

**Rediscovering Interlanguage (Applied Linguistics and Language Study)**

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In *Rediscovering Interlanguage*, Selinker attempts to 'purposefully misread' the literature in the areas of contrastive analysis (CA), error analysis (EA), and bilingualism to show that they predicted interlanguage (IL) data. The author pursues this tedious task, unsuccessfully and unconvincingly, in an introduction followed by ten chapters. Chapter 1, 'Beginning: Fries/Lado,' discusses the historical significance of systematically comparing the first language and the second language for pedagogical purposes. Chapter 2, 'Towards interlanguage: Uriel Weinreich,' focuses on the work of Weinreich and his contribution to the bilingualism literature. Chapter 3, 'Units and equivalence across linguistic systems: Some bilingual data,' discusses the learner's problems of identifying seemingly equivalent units across linguistic systems. The author seeks to establish a correlation between linguistic theory and the CA literature in chapter 4, 'Some problems of comparison: The CA literature.' Chapter 5, 'Some CA and EA (and possibly IL) data,' offers testable hypotheses based on data from previous studies. Chapter 6, 'Theoretical advances: Corder and Van Buren,' is a summation of their contributions to second language acquisition (SLA). Chapter 7, 'The quintessential CA/IL notion: Language transfer,' discusses the contributions of CA studies and the role of language transfer in SLA. Chapter 8, 'The continual discovery of IL,' argues for the IL hypothesis to be a viable hypothesis for SLA. Chapter 9, 'The reality of fossilization: An allegorical account,' is a fictitious conversation between the author and several linguists discussing

the notion of fossilization. Chapter 10, 'Reframing interlanguage: Where we are,' surveys the previous chapters and suggests further research in a broader and historical framework. The chapters are followed by an Appendix, References, and an Index.

The major focus of this review is to examine whether or not Selinker succeeds in his aim of revisiting 'founding texts', using his suggested research methodology of 'purposeful misreading', and to specifically show what the misreading accomplishes or fails to accomplish. An evaluation of the other aspects of the book besides Selinker's retrospective discussion of language transfer such as fossilization, "multiple effects," and where we are now in the study of interlanguage will also be included.

In the introduction Selinker proposes to examine current IL hypothesis by having a constant dialogue with its founding texts. He suggests that we read the early scholars to better understand how processes such as language transfer, fossilization, and universal processes function and interact with one another in the process of SLA. He states that it is necessary because many theoretical questions related to current IL and SLA research remain unanswered, and that these questions were at least discussed, if not answered, in the earlier texts. "Wisdom is possible," he notes, "but only through the careful study of certain previous texts as well as learning from the previous commentary upon them." (p.2). As it may seem, this claim is unfounded. He seems to be suggesting that we can only make significant progress retrospectively. This backward progression that he espouses seems to be an oxymoron. In order for a field like SLA to be thriving and breaking new grounds, a departure from the founding texts is necessary in that there is no solid, explanatorily adequate theory of SLA. If we keep going backward to read previous

commentaries on IL and SLA, there is very little chance that we will be able to understand the complicated process of SLA and develop a sound theory.

To emphasize the necessity of carefully understanding and sorting out the founding texts, Selinker warns us of the infamous 'baby and bathwater syndrome' where focusing too much on defects of founding texts can nullify a whole body of literature. He suggests that in disseminating and incorporating relevant ideas of founding texts our approach should be Talmudic. In his own words, "The Talmudic spirit teaches that one should always question basic premises and never accept things at face value." (p.2). That is to say, one should debunk false traditions and learn from the previous commentary on crucial issues to gain wisdom. This is not followed throughout the book. It is obvious that this approach is problematic and ironic. On the one hand, the author suggests that we should 'question basic premises', and on the other, he claims that we can gain wisdom from them.

Realizing the difficulty in not accepting things at face value and yet learning from them, Selinker suggests the methodology of a 'purposeful misreading' of founding texts in the field of SLA research, IL, CA, bilingualism, experimental psychology, theoretical linguistics, and other related fields. There arises a question as to how one can misread founding texts purposefully to derive anything constructive and enlightening. To answer this question, the author quotes Lado's predictive and behavioristic statement 'the learner will do X or Y', as an example. He argues that Lado has been read too literally which has resulted in dismissing his work. Purposefully misreading the same statement, however, as 'a learner might do X and/or Y under Z conditions', he believes, provides testable SLA hypothesis and accounts for IL variation.

