WHAT TO DO ABOUT INTERLANGUAGE

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A potentially fruitful area for applied linguistic research
is the nature of the linguistic systems used by second language
learners as they learn--or even after they appear to have stopped
learning. It has been suggested at various times that the find-
ings of this sort of research would be useful not only to language
teachers and textbook writers, but also to our understanding of
language contact in general and to a general theory of language
acquisition.   In this paper I will examine some of the claims
for and about this area of research that have been made in recent
years.

We used to think that we would be able to predict some of
the behavior of second language (L2) learners by looking at the
similarities and differences between their native language (NL)
and the target language (TL) that they were trying to learn. We
thought that if we did a rigorous enough analysis of the NL and
the TL, we would have the equipment we needed to prepare the best
set of pedagogical materials or to be ready to deal with problems
in the classroom. The contrastive analysis would tell us where
the two languages differed, and thus where we could expect inter-
ference errors (now called language transfer errors) to crop up;
it would tell us where the two languages were similar, and thus
where we would be able to expect facilitation of language learn-
ing. Making up our textbooks or lesson plans, we would naturally
place more emphasis on areas of interference and less on areas of
facilitation.

The so-called "strong contrastive analysis hypothesis" (Lee
1968) predicted that all errors made by L2 learners would be in-
terference errors. This was easily disproved, since plenty of
errors appeared that had no discernible source in the NL. The
"weak contrastive analysis hypothesis" (Wardhaugh 1970) was then
advanced, predicting that some errors would be predicted by a
contrastive analysis. This is of course less easily disproved,
and depends to a great extent on the nature of the model used to
describe the two languages.

After the heyday of contrastive analysis came Error Analysis
(Corder 1967), a taxonomic method of cataloguing the errors made
by L2 learners and looking at them to see where they came from.
The empirical data gathered this way would, it was thought, help
us to discover the etiology of the errors. At first, we thought
there were two main types of error: interlingual or interference
errors, and intralingual or overgeneralization errors. A third

type, developmental errors, has been proposed (Richards 1971), but it is unclear whether these errors, which are supposedly based on learning strategies, are substantively different from intralingual errors. If you made an error, you had done it either because you were illegally transferring a linguistic element or a linguistic relationship (to use the broadest possible terms) from your NL to production of the TL, or because you had made an analogical extension of something you had already learned in the TL. Thus, a Persian speaker, having diligently learned that it is wrong to say *This is the book that I read it might misapply the it-deletion rule and produce *This shirt is so tight that I can't wear. Unfortunately, learner errors refused to be so neatly categorized. Looking at the actual communicative production of L2 learners, we found many errors that appeared to have no origin in either the NL or any TL generalization. It was true, of course, that as students gained more knowledge of the TL they made fewer interference errors and more overgeneralization errors, but all along there were many other errors with no obvious source.

Recently, applied linguists have become dissatisfied with looking only at the errors made by L2 learners. Interest has shifted to linguistic phenomena other than errors, such as the order of morpheme acquisition (Larsen-Freeman 1975) in L2 learning, avoidance strategies (Tarone 1977), and a model of L2 performance known as the Monitor Model (Krashen 1977), in which it is claimed that there is a difference between L2 learning and L2 acquisition. In addition to these somewhat narrowly-defined fields, a far more ambitious field for research has emerged. For about the last fifteen years, starting with Corder (1967), people have been advocating looking at the whole of L2 performance, not just the errors. (See, e.g., Nemser 1971, Dickerson 1975, Schmidt 1980, and Eckman 1981.) It has been argued that correct performance can be just as interesting and revealing as incorrect performance, and that the linguistic competence of L2 learners can and should be described. The name given to this competence by Selinker (1972) is Interlanguage (IL).

