

SIMPLIFICATION: A STRATEGY IN THE ADULT ACQUISITION
OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE:
AN EXAMPLE FROM INDONESIAN/MALAY¹

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We think of language acquisition as a process in which the child arrives at adult grammar gradually by attempting to match to the speech it hears a succession of hypotheses of an increasing order of complexity as these increasingly complex hypotheses become available to the child through maturational change. For phonology this was clearly shown by Jacobson's spectacular discovery that the child learns phonemes in a largely fixed order, which is determined not externally by the order or frequencies with which they are heard, but internally by their relative linguistic complexity, as reflected also in the rules governing the possible phonemic systems of the languages of the world.
Kiparsky 1968:194

Kiparsky's comments on language development raise a number of issues which await adequate treatment in a theory of second language acquisition. Some of the unexplored variables concern the relationship of cognitive to linguistic development, the nature of language universals and their role in determining linguistic difficulty, differences between child and adult learners, and the contribution of affective factors. Recent accounts of second language learning differ in the importance they attribute to these or other variables. Di Pietro, for example, proposes an interesting model for second language learning based on a semantically oriented case grammar account of language (Di Pietro 1971). Selinker largely ignores semantics but utilises a psycholinguistic model in his Interlanguage paper (Selinker 1972). Richards (1976)

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proposes that language functions through the use of cognitive schemes and procedures that code experience into sets of semantic and conceptual units from which the basic elements of linguistic structure are constructed. These are 'deep structures'. Second language learning does not involve re-organisation at this level but necessitates the acquisition of additional sets of syntactic, phonological and lexical rules necessary for the realisation of language independent deep structures. Presumably the set of basic cases and relationships which are the core of the semantic systems underlying syntax can incorporate a much wider range of semantic distinctions than any language will actually make use of. Second language learning primarily involves the acquisition of a new set of realisation rules by means of which the new language expresses underlying relations and modes of cognitive organisation of a universal type.

Studies of how the language learner comes to arrive at this new set of realisation rules have confirmed that the system of rules developed by the language learner is not learned by imitation. Analysis of learners' errors indicates rather that the learner recreates for himself, the system of the language, using universal learning strategies which result in the convergence of output seen in the grammar of child language and of the second language learner. Language acquisition proceeds through formation of successive hypotheses about the linguistic rules involved. The intermediate grammars thus produced are sufficient for the interpretation of the target language code and for realisation of the learner's needs, though they may be deviant in many ways from the target language system.

Both child language and adult learning of a foreign language illustrate another universal principal - the tendency towards simplification of the rules of the language by the language learner, accompanied by a parallel pressure towards complexification of the rule system so constructed, by the target language community. By simplification is meant increasing the generality of rules through extending their range of application, and through dropping rules of limited applicability. "Two very general processes are at work here - in the process of learning, children tend to simplify the language by applying the rules as generally as possible, while the sociolinguistic environment of the older generation tends to force them to restrict rules, thus maintaining complexity" (Orlowski 1971:202).

The language learner thus typically begins by constructing general rules which do not account for redundant and unnecessary parts of the grammar. Later the learner is forced to add to the surface complexity of the language as surface details come to take on social meaning.

Simplified rules may be retained however for informal usage. This is illustrated by *shall* and *will* in English. In formal speech and in the written language a subtle distinction exists between *will* and *shall* according to choice of person. In informal usage this is simplified to 'll.

Ferguson states that all language communities maintain a simplified and a linguistically more complex register of speech for use with "particular statuses, roles, or situations". The complex variety is generally regarded as the standard language. Examples of simplified varieties are baby talk - the form of speech used by parents with babies and foreigner talk - a form of speech often used when addressing foreigners (Ferguson 1971). Pidginisation and creolisation represent the corresponding processes under special language contact circumstances.