There are two problems with this research methodology. First of all, if not literally, how else is one supposed to read Lado or for that matter any scholar? Lado did not say 'The learner will do X and/or Y under Z conditions,' and therefore shouldn't be given undue credit. Restating a misleading statement in a somewhat different way does not lead to fundamental insights. The 'purposeful misreading' approach seems to be wrong-headed. SLA research has lately come of age, and we know that learner behavior cannot be explained in a simplistic way, because there are many complicated things involved in language learning. Second, there is a serious flaw in this methodology that the author has not mentioned. Even though it may be true that the field of SLA can benefit from its neighboring fields, such as psychology, especially psychology of learning, and theoretical linguistics, a word of caution is in order here. While borrowing ideas from related fields, a responsible researcher must be aware that they may not have been conceptualized with language in mind, no matter how elegant, precise, and appropriate they may be in their respective fields. Ironically, the author himself warns of the consequences of borrowing methodology from other fields and admits that "...at times our work involves conceptually different sorts of phenomena from those in other fields...(p.246).

Obviously, the author is aware of the problem of conceptualization in borrowing ideas from other fields and then applying them to SLA problems. He suggests that ideas from neighboring fields should not be borrowed in their original form. They should be adapted to be congruent with concepts central to SLA. The author explains that in purposefully misreading "we do not do history per se, but are interested instead in reading the sources for what they can tell us about the problems that interest us." In other

words, the perspective the author chooses is to carefully examine how reframing the proposals of early second language researchers, namely Lado, Fries, Weinreich, Corder, Nemser, and Briere, might shed light on some crucial issues regarding IL studies that have been baffling over the years.

Ironically, the author himself admits that even he was wrong in strongly believing in Lado's hypothesis that by merely comparing linguistic structures of a first language (L1) and second language (L2), one would gain insightful information about the specific patterns that will cause the learner problems in learning a second language. Results of empirical studies did not conform to these predictions. Another defect in Lado's claim was the assumption that the learner will not have crucial problems with the L2 patterns that exist in his L1. This has not been proven empirically. Language learners may have some grammatical knowledge of their L2 and certain cognitive abilities that are not directly related to their L1. Interestingly though, the author admits that "perhaps this is where a whole generation of contrastivists (myself included) went astray." (p.14). Here again Lado is proven wrong, and his unfounded claims and strong statements, in Selinker's own words, "flies in the face of empirical reality." (p.19). Still, the author asks his readers not to take Lado as a dogma, but as a source of testable hypothesis in SLA, especially concerning language transfer. This can only be seen as his rigid obsession with contrastive linguistics in general and Lado in particular.

Revisiting Weinreich's seminal work in bilingualism, to prove that IL research can gain insight from its founding texts, Selinker argues that Weinreich was right in stating that translation words that exist in both languages (L1 & L2), but have undergone certain phonological change, are problematic. In particular, he says, words in both

languages that bear physical resemblance and are phonetic approximates, are prone to fossilize in the IL system of the learner. There may be some truth in this claim, but we must not forget that this is only in the case of phonology. The same behavior pattern may not exist in other formal categories. It is not valid to use a phonology example and then claim to have arrived at a concept for IL learning. Furthermore, learners do not always compare linguistic systems. It is not reasonable to assume that certain translation words fossilize solely because of the learner's NL.

Continuing in the same revisionist manner, the author makes another strong statement that "In any case, if all, or even most IL speakers fossilize, then it is clear that we must assume that they are pre-programmed to do so..." (p.33). Supporting the views of Fries, Lado, and Weinreich and ignoring sociolinguistic factors in language learning, the author suggests that the NL is always the starting point for the learner. This view that IL begins with NL is not supported and proven empirically. Before we make such unfounded claims, we need to seriously consider whether IL really begins with the L1 only. Another question we need to address is whether or not the learner has some grammar before he begins to learn a second language. The author's position that the L1 is the starting point for IL learning contradicts with recent findings and is inconclusive.

