# Interlanguage

*Forty years later*

Edited by
ZhaoHong Han
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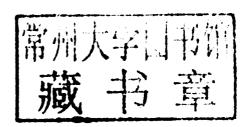*Edited by*

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John Benjamins Publishing Company

Amsterdam / Philadelphia

∞<sup>TM</sup> The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences – Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI z39.48-1984.

# Acknowledgements

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# Introduction

ZhaoHong Han and Elaine Tarone

Few works in our field – second language acquisition (SLA) – can endure multiple reads, but Selinker's (1972) "Interlanguage" is a clear exception. Written at the inception of the field, this paper delineates a disciplinary scope, asks penetrating questions, advances daring hypotheses, and proposes a first-ever coherent conceptual and empirical framework that inspired, and has continued to inspire, SLA research.

Sparked by a heightened interest in this founding text on its 40th anniversary, in 2012 a group of scholars convened at *The 2nd Teachers College, Columbia University Roundtable in Second Language Studies (TCCRISLS)* to examine and contemplate extrapolations of the seminal text for the past, the present, and the future of SLA research. The papers delivered at that forum, written out, reviewed, and then revised, are contained in the present volume.

This book is as much about history as it is about the present and the future of the field of SLA. The themes covered herein run the gamut from the theoretical to the empirical to the pedagogical. In ten chapters, scholars confirm, expand, and/or challenge the original conceptions articulated in Selinker (1972). Each chapter offers a prism through which one can view the evolution both of a specific domain and of the field writ large.

Chapter 1, by Elaine Tarone (Distinguished Teaching Professor, University of Minnesota, and author [with Bonnie Swierzbin] of *Exploring Learner Language* [2009, Oxford University Press]), provides a historical context for the "Interlanguage" paper. Recalling her perspective as a student of Selinker's, first at the University of Edinburgh in 1968 and later at the University of Washington in the early 1970s, Tarone deftly traces conceptual origins, explicates and highlights enduring themes, and explores influences on the 1972 paper. Many of the enduring themes she identifies are explored in depth in the ensuing chapters. Tarone contends that the best way to read the "Interlanguage" paper is as a series of foundational questions and possible answers, rather than as a proposed theory. These foundational questions include: What if the language produced by adult L2 learners has its own underlying system? What if adult interlanguages inevitably fossilize

(stabilize short of full identity with a target language)? She poses two of her own questions for future research: How do learners with little or no alphabetic literacy develop their interlanguages? And how do sociolinguistic forces within the speech community affect an individual's interlanguage (IL) development?

One prominent theme in the "Interlanguage" paper is language transfer, which Selinker suggests is one of five central cognitive processes making up a 'latent psychological structure,' largely responsible for the variable outcome of adult second language acquisition. In Chapter 2, Terence Odlin (Professor, Ohio State University, and author of *Language Transfer* [1989, Cambridge University Press]) picks up on Selinker's assertion of a need to predict IL development, especially in relation to language transfer. Reflecting on recent studies that seemingly enable predictions to be made for SLA in novel contexts, Odlin observes that Selinker's Latent Psychological Structure often takes meaning-based concerns into account in trying to create interlingual identifications between the grammatical systems of source and target languages. Odlin advances five sets of testable hypotheses for future research, cautioning, nevertheless, that group tendencies often seem predictable but individual behavior is usually much less so, particularly in light of three factors: multilingualism, idiosyncrasy in forms, and idiosyncrasy in meanings.

A considerable portion of the "Interlanguage" paper is dedicated to proposing and presenting arguments for the construct of fossilization, framed as a mechanism as well as a behavioral artifact of second language (L2) acquisition. Chapter 3, by ZhaoHong Han (Professor, Teachers College, Columbia University, and author of *Fossilization in Adult Second Language Acquisition* [2004, Multilingual Matters]), revisits the construct, in light of two widely observed phenomena of SLA: inter-learner and intra-learner variable success. Han claims, *inter alia*, that fossilization occurs in juxtaposition with acquisition, underscoring that fossilization research is less about revealing deviances from the presumed norm than about addressing a dual cognitive problem: Why is it that in spite of propitious conditions, development is cut short in some areas? And why is the developmental interruption made most apparent when learners attempt self-expressions in the target language?

