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# Adult language acquisition: cross-linguistic perspectives

## Volume I Field methods



*Edited by*  
CLIVE PERDUE

Written by members of the European Science Foundation project  
on adult language acquisition



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This work presents the methodology and results of an international research project on second language acquisition by adult immigrants. This project went beyond other studies in at least three respects: in the number of languages studied simultaneously; in the organisation of co-ordinated longitudinal studies in different linguistic environments; and in the type and range of linguistic phenomena investigated. It placed the study of second languages and inter-ethnic discourse on a firm empirical footing.

Volume I explains and evaluates the research design adopted for the project. Volume II summarises the cross-linguistic results, under two main headings: native/non-native speaker interaction, and language production. Together they present the reader with a complete research procedure, and in doing so, make explicit the links between research questions, methodology and results.

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**Adult language acquisition: cross-linguistic perspectives**

**Volume I**

**Field methods**



The **European Science Foundation** is an association of its fifty-nine member research councils, academies and institutions devoted to basic scientific research in twenty-one countries. The ESF brings European scientists together to work on topics of common concern, to co-ordinate the use of expensive facilities, and to discover and define new endeavours that will benefit from a co-operative approach.

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This publication arises from the work of the ESF Programme on Second Language Acquisition by Adult Immigrants.

*C'est pour*

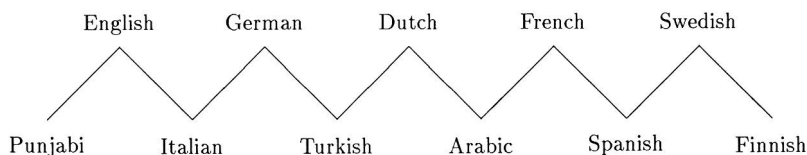
*Lara*

# Preface

These volumes present the results of a large research project which investigated adult language acquisition, *Second Language Acquisition by Adult Immigrants*. The project set out to study the structure and success of the acquisition process in adult learners, and to discover the explanatory factors behind these phenomena. It also aimed to place the study of second languages and inter-ethnic discourse on a firm empirical footing. To achieve these aims, it undertook a co-ordinated study of ten different linguistic cases of second language acquisition in five industrialised European countries: France, Germany, Great Britain, The Netherlands and Sweden.

The research design made it possible to make systematic cross-linguistic statements from a pairwise comparison of the acquisition of one target language (TL) by speakers of different mother tongues (or 'source languages': SL), as well as the acquisition of different TLs by different speakers of one SL. The organisation by language of the project is as follows:

## Target languages



## Source languages

The bulk of the data analysed in the project's different research areas (see below) comes from longitudinal case studies of four learners from each language pairing: four Italian learners of English, four Italian learners of German, four Turkish learners of German, and so on. Short biographies of these learners can be found in Appendix B of Volume I. These learners were contacted as soon as possible after their arrival in the respective target country, and their progress was monitored over two and a half years by the expedient of regular,

tape-recorded or video-recorded encounters, at four- to six-week intervals. During these encounters, they participated in a whole range of data collection techniques designed to elicit data relevant for the different research areas. In order to assess any possible effect of such systematic observation of the acquisition process of these learners, data were collected and compared from a matched group of learners of Dutch, French and Swedish using similar techniques, but on three occasions only, at the beginning, middle and end of the longitudinal study. Results from this 'control study' are reported in Volume I.

Six areas of research were chosen, in order to reflect the complex linguistic tasks such learners face in an environment where, initially, they interact with native speakers of an unknown language in situations where they have to make themselves understood. These areas are: *Ways of achieving understanding*, *Feedback in adult language acquisition*, *Reference to space*, *Reference to time*, and two aspects of the learners' problem of arranging words: *Word formation processes*, and *Utterance structure*. The results from these studies form Volume II of this work.

As far as second language studies are concerned, this project goes beyond previous research in the number of languages – both source and target – which are simultaneously studied, in the organisation of co-ordinated, longitudinal studies in these different linguistic environments, and in the range and type of linguistic phenomena investigated. Six research teams from the Universities of Brabant, Göteborg, Heidelberg, Paris, Provence, and the Polytechnic of West London were involved. (These teams are given in Appendix A of Volume I.) The question of comparability in such a large-scale undertaking was taken very seriously in initial planning, and a year was spent in piloting all aspects of the research methodology. This work resulted in the writing of a 'Field Manual', whose main purpose was to provide a comprehensive guide to the aims and methods of the project for participating researchers. The interest shown in this manual by researchers not involved in the project resulted in its subsequent publication, *Second Language Acquisition by Adult Immigrants: A Field Manual*, Ed. C. Perdue, Newbury House, Rowley, Mass. 1984. One of the functions of Volume I of the present work is to provide a critical evaluation of the project's research design as it was set out in the Field Manual, in order both to introduce advanced students to these problems, and to inform future research.