Kiparsky implies a cognitive basis for simplification, more complex rules developing as maturational development enables the learner to assimilate them. There is evidence for this in first language acquisition, since there is a correlation between the semantic complexity of language items and the order of development. However similar developmental sequences in adult and child syntax development, noted in recent studies, suggest that linguistic development can be considered independently from cognitive development, though the evidence for this position is far from conclusive. Data collected by Dulay and Burt seems to support the position that simplification is the result of a general learning strategy common to both children and adults. They propose:

- (1) The language learner possesses a specific type of innate mental organization which causes him to use a limited class of processing strategies to produce utterances in a language
- (2) Language learning proceeds by the learner's exercises of those processing strategies in the form of linguistic rules which he gradually adjusts as he organizes more and more of the particular language he hears
- (3) This process is guided in first language acquisition by the particular form of the L1 system, and in second language acquisition by the particular form of the second language system.

(Dulay and Burt 1974:109)

King discusses simplification and complexification as they influence language history, and isolates four major categories of language change evidenced in the historical evolution of languages; rule addition, rule loss, rule re-ordering and simplification. Both rule loss and re-ordering are regarded as a form of simplification. In his illuminating discussion of rule learning in children and adults, he suggests that when

adults make changes in their mother tongue, their rule changes can be regarded as a sort of overlay of the basic rules, the basic rules themselves remaining unchanged. Rule changes in adults consist of minor changes relatively late in the set of rules comprising a given component of the grammar (King 1969:ch.4).

Simplification may thus be considered as a universal learning strategy based on the extension of application of rules. Over-generalisation and analogy are instances of the same process. The immediate objective for a language learner is to construct an optimum grammar, that is, a grammar in which the fewest number of rules do the maximum amount of work. Subsequent complexification of the learner's rule system involves reduction of the generality of rules. Both processes are of interest to those concerned with language education and language planning, since any attempt to influence the direction of language development or change must, if it is to succeed, be in accordance with what we know of the natural laws affecting change in language. Second language learning is thus a vital field of enquiry, and insights obtained from the study of second language learning have important practical implications.

The case of the learning of Indonesian or Malay as a foreign language is of particular interest, since it offers striking illustration of the double pressures of simplification and complexification on language use and maintenance. On the one hand we have as part of the heritage of linguistic folklore, the widespread belief that Indonesian and Malay are easy languages to learn, a remark frequently made by those with no knowledge of either language. On the other hand we have the constant attestation by native speakers of Indonesian and Malay that they speak their languages very poorly. Generalisations about ease of acquisition are a consequence of the widespread use of simplified versions of Indonesian and Malay, which have been maintained in much the same way as have simplified versions of English in situations where the standard variety of the language is not perceived as the target for learning. Bazaar Malay, the simplified form of Malay in use in parts of Singapore and Malaysia, has long functioned as a medium of inter-ethnic communication. Such simplified varieties of a language have rarely been studied, since linguists generally confine themselves to descriptions of the standard language.

Another variety of Indonesian/Malay of equal interest is the variety spoken by foreigners who study these languages as foreign languages. Some of the characteristics of this variety of Indonesian/Malay will be described here, as evidence of the general principles of second language learning already discussed. My contact with Bahasa Indonesia

began in 1972 when I took up a year's appointment at Satya Wacana University in central Java. This is in fact not the ideal place to study Indonesian, since Javanese is the dominant language of both the town and the university, and the Indonesian spoken in the region is said to be influenced by Javanese. During my year in Java I suggested to an Indonesian student of linguistics that he do a study of my own acquisition of Indonesian and examine the Indonesian spoken by other foreign staff of the university. I co-directed the study and was one of the eight foreigners on whom the study was based (Djumadi 1973).

