1.0. FACTORS AFFECTING ACQUISITION

Research on both first and second language has shown that any theory of acquisition must include three domains:

1.1. THE SPEECH NETWORK AND CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERACTION

Learners typically are in contact both with other learners and with some speakers of the target language, TL. Unless they are isolated immigrants, they do not live totally submerged in a TL environment where TL is spoken by native speakers.

Nor do they hear a whole "variety of TL"; they hear particular utterances, moves, and exchanges. For some learners, the only exposure to TL is orders from an overseer. In such a case, what they hear and can learn to understand may be limited to the vocabulary and structure of those orders. The linguistic features of TL which they learn will be limited to whatever vernacular or accommodated register the overseer uses for those orders.

The types of activity contexts encountered and the strategies used by interactional partners with new learners can play a critical role. In cases where there is a structural need for adequate communication built into the communicative setting, the learner is not dependent on the variable initiative of conversational partners for learning (Ervin-Tripp 1986).

Children in creole-developing communities such as the Tok Pisin community studied by Gillian Sankoff are in contact both with similar children and with adult interlanguage or pidgin speakers. Adults have contacts with other interlanguage speakers. In such conditions one would expect variable linguistic features and much less stability than written records or reports suggest. Studies of the language heard by learners in the particular conditions of their contact are fundamental to studies of acquisition, since learners, especially adult learners, can differ widely in types of access to models. We cannot expect the outcomes to be the same. In conditions where learners hear more speech from other learners than from TL speakers, they may develop a shared community IL, as has developed in French-medium classrooms of Canadian anglophones (Selinker, Swain & Dumas 1975) 1.

1.2. THE LEARNER'S REFERENCE GROUP AND GOALS

Learners may decide they can become like native speakers and that they want to. Or they may find themselves excluded in caste-like conditions. In second language acquisition studies, a large part of the variation between learners is due to motivation. The most obvious mechanism for motivation to have such effects is via self-imposed increase in exposure to TL.

But social conditions of learning tightly constrain exposure. In comparable conditions of exposure, either identification with the target group or instrumental need can motivate learning. There is no reason at all to assume that learners always choose native TL speakers as their models in preference to models more like themselves. Learners who believe they are going home eventually, that they are despised by the TL speakers and can never interact equally with them, that they can never escape from the hopeless economic slot assigned them, or that they are unable to learn can in fact learn less than others with similar frequency of exposure. The mediating factors in such outcomes could be the amount of attention, interior rehearsal, and secondary reinforcement (pleasure in hearing oneself speak like the TL group).

1.3. THE BIOLOGICAL PROGRAM

By now, we have considerable evidence that the process of first language learning at least has common underlying principles in different languages. The mother-tongue data have been exhaustively analyzed in a two-volume book on first language acquisition edited by Slobin 1985. This proposal was discussed in relation to second language learning by Ervin-Tripp (1970) and Ervin-Tripp working with anglophones' acquisition of French (1978), and by many others.

Should we expect what we find with learners to apply to older learners? Some differences are: psychological focus (e.g. child egocentrism); facility with larger units of language due to prior experience - "chunking"; prior semantic knowledge which facilitates recognition of comparable categories; greater practical knowledge facilitating inferences about meanings; greater range and complexity of speech events attempted (e.g. asking for information, reporting conditional relations, making analogies, adding qualifiers or specifiers to identify referents - absent from early child speech). All of these differences (and the typically quite different social network) will inevitably make the first data seem quite dissimilar from young children (Ervin-Tripp 1981).

It has been hotly disputed whether there is a biological critical period which makes the data on first-language acquisition quite irrelevant for later learners. But when there are similar types of interaction opportunities, the similarities in acquisition processes at least make it plausible that the language learning device of children does not disappear.

Slow rates of learning in older learners appear in phonetics and morpho-semantics, either because there is a critical period, or because prior learning deeply affects and biases later experience. By morpho-semantics I refer to markers of definiteness, aspect, gender, number, etc., that is, the limited-class obligatory affixes or function words. Where the semantic classifications underlying these systems, or the mode of expression are different in L1 and L2, these are often particularly resistant to full mastery.

