

## Methods of Analysis: Contrastive and Error Analysis

In this section, we will consider the central issue in SLA - the linguistic system which is learned. The discussion will involve the nature and characteristics of this system, and its route of development. We will also discuss the role of the first language in determining the system that the learner learns. These would be presented under the headings: contrastive analysis and error analysis

### Contrastive Analysis

This is a field of research that flourished in the fifties and sixties. It emphasized the comparison of two languages = the mother tongue of the learner and the L2 that he wants to learn. Learning a new language will, thus, be learning a new set of habits and will inevitably be influenced by the old set of habits -i.e. the mother tongue. The learner of a L2 will transfer his old habits into the new linguistic context. Where L1 and L2 are similar, this transfer will be positive; where they are different, transfer will be negative.

This, in effect, equates the areas of difference between L1 and L2 with areas where the learner is going to meet with problems when learning L2.

An Arab learner of English has difficulty in pronouncing the English /p/ because it does not exist in the phonological system of Arabic as a distinctive sound. He usually replaces it with /b/. This is a case of negative transfer. This learner does not have any problem with the English /s/ or /k/ or /g/. We can thus predict those areas of difficulty when we compare L1 and L2 and point out those areas of difference between them. Now, if the errors that the L2 learner commits are predicted as the result of the influence of the old set of habits -i.e. L1- on his performance of L2, then we can concentrate on those areas of difference -and, hence, difficulty- in teaching L2. SLA is, therefore, the overcoming of the differences between the two language systems.

In spite of its appeal, the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) -as the above set of assumptions has come to be called, was not without its flaws and inadequacies. Two things are worth mentioning in this connection: vagueness in the difficulty assumption, and the validity of the error basis.

To give a formal definition of difficulty and the context in which it is to be expected, a number of measures were set to explain and grade difficulties. Areas of difference between L1 and L2 were classified. A hierarchy of difficulty was calculated in terms of transfer positive, negative, zero -depending on the presence or absence of a linguistic unit in L1 and L2.

The validity of prediction was also put to question. In its strongest form, CAH claims that errors are attributable to the difference between L1 and L2. Thus, a comparison of the two languages can predict those errors beforehand and the teaching syllabus can be geared to remedy them. This turned out to be too strong a claim to be maintained. It was found that not all attested errors that are made by L2 learners can be attributed to transfer from their L1. The predictions were valid only in the area of pronunciation, but not so much in grammar. Some errors are universally made by all L2 learners regardless of their L1 or the L2 they are learning. On the other hand, some errors that were predicted by CAH did not materialize. This motivated the weakening of CAH since it was admitted that interference from L1 can account for only some of the errors in L2, and that the sources of errors were many. In addition, evidence from errors has to come from actual attestation rather than from mere comparison between two languages.

The important thing to remember, here, is the role that contrastive analysis played in defining the characteristics of the linguistic system that the L2 learner develops though its conclusion may not be fully accurate in some areas -in its strong version, certainly. Another method of describing the linguistic system of the L2 learner has been developed. This is the method of error analysis.

## **Error analysis**

The study of errors committed by language learners has long been considered a fruitful method of diagnosing language teaching problems. In the last twenty-five years or so, it received a new impetus, with the growing interest in investigating the characteristics of the system that the L2 learner

constructs when he learns the language. Language acquisition came to be seen as the construction of a grammar by the learner.

In the acquisition of the mother tongue, children construct a grammar of that language based on the linguistic data they get from the environment. The system they build is not identical to their mother tongue system. Rather, it represents the developmental stages of their language acquisition. Children make errors which indicate that they have formulated the rules of their mother tongue grammar, but have not mastered their limitations yet. These are developmental errors. Similarly, L2 learners have been noticed to commit developmental errors that have nothing to do with their L1 background. They are the result of the language system which they have constructed and which deviates from the L2 system.

All this has led researchers to turn to the study of the errors that the L2 learners make by observation, classification, and analysis so as to reveal the language system that underlies them. These errors were found to originate in a variety of sources. Some of these errors can easily be traced to interference from L1, hence, the term interlingual errors. These could be accounted for by the CAB in its weak version. An example of this is the Arab learner of English saying knife pocket for pocket knife due to transfer from Arabic which has a reverse order of head and modifier to that in English - Arabic: Head-Modifier vs. English: Modifier-Head.

Other errors are committed by L2 learners regardless of their L1 background. These are intralingual errors. Some of these have been classified as signs of **overgeneralization** -one of the learning processes involved in SLA. This is the case in the overwhelming wrong use of the regular past tense suffix with irregular verbs e.g. write / writed, go / goed, etc... L2 learners, no matter what their L1 is, seem to make this error, which is obviously the result of extending the use of the regular past tense suffix to verbs which are not suffixed in this way, or do not form their past by suffixation.

Another source of intralingual errors is seen as a strategy of **redundancy reduction**, or **simplification**, whereby the L2 learner tries to reduce redundant information. It has been observed that many L2 learners of English fail to add

the third person singular [-S] inflection on the present tense verbs even when their L1 exhibits a rich inflectional system - e.g. John go, she play ,etc... This can only be explained as a case of reducing the redundancy of signaling the person twice, once on the subject and another on the verb. It is as if overt mention of the subject would suffice.

Another class of errors was termed **communication-based errors**, where a learner incorrectly labels an object by successfully communicating the desired concept. The use of **air ball** for **balloon** is an instance of this failure to come up with the appropriate lexical item but successfully conveying the idea.

The context of SLA might be the source of another type of errors. These are **teaching induced errors** that L2 learners make because of problems in their teaching misleading explanations, inadequate presentations, etc... This can be seen, for instance, in the faulty use of point out in place of point at because they were presented together.