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A SOCIOLINGUISTIC THEORY OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Pieter Muysken

0. Summary

This note argues that the study of second language (L2) acquisition can profitably be undertaken from a sociolinguistic perspective. The finding of sociolinguistic research that differentiation in speech communities is functional suggests that the assumption of norm-convergence for L2 acquisition should be modified: L2 acquisition in many cases results in speech quite different from the target, while this cannot always be blamed on a 'defective' learning situation. The implications of this perspective will be briefly explored for the study of 'input', 'interference', and 'pidginization'.

1. Introduction

The dominant research tradition in the study of L2 acquisition has been psycholinguistics, and arguably this has determined the shape of this study to a considerable extent. If we contrast the psycholinguistic perspective with that of sociolinguistics, we find differences on at least four points, which can be schematically presented as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PSYCHOLINGUISTICS</th>
<th>SOCIOLINGUISTICS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the individual</td>
<td>the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mastery</td>
<td>choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cognition</td>
<td>function</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>uniformity</td>
<td>variation</td>
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Psycholinguistic research has focussed on individual speakers or learners, sociolinguistics on groups of speakers. This is not a question of numbers, since the number of subjects or informants involved has often been larger in the former tradition than in the latter. Rather, the difference is that in sociolinguistic research it is recognized that people do certain things, speak in certain ways, etc. due to their membership in a specific group, and this group then becomes the focus of attention.

While psycholinguistics has stressed mastery (can a given speaker recognize the ambiguity in a given stimulus sentence, does a given learner 'know' a form or rule), sociolinguistics has stressed choice. What does a speaker do when there are alternative ways of saying the same thing (Labov, 1972), why do these alternatives
exist.

Similarly, psycholinguistics has focussed on the embedding of knowledge of linguistic rules and patterns in general cognitive structures, and sometimes the limits imposed by cognition on linguistic knowledge. In contrast, sociolinguistics has been explicitly functional in orientation. What is the function of a given structure or multiplicity of structures, and why do people speak the way they do. Language is looked upon as a tool and a symbol, not just as a cognitive representation.

Finally, psycholinguistic research has tended to search for generality in invariance, rather than in patterned variation. Sociolinguistics has, recognizing that language has many different functions and is used by different groups, focussed on differences rather than on uniformity.

Both approaches to language study are legitimate, of course, and useful in that they complement one another. The danger comes in when a given research tradition is shaped by the one approach, to the exclusion of the other. This danger is more than academic, in that the shape of a research tradition percolates down, through the implementation of proposals derived from results, into society at large.

2. Differentiation

The core finding, I think, of sociolinguistic research can be summarized as follows:

The form of a language is in part determined by the functions that it fulfills in a speech community. These functions are not limited to the referential one, but include also an indication of the perception of the speaker of his/her own identity. Hence not only uniformity in linguistic form is functional (facilitating the referential function), but variation as well (facilitating the identification function).

Differentiation in linguistic form, then, can be functional. This is clear in monolingual (L1) contexts, where we find at least three ways in which linguistic differentiation comes about:

a. phonological and phonetic change;

b. lexical change (semantic specialization leading to jargon formation, relexification, language games);

c. exploitation and overgeneralization of stylistic options in syntax.

This type of options has lead to an impressive amount of variation in monolingual contexts, but it is clear that differentiation in L2 contexts can be much more dramatic in its linguistic consequences, if you consider the possibilities that the various stages in the learning process offer.

The central claim of this brief paper is that differentiation in L2
contexts is as crucial as differentiation in L1 contexts, and can take two forms:

(a) When the L2 learner becomes part of the L2 speech community and is identified in that speech community with one of its constituent groups, he will adopt the linguistic forms characteristic of that group. This option I will explore in section 3 when discussing selection from 'input' in L2 acquisition.

(b) When the L2 learner or learners does not join one of the existing constituent groups of the L2 speech community, he or they will develop a speech variety characteristic of the newly formed group, which is added to the speech community with the L2 learner's entrance into it. This option I will explore in the sections 4 and 5 when discussing 'interference' and 'pidginization'.

3. Selection from input

Much recent L2 acquisition research recognizes the importance of a detailed study of the 'immediate target speech' of the L2 learner, rather than of some abstract model. Thus, the Heidelberg project included a sample of lower class Heidelberg German native speakers, with whom the foreign workers could be compared (Klein & Dittmar, 1979). The underlying assumption is of course that the immediate target speech guides the L2 process to a considerable extent. I want to suggest here, however, that it is not so much the input as such, but rather the selection which the L2 learners make from the input, that determines what is finally learned.

A striking example of this is L2 acquisition in the presence of two targets, such as that of immigrants in Montréal (Québec, Canada) who are more in contact with French (the general popular language spoken by 30% of the population) but tend to learn English (the prestige language). Here the larger portion of the linguistic input is ignored, and the less accessible English input is focussed upon.