The idea of a bioprogram is that there is a learning process which makes some structures easier and harder, more and less general in the acquisition data. In terms of
the development of pidgins and early stages of creoles, we would expect that there would be a preference for the easiest structures to learn; in pidgins, since they reflect rapid second language acquisition, in creoles, since they start as child inventions. There appear to be many common principles in such learning, e.g.

a) Acquisition of formulae, or phrases which co-occur in the situations in the speech of interlocutors. Fillmore (1976) has shown that these can be the basis of later restructuring, as their internal composition becomes evident to the learner through encountering variations.

b) Functional and positional salience. Forms which are functionally important — e.g. greetings, replies, curses, positive or negative imperatives if the learner is in action contexts — are likely to be functionally understood early. Forms in final position in phrases are more salient and remembered better than sentence or phrase-internal elements. Stressed forms are likely to be more salient than clitics or consonantal affixes.

c) Preference for simple one-to-one form-meaning relations rather than complex. The Turkish affix system, for instance, is learned extremely rapidly by children, because of such mapping simplicity (Slobin 1985). Perhaps this ease of acquisition makes a Turkish pidgin without suffixes unlikely. Systems in which gender affixes intersect case are likely to be simplified by learners because the formal markers of the more semantically important feature, case, is not obvious (e.g. Slavic). We would, on the ease of learning principle, expect to find only analytic or very simple one-to-one affixing in pidgins and creoles.

d) Salience of prototypic semantic relations in the earliest grammatical "templates" developed, e.g. transitive action, changes of location, statements of claiming or possession. It is not clear whether what is semantically complex or obscure to children might be equally so to adult learners, however.

e) Faster learning of contextually obvious meanings, e.g. location before time, greetings before explanations. Clearly the social and activity context of the learner's interactions may radically change what types of meanings are made obvious, or what kinds of meanings the learner is compelled to express. Some work may entail only discussion of the here and now; other work involves discussion of conditionals, and identifications tending to call for relative clauses.

Studies of child acquisition indicate that while in many cultures there is no accommodation to child speakers in terms of radical speech simplification, children themselves simplify. The similarity to pidgin/creole development is clear; one can expect that starting with whatever limited linguistic exchanges the learner has, there will be radical alterations by the learner in the early stages of acquisition. What happens from then on depends on the learner's social network / exposure and motivation / identity.

2.0. PRAGMATIC INFLUENCES

Recent research on considering pragmatics in the study of first languages has brought about changes that could be of importance in the study of second language acquisition:

2.1. DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM

The goal is taken not merely to be competence in syntax, semantics, and phonology, but sociolinguistic competence — the ability to create and participate in speech events appropriately.

But these levels of analysis are not independent. For example, the decision by a learner to apply for a job can affect episodes (explaining training), acts (narrating, justifying, asking for information), lexical selections (technical terms from previous job), morphology (conditionals, perfect, temporal indicators), pitch and intonation. Other settings — e.g. social, commercial, make different demands. Higher level decisions become apparent to other participants through context-sensitive realizations which can be at any rank. Shifts in key, as to joking, story-telling, are cued in ways that are culturally distinct (Gumperz 1982).

2.2. BROADER DATA BASE

We have found that setting alters speech in major ways, because of the differences in occurrences of speech genres and goals, intentions, topics, and key, all of which have linguistic consequences.

The broadening of the data base has brought some surprises; for example, grammars of child learners written on the basis of experimenter-child, mother-child, and child-child interaction are different. Child-child interaction has less questioning and confirming, a decrease in utterances about novel things which experimenters bring to interest children, less referential speech, and more social speech with complicated interpersonal functions. Since grammars for children are written on the basis of texts, the functional and context shifts change the texts considerably, as they would for adult learners.

2.3. FUNCTIONAL DIVERSITY

For very early stages of language learning, the primary categories for analysis may be functional, with relatively limited formulas or structural frames for each function. An example is a child of 2.36 who had a series of formulas like Accept : "Yes!" or repeat, Request permission : "Can I + Act?" which were very limited, contrasted with a more general frame Announce achievement : "I" + Act + Obj in which many verbs and objects could enter, as in "I put it, I tear this, I go peepee, I do cape". Fillmore (1976) has found similar limited purpose formulas at the basis of second language learners' first stages.