Although Selinker did not, in his original article, explicitly state what has now come to be known as the "Interlanguage Hypothesis", he laid the groundwork for a number of studies based on the notions he introduced. One study (Tarone et al. 1976) succinctly stated the hypothesis as follows:

> There exists a separate linguistic or psycho-linguistic system (interlanguage) which forms in the mind of the learner and may take the form of a pidgin and which may develop into a language in its own right. (96)

Tarone et al. go on to detail the IL hypothesis:

> There are four sets of observable facts upon
> which the IL hypothesis is based, and which
> may be used to evaluate that hypothesis. Each
> of these observable facts is studyable: first,
> the stability over time of certain errors and
> other surface forms in learner-language systems
> (i.e., "fossilization"); second, the mutual in-
> telligibility that appears to exist among
> speakers of an IL; third, the phenomenon of
> backsliding, or the regular appearance in bi-
> lingual speech of errors that were thought to
> be eradicated; and fourth, the systematicity
> of the IL at one particular point in time.   (97)

Since the introduction of IL to the applied linguistics lexi-
con, the term has been generally accepted to mean the language
learner's use of the TL, usually in speech, and always in communi-
cative situations. I believe it is seldom, if ever, used to
refer to TL production during drills and exercises, although the
term is being used rather loosely nowadays, as one can see by
looking at the table of contents of any recent issue of TESOL
Quarterly.

Among the things we require of scientific hypotheses, if
they are to be called scientific, is that they explain phenomena
not explained, or explained less elegantly, by previous hypo-
theses; and that they be falsifiable. That is, they must make
predictions about observable events in a narrow enough way that
should these predictions not be borne out, the hypothesis can be
disproved. A hypothesis that makes no predictions, or whose pre-
dictions can never be tested, is not a hypothesis. An irrefutable
hypothesis explains nothing. If I say that the universe rests on
the back of a giant turtle, my hypothesis cannot be tested, be-
cause we cannot get outside the universe and have a look to see
if what is holding it up is in fact a turtle. For all we know,
it might be an elephant; there might be elephants all the way
down. Since the hypothesis cannot be tested or disproved by ob-
servation of the facts, it says nothing about the nature of the
universe.

When dealing with narrower data, such as language, we can
also make refutable and irrefutable hypotheses. If I claim that
no language will be found with only voiced fricatives and no voice-
less ones, my hypothesis is easily disproved. Someone could find
a counterexample tomorrow in a language which did have only voiced
fricatives. But if I turn the hypothesis around, and say that I
think that languages with only voiced fricatives do exist, my
hypothesis is irrefutable, since I can always claim that we have

just not looked hard enough. My hypothesis therefore says nothing about the nature of language.

Let us now turn to the IL hypothesis. Before looking at its refutability, let us consider whether it explains what previous hypotheses have failed to deal with. Tarone et al. cite the four sets of observable facts listed earlier: <u>stability</u>, <u>mutual intelligibility</u>, <u>backsliding</u>, and <u>systematicity</u>. Are any of these explained, or explained in a new improved way, by the IL hypothesis? Let us look at each in turn.

<u>Stability</u>. By this, workers in the IL field mean showing "consistency in the use of forms <u>over time</u>" (Tarone et al. 1976:97). In other words, L2 students who use the same forms the second time you look at them that they did the first time you looked are showing stability. It is unclear to me that a whole new hypothesis is needed to explain the human propensity to learn things slowly, and to keep making the same mistakes. In other words, I do not think that such stability as is shown by L2 learners in their use of the TL is something that is better explained by the IL hypothesis than by the more general hypothesis that language is rule-governed behavior. The matter of stability becomes even less interesting when we find out that Tarone et al. have decided to distinguish two types of IL users. A Type I individual is one whose IL is characterized by stability, and a Type II individual is one whose IL is characterized by instability—that is, Type II's continue to learn. Thus one of the facts that the IL hypothesis purports to explain turns out to be rather circularly dealt with. If your student's IL's are stable, they must be Type I's; if their IL's are unstable, they must be Type II's. How do you tell which type a person is? By the stability of his/her IL, of course.

