

# 1 Introduction

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## 1.1 Aims and scope

This study is part of a larger project on the acquisition of a second language in everyday communication. In the course of this process, the learner<sup>1</sup> passes through a series of increasingly elaborate repertoires of linguistic devices that allow him<sup>2</sup> to express himself and to understand others with varying degrees of success when he tries to communicate with his social environment. Repertoires of this sort we call *learner varieties*. We assume that both

- the internal organisation of a learner variety at a given time, and
- the transition from one variety to the next over time

are essentially systematic in nature. Neither of these assumptions is trivial. Moreover, neither of them precludes a certain amount of randomness and unexplained, perhaps unexplainable variation. But we are only interested in the phenomena under investigation to the extent to which they are systematic and based on recognisable principles, and we assume that this extent is high.

One might ask whether a learner variety is indeed a "proper language" or rather some deficient, incomplete, erratic variant of it. We think, firstly, that this question is unanswerable, since the concept of "proper language" is ill-defined, and secondly, that it is at best irrelevant, at worst misleading. The question to be asked, instead, is whether a *learner variety is based on recognisable organisational principles, how these principles interact, and whether they also apply to fully-fledged languages*, i.e. to the "final" learner varieties in the case of first language acquisition. We think that the answer is "yes"; but this is an empirical problem.

The scope of the whole project will be outlined in section 1.2 below. It includes many aspects of the acquisition process, some of them clearly interlinked. The particular phenomenon in which we are interested in this volume is the way, or the ways, in which learners put their words together - that is, if we take

the word "syntax" in its literal meaning, the syntax of learner varieties. We will avoid this term. In linguistic theory, it is usually understood in a narrower sense than needed here, referring to certain formal principles of utterance structure. Syntactic accounts are stated in terms like noun phrase, direct object, case agreement, and similar ones. Thus, they would have the form of statements like

- the finite verb is clause-initial
- the relative clause precedes its head
- verbs of class x govern a NP marked as dative
- the adjective agrees in person, number and gender with its head noun

and similar ones. (We ignore more formal accounts of syntax; the same considerations put forward here apply to them a fortiori.) In learner varieties, however, organisational principles of this kind play a relatively minor role - at least in the elementary stages. The reasons are obvious. Learner varieties most often lack any inflexion, hence even a learner who has concepts in his first language like those above cannot apply them (supposing he wanted to); many early utterances have no verb at all; hence, government by the verb cannot be operative, except to the extent to which it is provided by the context. But this does not mean that utterances in learner varieties are chaotic and without any organisation. Other principles, also present in fully-fledged languages, have a stronger weight - for example principles based on what is freshly introduced and what is maintained from previous utterances, on what is in focus, on the semantic role of an entity referred to, and similar ones. Hence, any deeper understanding of the internal organisation of learner varieties and, as a consequence, of the nature of second language acquisition, requires going beyond purely "syntactic" principles in the narrower sense and including organisational principles of the latter type.

The central idea of the present investigation, then, is this: There is a limited set of organisational principles of different nature which are present in all learner varieties, including the borderline case of fully developed languages. It is the interaction of these principles which determines the actual structure of an utterance in a given learner variety. The kind of interaction and hence the specific contribution of each principle may vary, depending on various factors, such as influence of the language of origin. In particular, the interaction changes over time. The acquisition of verb morphology, for example, may heavily increase the contribution of purely "syntactic" factors to utterance organisation. Learning a new feature is not adding a new piece to the puzzle which the learner has to put together; it entails a reorganisation of the whole variety, changing the previous balance of the various contributing factors in a way which, eventually, brings it closer to the balance characteristic of the target language.

This idea, which we think is in sharp contrast to perspectives dominant in second language acquisition research will be explained in more detail in chapter 2 below. In particular, we will substantiate what kind of interacting principles we have in mind. The approach taken there could be characterised as essentially *inductive and hypothesis-guided* - that is, based on a first, explorative study, we shall develop some hypotheses on what learners with different languages of origin *could* do. And then, we shall see what they *do* do. This will be done in chapters 3-6; each of these chapters is devoted to the acquisition of one target language, and in each of them, speakers of two source languages are studied. Chapter 7 contains the general conclusions.

The analyses of chapters 3-6 attempt to distil general statements from systematic and detailed comparisons: (a) of the performances of one learner in one task repeated over time; (b) of the longitudinal study resulting from (a), with similar analyses of other learners sharing source and target language; (c) of the resultant description of this linguistic case, with analyses of learners from other language pairings (these are detailed in 1.2.2).

