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A Special Case of Second Language Acquisition: NthLA

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In investigating the process of language acquisition, researchers differentiate between the acquisition of a learner's native language (L1) and non-native language. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has traditionally come to mean any language learned by an individual after the L1. Some researchers have started distinguishing between monolinguals acquiring a second language (2ndLA) and bi- or multi-linguals acquiring another language (NthLA). It is claimed that having undergone the language acquisition process once, multilingual individuals approach this task with a more universal understanding of the rules and forms of language. A review of four studies shows aspects of how NthLA is different from 2ndLA by the nature of the number of languages already known to the learner, and the type of influence they can exert on a target language. Transfer and interference from sources other than an individual's native language are examined in particular. It is suggested that a more extensive study of the process multilingual learners undergo when acquiring a new language could benefit the field of language acquisition research.

In the 1960's, the focus of research shifted from language teaching to the learning process. This new focus quickly gained ground and became a separate field of study. Today, many types of research methodology and theory exist to investigate the complex process of language acquisition. Underlying the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is the agreement that although certain similarities exist, non-native language acquisition inherently differs from native language acquisition. It ensues that, in the bulk of language acquisition research, emphasis is placed on studying the acquisition of a learner's non-native language, without distinguishing its chronological order in the languages acquired. "Second Language Acquisition" (as well as the acronym "SLA") has therefore come to mean the acquisition of any non-native language. One approach to investigating language learning that has captured the attention of relatively few researchers in the field is that of differentiating between monolingual learners acquiring a second language (hence 2ndLA) and bi- or multi-lingual learners acquiring a new language (hence 3rd...NthLA).

Since the process of learning a non-native language is different from that of learning an L1, second language acquisition is a unique experience for a monolingual individual. It follows that undergoing this experience a second or third time will be somewhat different and less unique.

Chandrasekhar (1978) divides language organization into three levels: The *conceptual level*, the *verbalization level*, and the *behavioral level*.¹ In learning a first language an individual must acquire all three levels, and with every new language that follows, only the verbalization and behavioral levels will demand attention. In this way Chandrasekhar explains the basic difference between acquiring an L1 and acquiring an L2, and claims that there are hardly any new concepts involved in the adult non-native language learning situation. Taking his argument a step further, if there are hardly any new concepts involved in the adult non-native language learning situation, what few new concepts do exist, must be learned during the acquisition of the L2. Therefore, as it is claimed in this paper, there might be even fewer, if any, new concepts involved in the learning of the 3rd ...Nth Languages.

The notion of a *conceptual level* of language appears in SLA literature in various forms. Sanchez (1971) refers to a capacity or sensitivity formed by a combination of linguistic universals, a cognition of which can facilitate language learning in adults. Thomas (1988) refers to a similar notion as metalinguistic awareness, which she defines as the learner's conscious knowledge of the rules and forms of language. According to Chandrasekhar's interpretation, an individual acquires a *concept of language* upon acquisition of the native tongue. When the same individual is exposed to a second language, s/he finds that the conceptual level can apply to a language other than the native language. A bilingual person can thus be seen to possess a concept of languages². This initial expansion of the concept of language to a more universal concept of languages would be specific to second language acquisition, as it would involve applying the "concept", for the first time, to a language other than the native tongue. It follows that a multilingual learner would approach the task of Nth language acquisition with a heightened metalinguistic awareness, having already applied it to more than one language. A theoretic possibility exists that the universal application of the *concept of language* can be reinforced with every new language learned.

While few, a number of studies involving multilingual learners have been conducted. These studies have looked at effects of linguistically related non-native languages on the learning process. A review of some of the literature is presented and discussed, along with a discussion of the acquisition of a non-related Nth language.

1. Multilinguals as a group

The fact that multilinguals have a facility for language learning is not an uncommon observation in SLA theory, although it is rarely supported by evidence. People will commonly

¹ Certainly, Psycholinguistics have made progress since 1978, and it is very well possible that this organization of language is not supported in current research. Citing Chandrasekhar in this context is not meant to present proof of the argument in the current paper (if such proof existed, there would not be a need to argue so hard) but only to show that even researchers who do not specifically concentrate on distinguishing between the L2 and the Ln might provide worthy reasons of doing so.

² What possessing a "concept of languages" might entail is, for the current paper, less significant than the possible existence of such a concept. In general the term "concept of languages", as used here, refers to some combination of this notion as defined by the literature cited above.

assume that multilingual people have an aptitude for learning languages, or have found the perfect learning strategy to suit their needs. In making such an observation, factors of learning success are credited for an individual's ability to learn many languages. It is important to remember that learning success refers to the level of proficiency one achieves in a target language (TL) and not to the number of languages one can acquire. The relationship between learning success and multilingualism is therefore not direct: one does not generate the other. Some researchers have turned to investigating the specific ways that learning can be influenced by multilingualism, a consideration which has been mostly neglected.