Data for the study was obtained through interviews, oral translation tests, and through informal observation on the part of the investigator, followed by interviews in which the particular problems of learning Indonesian were discussed with the subjects. These were adult native speakers of English who had resided in Indonesia for an average of two to three years. The study limited itself to the difficulties of the affix system for foreign learners of Bahasa Indonesia; prefixes *ber*, *me*, *di*, *ter*; suffix *an*; *ke* + root + *an*; *per* + root + *an*; suffix *i*; *me* + root + *i*; suffix *kan*; and *nya*. What follows is discussion of selected samples from the data. Each of these were judged as errors in the use of the prefix system by at least five competent speakers of Indonesian. Discussion of deviancy is a sensitive issue in any language however, and it is not expected that all Indonesians would react identically to these examples. In what ways do the errors made by foreigners speaking Indonesian, illustrate the simplification-complexification hypothesis?

We will begin with the prefix *ber*, which in Indonesian is added to nominal, verbal, adjectival and adverbial roots. Thus, *sepeda bicycle*, *bersepeda to ride a bicycle*; *bahagia happy*, *berbahagia to be happy*. The precise function of *ber* is a question of controversy within Indonesian linguistics. A convenient summary of its major function is that it is a verb-forming prefix, stressing the state of the verb rather than the verb viewed as an action. A number of factors contribute to the difficulty of the *ber* prefix for foreign learners. A basic difficulty is the problem of recognising any consistent meaning in it, which encourages omission of it. Then there is the problem of distinguishing it from other prefixes such as *me* which appear to function similarly. Add to this the existence of a class of verbs which never take *ber* together with the fact that native speakers of Indonesian omit *ber* in informal usage and we have the basis for the frequent omission of the *ber* in all contexts by foreigners. The most frequently occurring errors noted among the eight subjects were:

- (a) omission of *ber* with nominal roots,

(b) overuse of *ber* in places where it does not occur,

(c) omission of *ber* with verbal roots.

(In order to permit presentation of examples a word for word translation of the Indonesia sentences is given with an attempt to carry over some feel for the error into the English. This is not always possible however.)

Examples of (a) are:

Di Singapore orang harus RAMBUT pendek.
In Singapore people must HAIR short.

Saya UMUR 23 tahun.
I AGE 23 year.

Saya juga masih kenal baik dan juga HUBUNGAN baik dengan dia.
I also still know well and also RELATIONSHIP good with him.

Well formed usage according to informants would include the prefix, using *berambut*, *berumur*, *berhubungan*.

The learner's problem is compounded by the fact that a similarly simplified register is used by native speakers of the language. In informal speech *berbicara to talk* becomes *bicara*; *berkerja* becomes *kerja work* and so on, preservation of the prefix being a marker of standard or formal speech. But whereas the native speaker controls the formal (complexified) and informal (simplified) registers, the foreigner tends to develop competence only in the simplified register. 'Foreigner talk' in Indonesian is typically marked by prefix omission, even in formal contexts.

An example of overuse of *ber* is its occurrence in place of *me* in the following:

Lama-lama kami mau BERNIKAH, mau menjadi suami isteri.
In the end we want BE IN A MARRIED STATE want become husband wife.

Nikah requires *me*, stressing the verb as an action:

Lama-lama kami mau MENIKAH

The prefix *me* poses related problems to those of *ber*. *Me* is likewise generally described as verb forming producing which stress the action of the verb rather than the state, which is emphasised by *ber*. Differences between *me* and *ber* are semantically subtle, rules for affixing *me* to roots are morphologically complex for the beginner, and *me* is in competition both with *ber* and with 'complete' verbs which do not take *me*. In addition, *me* is omitted by native speakers informally, in imperative sentences, and in certain passive constructions. Commonest errors in the subjects' use of this prefix were:

- (a) use of the prefix in contexts where it should not be used (over-generalisation),
- (b) use of *me* instead of *ter*,

- (c) use of *me* for prefix *ber*,
- (d) omission of *me* producing a form resembling a passive or imperative construction,
- (e) confusion of *me* and passive *di*.

The following illustrates (a) since a 'complete' verb - one which does not take the prefix - has been prefixed.

Tetapi orang itu MELARI dan saya mendengar kakinya dengan
But man that TO RUNNING and I hear feet-his with
sepatu MELARI keluar.
shoes TO RUNNING outside.

