



Error Analysis and Interlanguage

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Abstract:

This paper is concerned with a brief discussion on both Error Analysis Theory and Interlanguage Theory. According to the author, Error Analysis Theory based on the analysis of the learners' errors made in their learning process, and Interlanguage Theory based on the analysis of the features of learner language, are of crucial significance and implications to both English learning and teaching. Yet there still exist some problems with the description of the learner's errors. On the basis of the discussion concerning learner language, the author considers what attitude we should

take towards the learners' errors and puts forward some possible suggestions for remedial teaching.

Key Words:

error analysis; interlanguage; learner language

The significance of learners' errors and justifications of error analysis

Learners' errors were of no significance at all in the pre-scientific era when language teachers concentrated their efforts on the learning of the correct forms of the target

language by the learners. It came of no avail to make much fuss about errors as the belief generally held at that time among teachers and linguists was that it was teaching methodology that should be improved if learners made errors. It was considered that

Bad teaching probably gave rise to errors by learners, and if the teaching methodology improved to perfection, errors would be avoided and the learners would be enabled to learn that pure and accurate form of the target language. Another attitude towards learners' errors was that errors were simply inevitable in the learning process and what counted most was to design some means to deal with such errors. Accordingly, there would be no need to identify the sources of errors or the possibility of giving learners' errors their own right as a system. At the time when contrastive analysis prevailed in the field of applied linguistics and learners' errors were identified as the interference of the mother tongue of the learner with the target language they were learning. According to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, errors probably arise where there are great differences between the learner's mother tongue or any previously acquired language and the language he or she is trying to acquire. The errors themselves are interference or intrusion of the mother tongue and they have to be overcome in the learner's progressive learning until they are completely eradicated. Such negative attitudes towards learners' errors are not inconsistent with the behavioristic perception. The behavioristic notion of language learning is that of formation of correct habits from the reinforcement of the certain plausible

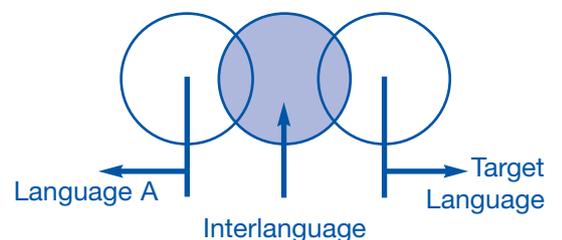
response to stimulus, in the light of which "errors were predicted to be the result of the persistence of existing mother tongue habits in the new language" (Corder, 1981,10). Such persisting habits harm the very learning process, namely, the habit formation process, and should be eliminated immediately to prevent their formation in the new language. The tendency for immediate error correction is strong in the teaching practice of audiolingualism. It was not until the late sixties that people began to gain a new insight into learners' errors. Strong evidence from researches in psycholinguistics has shown that the learners' errors are regular in their patterns and rule-governed. Studying of learners' errors could throw some light on how learners process language input as the errors themselves could be to some extent representative of the learners' intake, namely, how much the learners have learnt and how much they have yet to learn. Therefore, the justification of error analysis could be made for two orientations: first, pedagogical justification, it provides opportunity for a systematic means of eradication; second, theoretical justification, it is part of the systematic study of the learners' language (Corder; 1981). According to Corder, learners' errors are significant in three different ways. First, for teachers, the learners' errors could tell them how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and, consequently, what remains for him to learn. Secondly, for researchers the errors provide evidence of how language is learnt or acquired and what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of language. Thirdly for, learners, committing errors is a

way the learner has of testing his hypotheses about the nature of language he is learning (Corder; 1981). In modern language teaching and learning, there has been a shift of focus from the preoccupation with teaching (particularly explicit grammar teaching) to identification of the learners' communicative needs in language learning. The concept of learner-centeredness has gained its momentum in the overall language teaching and learning. In light of the new tendency, an adequate understanding of what processes, in which the learners engage themselves for the task of learning a second or foreign language, are attributable to the very fulfillment of that learning tasks by the learners are of crucial significance to decision making concerning development of teaching materials as input and providing conditions that are facilitative of the learning. In the Chomskyan notion of language acquisition, the second language learners experience the same process of formulating hypotheses about the target language they are learning. Errors by the learners in the language production are that the learner reveals his underlying knowledge of the newly acquired language. However, while what is going on in the learner's psyche when he or she tries to produce sentences basing on his or her own grammar is hard to observe, his or her language production (or performance) could provide observable data for illuminating that innate competence in the learner. If we acknowledge that learners' errors are systematic and that the learner's language is independent of either the mother tongue or the target language, then it would be justifiable to say that the study of errors by learners as well as the learner's language is

of great value to the understanding of language learning and even of language itself.