Linguistic distance between a learner's native and target languages can play a role in the acquisition process, a role which becomes more intricate when the learner is proficient in several languages. Multilingual learners of a new language can be divided into two groups with respect to language distance. The first consists of individuals learning a TL which is linguistically related to at least one of the languages they already speak. Most of the research to date on the subject of Nth language acquisition is associated with this group. The second group contains multilingual learners of a TL which is not linguistically related to any of the languages known to them. Some conjectures can be made about the language acquisition process of such learners, but no published attempt at collecting data on this group exists at the time of this writing. It would indeed be difficult to construct a controlled group of individuals proficient in more than one language, all learning a target language which is linguistically distant to an equal extent³ from other languages known to them.

2. Linguistically related languages

Corder (1979) claims that a learner could pass more rapidly along the developmental continuum towards a Target Language (TL) if his/her Native Language (NL), or another language known to this learner, is formally similar to the TL, and that the more similar the source language and the TL, the less the magnitude of the learning task will be.

Other languages known to the learner, however imperfectly, may, in the degree to which they resemble the target language structurally, have a facilitating effect. This hypothesis is supported by the very general observation that the more languages one knows, the easier the acquisition of yet another appears to be because in such a case the learner has a large number of "ready-made" hypotheses to test in processing the data of the new language. (Corder, 1979)

Linguistic similarity between the learner's known languages and the TL, if present, affects an Nth language learner in a singular way. In processing the data of the target language a learner

³ Of course, one of the most troublesome aspects of conducting such research is defining "linguistic distance" and finding a way to measure it! For example, if one considers historical relationship between languages as representative of linguistic distance, one would be ignoring the effects of convergence (a process by which two or more languages might acquire similar structure due to geographic proximity to each other).

of this group can utilize transfer and experience interference from a source which could be other than the native language, and in some cases, from more than one source. Such a learner approaches the language acquisition process with the benefit of having experienced positive and negative transfer at least once before. It is important to note that whatever similarity exists between one of the learner's languages and the TL must be perceived by the learner to be valuable in this context.

Using contrastive analysis, SLA researchers traditionally have contrasted a learner's TL with his NL. In response to this Chandrasekhar (1978) presented the Base Language Hypothesis, which states that a multilingual learner will transfer linguistic structures from the language which has the greater resemblance to the TL among those known to him/her rather than from the L1. Chandrasekhar justifies this hypothesis by pointing out that an organism will act identically in two situations only if they have something in common. In the hypothetical case of a learner of Spanish who speaks Italian, Chinese and Rumanian, Chandrasekhar would claim that due to its similarity to Spanish, Italian would function as the Base Language, acting as a source of transfer and causing the most interference. In studying Finnish-Swedish bilingual learners of English, Ringbom (1978, cited in Sikogukira, 1993) found that more errors could be attributed to interference from Swedish, irrespective of whether the learner's L1 was Swedish or Finnish. In accordance with Chandrasekhar's hypothesis, the fact that English is linguistically closer to Swedish than to Finnish, caused Swedish to be the main source of transfer, and function as the Base Language in this particular language acquisition process.

2.1. Review of existing data

A number of experiments have been conducted on multilingual learners of a new language. Two approaches can be observed in the studies reviewed here. One approach focuses on comparing the progress towards a target language of multilingual learners with that of monolingual learners. The second approach focuses on how other languages known to a multilingual learner affect progress in acquiring a new language. Linguistic distance and the existence of a Base Language, although not always the central theme, is a noted factor in each of the following studies. Conclusions can therefore in all certainty apply only to the process of NthLA of a linguistically related TL.

2.1.1. Ahukanna, Lund and Gentile (1981)

Ahukanna et al. conducted a study in the state of Imo in Eastern Nigeria where French is learned in the context of the mother tongue, Igbo, and the national language, English. The study examined interlingual interference traceable to Igbo or English, and analyzed errors made according to the nature of structural similarities between the L1 and L2, and the TL. The subjects of the experiment were 40 students in their second year in the department of French at Alavan Ikoku College of Education (AICE) in Owerri, Nigeria. Half the students had had 5 years of French prior to attending AICE, and half had no previous instruction in French. The experiment

was then replicated two years later on a similar group.

