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The emancipation of the language learner[1]

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Abstract

The general trend in language education over the years has been to ascribe to language learners increasing power and responsibility for their own learning. While this is commendable, the autonomy of learners is still constrained by views of language that see learners as being mere "hosts" of another's language. Such views restrict learners to roles as language learners who make errors not language users who innovate. This article argues for a more enlightened view of language and of learners, one inspired by a complexity theory perspective. It also proposes that such a perspective is respectful of learner agency.

Keywords: human agency, complexity theory, learner autonomy, errors/innovations

I will begin with an account of the evolution of views of the language learner. It is a personal account, drawing upon my experience in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), or, what I prefer to call these days, second language development. I will suggest that over the last 50 years or so, the view of the language learner has changed considerably. The general trend has been towards increasing empowerment of the learner. However, I will point to one obstacle that prevents the full emancipation of the language learner – and that is, ironically, a disenfranchising view of language. I will recommend an alternative view of language, one inspired by complexity theory, and I will conclude by asserting that complexity theory respects human agency, a point that is often misunderstood.

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An Evolutionary View of the Language Learner

Fifty years ago was the time at which our understanding of learning was influenced by behaviorism. According to behaviorist accounts of second language development, the learners' role was limited to repeating sentence patterns after the teacher, mimicking the teacher's model. In addition, it was seen to be important for the teacher to prevent learners from committing errors, which might result in the establishment of habits that would be difficult to overcome. One way to prevent errors was to control learners' production. This was accomplished through drilling, during which teachers corrected and reinforced learners' performance. In short, the learners followed the teacher's lead, taking little initiative, responding to environmental stimuli, and developing L2 habits by overcoming L1 habits through restricted practice.

During the second half of the 20th century, the cognitive revolution was launched. The relevance of behaviorist psychology for language was disputed, most famously in Chomsky's review of B. F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* (1957) in 1959. It was at this time that the field of SLA in its modern form came into being. It was founded on the revolutionary idea that learners were not passive, but rather were actively involved in their own learning – inducing rules from the input data, generating and testing hypotheses, corroborating, modifying, or refuting them.

It was a revolution, indeed, one that is still very much with us. Most SLA researchers point to the genesis of its influence in Corder's (1967) suggestion that there was a "built-in" syllabus in learners, an idea presumably influenced by Chomsky's notion of an innate universal grammar. To this, Selinker (1972) added the construct of interlanguage, a transitional linguistic system, activated by a "psychological structure latent in the brain." Also highly influential at this time was a longitudinal study conducted by first language acquisition researcher Roger Brown (1973). His study of the developing language of three children learning English as their native language found that there was a highly regular acquisition order for 14 English grammatical morphemes. Building on this finding, SLA researchers soon claimed that there was an acquisition order common to *all* English language learners, despite the fact that they spoke different native languages (Dulay & Burt, 1973). This was revolutionary at a time when heretofore most L2 behavior was thought to be shaped by the L1.

At the same time, there were other developments that expanded on the view of the learner as a cognitive being. Certainly one of them was the effect of affect, most famously, perhaps, in the work of Schumann (1978), who argued that social factors and affective variables cluster into a single variable, which was the major causal variable in SLA. Such research continues to this

day, inspired by the second major question in SLA:[2] the question of differential success. Researchers tackling this question seek to account for the observation that not all learners are uniformly successful in acquiring a second language. Research on individual differences appeals to learner traits such as motivation, attitude, aptitude, personality, and age.

Cognitivism and individual difference research continue to remain influential in SLA, contributing to our understanding of the active role played by learners and their dispositions. Further, it has inspired much research within an interactional approach, whereby researchers look for connections between the input that learners are exposed to and their output, or the language that learners produce. Researchers study how learners process input and how their interlanguage develops as a consequence. Seliger (1977) was perhaps the first SLA researcher to imbue learners with agency in this regard. Learners could generate their own input, he claimed, not merely passively receive it from others. Seliger's distinction between high input generators and low input generators was an important addition to the list of individual differences.

What has been called "the social turn" (after Block, 2003) followed from the recognition that SLA researchers need to concern themselves not only with language learning as an individual and primarily cognitive process, but also as a sociohistorically situated phenomenon. Socioculturalists, conversational analysts, and ethnomethodologists took the lead in arguing that individual cognition follows from social interaction. Lantolf and Thorne (2007) noted that sociocultural theory does not separate the individual from the social. Instead, sociocultural theory holds that "the individual emerges from social interaction and as such is always fundamentally a social being" (p. 213). Other important offshoots of the awareness of learner as a social being came from research on the structure of conversation and pragmatic competence, among others.

