



## **‘Interlanguage’ By Larry Selinker (1972)**

### **A Review**

This lecture is a review of the seminal paper by Larry Selinker, American professor of Applied Linguistics. This paper is entitled: *Interlanguage* (IL henceforth), and it was published in 1972 in the *International Review of Applied Linguistics*. Works of linguists like Selinker paved the way to the study of psychological processes that shape one’s IL, and thus, led to laying the foundations to the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) as we know it today.

### **Interlanguage**

In their attempt to achieve competence in a second/foreign language (L2), learners arrive at a stage where they develop a linguistic system that has the characteristics of both the target (learned) language (L2/TL) and their mother language (NL/L1). This *intermediate* system came to be called *interlanguage*. This said, a learner of L2 English whose L1 is Arabic will develop English-Arabic IL. And a learner of L2 English whose L1 is Japanese will develop English-Japanese IL. In Selinker words (p. 36),

...then in the making of constructs [errors] relevant to a theory of second language learning, one would be completely justified in hypothesizing ...the existence of a separate linguistic system based on the observable output which results from a learner’s attempted production of a TL norm. This linguistic system we will call “Interlanguage.”

Before interlanguage hypothesis was formulated, L2 learning was dominated by the contrastive hypothesis, suggesting that those elements that are similar in learners L1 and L2 are easier to learner than those that are different in the two systems. Thanks to the interlanguage hypothesis, L2 learning started to be viewed from the *learning* perspective: In this regard,

Selinker stated: “this paper [on IL] is written from the learning perspective, regardless of one’s failure or success in the attempted learning of a second language” (p. 31). This said, learners’ errors, as well as successful learning, should be equally considered by the linguists. At that time, taking the learners’ conscious attempts to control their L2 learning was a crucial turn in SLA.

### **Latent psychological structure**

Selinker assumes the existence of a *psychological structure* that is *latent* in the brain, and only activated when one seeks to learn L2. This latent structure is not the counterpart to Chomsky’s universal grammar and there is no guarantee that this latent structure will be activated at all while learning L2. According to Selinker, those L2 learners who achieved native-speaker competence should have ‘*somehow reactivated the latent language structure.*’ This category of learners represents the absolute minority and any theory of L2 acquisition should ignore them. It is the reason why Selinker in his paper focused exclusively on ‘*attempted learning,*’ whether successful or not, assuming that these learners reactivate a *different* latent structure (from that of successful L2 learners)— when they seek to express a meaning—they already have in their NL— in the TL.

### **Fossilisation**

Selinker assumed the existence of another mechanism in the L2 learners’ latent psychological structure, which he named *fossilisation*. He defined it as those ...

linguistic items, rules, and subsystems which speaker of particular NL will tend to keep in their IL relative to a particular TL, no matter what the age of the learner or amount of explanation and instruction he receives in the TL (p. 36).

For example, French uvular /r/ is observed to be retained in English-French IL. Against the main thinking of the time, Selinker suggested that L2 learners ‘*backsliding*’ is not random

and it is not always towards the NL norms. For Selinker, those fossilisable items *reappear* in performance even after they are thought to be eradicated. A case in point is the fossilisable *that compliment/verb+that* in Indian-English IL; Indian users of English tend to employ it with all verbs that take sentential compliments (rather than *that* compliments, e.g., think, consider).

### **Five central processes in IL**

These fossilisable items/structures are the result of five central processes. They can be influenced by L2 learners' NL (language transfer) as they can be influenced by the training procedures (transfer of training). Moreover, other influencers are: the learner's approach to the material being learned (strategies of second language learning), the learner's approach to communication with the TL native speakers (strategies of second language communication), and overgeneralisation of the TL rules/semantic features (overgeneralisation of TL linguistic material). When *all* these five psychological processes are observed in the learner's IL, then we claim to have an *entirely fossilised IL competence*. We have already dealt with many types of transfer in our lessons of contrastive analysis, so our attention here is to be entirely focused on the remaining four processes.