Furthermore, Weinreich's conclusion that certain structural conditions are likely to be transferred and certain favorable structural conditions are not, is not sufficient. As mentioned previously, we are not making any contribution to the field by giving some phonology examples and explaining that certain structure are prone to be transferred. There are larger issues that we need to envisage such as why only certain structures are

transferred and certain structures are not. In other words, a more precise description of what affects and shapes the form of IL system should be given if we are to make constructive progress. Weinreich failed to do it, and the author does not explain how Weinreich's observations and philosophical underpinnings have any ramifications for SLA literature.

Another question any serious research scholar needs to ask is how justified it is to compare studies in bilingualism with those in IL. Different semantic categories, namely expansive, additive, replacive, loanshift, loan translation, and loanblend, have very little or no bearing on SLA. They are concerned with historical linguistics, comparing, for example, Israeli Hebrew with Modern Hebrew. The author discusses semantic change and sound change influenced by language contact situations, which can be seen, at best, as part of a diachronic study. Although, in a multiple language contact situation, linguistic phenomena such as lexical change and sound change may be noticed, it is not reasonable to assume that the speech community is comparing units and equivalence across linguistic systems. Whatever modifications result from the processes described by the author, they are to fulfill certain very specific sociolinguistic needs in a specific language context. Kachru's (1985) example illustrates this point. 'Lathi-charge', a 'hybrid-term' in Indian English, means the police charging a mob with sticks or staff. From an American English perspective, it sounds skewed and deviant, but its use is perfectly appropriate in the Indian context, and is frequently used by speakers of Indian English, without comparing an equivalent term in American English.

As mentioned previously, IL is a process of creative construction. The author seems to be ignoring the creative aspect of IL systems when he makes a dubious

distinction between ‘Type 1’ and ‘Type 2’ individuals (p.56). According to him, a ‘Type 1’ individual’s IL is stabilized, whereas a ‘Type 2’ individual’s IL keeps changing over time (p.56). It is not clear, at all, how we can differentiate between ‘Type 1’ and ‘Type 2’ individuals. When does this creativity stop? It is no use quoting different scholars’ coinage of terms such as ‘fossilized competence’ and ‘stable approximative system’ (p.56). Are we equally sure that learners have fossilized competence? Must there be cultural constraints or personality factors that impede successful completion of SLA? How do we determine, at a certain stage of development, that a learner has fossilized? Aren’t we assuming, unreasonably, that no matter what strategies the learner employs, he or she will never make progress and continue learning? For the sake of postulating a theory, some kind of idealization is necessary, but calling learners ‘Type 1’ and ‘Type 2’ is not idealizing an assumption; it is labeling and demeaning. It discredits the learner’s ability to learn continuously and keep internalizing a system of rules until he gains mastery over his or her second language. As mentioned previously, the process of continued learning may be obstructed or affected by several social, cultural, linguistic, and psychological factors, but, by no means, it guarantees or confirms that the learner has fossilized.

In chapter 4, the author discusses some evident problems of comparing linguistic systems using contrastive analysis. He gives Sauer’s (1970) example which is not satisfactory (p.66). While comparing English and Spanish, one cannot ignore the fact that in a sentence like, “It is certain that John will win,” “It” is an ‘expletive’, serving the purpose of the subject, since “is certain that John will win” is ungrammatical in English. Therefore, the Spanish sentence, “Es cierto que Juan ganara,” cannot be treated as an



equivalent sentence structure. Quoting Sauer's example, the author claims, "It surely shows that up to this point there are equivalent sentence structures (ignoring the dummy 'It') (p.66). It seems that the author is fully aware of the flaws and shortcomings in his claims, but he continues to prevaricate, using conditions of ignoring linguistic facts and purposeful misreading. There are serious problems with the CA framework of comparing structures across languages. It assumes that certain structures that are chosen to be compared are the same. It has been mentioned before in this review that abstract phonemes challenge this paradigm.

The author goes to great length, praising Verma's systematic comparison of similarities and differences between Hindi & English, and then concludes, "One wonders if explanations such as these are reasonable for IL modification structures." (p.89). From a reader's perspective, one wonders if the author is suggesting that Verma's explanations of the similar and different transformational operations should be empirically verified to predict structure modifications in the IL of Hindi speakers of English and/or English speakers of Hindi. The author further admits that "We know this is sometimes true, but study of the model shows holes" (p.90). Common sense tells us that if there are holes in the model, it needs to be abandoned and a model without any 'holes' should be developed. More tinkering and patchwork may not be sufficient to defend a model that has already been proven faulty and erroneous. He further suggests, "If we ignore weaknesses already identified in each approach,[CA and EA] both provide *predictive IL data*... (p.139). This is quite misleading. The field of SLA cannot rely on ignoring weaknesses, especially if it is to develop an appropriate theory to account for learner behavior.