Similar results were obtained in the study of word order acquisition (Muysken, 1981) in Quechua-Spanish bilingual communities in Ecuador. Schematically the situation is as follows:

Figure I: Percentages of XV word order in the spoken Spanish of five groups of speakers

A diagram illustrating the percentages of XV word order in the spoken Spanish of different groups of speakers is shown.
The upper pyramid represents the monolingual Spanish target community, of which two groups of speakers are represented: merchants, with 22 % XV (= verb final) order in their Spanish, and semi-employed workers, with 34 % XV. The lower pyramids represent two separate communities of L2 learners: left a dependent Quechua-speaking village in the neighbourhood, right migrant Quechua-speaking load-bearers. Interestingly enough, the group of upwardly mobile Spanish-Quechua bilingual construction workers from the village does not adopt the non-standard monolingual 34 % XV norm, characteristic of the monolingual speakers with whom they have immediate and frequent contact, but rather the regional standard 22 % norm. With this latter norm, their contacts are only incidental and indirect.

In many cases, of course, L2 learners will adopt the norms of the immediate target variety, but the examples given show that this is not necessarily the case. The group of load-bearers has a different figure from either target, 47 %, and this could be interpreted either as characteristic of an early stage in the acquisition process, or as an indication that this group sets itself apart from the other groups in the target community. We will return to this in the discussion of interference or transfer.

4. Interference

The study of interference or transfer (the use of features of L1 when speaking L2) in L2 learning has immediate relevance for various domains of historical linguistics: the study of pidgins and creoles, of borrowing, sub-, super-, and adstratum, and of Sprachbund, convergence and diffusion. In all these cases the question is: to what extent do aspects (structures, rules) of the first language remain present in the L2 speech of learners, so that new generations speak a 'mixed' language? If interference is frequent as a part of L2 acquisition, historical linguists can posit mixture with more confidence to explain processes of language change. Thus the study of L2 acquisition in vitro, as it were, is turned to in order to settle this problem. Unfortunately, no unequivocal answers have been forthcoming thus far. On just about every major research issue with respect to transfer there has been disagreement.

Developmental sequence. Some authors have considered transfer characteristic of early stages of the acquisition process, and others have postulated that in fact transfer presupposes a certain amount of developmental complexity.

Aspect of grammar. Some researchers suppose that it is Humboldtian 'outer form' (phonetics, morphology, lexicon, word order) that is most easily transferred, others that it is rather distinctions of 'inner form' (deep structure, semantics) that carry over.

Distance L1-L2. In the view of some, interference occurs most easily with closely related languages (say, Dutch and German), of others that typological distance (e.g. between Tagalog and English) leads to transfer.

Directed/undirected. In much recent work 'directed' L2 acquisition
is assumed to show greater amounts of interference, especially by 'norm-conscious' learners, than 'undirected' acquisition. Others have found transfer to occur in natural learning situations as well.

Age. Traditionally it has been assumed that interference was characteristic of older learners, but it has been said to occur with children as well.

What I would like to suggest here is that the source of uncertainty with respect to interference or transfer is not simply inadequate data, but rather an incomplete perspective on the problem, due to the psycholinguistic research tradition. Suppose that transfer is not a phenomenon determined by conceptual aspects of the learning process (e.g. overgeneralization, the struggle for expression) alone, but also a divergence or differentiation device that the L2 learner has at his/her disposal. With target-convergent learning interference would play a minor role, while in other cases interference becomes a more constant means of producing L2 speech intelligible to native speakers but also different enough from the target for L2 speakers to express their separateness socially.

An example of the type of possible misinterpretation resulting from the strictly psycholinguistic view, coupled with a linearity assumption (to which we will return later) is provided by work in which the present author participated (Jansen, Lalleman, and Muysken, 1981). 16 foreign workers, Turks and Moroccans, living in the Netherlands were interviewed and later a sample of their speech was analyzed with respect to the position of the verb. Since the speakers had various levels of proficiency in their Dutch, we assumed that they represented various stages in the acquisition process. Since the speakers with lower levels of proficiency showed higher percentages of XV order, especially in the case of the Turks (whose first language is SOV), we concluded that interference occurs particularly in the early stages of the acquisition process. The crucial figure is given here:

Figure II: The development of XV order in subjectless sentences
An alternative interpretation of the same data (one for which only this author is responsible) is that speakers will vary in the amount of L1 structures they introduce into their L2 speech according to the degree of differentiation they want to achieve, and that the amount of transfer will often co-vary with the general level of approximation to the target, which we will discuss in section 5 under the heading of pidginization.

