

## On the Nature of Interlanguage

Gang Dong

Department of English, North China Electric Power University, Changping District, Beijing, China 102206

\* E-mail of the corresponding author: dgxddhuadian@163.com

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### Abstract

Interlanguages, which defined as the features of languages between first language and second language (L2), help to explore the nature of L2 study. The paper is twofold. The first attempts to review and explore the nature and properties of interlanguages. The second is to introduce basic methods in the study of interlanguages. These attempts may have some implications for L2 acquisition study.

**Keywords:** interlanguage, nature and property, L2 acquisition

### 1. Introduction

Interlanguage is a term coined by Selinker (1972), which may be generally defined as the features of languages between first language and L2. Ellis (2012:350) takes interlanguage as both the internal system that a learner constructs at a single point in time and the series of interconnected systems that characterize the learner's progress over time. According to Ellis, the study of interlanguage is a starting point to explain the nature of L2 acquisition. The paper is firstly to introduce certain widely held views of the nature and properties of interlanguages. In this context, Selinker's hypothesis is introduced and his five psycholinguistic processes are illustrated with support of the examples. Besides this, Gregg's claim in interlanguage variability is also presented. Following this, the paper introduces some of the research methods concerned with interlanguage study. These methods include four steps in selection of interlanguage data and five general steps to be taken in analyzing interlanguage data. Finally the paper summarizes features of interlanguage and specific methodologies in the study of interlanguage.

### 2. Nature of interlanguage

The term interlanguage was introduced by American linguist Larry Selinker (1972:71), who defined interlanguage as the separate linguistic system evidenced when an adult L2 learner attempted to express meanings in the language being learned. He hypothesizes that adults acquiring a L2 use "latent psychological structure". According to Selinker, interlanguage is shaped by five psycholinguistic processes which exist in this latent psychological structure, namely (1) native language transfer; (2) overgeneralization of target language rules; (3) transfer of training; (4) strategies of communication; (5) strategies of learning. These five processes are articulated in the following sections one by one.

Native language transfer, assumed by Selinker, is the process that learners make interlingual identifications in approaching the task of learning a L2. For example, learners may perceive native language *table* and develop an interlanguage like *mesa* to express *table of contents*, *table of motion* and so on. It is the same case for interlanguage grammar, which has transfer errors resulted from L1. A similar factor or developmental errors observed in interlanguage may involve overgeneralize rules as L2 learners acquire the L2.

Overgeneralization of target languages rules is a process that the learner shows evidence of having mastered a general rule, but does not yet know all the exceptions to that rule. For example, the learner may use the past tense marker *-ed* for all verbs, regular and irregular alike: *walked*, *wanted*, *hugged*, *laughed*, *hitted*, *gived*, *hitted goed*. The overgeneralization error *hitted*, *goed* shows that the learner has mastered a target language rule, but it also shows what the learner has yet to learn.

Transfer of training occurs when the second-language learner applies rules learned from instructors or textbooks. Sometimes this learning is successful, but at other times errors may result. For instance a lesson plan which describes the past perfect tense as the *past past* can lead the learner to erroneously use *the past perfect for the absolute distant past*, as in the isolated statement *My relatives had come from Japan in the 1700s*.

Strategies of Communication are used by the learner to resolve communication problems when the interlanguage systems seem unequal to the task. When in an attempt to communicate meaning, the learner feels that the needed linguistic item is not available to him or her, he or she can resort to a variety of strategies of communication in getting that meaning across. One example of this is that the learner wants to refer to an electrical cord in English and does not know the exact lexical item to use in referring to it, he or she can call it *a tube*, or *a kind of corder that we use for electric thing*.

Strategies of learning refers to the learner's conscious attempts to master the target language. One such strategy of learning is learner's conscious comparison of what they produce in interlanguage with the native language and a perceived target, which set up interlingual identifications. For example, in order to remember target vocabulary,

people may take the strategies of memorizing textbook dialogs or using flash cards.

### 3. The property of variability in interlanguage

To have an analysis of the above mentioned Selinker's Interlanguage Hypothesis, we can clearly see that in fact it defines three properties of interlanguages. That is, i) interlanguages fossilize; ii) interlanguages are characterized by first language transfer; iii) interlanguage use is characterized by variability. The first two properties are uncontroversially properties of interlanguage systems. As far as the third property is concerned, there is a conflict of opinion as to whether variability is a property of interlanguage systems or interlanguage use. There have been attempts to ascribe variability in interlanguage use to variable knowledge (Tarone 2004) or to what Ellis (2012) terms *variable competence*. Gregg (2008) is motivated and makes his claims for these attempts.