Starting with function categories results in a massive simplification in the data for early speech. Contextual specificity is typical of the early stages of the learning of speech in natural contexts. When contextual, functional, and discourse information is included in production rules, the level of abstractness of syntax may prove to be limited at first.

The major issue arising from this analysis is how the learner moves from this limited system to one with more flexibility, in which patterns transfer across function categories, increasing the level of generality of syntactic categories.

2.4. DISCOURSE

The highest level of analysis is no longer the sentence but other systematic discourse events such as moves, turns, exchanges, stories, conversations, rounds. The
appropriate level of analysis for a problem has to be demonstrated. Structural
textures such as code switches, paralinguistic cues, and lexical markers can indicate
the boundaries of these higher units. It has been possible to identify variable linguistic
features that are systematic and interpretable by virtue of the properties of such
discourse units, including location within these units.

2.5. ECOLOGICAL VALIDITY

This research privileges natural interaction as a data source, regarding
experiments or interviews as a special auxiliary step. Of course, something close to
natural interaction can be established by including the normal partners of the target
learner in a situation familiar to the speakers. That is, there are degrees of ecological
validity ranging all the way from systematic sampling of the actual natural milieu, to
emulating it by creating occasions for encounters where recording is possible, to
creating interaction with strangers in unfamiliar settings and in unfamiliar goals.

There are several reasons for this preference for staying as close as possible to the
actual learning milieu: (a) the learner’s ability to create speech events with language
is best seen in natural settings. It is not usually possible to know what population of
settings an artificial situation samples. (b) In cases of comparative research,
experimentor-designed settings which are superficially similar, or are similar in the
schema of the experimenter, can be crucially dissimilar to the learners, and
misleading in important ways. (c) In examining inter-group comparisons, it is of
fundamental importance to know the milieu of acquisition, which can radically alter
what is learned.

A recent example is the assumption that the major basis of infant language
acquisition was maternal repetition, simplification, elicitation, and expansion, that is,
types of accommodation and instruction. A difference for adult second-language learners seemed to be the absence of such extensive scaffolding by partners. New
research (Ochs & Schieffelin 1984) indicates that radically different interactive
milieux for acquisition can exist, even for children.

2.6. DISCOVERY OF LEARNERS’ CATEGORIES

In the study of language the speaker’s categories (not the prescriptive categories)
are primary; it is an effort to recover those natural categories. For this reason, the
learner’s structural contrasts can be taken as an entry point in discovering the
learner’s own organization of social life and conceptual system, in the faith that all
formal contrasts are systematic and carry meaning.

3.0. EXAMPLES

Several child acquisition examples illustrate these principles.

3.1. FUNCTIONAL DIVERSITY OF TEMPORAL CLAUSES

Aura Bocaz of the University of Chile and I have analyzed all the temporal
conjunctions in 5 children under 3 years and eight months.

We began by dividing all the instances according to the interpersonal functions
evident from content and context into sequential and nested narratives (referring to
the past), generics (referring to usual events), planning for the future, and bounded,
nested, and sequential control acts. We found that different conjunctions were used in

each of these: then for sequential directives, planning or narratives, when for
generics, nested narratives and bounded control acts, after for bounded control acts,
and while for nested control acts (though before and after were earlier and more
frequent as prepositions).

We also found strong effects on perceptual choices. In control acts and in planning,
the clauses marked by when, before, andafter used present tense verbs. Progressives
only occurred within which (e.g. I want a cooky, Mommy, a cooky while I eating).
In the main clauses, on the other hand, were various markers of the future and of
function, such as modals, imperatives, and will, going-to, and want-to.

The nested narratives (e.g. When I was matching a stove I burnt my finger) had
verbs in the when clauses which were more stative and less telic than the verbs in the
main clauses, and if they referred to an activity were more often progressive.

Clause order in the sequential control acts and sequential narratives followed event
order, but in the control acts the bounding or nesting clause was second, regardless of
event order (e.g. Can I have your worm when you get finished?). There seem to be at
least three production principles at work here. One has to do with mapping temporal
orders for successive events. The second has to do with contextualizing, or nesting,
which for some children preceded description of the foregrounded event. The third
has to do with focus on a directive or other control act, which is at the center of
attention and is stated first, before boundaries or nesting context.