In the remainder of this chapter, we shall sketch the layout of the whole project (1.2), and describe the data on which this particular study is based. The whole project used a number of different data collection techniques (1.2.2), each with specific advantages and disadvantages. For present purposes, we needed at least partial control over what the learners intended to express with an utterance. Therefore, we have chosen a retelling of a film, repeatedly done by the various learners at different times during the acquisition process. The details of this procedure are given in section 1.3.

We have not included a discussion of other work on the development of utterance structure in second language acquisition. For the theoretical issues, this has been done in detail elsewhere (see, e.g. Perdue, ed. 1984b, chapter 5; Klein 1986, chapter 6; Klein 1990, 1991). Reference to related empirical work, and in particular to longitudinal studies (see note 5), is found throughout chapters 3-6; theoretical and empirical work are briefly discussed in chapter 7.

## 1.2 "Second language acquisition by adult immigrants": The European Science Foundation project

### 1.2.1 *Motivation and organisation*

The project as a whole had two related aims: (i) to investigate in a systematic fashion the way in which foreign immigrant workers in industrialised West European countries go about learning the language of their new social environment; (ii) to analyse the characteristics of verbal exchanges between immigrants and native speakers of the language being learned. The aims are related in the sense that this type of language learning typically takes place *by means of* everyday contact with speakers of the new language.

Adult immigrants learn the language of their new environment more or less successfully. What was attempted was a careful analysis of this process in order to gain some insight into the linguistic and communicative factors which, amongst others, can account for the varying speed and success which adults show when learning a second language, the stages of proficiency they pass through, and also why it is that this types of language learning often stabilises at a restricted level of proficiency, or in other words "fossilises".<sup>3</sup>

Six research teams were involved in the project, based in Ealing College of Higher Education, and the Universities of Heidelberg, Brabant, Paris VIII, Provence and Göteborg. These teams comprised a team leader and specialists in the source- and target-languages under investigation. The Max-Planck-Institut für Psycholinguistik, Nijmegen, provided the central coordination.

In addition, a "Steering Committee" was appointed to advise the members of the Activity on their work and to report to the ESF on the overall progress of the Activity. It met at approximately yearly intervals.

### 1.2.2 *Design*

The Activity was designed as a *cross-linguistic* and *longitudinal* study.

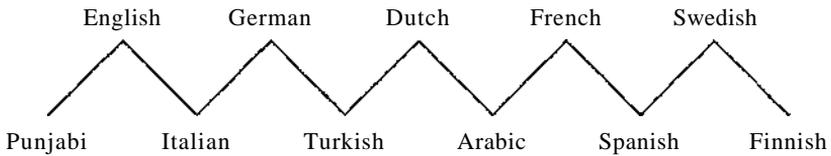
#### *Cross-linguistic research*

Two major variables studied in the Activity were the mother tongue of the immigrants and the host, or "target" language (TL). The influence of the mother tongue (or "source" language: SL) of an adult learning a second language has long been recognised:<sup>4</sup> one criterion for the choice of languages studied was therefore

to examine linguistically interesting cases of learning; for example comparing the learning of a closely related language - e.g. a Spanish speaker learning French - with that of an unrelated language - e.g. a Spanish speaker learning Swedish.

A second criterion for the choice of languages was that they should be representative of widespread cases of second language acquisition in Western Europe.

These criteria are not necessarily concurring, so for example while the five TLs chosen to be studied represent the European languages learned by the largest populations of immigrants, their linguistic "spread" is narrow: four out of the five are Germanic languages. The compromise reached was the following:



This organisation made it possible to undertake paired comparisons of the learning of one TL (e.g. German) by speakers of different SLs (here, Italian and Turkish) and the learning of different TLs (e.g. German and English) by speakers of one SL (here, Italian). This systematic comparison of ten linguistically different cases of learning enabled a distinction to be drawn between features of the learning process specific to one linguistic pairing, and features which were recurrent, i.e., which allow more general statements about the adult language learning process. These issues will be taken up systematically in Chapter 7.

#### *Longitudinal research*

The motivation for a longitudinal investigation had as its starting point the often-made observation that the language of this type of learner (what we are calling their "learner variety"), although relatively simple in relation to the TL, is nevertheless regular and clearly structured. Much previous work had hypothesised that the individual learning process can be construed as a motivated series of transitions from one learner variety to the next, approximating, in principle, more closely to the TL. The logic of an adult's language development could therefore be sought in the close examination of the relative communicative success of

learner languages *in use, over time*.

