

Chapter 3

Interlanguage

What is interlanguage?

The systematic development of learner language that reflects a mental system of L2 knowledge.

Interlanguage answers questions such as 'What is the nature of the linguistic representations of the L2 that learners form?' and 'How do these representations change over time?'

Behaviourist learning theory

The dominant psychological theory of the 1950s and 1960s was behaviourist learning theory.

According to this theory, language learning is like any other kind of learning in that it involves habit formation.

Habits are formed when learners respond to stimuli in the environment and subsequently have their responses reinforced so that they are remembered. Thus, a habit is a stimulus-response connection.

It was believed that all behaviour, including the kind of complex behaviour found in language acquisition, could be explained in terms of habits. Learning took place when learners had the opportunity to practise making the correct response to a given stimulus. Learners imitated models of correct language (i.e. stimuli) and received positive reinforcement if they were correct and negative reinforcement if they were incorrect.

For example, learners might hear the sentence

'Give me a pencil', use it themselves, and thereby be rewarded by achieving their communicative goal (i.e. by being given a pencil when they wanted one).

What are the points that can be taken against behaviorism?

1. It should be clear that behaviourist accounts of L2 acquisition emphasize only what can be directly observed (I.e. the 'input' to the learner and the learner's own 'output') and ignore what goes on in the 'black box' of the learner's mind.
2. Behaviorism cannot adequately account for L2 acquisition. Learners frequently do not produce Output that simply reproduces the input.
3. Furthermore, the systematic nature of their errors demonstrates that they are actively involved in constructing their own 'rules'. In short, learning is not just a response to external stimuli.

A mentalist theory of language learning

From a preoccupation with the role of 'nurture' (i.e. how environmental factors shape learning), researchers switched their attention to 'nature' (i.e. how the innate properties of the human mind shape learning). This new paradigm was, therefore, mentalist (or 'nativist') in orientation.

In the 1960s and 1970s a mentalist theory of first language (L1) acquisition emerged. According to this theory:

1. Only human beings are capable of learning language.
2. The human mind is equipped with a faculty for learning language, referred to as a **Language Acquisition Device**. This is separate from the faculties responsible for other kinds of cognitive activity (for example, logical reasoning).
3. This faculty is the primary determinant of language acquisition.
4. Input is needed, but only to 'trigger' the operation of the language acquisition device.

What is 'interlanguage'?

The term 'interlanguage' was coined by the American linguist, Larry Selinker, in recognition of the fact that L2 learners construct a linguistic system that draws, in part, on the learner's L1 but is also different from it and also from the target language. A learner's interlanguage is, therefore, a unique linguistic system.

The concept of interlanguage involves the following premises about L2 acquisition:

1. The learner constructs a system of abstract linguistic rules which underlies comprehension and production of the L2. This system of rules is viewed as a 'mental grammar' and is referred to as an 'interlanguage'.
2. The learner's grammar is permeable. That is, the grammar is open to influence from the outside (i.e. through the input). It is also influenced from the inside. For example, the omission, overgeneralization, and transfer errors which we considered in the previous chapter constitute evidence of internal processing.
3. The learner's grammar is transitional. Learners change their grammar from one time to another by adding rules, deleting rules, and restructuring the whole system. This results in an **interlanguage continuum**. That is, learners construct a series of mental grammars or interlanguages as they gradually increase the complexity of their L2 knowledge. e.g. eat > ate
4. Some researchers have claimed that the systems learners construct contain variable rules. That is, they argue that learners are likely to have competing rules at anyone stage of development.

5. However, other researchers argue that interlanguage systems are homogeneous and that variability reflects the mistakes learners make when they try to use their knowledge to communicate. These researchers see variability as an aspect of performance rather than competence. The premise that interlanguage systems are themselves variable is, therefore, a disputed one.
6. Learners employ various learning strategies to develop their interlanguages. The different kinds of errors learners produce reflect different learning strategies. For example, omission errors suggest that learners are in some way simplifying the learning task by ignoring grammatical features that they are not yet ready to process.
7. The learner's grammar is likely to fossilize. Selinker suggested that only about five per cent of learners go on to develop the same mental grammar as native speakers. The majority stop some way short. The prevalence of backsliding (i.e. the production of errors representing an early stage of development) is typical of fossilized learners. Fossilization does not occur in L1 acquisition and thus is unique to L2 grammars.

This concept of interlanguage offers a general account of how L2 acquisition takes place. It is also somewhat indeterminate in that it does not offer a very precise explanation of what takes place. In fact, it is, perhaps, more useful for the questions it raises than the answers it provides .

A computational model of L2 acquisition

The concept of interlanguage can be viewed as a metaphor of how L2 acquisition takes place. It implies that the human mind functions like a computer. The learner is exposed to **input**, which is processed in two stages:

1. First, parts of it are attended to and taken into **short-term memory**. These are referred to as **intake** .
2. Second, some of the intake is stored in **long-term memory** as L2 knowledge .

Finally, L2 knowledge is used by the learner to produce spoken and written **output** (i.e. what we have called learner language).