The issues of transfer and fossilization, both inter-related, are also the focus in Chapter 4 by Silvina Montrul (Professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Editor of *Second Language Research*), but this time, creatively in the context of bilingualism and multilingualism. Montrul expounds on the impact of the Interlanguage Hypothesis on contemporary SLA research within a Universal Grammar framework and discusses how this research, in turn, helps refine and elucidate much of Selinker's (1972) original proposal. The author argues that interlanguage constructs such as transfer, simplification, and fossilization are neither

unique to SLA nor defective processes, behaviors, or states of knowledge; rather, these are natural characteristics of any type of bilingualism and multilingualism, found in both individuals (e.g., heritage speakers' acquisition of their first language) and communities (e.g., Spanish immigrants in the U.S.), and can even be drivers of language change.

Selinker (1972) argued that successful acquisition (i.e., achieving native-like competence) cannot come about through instruction. In Chapter 5, Bill VanPatten (Professor, Michigan State University, and author of *Input Processing and Grammar Instruction* [1996, Ablex]) supports Selinker's position, contending that formal instruction focused on explicit rules has a limited role to play in shaping L2 learners' underlying competence (their mental representation of language). Rather, growth in competence results from complex interplays among input, language specific mechanisms, and input processing mechanisms. Reviewing research on staged development (including U-shaped behavior) and on poverty of the stimulus, VanPatten argues that there is no evidence that explicit rule instruction (in contrast to input processing) affects the L2 learner's underlying representation of language at any stage, and that interlanguages are constructed independently of rule instruction all along the way.

Following Selinker's principle that learners should be observed while engaging in "meaningful performance in a second language" (1972: 210), in Chapter 6 Kathleen Bardovi-Harlig (Professor, Indiana University at Bloomington, and author of *Tense and Aspect in SLA* [2000, Blackwell]) uses a functional approach to interlanguage analysis that investigates form and meaning relationships, and the way these change over time in the developing interlanguage. She identifies two ways to track these relationships: 1) A form-to-function analysis tracks a linguistic form (e.g., morpheme, or tense-aspect form) and its changing meanings, and 2) a function-to form, or concept-oriented analysis tracks a function or meaning (e.g. expression of past time), and the changing linguistic forms used to express it. Taking a primarily concept-oriented approach, Bardovi-Harlig explores (a) the expression of temporality, (b) pragmatics, and (c) conventional expressions, showing that interlanguage exhibits both systematicity and innovation in all three areas.

Selinker's (1972) principle that the best data for study of interlanguage is that produced during meaningful performance in a second language is contested in Chapter 7 by Susan Gass (University Distinguished Professor, Michigan State University, and author [with Alison Mackey] of the *Handbook of Second Language Acquisition* [2012, Routledge]), and Charlene Polio (Professor, Michigan State University, and Associate Editor of *Modern Language Journal*). Gass and Polio provide a historical and dynamic perspective on the question of what counts as relevant data, noting alternative views to Selinker's (e.g. Corder, 1973). The authors make the case for multiple data sources in the study of interlanguage,

arguing that data that were disallowed in the 1970s should not be in today's research environment. Reviewing research studies that used grammaticality judgments and artificial language both before and after Selinker (1972), they show the value of such data types in exploring theoretical constructs, such as indeterminacy and ultimate attainment, which cannot be studied solely using the type of data Selinker argued for 40 years ago.

In Chapter 8, Lourdes Ortega (Professor, Georgetown University, and Editor of *Language Learning*) explores and questions Selinker's (1972) admonition to pursue description prior to explanation in second language study. Through a chronicle of SLA studies on negation from a variety of theoretical perspectives, Ortega frames the relationship between description and explanation as a function of the theoretical or methodological approach adopted by the given study. Building on her historical review, Ortega calls for a rethinking of several topics: the definition and scope of research on variation, native language versus universal influences on interlanguage, and what she terms an "ambivalent relationship" in the field among constructs like accuracy, development, and native speaker competence.

Chapter 9, by Diane Larsen-Freeman (Professor, University of Michigan, and author [with Lynne Cameron] of *Complex Systems and Applied Linguistics* [2008, Oxford University Press]), challenges the idea of defining successful learning as "the reorganization of linguistic material from an IL to identity with a particular TL" (Selinker, 1972, p. 22). She contests the assumption of such a normative, telic "endpoint," arguing that if interlanguage is a complex adaptive system, there is no "endpoint" to its development; it is an open system that is always changing, with no goal to its development. The author acknowledges that there are conflicts between this view and the unavoidably normative aim of pedagogy and language assessment. She ends her chapter by exploring activities that teachers can engage with to reconcile the non-telic nature of language learning with the normative demands of teaching.