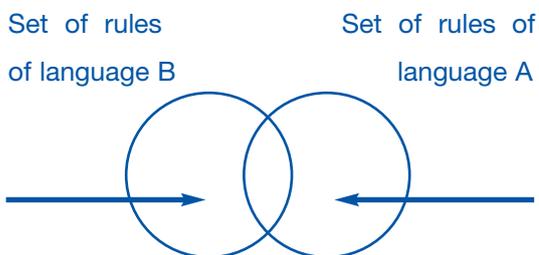
Defining errors: variety of foci

When applied linguists come to tackle errors, practical problems arise as defining errors is not in any sense easier than defining learning. Selinker (1972) simply discarded the concept of "errors" by viewing the language used by the learners as a whole language system, for which he coined the term 'interlanguage', implying that such language is a continuum on the one end of which there is the mother tongue or any previously acquired language and on the other there is the target language. The interlanguage shares the characteristics of two social dialects of the languages.



For the sources of this language system Selinker identified four possible areas of transfer that might shape the structure of interlanguage: transfer of one's native language or other languages the learner has already acquired, transfer of training, transfer of communication, and transfer of strategy. Nemser coined the term 'approximative system' for the language the learner is using, implying that the learner is engaged in a progressive process in the direction of the target language. Corder

would regard the learner's language as a dialect (or idiosyncratic dialect) which is based on the 'transitive competence' of the learner. He used the term due to two considerations: firstly, "any spontaneous speech intended by the speaker to communicate is meaningful, in the sense that it is systematic, regular, describable in terms of a set of rules". Secondly, "sentences of that language are insomorphous with some of the sentences of his target language, and have the same interpretation" (Corder; 1981). According to Corder, "two languages which share some rules of grammar are dialects"; the differences between an idiolect and idiosyncratic dialect would be that an idiolect "possesses rules drawn from overlapping social dialects but does not possess any rules which are not rules of any one of these dialects".



For idiosyncratic dialect, "some of the rules required to account for the dialect are not numbers of the set of rules of any social dialect; they are peculiar to the language of that speaker" (Corder; 1981). A learner's language is not the only type of idiosyncratic dialect; according to Corder there are also deliberately deviant, such as poetic texts, for which the author is supposed to know the rules of the language but chooses not to obey them; pathologically deviant, such as the language of aphasics who are supposed to know the rules of the language before

symptoms of their diseases take effect ; and infant learning his mother tongue. For errors themselves, Corder believed distinction must be made between the deviancy from the learner's language, which Corder called performance errors or mistakes and are accessible to automatic self-correction and should not count as errors, and those which "reveal his underlying knowledge of the language to date" and are not likely to be self-corrected by the learner himself since they are systematic and regular. However, if we think that the learner's language is systematic and has its own grammar and rules, we have to admit that whatever the learner utters when he or she tries to communicate in his or her language is legal and genuine in terms of his or her interlanguage. Every utterance he or she produces is grammatical and perfect except for some performance mistakes or slips of tongue or pen. Moreover, even if we try to identify errors in the utterances by the learner, the criterion applicable would still be very vague, by the fact that the determination of an error should be based on the situational context of the specific utterance. A well-formed sentence may still be erroneous or inappropriate in the context. Corder (1981) argued that whatever the surface form or apparent appropriateness of a learner's utterances, none are utterances in the target language. In other words, he is not speaking the target language at any time, but a language of his own, a unique idiolect, which no doubt shares many features of the target language. The only solution proposed by Corder is that "every utterancy of the learner must be regarded as an acceptable utterance in his transitional dialect. That is to say, every

sentence has to be analyzed in error analysis process. Then the major task of the linguist is to recognize the structures or constructs that are not in accordance with the rules of the target language and reconstruct them to provide some explanations.

The process of error analysis

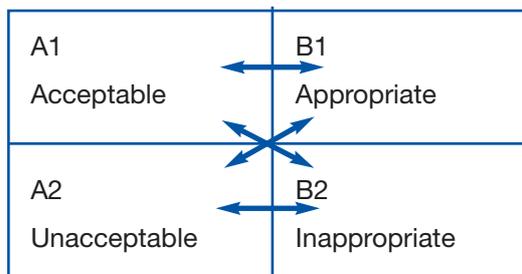
According to Corder, error analysis can be roughly divided into three stages: recognition of idiosyncrasy, accounting for a learner's idiosyncratic dialect, and explanation. Corder has also pointed out that in the process of error analysis, concentration only on superficially ill-formed sentences (overtly idiosyncratic) is not enough. Those that are well-formed but inappropriate relating to the context must also be dealt with. Such sentences Corder called "covertly idiosyncratic" cannot be interpreted 'normally' in context. Both overtly idiosyncratic and covertly idiosyncratic sentences have to be analyzed. The three processes in describing the learner's language are regularization, standardization, and de-contextualization. The process of regularization is an attempt to restructure "an utterance in order to eliminate the sorts of results of the adventitious failures of performance already referred to under the heading of slips of the tongues". And standardization would be to "restructure the speaker's utterances to remove the systematic variation between utterances from different individuals due to personal and sociocultural factors." De-contextualization is the process of "interpreting the speaker's message or intentions" (Corder:33).The most important

stage here is explanation. It is psycholinguistic, as it tries to explain how and why the learner's language is what it is. Corder justified the third stage that "we cannot make any principles used by his idiosyncratic sentences to improve teaching unless we understand how and why they occur".(Corder: 24)

