

Characteristics of bilingual language use

As previously mentioned, Baetens Beardsmore (1986:9) argues that, whereas from a purely *linguistic* standpoint the ambilingual as defined by Halliday, McKintosh & Streven (1970) (if at all he or she exists) is of no real investigative interest, the equilingual and the *non-fluent bilingual* (the latter being arguably representative of the majority of cases) “represents a more useful case for investigation in both sociological and linguistic terms.” This is due to the fact that we can investigate linguistic phenomena which distinguish the speech of the vast majority of bilinguals from that of respective monoglot speakers of those languages.

Interlanguage

Interlanguage is one aspect of bilingualism which can make the speech of the bilingual speaker different from that of the monolingual. This is a field of study which tends to be associated with second language acquisition and, according to Jones(1997), has its theoretical roots in a paper published by Corder (1967), “The significance of learners’ errors,” where it is argued that there is a correlation between the process of first and second language acquisition.

Corder (1967) argues that ‘mistakes’ characteristic of second language acquisition reflect the same process as those which are integral to the process of first language acquisition, that is, the speaker’s efforts to communicate and to ‘experiment’ with language, and that such ‘mistakes’ should be treated in the same way.

...the key concepts in both cases is that the learner is using a definite system of language at every point in his development, although it is not the adult system in the one case, nor that of the second language in the other. (Corder,1967:166, quoted in Jones, 1997).

Nemser (1971:116) likewise refers to second language acquisition as a series of “approximative systems” which change in the process of moving towards that of the target language:

An approximative system is the deviant linguistic system actually employed by the learner attempting to utilize the target language.

The essential point here is that such a system being adopted by the second language speaker/ learner is *independent of that of both the first and the second language*.

The term “interlanguage” was adopted by Selinker (1972) which, as Jones (1997) points out, corresponds to Nemser’s (1971) “approximative system” and what Corder (1971) refers to as “idiosyncratic dialect”. Jones (1997), therefore, states that the theory of interlanguage maintains four things:

1. that the expressions of second language learners are different from those of native speakers
2. that they are not a direct translation of the speaker's first language
3. that they differ in a systematic way from the target language
4. that they are not produced accidentally.

Selinker (1972) refers to 5 components of interlanguage in the learner's speech:

1. transmission of language
2. transmission of instruction
3. strategies of second language learning
4. strategies of second language communication
5. overgeneralization of the target language material

1. Transmission of language

This refers to traces of the speaker's first language found in his / her second language (or languages). These can appear in various guises including phonology and grammar (see Interference).

2. Transmission of instruction

This reflects elements of instruction in the process of learning the second language as in the tendency to adopt certain dialectal expressions, for example, which are not, strictly speaking, in keeping with the kind of language being targeted. Courses to teach Welsh to adults sometimes adopt dialectal forms which are not widely used and which are not, therefore 'appropriate' in all Welsh-speaking locations.

3. Strategies of second language learning

Simplification may be considered as an illustration of this, such as when learners adopt simplified versions of grammatical aspects, for example, in order to overcome or to avoid difficulties or irregularities in the targeted language. Some examples may also reflect what was referred to above as Transmission of Instruction where a tutor has advised learners to adopt less commonly used alternative expressions as when suggesting, for example, "People will still understand you if you say...." e.g. learners of Welsh are sometimes advised to use the simpler form of the preterite past tense by using a periphrastic form rather than the slightly more 'problematic' short form of the verb.

4. Strategies of second language communication

Simplification may also be considered as a strategy to facilitate *communication* in the second language by improving fluency of delivery without having to pay too much attention to correctness and the rules of grammar. Although not strictly 'incorrect', some would argue that the previous example mentioned above would also be an example of this kind of strategy.

5. Overgeneralization

This may be described as the application of general grammatical rules to irregular grammatical features. Adding an "s" to "tooth" and "sheep" to create the plural forms (as with other regular plural nouns in English) would be seen as an example

of this. Although (as Jones (1997) points out) Richards (1976) sees this also as a form of simplification at times, Selinker (1972) considers it to be a separate process.