Another development, whereby the language learner is seen as a political being, has been with us for some time – certainly since Paolo Freire's (1970) groundbreaking work on teaching literacy to occupants of Brazil's favelas. The political dimension of the language learner has been more recently boosted by work on critical pedagogy (e.g., Norton & Toohey, 2004), where learners who have been perceived to be disenfranchised are taught to think critically about their problems and experiences and the social context in which they are embedded.

Most recently in SLA, there is work dedicated to understanding embodied cognition. Cognitive linguistics sees the functional imperative of meaning-making as structured by the nature of our perceptual processes (e.g., Lakoff,

[2] Evelyn Hatch (1974) gave us two – leading to a bifurcated research agenda.

1987; Langacker, 1987). Since these processes shape experience, and experience is a function of how our bodies interact with the world, the meanings that cognition develops are also embodied (Holme, 2010). In SLA, Atkinson, Churchill, Nishino, & Okada (2007) have contributed to this area with their understanding of how physical alignment plays a role.

Then, too, SLA researchers, such as Schumann (1999), have suggested that there is an important physiological dimension to the learner that has not been given its due. Schumann and his students have been studying the neurobiology of SLA. They have proposed that the orbitofrontal cortex, the amygdala, and the body itself are involved in making personal and social decisions in normal conversational interaction and that these subserve decision-making in language use.

Making a case for "symbolic competence," Kramsch (2006, p. 251) offers a useful summation (and then some) of what I have written:

> Language learners are not just communicators and problem solvers, but whole persons with hearts, bodies, and minds, with memories, fantasies, loyalties, identities. Symbolic forms are not just items of vocabulary or communication strategies, but embodied experiences, emotional resonances, and moral imaginings.

What I have been proposing in this cursory treatment of the evolution of views of the language learner is that language learners have come to be characterized by more complete, more robust, more empowered profiles. Where once the environment was seen to be solely critical to learning success, with the learner having only a passive role, over the years, there has been a shift to seeing the language learner as a more cognitive, affective, interactional, social, political, embodied, neural, and symbolically competent person. Despite these advances, one obstacle remains before we can fully appreciate learner autonomy. This obstacle is a failure to appreciate the true nature of the explanandum, that is, language.

A Remaining Obstacle to Learner Emancipation

Kroskrity (2004) pointed out that underlying prevailing language ideologies, speakers of a given language were not seen as capable of being agents of linguistic change: "Rather than being viewed as partially aware or as potentially agentive, speakers – in Chomskyan models – were merely hosts for language" (p. 499). This was even truer of language learners.

Indeed, when language was perceived to be a closed system, a fixed target, then no matter what they did, language learners were disadvantaged to a certain extent. For example, a new linguistic form that a learner created might be considered an error, rather than an innovation. The goal of language instruction, although

never explicitly stated, was conformity to uniformity. But, such a goal, even if it is desirable, is not achievable (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008).

Thus, perhaps the last barrier to learner emancipation is to recognize that learners have the capacity to create their own patterns with meanings and uses (morphogenesis, following Larsen-Freeman, 1997) and to expand the meaning potential of a given language, not just to internalize a ready-made system. Such a view, of course, is compatible with my current theoretical commitment – to complexity theory as a metatheory, one which helps us to reframe our thinking.

Complex Dynamic Systems

Very briefly, I will introduce a complexity theory perspective on language. From such a perspective, language is a complex adaptive system. It is a system in which complexity is emergent, one in which language grows and organizes itself from the bottom up in an organic way.

Using their language resources, speakers "soft-assemble" (Thelen & Smith, 1994) language patterns on a given occasion. They cobble together their language resources, responding to the contingent demands and pressures of the communicative situation. They adapt their speech for the sake of their interlocutors. Through a process of coadaptation between and among interlocutors, language patterns emerge. They self-organize: "Self-organization refers to any set of processes in which order emerges from the interaction of the components of system without direction from external factors and without a plan of the order embedded in an individual component" (Mitchell, 2003, p. 6)

The patterns become stable through use, and are transformed with further usage. In this sense, we can see that language is constantly in flux. Certain patterns become preferred and stabilized; but the system is never static. Furthermore, there is "massive variation in all features at all times" (De Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007; Kretzschmar, 2009). This is true even of mature speakers, whose grammars have the potential to change as their experience changes (Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2009). Thus, linguistic signs are not "autonomous objects of any kind, either social or psychological," but are "contextualized products of the integration of various activities by individuals in particular communicative situations. It logically follows that they are continually created to meet new needs and circumstances . . ." (Toolan, 2003, p. 125).

