that influence the development of interlanguage contain: a) native language transfer, b) transfer of training, c) strategies of second language learning, d) strategies of second language communication, and e) overgeneralization of TL linguistic material.

According to Selinker, the first process, namely language transfer at the phonological, morphosyntactic and lexical and semantical levels, is an important, but not crucial, element forming interlanguage; researchers focusing on contrastive analysis considered it to be crucial. The contrastive analysis paradigm based on Charles Fries’ (1945) and Robert Lado’s (1957) theories, defined native language transfer (referred to as interference) as a main source of difficulties in the process of the second language acquisition. According to Lado’s basic assumptions, the elements of a native language that differ from the elements of a target language will cause problems in the process of learning, whereas similar elements will make the whole process easier. Adopting a sociolinguistic perspective, Weinreich (1953) uses the same term (interference) while referring to the transfer of elements from one language to another in bilingual situations.

Selinker has been inspired by a different idea offered by Weinreich (1953, 7–8), who observes a phenomenon called “interlingual associations”, or “interlingual identifications” when two or more languages meet. This phenomenon is related to the second language learners’ tendency to compare phonemes, grammatical relations, or semantic features in their native and target languages. As far as phonology is concerned, it may refer to /b/ phoneme in the Spanish language, which may be produced as a fricative bilabial sound [β], and which does not exist in Polish. At the lexical and semantic level, a Spanish language learner may identify the meaning of Spanish *traducir* as a Polish word *tłumaczyć*. This identification is partly correct since the Spanish word *traducir* signifies only written translation, whereas *interpretar* signifies oral translation.

Another psycholinguistic process that influences the evolution of interlanguage refers to the transfer associated with teaching/learning the second language in formal context, or formal circumstances. The role of the foreign language teacher, the choice of methodology (learning aids, appropriate course book) may determine success of the second language acquisition. The teacher may have a positive impact on the whole learning process, but he/she may also provide

inappropriate pronunciation examples. The choice of methodology (for example to what extent communication skills in a foreign language are trained) and the course book (clear and coherently structured content) are important. All these aspects related to the teaching process can, on the one hand, have a positive influence on the learning process, and on the other, they may lead to errors, defined in glottodidactics as induced errors (Stenson 1974).

What is also significant in the process of interlanguage formation, are learning strategies and communicative strategies used during teaching / learning process. Learning strategies are defined as cognitive and metacognitive mechanisms used by foreign language learners (Wenden 1987). These include mnemonic techniques, or conscious planning and monitoring the process of learning. With the use of communicative strategies, learners attempt to solve problems that appear when a given message in a foreign language is being conveyed and the competence of learners is limited (Tarone 1977; Bialystok 1983). Hence the mechanisms that exert negative influence on the development of interlanguage may be used. These mechanisms include, for example, avoidance strategy, which is based on the modification, reduction, or even the abandonment of a given message; or code-switching strategy, that is the introduction of native language (or other-language) elements in a given message. It can be assumed that compensation strategies foster the development of interlanguage and they include paraphrasing technique, substitution, the employment of non-verbal techniques, or requests for help to fulfil the communicative aim (cf. Tarone 2006).

The last process that has an impact on the development of interlanguage is the overgeneralization of the target language grammatical rules. Foreign language learners at the beginning acquire basic grammatical rules and they may, therefore, tend to regularise these rules. This phenomenon can be observed at the level of inflection level and generalization of conjugative paradigms (for example using **dormo* instead of *duermo* in Spanish, or **goed* instead of *went* in English).

Many researchers point out that the overgeneralization of rules also occurs during the first language acquisition among children. Taking into account the analogy presented above, such errors made by the second language learners are referred to as developmental errors (Richards 1974a; Dulay, Burt, Krashen 1982; Schachter, Celce-Murcia 1983; Ellis 1994). The progress of the second language acquisition should be associated with the elimination of such errors; unfamiliarity with the limitations of certain grammatical rules, or formation of invalid hypotheses due to deficient linguistic competence, on the other hand, may show the lack of progress or regress in the process of the evolution of interlanguage.

CONCLUSION

The concept of interlanguage is a continuation of previous research paradigms: the model of constructive analysis and the model of error analysis. At the same time, this concept is a new phase in the description of the language acquired by the second language learner. What seems to be crucial in the analysis of interlanguage is the fossilization of linguistic structures, which prevents adult learners from achieving native-like competence. What should also be remembered is the fact that age (early commencement of language learning) is a significant factor that conditions successful second language acquisition. It should be also mentioned that non-biological factors that play an important role in the process include learners' motivation, and environmental aspects.

Studies on interlanguage discussed mainly adults who learned the second language in a bilingual environment and they focused on the comparison between the second language acquisition by adults and the first language acquisition by children. Further studies should discuss the issues related to the development of interlanguage among children in the context of the second language acquisition.

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