This is a clear instance of over-generalisation, a strategy of simplification which derives from applying rules too generally. Over-generalisation is also responsible for menarik/tertarik *interesting/interested* confusion in the following.

Oleh karena dia MENARIK sekali kepada wayang kulit jadi
because he INTERESTING very toward puppet leather thus
saya MENARIK juga.
I INTERESTING also.

Me/ber substitution is illustrated in:

Kami MENCERITA tentang keadaan disini.
We RECOUNT about situation here.

Tapi tidak bisa MEMBICARA dengan teman.
But not can SPEAKING with friend.

The confusion illustrated here may be reinforced by certain Indonesian language textbooks. Introductory lessons often teach *me* as a marker of Indonesian verbs. Forms like *berbicara* may then be taught in their simplified form, *bicara*. If *me* is generalised as a verb marker and *bicara* as a regular root, *membicara* is produced by analogy.

We commented above on the difficulty of assessing learning of *ber* in view of the fact that it is also omitted by Indonesians as a sign of informal speech. The same applies to *me*, which Indonesians omit as a mark of informal register and which foreigners tend to drop as part of their strategy of simplification. Some Indonesian linguists have commented on the omission of *me* in written Indonesian, which is thought to be inappropriate for this register (cp. Alisjahbana 1972). In the foreign learner's speech *me* omission often creates a contextually inappropriate tone, giving an instructive or imperative mood to the sentence.

Kami pinjam dari lain yang SEWA untuk enam bulan.
We borrow from (man) other who RENT for six months.

Dan Garuda akan BAWA orang ke Bali.
And Garuda will TAKE people to Bali.

Misalnya kalau perpustakaan itu baik, mereka dapat meminjam buku, ya
Example if library good they can borrow book yes
mereka terus belajar tetapi kalau harus DIBELI buku sendiri ya
they continue study but if must IS BOUGHT book own yes
sulit.
difficult.

This type of error is quite common in the corpus. It may be that the learners interpret the passive *di* as a type of infinitive, as in:

Tentu seorang sana lebih DIIMPORT dalam bentuk masih kasar.
Of course a man there more IS IMPORTED in form still crude.

Alternatively, as Quinne suggests, errors of this type with passive may be due to incomplete mastery of the word order of Indonesian sentences (Quinne, personal communication). For example, translating the following sentence into Indonesian:

If we import this book it will be expensive. gives;
 Buku ini, kalau DIIMPORT, tentu mahal.

A foreigner may know that the passive *diimport* should be used, but insufficient mastery of Indonesian word order might lead him to produce a sentence like:

Apabila kita DIIMPORT buku ini tentu mahal.
If we ARE IMPORTED book this certainly expensive.

In considering the effect of simplification and over-generalisation on the use of Indonesian and Malay by foreigners it is interesting to compare morphological development in English as a first language. The following data is taken from McNeill, based in turn on data from two subjects studied by Bellugi, and illustrates the order of development of five morphemes in child acquisition of English (McNeill 1970:83).

Inflection	Age of appearance in months		Combined rank order in parents' speech
	Adam	Eve	
Present progressive <i>ing</i> .	28	19½	2
Plural on nouns <i>s</i> .	33	24	1
Past on regular verbs <i>ed</i> .	39	24½	4
Possessive on nouns <i>s</i> .	39½	25½	5
Third person on verbs <i>s</i> .	41	26	3

McNeill notes that the same order of development occurs in both children, even though the rate of development is different, one child taking twice as long to acquire the five inflections as the other. Forms employing the same phonetic variants do not necessarily appear at the same time. Three inflections have the phonemic realisation *s*, but it is clearly not phonological development that determine the order of emergence. In addition there is only a weak correlation between the frequency of the items in the parents' speech and the order of development. McNeill suggests that what determines the order of development is the scope of the grammatical rules they control. The larger the scope, the later the development. The child begins with the most general rule possible, that is, the one with the fewest exceptions. What takes time to learn are rules that cover a range of structures

within a single sentence, such as the *s* inflection. The same author discusses another phenomenon which he refers to as *inflection imperialism*, with an example from child acquisition of Russian. For Russian singular nouns, an instrumental inflection *om* is added to masculine and neuter nouns and the inflection *oy* to feminine nouns. The child learner however typically seizes on one inflection *om* and applies it to all cases. Later when he becomes conscious of the feminine suffix, this replaces the previously practised *om*, and is applied to all cases. Eventually the two forms are gradually sorted out with their appropriate distributions.