3.2. FUNCTIONAL DIVERSITY AND PRONOUN CHOICE

Deutsch & Budwig (1983) found that the possessive pronoun appears first only in
claiming contexts where the child attempts to gain or maintain control over objects.
The children’s own names were used in more representational contexts when
describing established possessive relations.

In her dissertation, Budwig (1985) studied my I subject alternations in videotaped
peer interaction. She observed that the youngest children, whom she called
“ego-anchored”, at first tended to use only the self as subject of action. “I” indicated
the subject in relatively descriptive contexts, when the child presupposes control. The
children used “my” with verbs in demands, challenges, protests, and disputes over
control of objects or enactment of activities. Apparent random variability between
first person subject forms was not so, when the functional context was considered.
The children had temporarily discovered a contrast some languages have formally
elaborated.

3.3. DISCOVERY OF LEARNER CATEGORIES

The use of distributional analysis of learner markers as a means of locating new
latent categories is illustrated in a study by Gerhard, later published by Gee and
Savasir (1985). Videotaped three-year-old play showed a contrast in future marking
by “gonna” and “will”.

Gee and Savasir discovered these forms embedded in contrasting activity types.
Linguists, working from speaker intuitions, had not seen these as sharply distinct.
They found that “gonna” occurs in planning distant future activity with time adverbs,
in non-interpersonal monologues about the speaker’s plans, in planning role playing
for oneself or a third party, in negating plans and in adversarial contexts. “Will” is
interpersonal. It occurred in undertaking joint cooperative action, in offers, requests
in the immediate present, in sharing, in enacting role playing. The study provides an
important model of a discovery procedure for locating speaker categories without prescriptive prejudices, starting with the speaker's forms.

Studies of acquisition in children, of second languages in adults and of the history of pidgins and creoles have had very different types of data bases, which have obscured the similarities in the issues which confront them. The best way in the future to confront the three commonalities I proposed at the beginning might be to look for overlapping acquisitional contexts (e.g. a developing pidgin / creole setting) and use identical methods of study.

SUSAN M. ERVIN-TRIPP

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NOTE

1. In a controlled study of the acquisition of Russian by Americans in an intensive program, Postovsky showed that if learners practiced aloud and heard other learners practice, they were more likely to make typical IL "errors" than if they only listened to tapes and native speakers.

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RÉSUMÉ

On se propose de définir un cadre pour le rapprochement des études sur l'acquisition du langage, sur l'apprentissage des langues secondes, voire sur la genèse des pidgins et des créoles. Toute théorie de l'acquisition des langues (étrangères ou familières) doit tenir compte de ces champs :
- les réseaux langagiers dans lesquels s'insère l'apprenti et les caractères des interactions auxquelles il participe;
- son groupe social de référence, ses objectifs et aspirations;
- le rôle d'une programmation biologique qui rend l'appropriation de certaines structures langagières plus facile; il en est ainsi des formules, des formes positionnellement et fonctionnellement salantes, des formes unifonctionnelles et monovalentielles, des relations sémantiques prototypiques et des significations contextuellement claires.

Une perspective pragmatique de l'acquisition conduit à reconsidérer les hypothèses et les méthodes tant dans le domaine de l'analyse de la genèse des langues que dans celle de l'appropriation des L2. Cela conduit tout d'abord à apporter une attention scrupuleuse aux situations d'acquisition. L'expérience montre que les données langagières recueillies varient en fonction des situations d'emploi. Il faut aussi tenir compte de la polyfonctionnalité des formes. Ensuite les entités discoursives, telles que le récit, l'échange, le tour de parole, etc., s'avèrent souvent fournir, contre toute attente, les unités d'analyse adéquates. Cela est à rapprocher du fait que les catégorisations linguistiques des apprenants ne coïncident pas systématiquement avec celles des langues en contact. L'attention aux situations d'emploi et d'apprentissage conduit aussi à s'interroger sur la représentativité des données eu égard à l'ensemble des échanges auxquels participe l'apprenant, à réfléchir à leur validité écologique.

Cette étude se termine sur la présentation de trois analyses de faits d'acquisition de l'anglais, langue 1 :
- la diversité fonctionnelle des marqueurs temporels;
- les motivations fonctionnelles du choix pronominal entre "my" et "I";
- les valeurs de "will" et de "gonna" dans une langue d'apprenant.