Finally, coming full circle, in Chapter 10 Larry Selinker (Professor, New York University) explores and exemplifies three major themes related to the "Interlanguage" paper: its place in the intellectual history of scholars studying second language acquisition; the present implications of viewing interlanguage as a linguistic system in its own right; and the need in future scholarship for a "deep interlanguage semantics." Selinker ends his chapter with advice for young scholars of interlanguage: He urges them (and all of us) to cultivate an active and independent intellectual curiosity by constantly testing, or "doubting" currently accepted orthodoxies in interlanguage scholarship, even those he himself propounds. He stresses the value of finding good questions, and (in keeping with Talmudic logic) the importance of not ever discarding the full range of possible arguments and answers to the questions one asks.

As this book amply shows, over a span of four decades the field of SLA has evolved into a complex web of competing conceptions and practices. Yet, a strong consensus can be seen across the chapters in support of the foundational postulate in the "Interlanguage" paper, namely that learners build an independent linguistic system driven by a powerful internal, interfacing mechanism that, in turn, interacts with the environment in which learning occurs. Where researchers appear to part company is in the vantage points they choose for their pursuit of the common goal of understanding that system. The differences cannot be understated; in keeping with Selinker's advice (this volume) to cultivate open-mindedness, they exert an influence over fundamental questions such as: What constitutes SLA research? What should this research attempt to describe and explain? Questions that have emerged from within this volume are many, out of which ten practical ones stand out for us as editors:

1. What goals do second language learners have for their developing linguistic systems?
2. How should interlanguage research take any such goals into account?
3. Should native speakers of the target language provide baseline data in L2 research? From which speech communities should they be sampled, and why?
4. Should interlanguage development be judged in terms of success or failure?
5. Does explicit rule-based instruction facilitate, hinder, or fail to affect interlanguage development?
6. How does (lack of) alphabetic print literacy affect processes of interlanguage development?
7. How do sociolinguistic forces within the learner's speech community variably affect interlanguage development?
8. Should SLA researchers borrow theories from other disciplines, or build their own?
9. Is it possible or desirable to have a uniform theory of SLA, and agreed-upon definitions of acquisition? Why?
10. Should SLA research benefit from a conceptual separation between the theoretical and the applied?

We would like to leave these questions for the reader to contemplate while considering at his or her own pace the insights and perspectives provided by each chapter.

This book offers a resource to novices and experts alike in and beyond the field of SLA. By virtue of revisiting the "Interlanguage" paper, a founding text, in the company of 10 current scholars, the book sets a precedent for helping advance disciplinary inquiry through identifying and mining its scholarly heritage and legacy. It is our hope that this exercise will be continued as the field advances.

**Foto 1.** Speakers at the Interlanguage 40 Years Later Symposium



**Foto 2.** Elaine Tarone, Susan Gass, Miriam Eisenstein, Larry Selinker, Jan Hulstijn

# Enduring questions from the Interlanguage Hypothesis

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This chapter claims that the Interlanguage Hypothesis is best understood, not as a theory of second language acquisition (SLA), but as a set of questions that motivate divergent answers and research programs. Selinker's (1972) basic question is whether there is a linguistic system that underlies the output of second language learners. Related questions that continue to stimulate research focus on: the relationship between first and second language acquisition, whether and how the linguistic systems formed in SLA fossilize, and whether and how learners' interlanguage use varies in different social situations. The chapter also considers related questions not addressed in Selinker (1972): the impact of alphabetic print literacy on interlanguage development, and whether interlanguages are features of speech communities.

## Introduction

In the Fall of 1968, as a graduate student in Edinburgh University's Applied Linguistics Department, I was privileged to witness the early stages of creation of the Interlanguage Hypothesis. As a Berkeley grad who had been transformed by the civil rights movement, I'd not been particularly successful in efforts to teach standard English to high school dropouts in an Urban League Street Academy in Harlem, and so I had set out to learn more about applied linguistics. That quest led me in the Fall of 1968 to be the only American in a cohort of 30 graduate students in Edinburgh, all of us studying applied linguistics to become better English as a Second Language (or English as a Second Dialect) professionals. The only other American in the program was a professor on Fulbright leave from the University of Washington: Larry Selinker.