It follows then that when it comes to language "there is no end and there is no state" (Larsen-Freeman, 2006). Again, I turn to Kramsch (2009, p. 247), who notes that complexity theory offers an ecological perspective on language education:

> An ecological approach to language education does not seek dialectical unity, or bounded analyses of discrete events, but on the contrary open-endedness and unfinalizability . . . It problematizes the notion of bounded speech communities and focuses our attention on open-ended, deterritorialized communicative practices rather than on the 'territorial boundedness' posited by the 'one language – one culture' assumption (Blommaert, 2005, p. 216).

Error or Innovation?

Kramsch's words make us wonder about the difference between an innovation and an error. From a complexity theory perspective, errors and innovations are both nonconforming productions. Both are responsible for language change. The difference between the two is that the latter is socially sanctioned. What follows are three examples of errors...or are they innovations?

(1) *Refudiate*

Sarah Palin, the 2008 Republican candidate for Vice President of the U.S., likely inadvertently coined a new word *refudiate* to bridge the gap between *refuse* and *repudiate*. She used it in a Fox News television interview on July 19, 2010. While it may well have been an unintentional slip, it is interesting to note that the *New Oxford American Dictionary* named it "the 2010 word of the year" (*The Los Angeles Times*, November 15, 2010). Clearly, the acceptability, or at least the attention given to a new form, depends on the perception of the social prominence of the speaker.

(2) *Watchale*

According to Wolfram (as cited in Cullinan, 2011), *watchale* means 'watch out.' It combines English *watch* and Spanish *mirale*. Such words, the product of contact between two languages, are said to be an example of linguistic hybridity. However a problem with the concept of hybridity, which Makoni and Makoni (2010) note, is that hybridity is predicated upon and privileges the notion of languages as discrete entities. This implies that one can deterermine where one language ends and the other begins. In contrast, Makoni and Makoni propose the term "vague linguistique," which acknowledges that speakers have access to diverse linguistic resources and use them in unpredictable ways. Their approach accords speakers agency in using "bits and pieces" of languages, even, or especially, when they have uneven proficiencies in these languages (Makoni & Makoni, 2010). Garcia (2009) refers to a similar practice as "translanguaging." Translanguaging is an act performed by bilinguals who access different linguistic

features from "autonomous languages" in order to maximize their communicative potential. While traditional analyses of this practice might call it "codeswitching," Garcia claims that translanguaging goes beyond it in its creativity.

A related point made by Wolfram, Kohn, and Callahan-Price (2011) is that accommodations that speakers make to new forms are often continuous and incremental, not a discrete occurrence. For instance, research by Wolfram, Carter, and Moriello (2004) found that production of the /ai/ diphthong among adolescents in two Hispanic communities in North Carolina, a state in the southeastern region of the United States, accommodated to the diphthong, but did so in a gradient fashion, one that was both variable and sensitive to individual lexical items.

(3) *Informations*

Informations is a form attributed to English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) speakers, in "violation" of the noncount nature of the noun in Standard English. But, is it an error? Instead, it could be taken as evidence in support of the agency of ELF speakers who develop a shared repertoire to suit their particular purposes.

> ELF users exploit the potential of the language, they are fully involved in the interactions, whether for work or play. They are focused on the purpose of the talk and on their interlocutors as people . . . absorbed in the ad hoc, situated negotiation of meaning. (Seidlhofer, 2009, p. 242)

A language, Reagan (as cited in Makoni & Pennycook, 2005, pp. 137-138) suggests, "is ultimately a collection of idiolects which have been determined to belong together for what are ultimately non- and extra-linguistic reasons." There is thus a need to "reject the positivist objectification of language in favour of a more complex, sophisticated and nuanced view of language" (pp. 137-138).

I have offered three examples of errors/innovations. In each case, one would be hard-pressed to distinguish in any formal way an error from an innovation. Of course, there are three points worth making in this regard:

1. A new form may not be immediately acceptable. If it is to reshape the system at all, it may take time.
2. The acceptability of a new form is interlocutor dependent (based on their perception of who the speaker is).
3. It is not the case that anything goes.

For instance, there are impossible sequences in a given language, ones that, for instance, violate phonotactic constraints. In English, for example, the following sequences are not acceptable: *ftik*, *tsaim, feh, pkig, rcang*. In addition,

unconventional forms must not impede intelligibility. Furthermore, not everything goes anywhere. There are pragmatic conventions that do not prevent, but do constrain to some extent, whether or not the use of a form is deemed appropriate to the situation. Moreover, to be fair, learners do want feedback on how what they have produced stacks up against the idealized system.

Clearly, though, learners set their own goals, and pursue them, charting their own paths (Larsen-Freeman, 2006). What they do to accomplish their goals might not, then, be seen to be successful from the perspective of the idealized system. Errors, on the other hand, are always defined from the perspective of the norms of the idealized system. Language norms are monolingual, but the learners are not (P. Herdina, personal communication).