Despite being applied initially to second language acquisition in *adults*, Selinker, Swain and Dumas (1975) applied the concept of interlanguage to language acquisition amongst English-speaking children in French immersion education in Canada. They highlighted four characteristics in their language:

1. some errors continued over a long time
2. those using interlanguage understood each other
3. mistakes reappeared despite the belief that they had disappeared
4. a definite system underpinned the interlanguage at times, namely, transfer, overgeneralization and simplification.

Jones (1997) refers to some of the 'errors' which Selinker, Swain & Dumas (1975) illustrate in the context of immersion education. For example, language transmission: "Il est trois ans" (He is three years old), the correct idiomatic form in French being "Il a trois ans" (literally "He *has* three years").

Overgeneralization is illustrated by "une maison nouvelle" (a new house) where the general rule that adjectives follow the noun in French is also applied to an exception.

Jones (1997) also refers to examples of language transfer, overgeneralization and simplification found in her own research in a Welsh language immersion context, mentioning such things as incorrect syntax derived from English being adopted for the genitive case in Welsh.

The Welsh language currently shows clear evidence of the traits of interlanguage noted above. For example, strategies of language learning and communication appear in the tendency to adopt periphrastic rather than short forms of verbs in the future tense as well as in the conditional and the preterite past tense. Despite reflecting a limited amount of dialectal usage, this enables learners to avoid the need to apply different verbal endings.

Baetens-Beardsmore (1986:129) considers Selinker's (1972) theory of interlanguage to be beneficial in terms of encompassing the fluent bilingual speaker and the learner within the same framework, and explaining the range and degrees of individual bilingual development.

The attractive element in Selinker's argument is that it draws a link between the highly accomplished early bilingual and the non-fluent bilingual in terms of common reference...The interlanguage theory also explains the great range and variety of abilities encountered in different degrees of bilingualism, since the component factors which determine them will vary from case to case.
(Baetens-Beardsmore,1986:129)

Such a standpoint implies interlanguage as being a continually changing and developmental process in language acquisition along a continuum of gradual improvement. However, another linguistic concept which offers a different perspective on interlanguage is that of *fossilized interlanguage* or (FI).

Fossilized Interlanguage

In Reader 3, Dodson (1995:109) describes fossilized interlanguage (FI) as a point in L2 progress when “errors, even basic grammatical errors, made by L2 learners during communicative L2 acquisition become ‘frozen’ or fossilized and are almost impossible to eradicate once established.” In accordance with our earlier discussion of interlanguage, he continues:

FI can be characterized as a simplified form of the target language where pupils’ use of vocabulary is limited, redundant language features are ignored and many grammatical devices such as gender, number, tense, mutations, articles etc are avoided, eliminated or used wrongly, whilst at the same time a great deal of transfer from pupils’ mother-tongue causes interference. (Dodson,1995:109).

The continuous misuse of language or use of language ‘variation’ amongst a large number of speakers, therefore, can lead to fossilisation and, ultimately, to a new kind of language which becomes difficult to eradicate and can include lexical, grammatical and syntactical interference. This is not a matter of fluency, but rather being fluent speakers of incorrect language.

Despite a tendency to associate interlanguage with immersion education i.e. early years education, and as a passing phase in language development, nevertheless, there seem to be circumstances under which further ‘development’ seems to slow down, resulting in the fossilization of incorrect linguistic traits. Such circumstances include a lack of social contact between L2 speakers and the native population which speaks the target language. For example, it is a well-known fact that the current revival in the number of Welsh language speakers is largely due to the significant and increasing numbers of children from non-Welsh-speaking homes who attend Welsh-medium schools in non-Welsh-speaking parts of Wales.

However, as Dodson (1995:109 -110) states:

FI is by now a well-known phenomenon, although in countries where L2 (second-language) immersion education is found, the authorities have in the past tended to underplay its effects, while teachers themselves are often only too glad that their pupils are saying anything at all.