As it turned out, I had left a social revolution in the States and walked into an intellectual revolution in the field of applied linguistics. Larry Selinker was in Edinburgh to work on a new construct he called "interlanguage" along with

Prof S.P. Corder, who had proposed something related called "transitional competence" (Corder, 1967). Together these ideas were going to revolutionize our understanding of the way adults learn second languages, and free second-language pedagogy from the chains of behaviorism, aligning it more with Chomsky's (then-new) theory of the way first languages are acquired. The central hypothesis of their work was that learner language was *not* a hodgepodge of errors all caused by the learner's native language (NL), but an autonomous linguistic system in its own right that evolved according to innate and probably universal processes.

Selinker had recently completed his Ph.D. at Georgetown under the direction of Robert Lado, who was still defending his (1957) behaviorist claim that *all* second-language (L2) learning difficulties were the result of the transfer of patterns from one linguistic system (the native language, or NL) to another (the target language (TL, or L2[1]). According to Lado, a contrastive analysis of linguistic differences between these two linguistic systems, the NL and the TL, could predict all such learning difficulties – and all errors. But Selinker 's dissertation, designed to test Lado's claim, had found that many errors in the language produced by learners of Hebrew could not in fact be explained by transfer from English NL. In other words, the behaviorist explanation for second-language acquisition did not account for all learner language data.

The evolving consensus in discussions at Edinburgh 1968–69 was that in the process of second-language acquisition, there were not two, but *three* linguistic systems of interest: native language, target language, and learner language. This third system, called a 'transitional competence' by Corder, and 'interlanguage' by Selinker, should be considered a linguistic system in its own right, and the object of as much serious linguistic study as the NL and the TL systems. Cognitive processes other than transfer might be at work in shaping this third linguistic system; researchers should be able to describe that "interlanguage" (IL), and through that research, the underlying cognitive processes that created that system. Almost no research of this type existed in 1968–69. At the end of the year, I was accepted into a graduate program in applied linguistics at the University of Washington in Seattle, where during the next three years, Larry Selinker continued to work on drafts of a publication ("the interlanguage paper") that was ultimately to be published in 1972. He continued to discuss the key concepts of interlanguage at length. In his graduate courses, as he led discussions he would read from and add to the manuscript he was drafting, presenting one or another of the themes he was working on and inviting questions: transfer (what other

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1.    In this chapter, the terms target language (TL) and second language (L2) are used interchangeably to refer to any language that is the target of acquisition after the learner has acquired a native language.

cognitive processes might there be?), fossilization (surely not every learner's language fossilized! Did the learner language systems of children stop developing the way adults' seemed to?) interlingual identifications (how does the learner understand the 3 linguistic systems she is struggling with?), the data to be used to research IL (do learners' grammaticality judgments accurately access the rules of interlanguage? Why or why not?). In class, I was privileged to join Larry's students[2] in discussing these questions, asking our own, arguing over possible answers. Now and then Larry would scribble a student comment on a little torn off piece of paper and tape that scrap to the growing collage, turning the whole thing sidewise, or upside down, to read his draft to us. Later the collage would be tidied up and published as Selinker (1972), the "interlanguage paper", and those scraps of paper would become footnotes framed as "personal communications" from named students[3].

In other words, the interlanguage paper was not so much written as it was gradually assembled over a period of several years as a set of possible hypotheses and questions, emerging gradually out of extensive co-construction and collaboration, arguments and debates, between Larry and anyone he could get to join the discussion. And although the resulting publication, Selinker (1972), may not be a tightly organized piece of prose, I hope to show that the themes that were identified in that paper as a result of that process have been enduring and lively ones that have continued to resurface for the last 40 years in research on second-language acquisition. I would argue that the essential role of the interlanguage paper in our field has been to identify core issues and questions to interest, stimulate or goad researchers to go out to gather empirical data, to try to find out what adult language learners were really doing when they learned another language.

The interlanguage (IL) hypothesis is not really a theory, I would argue, if we think of a theory as a proposal that converges upon a single set of answers to some question. Rather, the IL hypothesis asserts a foundational question, namely: What if learner language is a linguistic system? From this implied question, more questions arise, as well as different possible answers to those questions. In this way, we can understand the IL hypothesis as a proposal asking us to think as widely as possible about what the nature of a possible IL linguistic system might be, and how we can gain insight into that by gathering empirical data. Conceived of as questions,

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2.   Among others: Chris Adjémian, Hal Edwards, Tom Huckin, and Robert Vroman (later Bley-Vroman).

3.   Few scholars today are as conscientious about documenting and acknowledging their students' contributions to their thinking.

not answers[4], the themes advanced in Selinker (1972) have served to stimulate a respectable amount of research and theory-building.