Descriptions of adult language development had however been based overwhelmingly<sup>5</sup> on extrapolations from the results of cross-sectional studies (i.e., studies of different learners at different stages of development). What was lacking were in-depth, longitudinal studies seeking to identify which communicative factors, *in context*, motivated linguistic development, and which factors caused the learner's language to fossilise.

It was therefore decided to collect a variety of comparable spoken language data from small groups of learners over time, with the goal of reconstructing from recordings of spoken exchanges, definable and recurrent language activities, and of observing how the linguistic characteristics of these activities evolve.

Adult learners were regularly recorded over a period of 2½ years from as near as possible to the beginning of the learning process, with the aim of constituting a corpus of 20-25 recordings of approximately two hours' length for 40 learners, i.e., 4 learners for each SL-TL pairing. This aim was achieved. The detail of the field work is given in the following paragraph.

#### *Informants and data collection techniques*

All research teams performed essentially the same set of tasks and studies during the data collection phase of the project. The high comparability of the recorded data is intended to counteract the inevitably varied real-life experiences of informants in different countries and living environments.

The criteria adopted for selecting informants can be seen as safeguards against too much obvious dispersion in their backgrounds and living and working conditions at the outset. Generally speaking, they were young adults with legal status and no native TL-speaking spouse. Their education was limited: they were therefore in the main working class, with work (or some other activity) providing day-to-day contacts with the TL, in which they were minimally proficient at the start of the investigation. Small biographies of the informants contributing to the present study are included in Chapters 3-6.

Informants were recorded in real-life everyday transactions wherever possible, or in role-plays of these transactions with volunteer representatives of the host society (bank clerks, employment officers, etc.) Conversations with researchers were recorded at every meeting. Furthermore, tasks especially designed to get abundant relevant data for specific research areas were recorded at set intervals. All these studies were ordered into three data-collection "cycles" of about 10 months' duration, thus allowing a precise analysis of specific aspects of their developing proficiency. The main data collection technique for this study is

described in 1.3.

#### *Research areas*

Learners are initially faced with a problem of *analysis* of the language they hear: identifying words, their meanings and the relations holding between words in connected speech, and of indicating whether they have or have not understood. This problem is dealt with in two studies: "*Ways of achieving understanding*", and "*Feedback in adult language acquisition*".

They are faced with the problem of *synthesis* of the words they have learned, i.e., of producing understandable speech themselves. Specific studies were made of the learner's problem of arranging words to form larger units of speech - the present report - and of locating the objects or events they talk about: "*Temporal reference*", "*Spatial reference*".

Finally, a quantitative study was made of the words the learners come to use: "*Processes in the developing lexicon*".

#### *The "observation" effect*

The longitudinal informants were systematically observed over a long period. Researchers became close to them in order to identify their problems, and, on occasion, gave practical help. A control *study* comprising a group of 24 different learners was therefore undertaken in order to identify the effects that the method of observation itself may have produced on the longitudinally studied learners. Its results<sup>6</sup> show that there exist small differences in performance which may be attributed to the *observational effect*. However, these differences have to do with motivational, inter-personal phenomena in linguistic exchanges, and do not show any substantial effect on the structure of the acquisition process or the nature of these learner varieties.

### 1.3 Data base: The Charlie Chaplin retelling

Within the scope of the present study, it was simply impossible to exploit the whole range of data collected and available. We decided to concentrate on one type of data which we think represents a reasonable compromise between authenticity, on the one hand, and controllability, on the other: film retelling. The procedure, described below, was done three times (once per cycle), at an interval of about 10 months on average. The precise times and some modifications are noted in the various chapters below. The retellings, which varied a great

deal in length, were then transcribed - mostly in orthography, sometimes, where needed, in broad phonetic notation. The examples quoted in the subsequent chapters are usually somewhat "edited" - i.e. false starts, hesitation phenomena, feedback signals etc. are omitted, unless there is a special reason to mention them.

The procedure, referred to here as the "Chaplin retelling" was done as follows:

The project researchers working in Heidelberg made a *montage* of extracts from Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, which lasts about twenty minutes and is divided into two main episodes, described below. The procedure for the activity is simply that a researcher and an informant watch the first episode together, then the researcher leaves the room while the informant watches the second episode. The researcher returns immediately after the end of the film for the informant to retell him/her the second episode. In this way, a "common ground" was created on which the informant could draw in his retelling.