After piloting, the main project started in 1982, and lasted until 1988. The first three years were spent collecting data and doing pilot analyses, while the second period was devoted to the systematic

transcription and analysis of the data, and writing the final research reports. The main body of the data has since been stored on the computer in the form of a data archive, which is described in chapter 7 of Volume I. The data archive is a public facility, and these volumes also serve to invite any reader interested in doing research on spoken (first and second) language use, or in using longitudinal studies as a basis for language training programmes, to avail him- or herself of these data.

Many hands built this project up from a gleam in Willem Levelt's eye, to six lengthy final reports and a data archive which includes copies of all published work based on data collected during its course. Authors of the individual chapters of these volumes are given in the appropriate places, and their affiliations may be found in Appendix A (chapters without such specification were written by the editor). The editor wishes to emphasise the stimulating, sometimes conflictual, but always rewarding years of working together which lie behind these volumes, which should be seen as the product of teamwork. During the editing process, some individuals took the trouble to read and comment on different chapters, and the help of Angelika Becker, Mary Carroll, Roeland van Hout, Eric Kellerman and Wolfgang Klein is gratefully acknowledged. All remaining imperfections and inaccuracies are of course to be laid at the editor's door.

# Acknowledgements

These volumes are the outcome of an enterprise which came into being eleven years ago thanks to the unstinting efforts of Sir John Lyons, and Professor Willem Levelt, of the Humanities and Social Sciences Committees of the European Science Foundation (Strasbourg). It was an additional activity of the European Science Foundation, and the Max-Planck-Institut für Psycholinguistik (Nijmegen) provided the central co-ordination. Ten member organisations of the ESF contributed financially to the project. They are: the National Fund for Scientific Research (Belgium), the Academy of Finland, the National Centre for Scientific Research (France), the Max Planck Society (Germany), the Netherlands Organisation for the Advancement of Pure Research, the Norwegian Research Council for Science and the Humanities, the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Council (Sweden), the Swiss National Science Foundation and the Economic and Social Research Council (United Kingdom). Moreover, the Dutch, French, German, Norwegian and Swiss organisations just mentioned generously gave extra funds to allow the data archive, the *European Science Foundation's Second Language Data Bank*, to become operational. The project also benefitted from the help and support of the ESF's secretaries for the Social Sciences.

A Steering Committee of outside specialists appointed by the ESF (see Appendix A) gave freely of their expertise, and were kind enough to give detailed comments on the six final research reports before they were submitted in 1988. The staff of the Max-Planck-Institut für Psycholinguistik have given generously of their time, energy and – seemingly unlimited – good-natured cheerfulness throughout the project. Special thanks are due to Sylvia Aal for the painstaking preparation of this manuscript.

The contribution of the project's researchers who are not authors of chapters in these volumes should not go unacknowledged, as their role in this piece of collaborative research was just as important.

Thanks are due, above all, to the learners introduced in chapter

3 of Volume I, who allowed us to observe their language and life in a strange country over a period of nearly three years. The research presented here would obviously not have been possible without their co-operation, which is acknowledged with immense gratitude.

## A short note on presentation

Authors' names whose work is cited in Volume I as belonging to the ESF project's bibliography, that is, published work stored in the data archive, are prefixed with *ESF*. Work by authors not so prefixed may be found in the *References* section.

The transcription conventions of the data archive are given in detail in Appendix C of Volume I. They have been somewhat simplified in the body of the text in order to improve the legibility of examples. The following conventions may be noted: + represents a short pause, and / a self-correction; sequences in another language than the TL are enclosed in \* \*, sequences in broad phonetic transcription are within [ ], and ' ' enclose English glosses of the examples. The glosses are intended to give the reader an idea of the meaning of the example, and are not intended as a grammatical analysis.

The abbreviations 'source/target country', for 'country where the source/target language was/is learned' are used, since some other possible expressions, such as 'mother country' or 'host country' have connotations which do not always correspond to the experiences of the learners studied here. Finally, the generic learner is sometimes a 'he', sometimes a 'she', depending upon whether the hands behind the pen of a particular chapter are predominantly male or female.