#### *1. Overgeneralisation of TL linguistic rules*

Each of the sentences below include an example of an overgeneralised rule in English IL:

1. What did he intended to say? (the past tense marker *-ed* is used with *did*)
2. After thinking little, I decided to start on the *bicycle* as slowly as I could as it was not possible to *drive* fast. (extending the verb *drive* to all types of vehicles)

3. Max is happier than Sam's these days. (ignoring the rule that auxiliary contraction is not possible when the constituent immediately following the contracted form is deleted, i.e., *happy*)

## 2. *Transfer of training*

A good example to illustrate this process is the performance of Serbo-Croatian-English IL performance regarding the failure to make the distinction between *he* and *she*. They tend to overuse *he* at the expense of *she* in their production—disregarding their level of proficiency. In this case, no L1 transfer is assumed, given that both English and Serbo-Croatian languages distinguish between animate *he* and *she*. This has then to be explained by textbooks input and teachers' habits. That is to say, both present examples with *he* but never with *she*. Despite the fact that the learners are aware of the distinction between the two pronouns, they keep the *fossilisable* item in their English IL. One possible explanation is that L2 learners consider it unimportant to make the distinction between *he* and *she* for a successful communication; so, this IL form is also understood as a strategy of L2 communication.

## 3. *Strategies of second language learning*

In many interlingual situations (where learners are using both L1 and TL), it is observed that L2 learners simplify the TL system. As examples, in 4 and 5 below, learners assume that verbs in English are either transitive or intransitive and also that progressive forms should always have *-ing*.

4. I am feeling thirsty.
5. Don't worry. I am hearing him.

Moreover, it is noted that English-Russian IL is characterised by dropping the grammatical formatives (e.g. articles, plural forms, past tense) as can be seen in 6-8.

6. It was *nice/nice* trailer/*big* one.
7. I have many hundred *carpenter* my own.
8. I was in Frankfurt when I *fill* application.

Such IL performance can be attributed to the learning strategies (particularly *simplification*) as well as communication strategies. As for the latter, to avoid being hesitant and disconnected, Russian learners prefer not to pause and think about the right grammatical forms/markers to use. However, this does not mean that all strategies of second language learning are conscious.

Besides these five central processes discussed above, other processes are also observed to influence—to some degree—the shaping of IL performance like *spelling pronunciation* and *hypercorrection*.

Having tackled these five processes influencing learners IL performance, Selinker moved on to identify five problems related to these processes, which deserve further examination and empirical evidence to unravel their nature. These five problems can be briefly summarised:

1. It is not always possible to link observed performance to one particular process, with a great degree of certainty.
2. The notion of fossilisation needs to be systematised, so that what items are fossilised, and in which interlingual situation, can be largely predictable. This is not always easy to do, taking into account the observed '*non-reversibility of fossilisation*.' It is noticed that both Spanish and English distinguish between *he* and *she*, but only Spanish learners of L2 English face problems in using *he* and *she*, while English learners of L2 Spanish do not.

3. These five central processes for Selinker fit what he called '*attempted learning*' or '*unsuccessful*' learning of TL. Therefore, what the teacher has to do to help successful learning is not meant to be covered by Selinker's learning perspective on IL.
4. To provide an evidence for the existence of the units that comprise the '*latent psychological structure*,' we need to study the three systems: NL, TL, and IL.
5. To study IL empirically, three datasets should be examined: NL, TL, and IL. The question which arises here is that can we create the same experimental conditions while examining the three linguistic systems. Selinker referred the reader to his previous experiments on language transfer where— he claimed— to have investigated the three systems in '*an efficient and valid manner*.'

## Reference

Selinker, Larry (1972). Interlanguage. Republished in Jack C. Richards (Ed.), Error analysis: perspectives on second language acquisition. London: Longman.