This sociolinguistic interpretation (transfer as a means toward differentiation) implies that the particular feature transferred is arbitrary from a structural or psycholinguistic point of view, just as the particular sound in the pronunciation of which two social classes differ is arbitrary. Interesting confirmation for this is found in the differences in Quechua features between Peruvian and Ecuadorian early Quechua-Spanish interlanguage:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>PERU</th>
<th>ECUADOR</th>
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<tr>
<td>Adjective-Noun</td>
<td>Noun Adjective (Q = AN, Sp = NA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessive Noun</td>
<td>Noun Possessive (Q = Poss N, Sp = N Poss)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complement Verb</td>
<td>Complement Verb (Q = XV, Sp = VX)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In both situations the source language is the same and the target language as well (ignoring irrelevant dialect differences in both), but in Ecuador only one Quechua feature is transferred, and in Peru three features. As was shown in Figure I and the accompanying text, the transfer of verb-final word order in Ecuadorian Quechua-Spanish interlanguage is embedded in a situation in which verb-final word order functions as a sociolinguistic variable. No detailed study has been done in Peru, but dialect surveys mention Adjective-Noun and Possessive-Noun orders as features of regional Spanish.

When I state that the choice of features transferred is psycholinguistically arbitrary I do not mean to suggest that psycholinguistic factors play no role in determining which features could be transferred at all, but rather that the frequency and persistence of transfer features is outside of the realm of psycholinguistic. Of the wealth of non-target features characterizing the very earliest interlanguage, only some are maintained in a systematic fashion.

5. Pidginization.

The last aspect of L2 acquisition which may be profitably viewed from a sociolinguistic perspective, I think, is pidginization. While earlier work had suggested that L2 learning may stop for certain speakers before the target norm is fully acquired (cf. Selinker, 1972), Schumann (1978) documents in detail the incomplete acquisition of the English auxiliary, negation and interrogation system by Spanish speaker and terms this pidginization. Schumann uses the term pidginization since in the case of very incomplete L2 acquisition "a language is restricted to the communication of denotative referential information and is not used for integrative and expressive functions. Restriction to the communicative function results from the learner's social and/or psychological distance from the target language group." (1978: viii). Towards the end of the
monograph Schumann continues (1978: 114 sq.): "Therefore pidginization appears to be a stage which all second language learners go through but which persists under conditions of social and/or psychological distance.... In terms of cognitive strategies, the relatively unmarked, simple code resembling a pidgin that characterizes the early stages of second language acquisition is viewed as a product of cognitive constraints caused by the lack of knowledge of the target language."

Social factors are seen in this work as blocking or favoring progress along a linear path towards the target. A similar conception is found in the correlational studies of the Heidelberg project, where it was found that contact with Germans on and outside the job and age of arrival in Germany were the most important independent variables explaining differences in the degree of success in learning German of foreign workers (Klein & Dittmar, 1979). Neither in the Heidelberg work nor in Schumann's work (which takes different kinds of 'distance' as the causal factor) the problem is discussed of how much contact is needed for successful acquisition. In the light of the previous discussion of differentiation, however, the phenomena referred to as 'pidginization' may be interpreted as extreme and unfortunate results of differentiation.

Note in this respect that sociological studies of industrial migrants have shown that the group of foreign workers does not become part of the indigenous working class, but form a new class on their own. A similar view is held by Richards (1972), who states that: "Non-standard English will be the outcome of learning when the learner learns under circumstances which hinder his becoming a member of the community of standard speakers. Self-perpetuating social stratification correlated with color, race, and other ethnic indicators, lead to the non-standard dialect taking on a new role of ethnic identity and solidarity." The question now is whether the creation of non-standard varieties as described by Richards can be equated with the type of extremely limited pidginized speech described by Schumann. Probably the latter is much further removed from the target. Nonetheless it is impossible here to draw a sharp line, as is clear from the Heidelberg results. At each point there is a tension between norm-divergence, crucial for self-expression and differentiation, and norm-convergence, crucial for communication with the target group. Different individuals resolve this tension in different ways.

6. By way of conclusion

I cannot go into the details here of Schumann's analysis, but hope the general outline is clear of a more sociolinguistic way of looking at L2 acquisition. I will conclude by suggesting some other lines of research which may be pursued in L2 acquisition within a sociolinguistic paradigm, lines of research obviously inspired by L1 sociolinguistic studies:

(a) the 'marché linguistique', which postulates a direct relation between the amount of standard speech required by the working and living situation of speakers and their actual speech when interviewed (Sankoff & Laberge, 1978), can be directly related
to the work on minimal requirements in L2 acquisition, and to different types of functional work.

(b) the work on 'style shift' (e.g. Labov, 1972) can be plausibly related to the work in monitor theory that has been carried out in L2 acquisition (Krashen, 1981).

(c) the concept of 'network' which has been adopted from sociological into sociolinguistic research can fruitfully be extended to work on the social factors governing L2 acquisition.

This article remains programatic since none of this work has been carried out, for reasons stated above of the dominance of the psycholinguistic perspective. I hope it has become clear that familiar issues can be fruitfully (perhaps more fruitfully) looked at from the complementary sociolinguistic perspective as well.

Notes

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1. This section owes much to a survey of the literature on transfer by Yolande Emmelot & Dolly van Kooten (1981).

2. The Peruvian data come from Luján, Sankoff & Minaya (1980), and the Ecuadorian data from Muysken (1981), where the issues raised here are discussed in more detail.

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