Many of the original themes in the IL paper can certainly be recognized as related to some of the *answers* proposed in the various theories of second-language acquisition that have been proposed and have generated research since 1972. But while those various SLA theories have risen or fallen in popularity over that period, the central questions of the interlanguage paper, generating different possible answers, seem to continue to generate interest, research, and theory-building. Those enduring themes were explored in some depth in discussions at the Teachers College, Columbia University Interlanguage Symposium of 2012 and are reflected in the different chapters in this volume, in light of some of the research data and theoretical ruminations they have generated. In the present chapter, I provide a brief overview of five interrelated themes – three themes explicitly laid out in the original interlanguage paper, and two that have surfaced in subsequent exploration of the Interlanguage Hypothesis. In keeping with their origins in Selinker (1972), I have presented each theme as a question rather than an answer.

**Selected, interrelated themes originating in Selinker (1972)**

**1.  What if adult L2 acquisition is different from child L1 acquisition? How, and why?**

As noted earlier, the IL hypothesis began to develop very soon after Chomsky (1965) had proposed a powerful theory about the way children learn to speak their native language: born with an innate knowledge of language (UG) that engages innate acquisition processes, children are (with rare exceptions) completely successful in acquiring the ability to speak their native language. One of the central questions raised by Selinker (1972) suggests that the processes of adult second language acquisition must be different from the child L1 acquisition described by Chomsky. This is because the outcomes of child first language acquisition and adult second language acquisition are dramatically different: very few adults acquire a second language perfectly, an outcome that children seem to effortlessly and universally achieve in acquiring L1.

The IL hypothesis postulates that one major reason for this could be that adults, unlike children, do not have access to Universal Grammar (UG)[5], and so they resort to other kinds of cognitive processes to internalize a TL. Selinker (1972)

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4.    As Selinker (this volume) makes clear, this focus on good questions together with the variety of possible answers to them, has deep roots in the Talmudic tradition.

5.    It was then referred to as the Language Acquisition Device, or LAD.

referred to this set of general cognitive processes as a "latent psychological struc-ture (LPS)." But another major reason could also be that adult L2 learners, by defi-nition, already have acquired one language, and that early-learned language sys-tem could influence, or interfere with, the formation of subsequent language systems (see Odlin, this volume). In other words, both LPS and NL transfer[6] are cognitive processes engaged in adult SLA that are absent in child first language acquisition (see Selinker & Lakshmanan, 1992).

An early debate about IL that followed from these possibilities had to do with whether IL is a natural language, one that is acquired by processes of UG, and whose constructions follow language universals. Corder (1967) felt that adult L2 learners were capable of beginning all over again with UG to acquire L2s de novo, engaging exactly the same universal processes used in acquiring their L1s. Selinker (1972) suggested a different possibility: that L2 learners could be beginning the acquisition process not with UG but with their LPS. If so, IL was not a natural language and its constructions did not have to follow language universals. Adjémian (1976) proposed a compromise position, arguing that ILs might be natural lan-guages, but ones whose grammars possessed a distinctive characteristic. He pro-posed that IL grammars were "peculiar in being permeable;" this permeability was what allowed learners to incorporate forms from their native language and to gen-eralize or otherwise "distort" target language constructions when communicating. Adjémian argued that because ILs possess this unique characteristic of permeabil-ity, learner judgments of the grammaticality of IL utterances could not be trusted, and needed to be supplemented with large amounts of specific data from learner performance. An ongoing question related to UG and IL is whether adults have full, partial, or no access at all to UG in second language acquisition. This debate obviously has continued over the subsequent decades in a range of different ways Is there a critical period for language acquisition, after which adults have no access at all to UG (see Birdsong, 1999, 2006; Hakuta et al., 2003)? Or, in acquiring a language after the first, do adults have full, partial or no access to UG (see Montrul, this volume)? And do the circumstances affect degree of access (Eckman, Bell & Nelson, 1984; Eubank, 1991; Gass, 1989; Schachter, 1996; Sharwood Smith & Truscott, 2005; White, 2003)?

As Selinker (1972) focused on similarities and differences between adult L2 acquisition and child L1 acquisition, it also set up a dialectic between innatist UG explanations and cognitivist ones. That dialectic has been a deep and productive one. Are universal, language-specific processes of the sort specified in UG required

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6. An anonymous reviewer notes that UG access and NL transfer were considered related in early debates about UG in SLA, and that the so-called no-access and indirect access positions reflect this thinking.