On Creativity in Language Use

Thus, learner productions might seem to be erroneous; yet, what learners do is purposeful. But this, of course, is true of us all. The language we use is an approximation of an ideal type. The learner's system is based on the unique language background and the unique language learning path of the individual speaker. It never matches the ideal type, and it will never be identical with the system of another speaker. Thus, the difference between learner language and nonlearner language is just a matter of degree. Learning is not just the discovery of patterns inherent in an invariable object. It involves changes in the learner.

I have given only three examples of errors/innovations, but, of course, this same creative drive to exploit the meaing potential of language occurs at all levels. Canarajah (2007, p. 94) recognizes that language use is a social process, constantly reconstructed in sensitivity to environmental factors. Of course, Chomsky was concerned with creativity in language use. However, Chomsky's notion of creativity was predicated on variation within a fixed, closed system. Sentences can be novel, but the rules of language that produce them do not vary from a Chomskyan point of view.

Shanker and King (as cited in De Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007) contrast this information-processing view of creativity with one informed by complex dynamic systems: "whereas the information processing paradigm sees creativity as a property of the language system itself, . . . dynamic systems theory views creativity as a property of agents' behavior in co-regulated interactions". I am fond of quoting Gleick's (1987) depiction of the dynamic of complex systems – "the act of playing the game has a way of changing the rules" (p. 24). True innovation actually changes the rules of the game – changes the system. In the case of language, it is an an open system, one that is emergent, continually self-modifying.

It is said that the area of the greatest biological diversity is an area of liminality – of in-betweenness. This is the case where the meadow meets the for-

est and one where one temperature zone in the ocean meets another. This may also be true of human languages. In fact, multilingual, multicultural contexts may favor creativity (Carter, 2004). Carter points to Rampton's (1995) "crossing" (a feature of cross-lingual transfers and creative mixing) adopted by urban adolescents in the South Midlands of Britain, which concerns the use of Creole by adolescents of Asian and Anglo descent, the use of Panjabi by Anglos and Afro-Caribbeans and the use of stylized Indian English by all three groups. It may be the case, then, that human creativity is also fostered in areas of liminality.

In this article, I have tried to make a case for a complex dynamic view of language offering us a richer, more complete, and more empowering view of the language learner. I have argued that seeing language as a complex system invites all speakers to use language in a way that is purposeful, which in turn changes the rules of language. As the game is played, language changes.

The Logic of Freedom

My remaining objective in writing this article is to defend complexity theory from those who criticize it for being apolitical – for denying learners agency to act according to their own wills and purposes. I would like to counter this criticism by proposing a different interpretation of what is on offer. Osberg (2007) contrasts "a logic of determinism" with "a logic of freedom." The former invokes a linear concept of cause and effect, where a cause has predictable consequences. Deterministic processes follow immutable laws. Since outcomes are fully determined, there is no room for anything else to happen. As Osberg says, in such processes freedom simply does not exist. However, in a logic associated with complex dynamic or emergent processes, what Osberg terms "a logic of freedom," the system has the freedom to develop along *alternative trajectories*." As Osberg (2007) says, "since emergent processes are not fully determined – they contain within themselves the possibility of freedom" (p. 10).

Thus, for complex systems, while a system's potential might be constrained by its history, it is not fully determined by it. Innovation emerges in open systems, the systems of complexity theory. "Knowing how to negotiate our way through a world that is not fixed and pregiven but that is continually shaped by the types of actions in which we engage" (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991, p. 144) is a challenge of being human.

Conclusion

I have suggested in this article that in the field of language teaching and learning, there has been a continuous move over the years to perceive the

learner as being ever more complete and empowered. I have also proposed that the remaining barrier to full empowerment resides in reconceptualizing language as an open, complex, dynamic system. In so doing, the creativity of all language users, including language learners, is respected. This does not mean that learners' performances are identical to the idealized system, nor that they are identical to the system of proficient users of the language, but it does call into question the difference between an innovation and an error. After all, innovations often meet with social disapproval at first, just as the great Pole, Copernicus, was initially criticized for proposing a heliocentric view of the solar system.

What will learner emancipation take? It will take a shift of attitude, similar to what ensued when the SLA researchers no longer regarded the L1 exclusively as a source of interference in L2 learning, but rather as a resource to be drawn on by L2 learners. Of course, changing attitudes is no small feat. Still, learner agency is not fully appreciated when learners are seen to be mere hosts of another language. In actuality, learners actively transform their linguistic world; they do not merely conform to it.

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