# Contents



Preface	xi
Acknowledgements	xiv
A short note on presentation	xvi
1 Aims of the ESF project	1
1.1 Three questions	1
1.2 The <i>learner variety</i> approach	2
1.3 Question I: Determining factors	4
1.4 Question II: Order of acquisition, speed and success	8
1.5 Question III: Language in use	9
1.6 Summary: aims and research areas	12
2 Previous longitudinal studies	14
2.1 Introduction	14
2.2 Extrinsic explanations	16
2.3 Intrinsic explanations	21
2.4 Summary of results	33
2.5 Conclusion	37
3 Who are the adult immigrants?	39
3.1 The 'ideal' informant	40
3.2 Real informants	42
3.3 Conclusion	51
4 Research areas: some communicative tasks for the learner	52
4.1 Introduction	52
4.2 Interaction	55
4.3 Production	61
4.4 Conclusion	70
5 Research design	72
5.1 Piloting	72

5	Research design	72
5.1	Piloting	72
5.2	Cross-linguistic design	76
5.3	Longitudinal design	84
5.4	Conclusion: the research design as multiple controls	91
6	Data collection techniques	93
6.1	Introduction	93
6.2	Interaction	94
6.3	Production	99
6.4	Conclusion	106
7	Transcription, storage and retrieval of data	108
7.1	Transcription	109
7.2	Organisation of the data bank	114
7.3	Programmes for computer-assisted analysis	116
7.4	Conclusion	129
8	Measuring language acquisition	131
8.1	Type and quantity of feedback use as a measure of language proficiency	133
8.2	Richness and variety in the developing lexicon	145
8.3	The influence of socio-biographical factors	164
8.4	The control group study	173
	Appendix A: Steering Committee and researchers	186
	Appendix B: the learners	189
	Appendix C: sample transcripts	211
	References	226
	The ESF-SLDB bibliography	233
	Author index	247
	Subject index	249

# 1 Aims of the ESF project

## 1.1 Three questions

This project examines the second language acquisition of adults who arrived to settle in industrialised European countries for economic or political reasons. In as far as such learners manage to acquire the language of the country of immigration, they do so largely through everyday interaction with their new language environment rather than through formal tuition. This language acquisition takes place in a context characterised by social, educational and linguistic problems. The project set out to study some of the latter, in the hope and conviction that a better understanding of these would eventually contribute to a better understanding of social and educational issues.

So far as social issues are concerned, the cases of acquisition studied are representative of the linguistically most important immigrant communities of Western Europe in the 1980s (communities which are moreover often numerically more important than regionally-based autochthonal minority language communities). They typify the problems of dealing with a linguistic environment on unequal terms. The study of such asymmetrical discourse, where the non-native learner has to deal with the socially dominant language and its representatives, can be seen as a contribution to the study of inter-ethnic communication (and misunderstandings), and of the links between language, social position and disadvantage.

As for educational issues, a possible definition of language pedagogy would be that it is an attempt to intervene in a naturally occurring process in order to make this process more efficient. From this point of view, the project should be seen as another in a series of studies (see chapter 2 for an appraisal) which describe and explain the acquisition process in an everyday social setting, so that pedagogical intervention may be better informed.

The project concentrates on linguistic issues: it investigates three general and inter-related questions about second language acquisition

by adult immigrants, set out in its Field Manual as follows:

- I. the factors on which acquisition depends;
- II. the general structure of second language acquisition with respect to
  - a. the order in which elements of the language are acquired and
  - b. the speed and success of the acquisition process;
- III. the characteristics of communication between native and non-native speakers of a language. (ESF:Perdue 1984:3)

These volumes have a double purpose: to explain how the project set about investigating the above questions, and to present the answers it was able to formulate. In Volume I, the approach we take to the study of adult second language acquisition (ALA) is explained: why we studied the discourse activity of individual learners over time (chapter 5) and the criteria motivating our choice of learner (chapter 3); what aspects of this activity were studied (chapter 4) and the techniques we used (chapter 6); why comparative studies of learners of different languages were undertaken (chapter 5). Volume II gives, in condensed form, the cross-linguistic results of the six main research areas of the project, grouped under two headings: native/non-native speaker interaction, and language production. These results were originally submitted to the ESF in the form of research reports.

We thus present the reader with a complete research procedure, and in doing so, try to make the links between research questions, methodology and results as explicit as possible. The reader should then have the means to assess the potential of such a procedure for him- or herself. This introductory chapter will be devoted to a discussion of the three initial aims of the project in turn; the discussion also introduces the research areas, and serves as a menu for subsequent chapters. An effort will be made throughout Volume I to evaluate the initial aims of the project in terms of what it was possible to achieve, so that readers may draw their own lessons for future research. In this respect, Volume I serves as an updated Field Manual, as promised in the preface of the original in 1984.

## 1.2 *The learner variety approach*

The approach taken by the project corresponds closely to what is most often called the 'interlanguage' approach (Selinker 1972), which