The same phenomenon of inflectional imperialism is observed in adult acquisition of Indonesian or Malay. There is a period when prefixes are omitted, a period of over-applying them, and then later their patterns of correct usage may be sorted out. This is seen in the case of the suffix *kan* which is used to form transitive verbs from other parts of speech, and when applied to verbs already transitive, focusses on the object of the verb. Error analysis reveals an initial failure to distinguish between transitive verbs with the *me* + root form and those with *me* + root + *kan*. The omission of the suffix then affects the *di* + root + *kan* construction. Once the learner becomes aware of *kan*, however, it starts to replace the *me* + root construction and may be applied indiscriminately.

An example of omission of *kan* is:

Tapi saya tidak tahu, saya belum tahu rencana MENDAPAT
But I not know I not yet know plan FIND

scholarship itu.
scholarship this.

Use of the *di* + root form with *kan* omission is illustrated by:

Semua klakson DIBUNYI.
All horns SOUNDING.

Mereka lalu MENAMBAH pekerjaan pada pekerjaan yang sudah ada.
They then BE ADDED work to work which already is.

An example of overuse of *kan* would be:

Kalau ada yang belum jelas silahkan MENGINTERUPSIKAN.
If there is what not yet clear please INTERRUPT IT.

Inflectional imperialism, more commonly known as over-generalisation, is a natural outcome of contact with two or more apparently competing forms for a similar grammatical function. It is found as a common phenomenon in many language communities, particularly when simplified (non-standard) and complexified (standard) varieties of a language exist side by side. Speakers of the non-standard dialect typically over-generalise when attempting to produce the standard form of the language. This phenomenon is also referred to as *hypercorrection*.

In English it leads, for example, to overuse of *whom* in sentences like *Whom do you think is the culprit?* According to King it occurs when speakers of Low German attempt to speak High German (King 1969). Geertz gives examples of speakers of low Javanese attempting to create high forms for words which have no high forms.

Prijaji speakers of (what they regard as) 'correct' Javanese are continually making fun ... of 'ignorant' villagers who use tjintem as the high form of tjina (Chinese), when 'really' there is no higher form. Similarly for the village use of kontnen for kori (door) and, worst of all, their creation of high forms of place names which never should alter; Medinten for Kediri; Surobringo for Surabaya.

(Geertz 1960:258-9)

In the same way Malays find humour in the errors made by speakers of non-standard Malay when they attempt to speak the standard dialect.

CONCLUSIONS

Language teaching and language planning generally set as their goals promotion of the learning or wider use of a standard form of a language. In all language communities, however, simplified language varieties are used for particular social functions. These are also the varieties likely to be employed by those acquiring the language as a foreign language, since learning proceeds through the development of systems of rules of progressive linguistic complexity. In this paper I have considered the factor of simplification as it affects language learning, ignoring the role of other variables (cp. Richards and Sampson 1974). Study of learners' simplifications provides data of interest to the theoretical interests of linguists, and the practical concerns of language teachers and language planners. It enables comparison of teaching to learning strategies, a necessary pre-requisite to drawing up realistic objectives for foreign language programmes. The examples discussed in this paper have been taken from the national language of Indonesia; however the general principles discussed presumably apply to the learning of other Asian languages. Applied linguistics can make a useful contribution to practical questions concerning language standardisation, through considering the nature and significance of learners developing linguistic systems.

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