After discussing several different problems of CA without giving any concrete model, because there is none, the author shifts his focus to the role of UG and its dominance on language transfer. He quotes Blane's study which concentrated on the segmental phonemes of English and Hebrew. It should be noticed that phonological competence is a specific skill that requires both perception and production. There is enough evidence in the IL phonology data that syllable structures and certain prosodic features are particularly susceptible to transfer. Not to be forgotten, phonology involves forming internal phonetic structures and specific articulatory movements. Both native and non-native speakers of a language do this. It may not be a wise course to make generalizations about SLA, based on phonology data. Of late, there has been a great deal of work done in generative phonology, and the field has departed from the early days of structural phonology. As mentioned above, there are phonemes in several natural languages that are underlying representations of abstract phonemes and that occur in specific phonological environment. A question comes up as to how justified it is for a field like SLA that has recently been coming of age to go back to the sixties and the seventies and search for research tools that we already know were defective.

The author's extreme adherence to his original proposal that earlier studies in CA, EA, and bilingualism predicted IL data is writ large throughout the book. It seems as if he has organized the chapters to revert back to his suggested methodology of 'continued discovery' and 'purposeful misreading'. But he has not been able to substantiate his proposition with convincing arguments and insightful examples. He uses Van Buren's argument that CA must ensure whether a common category which is under experimental investigation is actually a common category or not. However, Van Buren also concluded

that “no version of any grammatical model in existence...is adequate to describe the data.” (p.148). The author seems to be suggesting that Van Buren’s model, Lado’s important thoughts, and the work of other scholars have paved the way for further empirical studies and have generated many IL hypotheses.

At the same time, we should learn from scholars like Corder who noted that learners’ NL is not necessarily negative and impeding; it is rather facilitative. He admitted that the field of SLA has come a long way (p.149). He also claimed that learner language is structured enough for careful investigation. Corder indeed was a visionary in suggesting that “We need to make a regular series of checks on [the learner’s] grammar to see the effect that exposure to certain data has had on the state of his grammar.” (p.151). He further stated that “we can make certain [but not definite] inferences about the learning process by describing successive states of learner language.” (p.151). A realization that inevitably invalidates the claims made by the structuralists of the sixties like Lado.

Research has shown that L2 learners have intuitions about the grammaticality of the language they are in the process of learning. In proposing that language learners are pre-programmed to use language transfer as a learner strategy, the author knows that it is not true, and admits, “So in some sense I was very clearly wrong.” (p.155). We see in Corder a clear indication that SLA researchers must not assume the classical CA position. Classical CA fails to make correct predictions. Why this is so may not be as mysterious as the author claims it to be. Heavy reliance on structuralistic comparison may be why classical CA falls short of predicting exactly when the learner will make a mistake. Isn’t

the author contradicting himself in testifying that Corder was a visionary? One wonders if his ‘purposeful misreading’ methodology is really substantial.

A rigid adherence to his belief in CA and CLI is explicit everywhere even though he admits that “Structural congruence is most probably necessary, though not sufficient.” (p.209). Yet he firmly believes that learner behavior and his performance in L2 can be attributed to a contrastive strategy. This too is not substantiated by empirical data. There seems to be a hiatus between earlier studies done by Nemser and likewise and scholars of today who have taken a generative approach to SLA. Contradicting himself again, the author admits that because of recent studies it is possible to envision that SLA is both a process of using selective NL knowledge and of reflecting universal properties that are not language specific (p.214). This is in stark contrast to his notion of ‘fossilized competence’. The above statement is a realization of the current vision, particularly the universal aspects of language acquisition, and does not validate his methodology of ‘purposeful misreading’ and ‘continued discovery’ of IL based on founding texts. We have departed from the rigid view of transfer being an inhibitory source in learning a second language and are moving towards the creative aspect of language learning, questioning notions such as fossilization, contrastive strategies, a fact the author refuses to accept.

