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Critical thoughts about “How Languages are learned”

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This paper will express some of my thoughts, opinions and ideas about second language acquisition based on some of the SLA theories outlined in the textbook “How Languages are learned” by Lightbown and Spada.

Philip K. Dick once wrote a story titled “Do androids dream of electric sheep?”. That story dealt with questions such as what is reality? What does it mean to be human in a digital, mechanized world? Where, if anywhere, should we draw the line between the value of real and artificial life? Well, I am not sure which kind of sheep androids dream about, or where the line should be drawn between real and artificial life, but it seems the human mind might be a type of artificial intelligence comparable to a computer when it comes to language learning. My dreams are about English, French, sometimes Turkish and even also occasionally some Vietnamese speaking sheep. Why do I dream in those languages? I don’t know. How often do I dream in English compared to French? I am not sure. Does it mean I am more proficient in English than French or vice versa? And in which language do most people dream? Their native language or one of their targeted languages?

Since the beginning of the semester we have covered several theories about “How languages are learned” (Lightbown, Spada) as our textbook informs us. Some of the various theories detailed in class were behaviourism, innatism, connectionism, Krashen’s Monitor Model, as well as other ideas such as noticing hypothesis, contrastive hypothesis, or modified interaction hypothesis. Many research, many hypothesis, many theories have been put forward since the 40’s, 50’s and 60’s but today there still doesn’t seem to be any real agreement on one true explanation behind the mystery of the origins and evolution of language in the human mind. Is a second language acquired or learned? How important is the social environment in the learning process of a target language? Is there really such a thing as Universal Grammar underlying all languages? Is it ever too late to start learning or acquiring a new language as the critical hypothesis theory seems to imply? I am not sure what the answers to those questions are, or even if there are any definite ones but here some of my thoughts on the matter of language

learning, on some theories we covered in class and foreign language speaking sheeps in my dreams.

Each new theory on language acquisition (first or second, or more) brings more questions than answers. I don't think there is only one way or one theory which explains how we learn or acquire languages. Our extbook is filled with cognitive theories, how the brain is the key to all of it, how its inner workings holds the answers to all our questions and the acquisition mysteries. Each decade brings new theories build on the previous ones, sometimes even build in opposition of them. Noam Chomsky's UG and innatist theories were developed in reaction to the theory of behaviorism but it still has some unanswered questions such as : are there really brain structures just dedicated to language learning? Does the environment have no importance in the language learning process? Must it be one or the other or could it be a combination of both "inner and outer" learning experience? Another fascinating question is the one that deals with the different level of proficiency/fluency of the targeted second language and of the first language. How do we evaluate which level is proficient and which one is not? The question of native speakers versus non native speakers when it comes to knowledge of a targeted language is a very tricky and fascinating one. If the environment is crucial in language acquisition, which I believe it is, different children from different social backgrounds will have access to different types of first language users. Lower socio-economic background might lead to a lower level acquisition of a native language versus a non native speaker who will have studied that same language as a targeted second language in school. In this case, is the proficiency level of the non native speaker truly lower than the native speakers'? Another important factor we covered in class concerned the "World Englishes" or in other words: the different "types" of English which exist around the world, even within the same country. Which one is better? Is there a better English being

practiced in one specific area of the world? Of course, I understand I am addressing two types of questions here: how is language acquired and how do we know we have reached a proficient level and based on which criterias? The testing of language learning is a whole different topic of research itself. Testing someone on language skills may be influenced by many biases: cultural, relational, referential (point of reference of an assessment), purpose of the test (placement or achievement), etc... There is the study of language itself (its morphology, syntax, semantics, phonology, phonetics, pragmatics) and the study of its acquisition (inner/outer; brain/environment) /learning (classroom style). I found many theories of acquisition to be very interesting. They opened my eyes and thoughts to new issues, new questions, and new potential philosophies of teaching. Here is one I found stimulating: *the interaction hypothesis*.

The interaction hypothesis which “argues that conversational interaction is an essential, if not sufficient, condition for second language acquisition” (Lightbown, Spada; p.43) seems an obvious one: if you do not speak it you will not learn to speak it! But it also implies the following : the importance of “corrective feedback during interaction” (p.44). I believe the human interaction factor is crucial in acquiring a second language. Making mistakes is part of the learning/acquisition process through the corrective process, or “conversational modification such as comprehension checks, clarification requests and self repetition” (p.44). In one of our classes the question of the importance of fluency over accuracy was raised. Is it more important to be accurate or to be fluent? I feel it is important to make the potential students (adult or child) feel comfortable speaking before continuously correcting them. Some students might already feel self conscious enough without the teacher (or anyone else) constantly correct them. It might lead to a shut down. However, the manner of correcting someone is just as crucial as the correction itself.

There are many others theories or topics related to language learning I found to be provocative: contrastive analysis theory, the noticing hypothesis, the critical period hypothesis, etc... However, as Susan Gass and Larry Selinker wrote, “the study of second language acquisition impacts and draws from many other area of study, among them linguistics, psychology, psycholinguistics, sociology, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, conversational analysis, and education, to name a few” (Gass, Selinker; p. 1). There are so many different perspectives in which to approach the study of language learning that it becomes a little disorienting. The approach that caught my attention the most is the sociolinguistics aspect. It draws on the identity of the learners, their culture and their history and how it affects their learning process. I speak therefore I am. But who am I? What is my identity as I second language speaker? The vocabulary, syntactic structure, accents used define the type of second language speaker I am, detail my background and my culture, in other words, makes me who I am. Languages are about communicating ideas, thoughts, feelings in a way that is understood by the people we are adressing in a particular context. Each context requires various ways of communicating, distinctive pronunciations, numerous identities. As Noam Chomsky informs us: “When we study human language, we are approaching what some might call the human essence, the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to humans”.

Similarly, it is unique to humans because “ social interaction with more proficient members of a particular community centrally mediates the development of both communicative competence and knowledge of the values, practices, identities, ideologies and stances of that community” (Duff, Talmy; p.98).

Judging someone based on how they speak a second (or third, or more) language is unfair to them, to ourselves and to the teachers/environment of that person. Gass and Selinker explain that “these judgments in many instances are not justified, because many of the speech patterns that non native speakers use reflect their non nativeness rather than being characteristics of their personality” (p. 3).

In conclusion, languages are a means to an end. The end is communicating ideas, sharing feelings, expressing new discoveries, and creating history and culture. We can study the mechanics of the how, the reasons behind the why, the grand myths underlying the what/rules but in the end it is just about being less alone. Part of me believes that languages were born out of a need to be less alone, to be part of a society (civilized or primitive) where we are understood with the same point of reference. Today, new people try to learn new languages to try to become a part of a new community, and through understanding the words, vocabulary, sentence structures, also want to discover a new culture.

Tonight I will be dreaming of speaking sheep. Electric or not. Vietnamese, French or English. Goodnight!