<u>Systematicity</u>. Tarone et al. (97) call learner speech systematic "when it evidences an internal consistency in the use of forms <u>at a single point in time</u>". It is not clear just how internally consistent learner speech has to be before it is considered systematic. Nor is it clear whether IL's are just as systematic as NL's, more so, or less so. We all know that native languages show more variation than many linguists would like, with different forms used in different sociolinguistic contexts. Are IL's as prone to variation as NL's? Perhaps they are not. I know that when I communicate in a foreign language, I tend to use a much smaller range of styles than native speakers would, because I have a smaller range at my command. I therefore have more systematicity, according to this definition, in my IL than in my NL. If you have fewer shirts to wear than your neighbor, you will wear the same shirt more often than he will. Thus to my mind the systematicity of IL is not something to be wondered at.

Mutual Intelligibility. Language teachers are fond of re-
counting anecdotes about a Japanese student interpreting the
English of an Arabic speaker for the teacher, or a group of
elementary ESL students apparently conversing among themselves
in English while a native English speaker listens uncomprehend-
ingly. I know of no serious research that has been done to try
to measure the mutual intelligibility of various stages of IL.
Do the students from one class understand those from another, or
only their classmates? Do more advanced students understand less
advanced students, or is it the other way round? How do you tell?
Adjemian (1976) puts the case admirably for having one's mutual
intelligibility cake and eating it:

> Mutual intelligibility is an inherent property
> of ILs as a result of their being members of the
> set of possible humane languages. The notion
> "mutual intelligibility" is relevant at the very
> onset of a study: it must first be established
> whether a group of learners can communicate
> verbally with each other in a language other
> than their NL. If so, then it may be assumed
> that they share an IL. If not, than it may be
> claimed that they do not yet possess enough of
> a non-native grammar to have caused the emergence
> of an IL. (300)

The mutual intelligibility that the IL hypothesis is supposed
to explain is thus adduced as evidence for the IL itself. If
they can understand one another, they have an IL--how else could
they understand one another? If they can't, they must not have
one--if they did, they could understand one another. This kind
of reasoning can be applied to tennis: if you hold your mouth
right, you will serve an ace. If you don't serve an ace, you
must have been holding your mouth wrong.

Backsliding. All language teachers are familiar with, and
despair of, backsliding. The term is used to mean the apparent
mastery of a linguistic form in the classroom, but the non-use or
incorrect use of that form in communication. I do not see that
backsliding is peculiar to second language learning, or that we
need to explain it in terms other than the normal patterns of
human learning behavior, whether one is trying to learn to ride
a bicycle, play the trombone, or be fair to one's spouse. The
IL hypothesis seems to me to predict more that backsliding would
not occur than that it would.

None of the four phenomena that the IL hypothesis purports to
explain, then, need to be explained by a new linguistic hypo-
thesis. Let us now look at the falsifiability of the entire
hypothesis. Does it predict observable events? Can it be dis-
confirmed by looking at observable data? In order to disconfirm

it, one would have to show that there is in fact no system separate
from the NL and TL which develops in the mind of the learner. One
would have to show that the learner has simply grafted some TL
forms onto the internalized NL system--or that he/she has in fact
internalized the TL system in one gulp, but also has a set of
deletion, truncation, and general mess-up rules to unlearn, such
as was once posited for children acquiring their first languages.
Neither of these positions is provable, nor could any data be
found to support them.

There is nothing, therefore, that we can ever hope to observe·
which would disprove the IL hypothesis. It therefore tells us
nothing about second language acquisition. It makes no prediction
which could ever turn out not to be the case, so what good is it?
Is the emperor really wearing no clothes? I think that the _idea_
of interlanguage can be useful. It has stimulated us to look at
more than the errors made by L2 learners, and to try to look at
the whole of whatever linguistic systems they are using. By look-
ing at the things they get right, as well as at the things they
get wrong, we might begin to find out what it is that is easily
learned, and build on that in our textbooks and lesson plans. In
getting us away from our preoccupation with errors, IL has done
well. If professionals in the field now want to use the term to
mean "communicating in a foreign language", that's fine. But
let's stop calling it a hypothesis.

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