Gregg claims that Tarone and Ellis both make the implicit distinction between performance and competence explicit. Gregg reasons that if implicit in the variable competence model is a rejection of the principles of generative grammar and of L2 acquisition theories based on generative theories of language, then Tarone and Ellis both makes this implicit rejection explicit. Gregg uses one example of Tarone as the evidence to prove his reasoning. Tarone, for instance, deliberately uses the term "capability" to avoid the implications associated with *competence*. Thus Gregg analyses that on the one hand Tarone wishes to disclaim responsibility for performance errors like slips of the tongue (Tarone 2004:153). But on the other hand Tarone's reasons for using a special terminology seem to reflect her misunderstanding of the nature of competence: A learner's *competence* must be heterogeneous, since it is in the process of being formed. Therefore, Gregg concludes that Tarone has a misconception of the distinction between competence and performance.

Gregg argues that variable rules cannot be part of interlanguage competence of a learner, while Tarone claims that variable rules are part of a learner's competence. For instance, "an interlanguage may be viewed as a system of underlying rules, many of which are categorical and many of which are variable" (Tarone 2004:74). Later, she says that "the regularities in each style in the continuum may be described and modeled, and those models systematically related to one another using sets of variable and categorical rules" (Tarone 2004:36). Gregg assumes that if the choice of *regularity* over *rule* is simply, if capability is knowledge, then people can conclude that Tarone is still committed to variable rules. The example Gregg's reasoning on Tarone's words may serve as the example that variable rules are not part of interlanguage competence of a learner. In the following part, research methodology related to interlanguage is introduced, as it is closed related arguments of interlanguage study.

### 4. Interlanguage studies

As it is widely accepted that different researchers can have different research designs, particularly regarding the kind of data which are considered relevant to the study at hand. So understanding and determining what constitutes data can help us further our study in interlanguage (O'Grady et al, 2013).

Determining what constitutes data involves four steps. The first step is to arrive at a clear and precise definition of the variables which need to be investigated in a given research study. The second step is to operationalize the variables, that is, to identify specific behaviors which could provide acceptable evidence for describing them. The third step is to justify these behaviors are those recognized by current theories in the field of applied linguistics and other related disciplines. The fourth step is to elicit the behaviors by means of a variety of data collection procedures. The four steps are explicitly instructed with examples in the following passages.

Let us consider the hypothetical example of a research project in which the variable *language proficiency* needs to be investigated. The researcher will first need to operationalize this abstract variable in order to determine what will constitute relevant data. The behaviors identified for this purpose will then serve as appropriate pieces of evidence for the existence, or lack of language proficiency. Such behaviors may include ability to pronounce words correctly, and to speak the language with a certain degree of fluency, possession of certain vocabulary, mastery of specific grammatical structures, or any other behaviors considered to be compatible with the current theories on language proficiency. Any of these behaviors, when elicited by means of a variety of data collection procedures, will be considered as the data of the study, since each provides an indication of language proficiency (Seliger and Shohamy 1999).

Once a research has decided what data to collect, and has collected the data, the next phase of research is data analysis. Data analyzing involves the following five general steps.

The first step is to make a list of the collected data according to a specific research criteria. The second is to analyze and categorize the data according to the specific research criteria. The third is to give reasons to explain the data categorization. The four is to generalize the data and test if the generalization is supported by the data. The last is to deal with the exception data. Examples of the steps are as follows.

Let us consider the following set of data from 4-1 to 4-5 (the underlined words are used for emphasis).

(4-1) We used to pronounce every thing British English.

(4-2) It doesn't give me problems future.

(4-3) He's working his thesis now.

(4-4) If I come early, I will register fall.

(4-5) The people are outside this time.

This set of presented data analysis concerns prepositions usage, thus our criteria is whether these data have proper use of prepositions, then we see that 4-1, 4-2, 4-3, 4-4, 4-5 lack the proper preposition in utterance. We might describe this learner's behavior as one in which a simplification strategy is involved, although in this case it may be a dangerous generalization (Gregg 2010). As all the data presented have not appropriate proposition in utterance, and there is no exceptions needed to be explained. We can conclude that the learner does not know how to use prepositions appropriately in English and the strategy *use no preposition except in specifically constrained instances* should be adopted by the learner.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have a discussion of the nature of interlanguage and the properties of variability in interlanguage. Some of the research methods that are concerned with interlanguage study are also illustrated in the paper.

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