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Simplification in Language Learning: What Do Learners Simplify?

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Abstract

This article focuses on the notion of 'simplification' in language learning from the perspective of the learner and that of the teacher. Instead of using the term to refer to a learning and communication strategy whereby learners drop certain linguistic elements, we believe that it can be reserved for the caretakers and language teachers who 'simplify' their language to communicate with the learners. The learners' use of a reduced system is due either to cognitive limitations or the use of various learning and communication strategies which lead to the omission, insertion, substitution or mis-ordering of linguistic elements. Language learners use interlingual and intralingual transfer strategies in an attempt to facilitate the task of learning and communicating in the target language. Omission of linguistic elements is not intended to 'simplify' the language. The linguistic elements that learners add due to transfer may be more than those they omit. Hence, linguistic simplification by caretakers and language teachers needs to be distinguished from the simplification of the learning task by the learners.

Keywords

linguistic simplification, simplification of learning, communication strategies, intralingual transfer, interlingual transfer

1. Interlanguage vs Purposeful Simplification

Most researchers (e.g. Ringbom, 1987; Seliger, 1988) agree that transfer from the native language and overgeneralization within the target language are two manifestations of one process,. In both cases, second or foreign language learners fall back on their previous linguistic knowledge, their native language and their interlanguage to solve their communication problems. Some researchers (e.g. Meisel, 1983) tend to equate the learners' interlanguage with other types of simplified registers such as telegraphese, motherese and foreigner talk because the missing elements are similar in all cases. In doing so, these researchers rule out reliance on interlingual transfer as a possible reason for the omission of elements in the interlanguage on the grounds that the same phenomenon is observed in the above mentioned simplified varieties used by adult monolingual native speakers.

However, we believe that the reason for the missing elements in the learner's language might be different from that of other simplified varieties where the speaker or writer intentionally drops certain elements from his or her fully developed language. In other words, simplification resulting from incomplete knowledge of the target language is not the same as purposeful simplification since, as Corder (1981) points out, learners do not have the complex system which they could simplify. Different reasons may be advanced for the same phenomenon, (Ringbom, 1987). For example, someone may not use the present auxiliary verb "*is/are*" in an SMS or a telegram for the sake of economy; a child native-speaker of English might also omit that verb due to cognitive immaturity while a second or foreign language learner might commit the same error due to the influence of the first language. Of course children drop elements when acquiring their native language, but they might do so because of their cognitive limitations and their inability to attend to and produce minute linguistic details.

Language learners employ the transfer strategy in order to simplify the task of learning, not to reduce the target language into a simpler system in the sense of replacing the difficult syntactic and lexical forms by other forms that suit their competence level in the target language. Simplification or reduction of the language by dropping certain elements is only one consequence of transfer from the native or the target language. It is a result of opting for the maximum amount of learning or communication with the limited number of forms or rules available, (Richards, 1975). The attempt to simplify the learning task by means of interlingual and interalingual transfer may result in inserting redundant linguistic elements as well as in dropping required ones among other types of errors (substitution and mis-ordering). The following are only a few examples of omission and addition errors detected in the written English of Arabic-speaking second year university students:

(A) Spelling: omission of silent letters:

    * *no* (= know)   * *dout* (= doubt) * *weit* (weight)

(B) Grammar:

    [1] Omission:

        * *We wait   ^   the bus all the time.*

        * *He was   ^   clever and has ^   understanding father.*

        * *In the village there is   ^   man   ^   speak   French.*

        * *What ^   he said to you?*

        * *Rice need plenty   ^   water.*

        * *She was   ^   youngest girl between us.*

    [2] Addition:

        * *Students are do their researches every semester.*

        * *Both the boys and the girls they can study together.*

        * *He let to go to the home late in the night.*

        * *Some Arabs students they are very smarts.*

        * *Are the students are go to the school regular?*

They are works in the sheeps farm.

2. Simplification of Learning

Selinker (1972) talks about the causes of errors and presents the question *What did he intended to say*? as being due to overgeneralization (i.e. intralingual transfer), and *I am hearing him* as being due to simplification. However, these may be examples of transferring irrelevant elements as a result of the learners' attempt to simplify the learning task and not the target language system. The second example, *I am hearing him*, may be an instance of intralingual transfer, based on similar forms such as *I am listening and I am speaking*. Since *.. did ... intend ...* and *I hear...* would be linguistically more reduced than *... did ... intended...* and *I am hearing...*, then there seems to be no reason to account for such 'complexifications' in terms of linguistic simplification. Rather, they are due to the simplification of the learning task which is, in most cases, the reason behind all kinds of errors including omission and addition errors made by language learners. Linguistic simplification can then be clearly distinguished from simplification of learning task, and the various linguistic achievement strategies employed by learners can be seen as bridging steps leading from task simplification to linguistic simplification as one of the outcomes of task simplification (Mahmoud, 2005).