As this quote suggests, another factor which seems to account for FI is teaching methodology and the tendency to encourage ‘fluency’ at the expense of correctness:

...when pupils begin to speak in their second language in the classroom, the teacher is so often glad that the target language is being used, that any faulty language produced will not be corrected. This, of course, is a signal for the pupils concerned that they have made themselves understood and, as no correction was made, that the utterance spoken was linguistically correct. (Dodson,1995:121)

The development of FI in L2 immersion education is ultimately due to the fact that the mother tongue of the pupils is avoided in the teaching of the second language....based on the pedagogue principle that the learning of a second language should imitate as closely as possible the learning of one's first. (Dodson, 1995:117)

However, in terms of the process of *language acquisition*, we are reminded of Hammerly's (1989 :29) observation, which was *partly* quoted previously:

Listeners to a second language interpret what they hear on the basis of the language or languages they know, eliminating what seems redundant, such as certain endings, little unstressed words like articles prepositions and so forth, even though they are important in the second language. *Of course, the listener as listener cannot be corrected by anyone, so, without saying a word, faulty second language structures are internalised.* (emphasis added)

Discussion of bilingual education methodology is reserved for a later module, namely ECDA-7005. However, it is relevant to the present discussion to note that in Reader 3 Dodson (1995:117) distinguishes between *medium-orientated activities* and *message-orientated activities* in the process of language acquisition, alleging that message-orientated strategies in the classroom sometimes take precedence over medium-orientated strategies; simply stated, that communication of what you *mean* is more important than *how you say it*.

It is for this reason that researchers of French immersion programmes draw attention to the stagnation of linguistic development amongst learners after having reached a stage of being able to make themselves understood in the L2. As Baetens Beardsmore (1986: 128-129) states:

Their communicative needs in the classroom are orientated towards the conveyance of cognitive meaning...there is no strong social incentive to develop further towards native-speaker forms.

As previously suggested, due to fossilization, interlanguage can be prevalent at stages later than immersion education. Studies were made by Pellerin & Hammerly (1984) of 18 year old pupils in Vancouver who had received French-immersion education from the age of 5. In unstructured interviews based on very familiar topics, they found an average of 53.8% incorrect sentences (ranging individually from 40.3% to 72.4%) counting grammar and vocabulary only.

Hammerly (1989:18) makes the following observation:

...although the students managed to communicate nearly all of their ideas, they did so in Frenglish, not French. Frenglish is not a language nor a dialect but an embarrassment. A 6 year-old may sound cute coping with communication needs in very faulty French, but would you say the same of a 30 or 40 year old?

Referring back to the productive skills which were mentioned earlier, there are, of course, further complications when we examine interlanguage in terms of literacy as opposed to oracy. Dodson (1995:111) makes the following observation:

Poor receptive and productive skills at the aural/oral level will be compounded at the written level, since inaccuracies which might pass unnoticed in speech become glaring, and worse still, virtually ineradicable when they appear in writing. Less easy to detect, and hence to correct, is any inaccuracy in the pupils' reading comprehension; yet this will affect their ability to study across the whole curriculum.

Two “schools” of thought

It seems evident from previous discussion that there exists a certain amount of debate and disagreement surrounding the phenomenon of interlanguage.

B. Morris Jones (1988) and Thomas (1991), for example, argue that these are not 'mistakes' as such since they are based on systematic 'rules' in their usage.

There is also disagreement with regard to the amount of first language interference on second language acquisition. As mentioned previously, Corder (1967) argues that 'mistakes' characteristic of second language acquisition reflect the same process as first language acquisition and should be treated in the same way. This view is seemingly supported by Dulay & Burt (1973) who argue that most inaccuracies connected with L2 interlanguage are developmental rather than derived from L1 i.e. are similar to inaccuracies in children's speech in the normal acquisition of L1. This view is further supported by Dulay, Burt & Krashen (1982):

Studies show, for example, that only 5% of the grammatical errors children make and at most 20% of the ones adults make can be traced to crossover from the first language. Learners' first languages are no longer believed to interfere with their attempts to acquire second language grammar, and language teachers no longer need to create special grammar lessons for students from each language background.

However, as we saw earlier, Hammerly (1989:29) presents a contrary view in maintaining that “listeners to a second language interpret what they hear *on the basis of the language or languages they know.*”

We can see from previous discussion, for example, that Nemser's (1971) view of second language acquisition as a series of “approximative systems” which change in the process of moving towards that of the target language is at variance with the idea of fossilization (i.e. *stagnation* rather than change along a linguistic continuum).

As previously stated, further issues surrounding interlanguage and fossilized interlanguage impinge also on areas of language acquisition as well as teaching methodology which are the concern of later modules in this programme. Such issues will, therefore, be addressed in due course.