The students were given a grammar test written especially for this study, which was designed to reflect errors that could be attributed to interference from each of the following sources: 1) Igbo, but not English; 2) English but not Igbo; 3) Both Igbo and English; and 4) Incorrect applications of rules of French, not reflecting Igbo or English patterns. The test revealed that the greatest number of errors occurred on items traceable to interference from English, and the least from Igbo. Ahukanna et al. concluded that susceptibility to interference effects in language learning is related to the similarity between the base language and the target language, and is inversely proportional to the level of proficiency in the TL, where increased proficiency decreases interference.

2.1.2. Magiste (1984)

Magiste examined a study which was initiated by the National Swedish Board of Education in 1982, that involved a total of 2,736 immigrant 8th graders, excluding native English speakers. The study compared the immigrant students with Swedish monolingual students with respect to performance in English. Analysis was based on results of a standardized test in English which consisted of 4 parts: vocabulary, reading, listening comprehension and grammar. Other factors that were taken into consideration were parental educational background, time of immigration, the students' proficiency in Swedish and in the first or home language, and the language used by the students at home. Similarity between the L1 and English was also considered a factor.

The results of the test showed that immigrant students who always used Swedish at home but had a passive knowledge of their L1 performed better in English than Swedish monolingual students. However, those immigrant students who actively used their home language daily had slightly lower test results in English than Swedish students.

Magiste concludes that passive bilingualism in learners of a younger age seems to facilitate learning a third language, while active bilingualism might delay it by causing interference. She attributes this effect to a type of strategy used by the learner, and explains that a learner who chooses a single-language strategy during task performance is better equipped to avoid interference.

2.1.3. Thomas (1988)

Thomas examined the progress of 16 English speaking college students with prior knowledge of Spanish, and 10 monolingual English speaking students, in studying French. All students were equal in terms of socio-economic status, amount of exposure to French, teacher, teaching method, and textbook. Thomas found no significant difference between their aptitude, as measured on Form A of the Modern Language Aptitude Test (Carroll & Sapon, 1958), or motivation, as measured on a modified version of Gardner & Lambert's Attitude and Motivation

Questionnaire. Aptitude and attitude are admittedly difficult to measure accurately, nevertheless an attempt was made to control these variables. The test was administered after one semester of instruction in French, and consisted of a vocabulary and grammar test as well as a communication based test.

Thomas' findings show that bilinguals have an advantage over monolinguals when performing those activities usually associated with learning French formally in a classroom. Thomas notes that bilinguals as a group appear to have developed the ability to avoid those errors which act as a barrier to comprehension, and manipulate the structures learned in class to communicate with native speakers.

In the same study Thomas also compared bilinguals with formal instruction in their L2, labeling them "biliterate"⁴, with bilinguals with no formal instruction in their L2, who she labeled "monoliterate". She notes that biliterate students performed on the tests better than monoliterate students and concludes that if learners are trained to be aware of the similarities between their related language and the TL, they can exploit positive transfer and avoid interference.

2.1.4. Sikogukira (1993)

Sikogukira conducted a study to explore the transferability of lexical properties from French (as an L2) to English (as an L3), with the fundamental assumption that transfer potential, pattern, and process, is determined not only by the degree of relatedness between the learner's Base Language and the TL, but also by the learner's perception of the distance between the source language(s) and the TL. The study was conducted in Burundi, where the L1 is Kirundi, and the L2 is French, with the assumption that French functioned as the Base Language. The subjects were 126 students in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Burundi: 50 students from 1st year, 28 from 2nd year, 25 from 3rd year and 23 from 4th year. All students had the same exposure to the TL prior to their enrollment in the university.

Sikogukira administered a test that explored the use of French-English cognates from 2 categories:

1. French-English cognates whose meanings are the same or similar in French and English, and which are in a relation of synonymy with non-cognate English lexemes (e.g. *commence, begin, start; espionage, spying;*) or hyponymy (e.g. *assassinate, murder, kill; gluttony, gourmandise, greed;*).
2. French-English cognates whose meanings differ in the two languages (e.g. *venue, siege, tutor*).

⁴ This is an unfortunate choice of terminology because it suggests some focus on literacy skills and their possible ability to transfer. In fact, Thomas seems to be referring to formal instruction of grammar.

Sikogukira found that Burundian students of English showed a tendency to use non-cognate English lexemes, a tendency to transfer French-English cognates whose meanings differ, and in both cases this tendency decreased with an increased proficiency level in the TL. He concluded that a Base Language will influence the learners' TL causing both positive and negative transfer, and that as the level of proficiency in the target language increases, the learner becomes more able to control this influence.