IL is a psycholinguistic concept, and it should be mentioned that it has always been a pre-existing state discovered by empirical research. It would be more appropriate to call IL a language-learning phenomena that was always there. Through empirical research, people discovered it from time to time. Different scholars gave it different terms. Nemser’s ‘approximative systems,’ for example. But how does it relate to

‘purposeful misreading’, and ‘continued discovery’ of IL? Any applied field thrives because researchers make progress in a progressive way, not in a regressive way. Since nobody has given an adequate theory of SLA that captures all the processes and phenomena involved in second language learning, we must break new grounds. Considering that there are many complicated factors such as language transfer, fossilization, individual variation, social and psychological distance, capturing them within a particular theory is a daunting task to begin with. The earlier scholars, namely Briere, Lado, Nemser, Corder, etc., did talk about what the author calls “in-between” language or grammar, but they only hypothesized; they didn’t test their hypotheses empirically.

We know that in the case of first language acquisition, the learner starts from no prior linguistic knowledge and attains adult knowledge. We also know that in the case of SLA, the learner starts from knowledge of a language and constantly constructs a system of second language rules. However, it would be wrong to presume that the learner starts with zero knowledge. There is evidence in current research, Flynn (1995), for example, that the learner has some grammar, before he begins learning his second language, which may not have any bearing on his prior linguistic knowledge.

In making continual discovery of IL by collecting and analyzing data, seeing IL in a different light, making advancements and adding new dimensions to the field of second language acquisition research, we will come to a better understanding of language learner behavior in relation to language transfer and other processes; something the earlier scholars failed to do, and the author repeatedly confirms that they did. His methodology, or Garfinkel’s methodology of ‘purposeful misreading’, and ‘borrowing methodology’ is

nothing but revisionist history and is wrong-headed. We know that simplistic theories, heavily depending on language transfer, fossilization, and backsliding, are not able to capture everything related to the complicated process of SLA, and that we need to have a broader framework that covers everything relating to the complex and intellectually challenging phenomena of language learning.

The last chapter “Reframing interlanguage: Where we are” summarizes the previous chapters and looks at implications for future research in IL studies and SLA. One notices the same rigid tendency to view language transfer as the principal learner strategy. Commenting on the role of universal processes in creating IL, the author says, “Language transfer concerns at times are prime and universal properties are activated if the learner’s attempt at interlingual identifications fails.” (p.261). This claim is not founded and seems to be suggesting that universal properties are followed by the learner only and only when language transfer strategy fails. This is a clear indication of the author’s obsession with language transfer and fossilization, giving in a little bit to accommodate other processes, perhaps for fear of criticism, and/or to at least account for phenomena language transfer cannot account for.

Summing things up, he makes a strong theoretical prediction in reference to his ‘multiple effects principle’ by claiming that “In every instance of the multiple effects principle, language transfer will be involved.” (p.263). In his conclusive remark, he stresses that “we view language transfer and fossilization in a broad conceptual/historical framework,” since UG-based work in SLA does not account for sociolinguistic factors and since “current conceptualization of theory in SLA is limited and limiting.” (p.264). This is no justification for accepting his methodology of ‘purposeful misreading,’

‘borrowing methodologies’ from other related fields, and having constant ‘dialogues with the founding text’. It is not premature and unreasonable to assume that we may, in the coming years, develop a theory that subsumes universal properties, language transfer, and sociolinguistic factors - that can both impede and/or facilitate language learning - to explain the complicated process of SLA. It is not necessary to depend retrospectively on garbled misuse and/or misreading of founding text to rediscover the phenomena of IL, because we are now beginning to see the learner’s prior linguistic knowledge as being facilitative and not inhibitory, and universal properties of language learning playing a definitive and constructive role in the learner’s language growth.

Since the book does not provide a balanced account of research in second language acquisition and interlanguage (including both cognitivist and behaviorist perspectives), it may be used as a supplementary text for an introductory course in second language acquisition. Each chapter is followed by several interesting and intriguing “Points for discussion”, which may be useful for interactive classroom activities. This book sets forth the fundamentals that a student of linguistics is bound to come across in other detailed sources. For those with particular interest in second language acquisition, language transfer, interlanguage, and fossilization, “Rediscovering Interlanguage” is a rich source of reference. However, readers should keep in mind that the book should not be used as a primary source for an SLA course because of its unreliable and misleading methodology of ‘purposeful misreading’.