Chapter 4: Social aspects of interlanguage

Three rather different approaches to incorporating a social angle on the study of L2 acquisition can be identified.

1. The first views interlanguage as consisting of different 'styles' which learners call upon under different conditions of language use.

2. The second concerns how social factors determine the input that learners use to construct their interlanguage.

3. The third considers how the social identities that learners negotiate in their interactions with native speakers shape their opportunities to speak and, thereby, to learn an L2.

1. Interlanguage as a stylistic continuum: Elaine Tarone

Drawing on work on variability in learner language, **Elaine Tarone** has proposed that interlanguage involves a **stylistic continuum.** She argues that learners develop a capability for using the L2 and that this underlies *'all* regular language behavior'. This capability, which constitutes 'an abstract linguistic system', is comprised of a number of different 'styles' which learners access in accordance with a variety of factors.

Tarone sets out two extreme styles in the continuum:

1. At one end of the continuum is the **careful style,** evident when learners are consciously attending to their choice of linguistic forms, as when they feel the need to be 'correct'.

2. At the other end of the continuum is **the vernacular style**, evident when learners are making spontaneous choices of linguistic form, as is likely in free conversation.

An example will help to make Tarone's model clear. Japanese learners find it difficult to learn the sound /z/, as in 'zoo' and 'churches'. Now, imagine that we collect samples of spoken English from a number of Japanese learners over a period of time and under different conditions of language use-free speech, reading a dialogue, and reading lists of isolated words. What would we find? One study found Japanese learners produced /z/ most accurately when reading isolated words and least accurately in free speech. They produced it at a level between these two when reading a dialogue. This study also showed that over time the learners improved their ability to use /z/ accurately in their careful style (i.e. when reading lists of words) to a much greater extent than in their vernacular style (i.e. in free speech).

- Tarone's idea of interlanguage as a stylistic continuum is attractive in a number of ways:

  1. It explains why learner language is variable.

2. It suggests that an interlanguage grammar is constructed according to the same principles, for native speakers have been shown to possess a similar range of styles.

3. It relates language use to language learning.

- Problems with Tarones model of interlanguage:

The model also has a number of problems.

1. First, later research has shown that learners are not always most accurate in their careful style and least accurate in their vernacular style.

2. A second problem is that the role of social, "factors remains unclear. Native speakers style-shift in accordance with whom they are addressing, using a careful style with non-familiar addressees, especially if they are socially subordinate to them, and a vernacular style with familiar addressees who are their social equals.

2. Accommodation Theory: Howard Giles

Another theory that also draws on the idea of stylistic variation but which is more obviously social is Howard Giles's accommodation theory. This seeks to explain how a learner's social group influences the course of L2 acquisition. For Giles the key idea is that of 'social accommodation'.

The theory suggests that when people interact with each other they either:

1. try to make their speech similar to that of their addressee in order to emphasize social cohesiveness (a process of convergence) or

2. to make it different in order to emphasize their social distinctiveness (a process of divergence).

It has been suggested that L2 acquisition involves 'long-term convergence'. That is, when the social conditions are such that learners are motivated to converge on native-speaker norms (i.e. speak like native speakers) high levels of proficiency ensue, but when the conditions encourage learners to maintain their own social in group less learning takes place. According to Giles's theory, then, social factors influence interlanguage development via the impact they have on the attitudes that determine the kinds of language use learners engage in.

Accommodation theory suggests that social factors, mediated through the interactions that learners take part in, influence both how quickly they learn and the actual route that they follow.

3. The acculturation model of l2 acquisition: John Schumann

This model is built around the metaphor of 'distance'.

The theory originated in a case study. Schumann investigated a thirty-three-year-old Costa Rican named Alberto, who was acquiring English in the United States. Schumann found very little evidence of any linguistic development in Alberto over a ten-month period. **How?**

1. Alberto used a 'reduced and simplified form of English' throughout. For example, he did not progress beyond the first stage in the development of negatives

2. He continued to use declarative word order rather than inversion in questions (for example, 'Where you get that?'),

3. He acquired virtually no auxiliary verbs.

4. He failed to mark regular verbs for past tense or nouns for possession.

In short, Alberto appeared to have **fossilized**, or as Schumann put it **'pidginized'**, at a very early stage of development. **Why was this?** Schumann entertained a number of possible reasons-for example, intelligence and age-and dismissed all of them. This led him to consider whether the reasons that have been advanced for the formation of a **pidgin** (i.e. a very simple contact language used among speakers who have no common language) might also apply to L2 acquisition. Why does an early pidginiztion take place?

- Schumann proposed that pidginization in L2 acquisition results when learners fail to acculturate to the target-language group, that is, when they are unable or unwilling to adapt to a new culture.

What is the main reason for failing to acculturate with target language community?

- The main reason for learners failing to acculturate is social distance.

What is **social distance**?

It concerns the extent to which individual learners become members of a target-language group and therefore achieve contact with them.

- A learner's social distance is determined by a number of factors.
    - When the target language group and the L2 group view each other as socially equal both groups wish the L2 group to assimilate the target language group and the L2 group share the same social facilities, the L2 group lacks cohesion (i.e. has many contacts with the target-language group), the L2 group is small, both groups display positive attitudes towards each other, and the L2 group is relatively permanent.
    - Schumann recognizes that social distance is sometimes indeterminate. In such cases, he suggests psychological distance becomes important and identifies a further set of psychological factors, such as language shock and motivation, to account for this.

<u>Problems with Schumann's Theory:</u>

<u>There are two problems with such a model.</u>

1. <u>First, it fails to acknowledge that factors like 'integration pattern' and 'attitude' are not fixed and static but, potentially, variable and dynamic, fluctuating in accordance with the learner's changing social experiences.</u>

2. <u>Second, it fails to acknowledge that learners are not just subject to social conditions but can also become the subject of them; they can help to construct the social context of their own learning.</u>

4. Social identity and investment in L2 learning: Bonny Peirce

<u>The notions of 'subject to' and 'subject of' are central to Bonny Peirce's view of the relationship between social context and L2 acquisition.</u> She illustrates this neatly with an extract from the diary of Eva, an adult immigrant learner of English in Canada:

The girl who is working with me pointed at the man and said:

'Do you see him?'-I said
'Yes. Why?'
'Don't you know him?'
'No. I don't know him.'
'How come you don't know him? Don't you watch TV? That's Bart Simpson.'

It made me feel so bad and I didn't answer her nothing.

Eva felt humiliated in this conversation because she found herself positioned as a <u>'strange woman', someone who did not know who Bart Simpson was. She was subject to a discourse which assumed an identity she did not have.</u>

- <u>The notion of social identity is central to the theory Peirce advances.</u> She argues that <u>language learners have complex social identities that can only be understood in terms of the power relations that shape social structures.</u>

- <u>A learner's social identity is, according to Peirce, 'multiple and contradictory'. Learning is successful when learners are 'able to summon up or construct an identity that enables them to impose their right to be heard and thus become the subject of the discourse. This requires investment, something learners will only make if they believe their efforts will increase the value of their 'cultural capital'</u>

Peirce's social theory of L2 acquisition affords a different set of metaphors. L2 acquisition involves a "struggle' and 'investment'. Learners are not computers who process input data but combatants who battle to assert themselves and investors who expect a good return on their efforts.