Appel and Muysken (1987) maintain that intralingual or developmental errors are due to reliance on two strategies: simplification and generalization. They attribute the deletion of articles, auxiliaries, prepositions, and personal pronouns to simplification. Then they go on to make a compromise by saying that generalization could be viewed as a specific instance of simplification, because it also implies the reduction of the range of possible structures. However, since the deletion of the above elements (i.e. articles, auxiliaries, etc.) by Arabic speakers may be due to generalization of their native language features, interlingual transfer can be viewed as a strategy resulting in linguistic simplification. Selinker et al. (1975) classify the errors made by English-speaking learners of French into language transfer, over-generalization, and simplification. According to them, using one form for all tenses is an instance of simplification. Seeing that there is no difference between such errors and those which they classify as due to language transfer or over-generalization, Selinker et al. (ibid) say that simplification is related to language transfer and over-generalization. They go a step further to say that it may be more fruitful to consider simplification as the 'super-ordinate strategy' with overgeneralization and transfer as types of simplification. However, this confusion may be cleared by viewing this 'super-ordinate strategy' as a step that the learner takes to solve his learning and communication problems, that is, task simplification. Thus, language learners rely on their first language as well as on what they know from the target language in order to simplify the learning and communication task. Hence, linguistic simplification (e.g. omission of certain elements) is one of the many surface manifestations of the two strategies of interlingual and intralingual transfer.

3. Transfer and Other Strategies

Mukattash (1981) de-emphasizes the role of interlingual transfer by suggesting simplification as a reason for the omission of the copula by Arabic speakers. He presents the following examples: *Where uncle Nat?, Why you smiling?, What you going to do tomorrow*? However, the omission of the copula in these cases may be due to the children's inability to grasp minor details in the speech of adults due to their cognitive immaturity, (e.g. the contracted forms of *is* and *are*). Mukattash (ibid) goes on to give yet another reason based on Richards (1974): similar omissions have been observed in the interlanguage of second or foreign language learners with different native languages. However, as Ellis (1985) says, commission of the same error by learners with different native languages cannot be taken as evidence that the error is intralingual. As explained earlier, the same error (e.g. omission of the present auxiliary verb "is/are") may be made by students for two or more for different reasons, (Mahmoud, 1998, 2000, 2002). Wong and Choo (1983) experimented with learners from two different native languages assuming that errors due to interlingual transfer would be different while the developmental ones would be shared by all learners. Many errors were found to be similar as a result of the similarities between the learners' unrelated native languages.

When we refer to the language learner's use of a reduced system as 'simplification', we should not lose sight of the other communication strategies such as 'message reduction' where the learner's linguistic means fall short of achieving his communicative goal. This is a situation where the leaner would wish to expand and not 'simplify' the target language. For instance, a learner who wanted to say "*I saw a serious traffic accident yesterday.*", said "*I saw accident yesterday.*", and tried to fill in the gaps by body language and sound imitation. Was he trying to simplify the English language? A communication strategy such as 'message adjustment' where language learners use general words such as "*nice*" and "*flower*" instead of "*friendly*" and "*rose*" respectively is not, of course, intended to simplify the language.

4. Teachers vs Learners

'Simplification' in language learning should be reserved for cases where caretakers communicate with a child using simple vocabulary and short sentences aided by intonation, body language, pauses, repetitions and context clues following the 'here-and-now' principle. Adults also resort to 'baby talk' for the sake of communication. The child's cognitive limitations necessitate adults' simplification of language to sustain communication in a situation where the child faces two types of complexity: formal (syntactic) complexity and cognitive (semantic) complexity. The child's reduced language (the use of content words without function words or inflections) reflects his cognitive limitations. Being such good 'language teachers', caretakers gradually and smoothly lead the child along the continuum of linguistic development from simplification to expansion after careful assessment of the child's proficiency level at each stage of development. As for adult second or foreign language learners, the cognitive complexity problem is solved. They need to find linguistic forms and structures for the concepts they already know in their mother tongue. The principle of making use of what is already known is not

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confined to concepts; it also applies to the transfer of linguistic forms from the first and second language to solve the formal complexity problem. The second language learner's cognitive maturity and linguistic creativity are behind the use of various compensatory communication strategies which lead to an interlanguage characterized by errors of omission, addition, substitution and mis-ordering. The errors of insertion of redundant linguistic elements may be more than those of omission depending on the nature of transfer, In this case, it will be an over-simplification to say that 'simplification' is a learning strategy whereby learners try to reduce the target language system.

5.Conclusion

Language learners do not have the complex linguistic system that they can simplify. The reduced system used by the children learning the mother tongue is due to their cognitive limitations. In case of second or foreign language learners, the language transfer strategy leads to different types of error including omission of linguistic elements as well addition of some others. Thus, second or foreign language learners, like first language learners, use a reduced language in their attempt to learn and communicate in the target language, but not to simplify it. Those who simplify the target language are the caretakers who strife to communicate with the child. What learners actually simplify is the task of learning and communicating in that language. Linguistic simplification is not a strategy; it is the result of the learner's use of various learning and communication strategies. It could be a 'teaching' strategy, not a 'learning' strategy. Thus, caretakers and language teachers 'simplify' the language whereas language learners 'simplify' the learning task.

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