

Klein, W. (1997). Learner varieties are the normal case. In E. Kellerman (Ed.), *The Clarion* 3, 4-6.

Wolfgang Klein

Perhaps the saddest aspect of this linear ranking lies in the acceptance of inferiority by bottom dwellers, and their persistent attempt to ape inappropriate methods that may work higher up on the ladder. When the order itself should be vigorously challenged, and plurality with equality asserted in pride, too many [bottom end] scientists act like the prison trusty who, ever mindful of his tenuous advantages, outdoes the warden himself in zeal for preserving the status quo of power and subordination.

From: Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life*. The Burgess shale and the nature of history. New York: Norton 1989, p.279.

### **Lerner varieties are the normal case**

Within the various disciplines that investigate the manifold manifestations of the human language faculty, research on how people learn a second language does not rank very high. Second language acquisition researchers are bottom dwellers. I have never understood why this the case, let alone why it should be the case. Does it simply reflect firm but irrational caste prejudices on the part of those who want to protect their privileges; or has it anything to do with the discipline itself - its object, its methods, its theoretical or empirical standards, its potential benefit for mankind?

To begin with the latter; it would appear that among the various linguistic disciplines, SLA research is probably the only one that is, or at least can be, of any substantial practical use. This should be a solid base of self-confidence, and a good reason to be held in some esteem by others, especially by those who are less fortunate in this regard. In fact, when linguists find themselves in a situation where they are urged to justify their existence in the eye of the common beholder, this is one of their arguments (together with aphasia, machine translation and automatic speech recognition). But the common beholder does not really count in the eye of the researcher. Moreover, the mere fact that some kind of research might be applicable is a classical reason why it is considered to be secondary as a scholarly enterprise. It is not pure. Partisans of this attitude, a stable component of our academic heritage since Plato and Aristotle, would probably not directly profess it. Instead, they would refer to the low standards in the field, or to the fact that this sort of research cannot tell us anything of real interest about the laws of nature or the nature of the human mind. Is this true?

I do not think that the field of SLA in general scores so badly as regards the standards of cogent argumentation, of conceptual clarity, of clean data collection and of empirical validation. This is not to mean that it could not improve considerably in almost all of these respects, and any effort in this direction should be made. But first, as for scientific standards, our field is not worse, and sometimes better, than many other domains of linguistic research. I do not think, for example, that the empirical basis of typological comparison is on the average more solid than what is normally done in SLA research. Nor do I believe that notions commonly used in theoretical linguistics are of necessity clearer and better defined than those used in the study of second language acquisition. And second, one wonders whether higher empirical or conceptual standards would change anything substantial in the established rank order. No one knows, and it is surely worth trying; but I doubt it. The problem seems to be rather that no one sees how the analysis of the odd productions of the second language learner, this distorted, flawed, ridiculous, chaotic mimicking of “real language”, could tell us something substantial, something principled, something fundamental about the nature of the human mind. It is this perception that must be changed in the first place. Learner varieties are a genuine manifestation of the human language faculty, and the carefully and systematic investigation of how they are internally structured and how they develop over time is a genuine contribution to the understanding of the human language faculty. In fact, I believe that learner varieties are the core manifestation of the human language faculty, and “real languages” - or a speaker’s perfect knowledge of a “real language” - are borderline cases. They are particularly interesting for social and cultural reasons, they are also interesting because they often exploit the structural potential of the human language faculty to a particularly high extent. But to the linguist, they should be no more privileged than is the noble lion over the humble *Drosophila melanogaster* to the biologist.

We are used to take perfect mastery of a language to be the normal case, and the linguistic knowledge of a perfect speaker - a speaker who masters a “real language” up to perfection - to be the primary object of the linguist’s efforts. But what does it mean that a speaker masters a language perfectly well, what must his or her knowledge be like in order to qualify as native? Our common *façon de parler* in these matters somehow implies that there are such entities as “real, fully-fledged languages”, such as English, Latin or Eipomek, and speakers ‘know’ them to a higher or lesser degree. But this is a myth. Sociolinguists like Labov as well as theoretical linguists such as Chomsky have reiterated that it is a myth, it is clear to everybody who ever tried to answer the most frequent question posed to the linguist (‘how many languages do you speak?’) or the second-most frequent question (‘How many languages are there on earth?’). I always say ‘five thousand’ (to the second question), and I have found that the only person who is not happy with this answer is myself - because I know that there is no clearly-shaped and well-defined entity such as ‘a language’, let alone five thousand. Sometimes, I try to explain that there are no clear borderlines, that there are many dialects, registers, that it is arbitrary whether we count Frisian and Dutch, Dutch and Standard German, Standard German and Swiss German as variants of one and the same language or not, that ‘a language’ is a dialect with an army, etc etc. No layman wants to hear this, and understandably so. Most linguists don’t want to hear it, either, and this is not understandable.

There are five thousand languages on earth. There are 185 countries on earth. This means that there are - on the average - 27 languages per country, with a range between 1 and

several hundred. Two semesters of statistical training inform the linguist that this does not necessarily mean that every inhabitant of a country speaks 27 languages (on the average). Multilingualism of a country does not transfer to the multilingualism of its inhabitants. But it would be equally silly to conclude that monolingualism is the normal case. The normal case is simply that a person has varying knowledge of different languages. That would be the good way to state the facts for the layman who believes that there are well-defined entities called 'languages'. But there aren't. What really happens is that human beings, equipped with this species-specific mental capacity called human language faculty, manage to copy, with varying degrees of success, the ways in which other people speak. They develop learner varieties. In some cases, they push this process to a degree where their own competence to speak and to understand does not perceptibly differ from that of their social environment (or, perhaps, a special group within their social environment, like school teachers). Then, we speak of "perfect mastery". But this perfect mastery is just a special case of a learner variety - that case in which neither the learner nor his neighbours notice any difference, or at least no difference they would consider to be of particular social importance. Normally, the speaker's language faculty also allows him or her to develop many more than just one such learner variety; the degree to which these come close to what those the speaker learns from do varies considerably. But all of them are manifestations of the human language faculty. Many learner varieties do not exploit the full potential of this faculty, for example in terms of syntactical or morphological structure or of lexical repertoire. But even my Russian learner variety, which is very elementary indeed, uses more of the human language faculty's morphological potential than the 'fully-fledged language' with most native speakers on earth, Chinese.

If we really want to understand the nature of the human language faculty, we must investigate how its manifold manifestations are organised and of how they develop over time. This includes the study of 'fully-fledged languages' - or more precisely, the speaker's knowledge of a fully-fledged language - as a special case. This case is perhaps particularly interesting for cultural and sometimes even structural reasons. After all, the ways in which Shakespeare, Joseph Conrad and the average inhabitant of Pontefract put their words together are more complex, more refined, more multifarious and therefore perhaps more instructive to an understanding of the human language capacity than the learner variety of Saifullah Singh, Lieschen Müller or Giuseppe Scorsese after five years in Stockton-on-Trent. But we should keep in mind that the learner varieties of the latter are the normal case, nowadays as well as in the history of mankind; and here as everywhere in science, the investigation of the normal case should not be something peripheral, left to those at the bottom end, who are graciously, and with occasional friendly applause, allowed to borrow from those working higher up on the ladder. The systematical and careful study of how people process linguistic input in communicative situations, of how they use their innate capacities in order to turn this input into learner varieties and of how they abandon these for other, more complex or just differently organised learner varieties until this process eventually comes to a halt, in short: the study of second language acquisition is not a minor, a derived branch within the various disciplines that set out to investigate the human language faculty. It is central to an understanding of that remarkable capacity with which a friendly nature has endowed us.