### *Episode 1*

Subtitle: America 1930 - poverty, hunger, unemployment.

Charlie gets into a demonstration against unemployment, is taken for the leader and put into prison. At dinner one of his fellow-prisoners hides heroin in the salt-cellar, and Charlie helps himself by mistake. With the drug he gains a heroic force: he foils an attempt to escape and frees the director, who, in gratitude, releases him with a letter of recommendation for a job. Charlie is not too enthusiastic about this because he feels he is better off in prison than at liberty.

Parallel with this we see a second story: a young girl (whose father is a widower, unemployed and without the means to feed his three children) steals food for her family. Her father is shot in a demonstration, and the children are sent to an orphanage. The girl manages to escape at the last moment.

### *Episode 2*

Subtitle: Determined to return to prison.

Charlie finds work in a shipyard. Clumsily he causes the launching of a ship that was not finished. He is immediately fired and is all the more determined to go back to prison. Meanwhile the girl, alone and hungry, sees a bakery van unloading bread at a bakery. As she steals a loaf of bread, a woman comes around the corner, sees her, and tells the baker, who in turn calls the police. In flight, the girl bumps into Charlie, and when the police arrives, he admits to the theft in order to return to jail. As the policeman is preparing to take

him away, the woman arrives to say that in fact the girl stole the bread. The policeman arrests the girl and releases Charlie. Still determined to return to jail, Charlie goes into a restaurant, eats, and as he is standing at the cash desk, sees a policeman outside the window. He calls the policeman in and tells him that he has no money. Again, Charlie is arrested. While the policeman is calling a police van from a phone next to a kiosk, Charlie orders a cigar and generously gives chocolate to two boys who happen to stop there. Again, he cannot pay. The police van arrives, and Charlie enters to find it crowded with other indigents. Eventually the van stops and the girl gets in. There is a struggle and Charlie, the girl, and the policeman fall out. The policeman is unconscious; Charlie and the girl escape. As they are walking through a residential area, they see an idyllic middle-class family scene: a couple comes out of the front door, the husband kisses the apron-clad wife, he goes off to work, she re-enters the house. Charlie and the girl express their determination to get a house. Ten days later, the girl announces to Charlie that she has found a house and takes him to see it. It is a dilapidated shed. Inside, beams fall, tables collapse, and floors give way as the two protagonists try to make it habitable. Eventually they succeed and walk blissfully off into the sunset.

If we assume that the learner participates cooperatively, i.e., that he wants to try to get his listener to understand the story he retells rather than confuse him, then this task is interesting for our present purposes for two major reasons:

(1) This is a complex verbal task: the speaker retells part of a relatively complex story, consisting of events whose relationship to each other must be specified (e.g. event *a* caused event *b* to happen). Within each event, the speaker has to tell who did what to whom, introducing new characters and maintaining reference to characters who are already on stage. The main characters are male (Charlie) and female (the girl) and they act and are acted upon. Their stories, which run in parallel during the first half of the film, intertwine during the second half, necessitating a choice on the part of the learner as to which of them is central in which event.

(2) We have (partial) control over what is mutually known or not to learner and listener at the beginning, and over the retelling of the story by the learner, in that we have the film to compare with his production. This (partial) control gives us, therefore, a (partial) idea of what the speaker *maximally* wants to retell (given the cooperation assumption above).

The importance of both factors will become clear in the sample analysis of chapter 2.4 below. There, we shall also discuss some of the problems connected with these kinds of data.

## Notes

1. We are primarily concerned here with adult second language acquisition in everyday communication, and it is basically this type of acquisition we have in mind when talking about "acquisition", "learning", "learner" etc. We think that a great deal of the general considerations and some of the results also bear on other types of acquisition, notably first language acquisition, on the one hand, and second language acquisition in the classroom, on the other. It is easy to see, however, that there are clear differences as well, and we will avoid any kind of generalisation, interesting as this would be.
2. There are male and female learners among the participants in this project. For simplicity's sake, we shall use the male form when referring to both of them.
3. The term is from L. Selinker: "Interlanguage", *IRAL* 10, 1972.
4. For a full discussion, see Kellerman 1987, chapter 1.
5. Schumann 1978, Giacobbe and Lucas 1980, Huebner 1983, Clahsen 1984, Hilles 1986 and Sato 1990, are noteworthy exceptions, and are discussed *passim*.
6. 3. Edwards and W. Levelt: The observation situation as enriched input context: effects on learner repertoire and motivation to perform. ESF Working Paper, Strasbourg, 1987.