One explanation is that the idiosyncratic dialect is the result of interference the mother tongue. And such interference poses hindrance to learner's acquiring the habits of the second language. In this perception, the idiosyncratic sentences are but "evidence that the correct automatic habits of the target language and not yet been acquired" (Corder:25).Then it is only a matter of methodological improvement for the final eradication of all the errors (the habits in the second language). The other explanation, according to Corder, is that "language learning is some sort of data-processing and hypothesis-forming activity of a cognitive sort". And the learners make false hypotheses about the rules of the target language in their language production. Then the efforts should be made towards enabling the learner to "reformulate a hypothesis more in accordance with the facts of the target language (Hockett 1948, quoted by Corder:25). According to this view, learner's errors are not negative hindering forces, rather, they are inevitable and necessary parts of the second language learning. Therefore, if we can have an adequate description of the idiosyncratic dialect and provide plausible explanations, we would be able to provide facilitative conditions for the learners to formulate hypotheses about the rules of the target language.

Varieties of errors: acceptability and appropriateness

In the learner's idiosyncratic dialect, one sentence could be well formed, in terms of the target language-based criterion, but denies appropriate interpretation in the context. Here the problems of appropriateness arise when we try to decide which sentence or phrase is idiosyncratic and which one is not. Generally, there are two kinds of appropriateness. First, the learner's utterance must be of the truth value concerning its referential relationship, indicating that the referring expression used in the utterance must have its real referent in his or her real life. This is what Corder called *referential appropriateness*. For example when a second year college student says "I found a part-time job in the corporation this summer vacation", the utterance is well-formed and syntactically perfect. But the referring expression 'the corporation' might be inappropriately used to refer to a small shop on the campus. It is referentially inappropriate. Second, the learner has to be able to select the appropriate style or register of language for the social situation, hence social appropriateness. When a learner approaches a foreigner on the street greeting "can you speak English", he produces an utterance that is socially inappropriate. Accordingly, a sentence can be acceptable but inappropriate or unacceptable but appropriate. Listed below are the possible varieties of the idiosyncratic sentences for interpretation:



- 1) A1 and B1: free from errors (non-idiosyncratic)
- 2) A2 and B2: erroneous
- 3) A2 and B1: erroneous
- 4) A2 and B2: erroneous

For any sentence of the idiosyncratic dialect, plausible interpretation in terms of the target language has to be applied. According to Corder, there are four possibilities for an interpretation: 1) well-formed sentence and plausible interpretation; 2) well-formed sentence but incorrect interpretation; 3) acceptable utterance but ambiguous, that is, accessible to two possible interpretations; and 4) well-formed but uninterpretable sentences. In the restructuring process, correct interpretation is possible to be made in accordance with the learner's intention in the first case. For the second case, some incorrect interpretation can be made of the erroneous sentence by the learner. Sometimes the first interpretation based on one's intuition could be irrelevant to the context in which the sentence is placed. To solve this problem, Corder proposed that a longer context or larger range of context has to be taken into account in making out the learner's intended meaning. In the third case, the overtly erroneous sentence is accessible to two possible interpretations. The decision on the genuine one has to be based on the reference to the mother

tongue of the learner. The implication for the discussion above would be that “the well-formedness or otherwise of a learner’s utterance is not the only criterion for establishing the presence of errors”, and “what is crucial is whether the normal target language interpretation of his utterance is appropriate or not in the context” (Corder: 44). For the interpretation of the learner’s idiosyncratic dialect, a teacher is in a good position to perform the task when he or she has the following advantages: 1) he or she has a good understanding of the learning situation of the students and can easily relate the learners’ utterances or sentences to the actual context 2) he or she is the native speaker of the learner’s mother tongue and is therefore capable of interpreting the learners’ intended meaning in terms of the mother tongue 3) he or she was once, and may still be the speaker of the idiosyncratic dialect, namely, he has the similar experiences of formulating hypotheses about the rules of the target language. So a teacher who is non-native speaker of the target language but shares the mother tongue of the learners is in a better position than the native speaker of the target language when tracing the errors in the learner’s interlanguage.