2.2. Summary

Research presented above investigates aspects of how other languages known to a learner of a TL affect his/her progress, based on a perceived similarity between the learner's source language(s) and target language. Influence exerted by the learner's Base Language(s) can assist progress by providing a source of transfer as well as hinder it by causing interference.

2.2.1. Transfer

An adult learner will apply cross-linguistic transfer from his/her Base Language to the target language. The quantity and quality of such transfer will depend on one's perception of the similarity between the Base Language and the TL. Formal instruction in the Base Language can help develop the awareness of this similarity, and help the learner exploit positive transfer and learn to avoid transferring in potentially difficult situations.

2.2.2. Interference

A multilingual learner's Base Language will cause the most interference to the TL. The level of interference can partially depend on the learning strategy adopted by the individual. In younger children who actively use the Base Language the interference may be more pronounced because they may have less control over choosing a strategy that focuses solely on the target language. In both adults and children building resistance to interference is developed with increased proficiency in the target language.

3. Linguistically distant languages

The second group of multilingual learners consists of individuals acquiring a language which is not linguistically related to any of their known languages. As stated above, the existence of a Base Language as a main source of positive and negative transfer wholly depends on the learner perceiving the linguistic similarity between this language and the TL. Therefore, learners who are unaware of any linguistic relationship between their known languages and the TL, regardless of whether such a similarity exists, can also belong to this group. There are no specific studies to show how this type of NthLA differs from 2ndLA. General observations about Nth language learners as a group can be applied to learners of a linguistically distant language to show how previously acquired knowledge can affect their progress.

3.1. Transfer and Interference

With the absence of a Base Language, the potential for positive linguistic transfer for a learner of this group is small, while interference could be caused by several sources and would therefore be harder to trace or control. On the other hand, previous experience with linguistic transfer could prove helpful. Access to several linguistic structures could aid the learner in perceiving the lack of linguistic similarity and therefore, as explained by Chandrasekhar in the Base Language Hypothesis, to not be prompted to act identically in this situation. L2 learners may come to the same realization in later stages of language learning, where an Nth language learner could avoid transfer earlier by adopting a strategy that focuses on the TL as a discrete structure, thereby resisting interference.

3.2. Concept of Languages

The language acquisition process can be influenced by more than the knowledge of a Base Language. Having previously experienced non-native language acquisition, an Nth language learner will have expanded his/her *concept of language* to a more universal *concept of languages*. This learner will have an improved metalinguistic awareness, or a better conscious perception of the rules and forms of language, an insight which can be utilized in the progress towards a TL. The exact way in which a universal concept of languages can assist a learner remains a conundrum in SLA theory. Sanchez (1971) makes a reference to Chomsky's theory of a capacity for language learning which exists in prepubescent children. Sanchez proposes that when an adult becomes more conscious of linguistic universals, s/he gains linguistic sensitivity which is a mental state appropriate to learning languages that can replace the "language acquisition device" humans lose after puberty. A more exact and better researched explanation has yet to be found.

With the absence of a Base Language to directly influence the learner's progress towards a target language, a universal concept of languages will have a large effect on the language acquisition process. Metalinguistic awareness may be the only factor that distinguishes the language acquisition process of this type of Nth language learner from that of a monolingual learning a second language. It is therefore suggested that research into linguistically distant NthLA could lay the foundation to better understanding how linguistic sensitivity is formed, and how it affects human language learning ability.

4. Conclusion

In examining existing data on NthLA, which is limited to the acquisition of a new language that is linguistically similar to one known to the learner, some general observations can be made.

Multilingual learners undergo a slightly different process when acquiring a new language than monolingual learners acquiring a second language. In NthLA a learner has access to several linguistic structures, or what Corder calls "ready-made hypotheses", to aid him/her in processing

the input of a TL and constructing an interlanguage. In NthLA the Base Language will be the main source of transfer and interference. Previous experience with language acquisition can aid the learner in choosing a strategy that makes the most of positive transfer and avoids potentially difficult situations.

In light of the Base Language Hypothesis and the research that appears to support it, it may become necessary to re-evaluate some of the data collected in language acquisition research. Data that was collected for contrastive and error analyses, in particular, may have required a closer examination of the inventory of languages known to the various subjects of the studies. Reviewing the various conclusions in the context of linguistic distance and the existence of a Base Language may help yield a more accurate interpretation of the data.

As a group, individuals undergoing NthLA do so with an improved understanding of the concept of language. The notion of a universal concept of languages is not new to the field of SLA. The process in which it is formed, the way it is applied to language learning, and how it is augmented to incorporate newly acquired languages, is at the very heart of language acquisition. In conclusion, it is suggested that research into the language acquisition process of bi- or multilinguals could shed some light on the language acquisition process in general.

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