Problems with EA

There still exist a lot of problems with the description of the learner’s errors. The elusive nature of the learner’s language, the variations of errors, and the mother tongue influence all complicate the description. Following are the major problems:

a. Interlanguage is changing

As the learning process is the process of formulating hypotheses about the rules of the target language, the learner would constantly test his or her hypotheses and try to revise them to be more in accordance with the target language. So in the strict sense, it is quite impossible to have a sectional or horizontal study of the learner’s language. While a longitudinal study is more feasible, arbitrary decisions have to be made sometimes as to when some features disappear and new features arise on the continuum. Even for well-formed and appropriate sentences by the learners we still have a right to doubt that they genuinely represent the underlying knowledge of the learners, as such utterances or sentences might be simply an imitation of the ready-made set expression or formula. Corder gave the example of the learner’s use of the greeting “how do you do”, of which the well-formedness and appropriateness does not guarantee that the learner has really mastered the use of the verb ‘do’. However, the changeable nature of interlanguage does not affect interlanguage as a systematic and independent language in its own right. As Corder argued, “that his language is changing all the time, that his rules are constantly undergoing revision is of course, true and rarely complicates the problem of description but does not invalidate the concept of “ a learner’s language” (Corder: 56).

b. Only textual data is not enough

Corder has identified two basic constraints, external constraint and internal constraint,

for the textual data to be inadequately representative sample of the learner's language. By external constraints Corder indicated the fact that textual data is not spontaneous language produced by the learner under the pressure of natural communicative needs. Moreover, there are such artificial constraints as topic restriction, time constraint, and threats of failure. By internal constraint, Corder meant that "the learner himself will place limitations upon the data we work with, by selecting those aspects of knowledge which he has most confidence in" (Corder: 60). That is to say, the learner would not reveal sufficient data about his underlying knowledge of his language. From the textual data, we seem to get only what the learner believes he knows rather than what he really knows. However, in a foreign language learning context, elicitation of data of spontaneous language production is very difficult to achieve, simply because the learners are seldom engaged in a real communication in the target language. We can hardly get a whole corpus of the learners' spontaneous speech production when they only have fragmentary and occasional performance.

c. Language transfer versus universality of interlanguage

On the one hand, we have identified that most of the learners' errors can be traced to the influence of their mother tongue and acknowledged that language transfer plays crucial role in interlanguage. On the other, strong evidence has shown that there are a lot of similarities in the interlanguage of learners with various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Such similarities seem to

prove the hypothesis that all sorts of second language learners follow the same sequence of learning and their prior knowledge of their mother tongue comes no avail to the acquisition of the new language. However, modern cognitive learning theories have formulated that the very success of learning is determined by how much the learner has already known about the subjects. And the learning process is the process of incorporating the new items into the already existent cognitive structure (Ausubel 1963). When a learner has already had sophisticated knowledge about one language system, it is hard to imagine for him not to exploit the advantage of prior knowledge in the second language learning. Corder has the justification that "it appears then that the nature of the interlanguage grammar a learner creates for himself is to a considerable extent determined by the knowledge of language the learner already possesses and how elaborate and sophisticated that knowledge is" (Corder: 74). But it is true at the same time that such factors as age, settings, and motivation would play significant roles in second language learning. The younger the learners, the more communicating oriented, and the more informal the setting, the more similar the structural properties of their interlanguage systems will be. As Corder has pointed out, "the maximum degree of similarity between approximative systems of learners will be found in the case of young learners of any language, whatever their mother tongue in the earliest stages of learning a particular language in an informal setting, and per contra that the maximum differences in the approximative system of learners will be found among adult learners

of different mother tongues learning different target languages in formal settings” (Corder: 77). In the Chinese learning situation, we would probably place our learners on the other end of the scale: they are adult, learning English for academic purposes, and have highly formal instructional settings. So much can be expected of the features that are unique to the Chinese learners of English. And we can base most of our interpretations of their sentences on the mother tongue translation, as it is the case in actuality.

Conclusion

As the learner’s language is systematic and describable, error analysis provides access to the observable data from which inferences can be made about the learner’s underlying knowledge about his or her language. As a methodology error analysis has implications both for practical purposes and psycholinguistic orientation. It serves to help the teacher to gain insight into the learner’s learning process and provide more facilitative conditions that can promote the process. Mere error correction, particularly the immediate correction in class, may distort the learner’s hypothesis formulation and delay the learning process. More solid evidence could be obtained when the data is elicited from a large corpus of the textual materials, in which irrelevant performance mistakes can be more easily deleted on the basis of probability method and regularity can be more easily captured. Moreover, the corpus can be enhanced by integrating materials from the learner’s oral production for evidence of spontaneous speech. Even though caution has to be made about our

interpretations in locating the possible sources of the learners’ errors, steady progress could be made when the methodology is improved and variables are held in control.

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