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ABSTRACT

The nature of common language errors for learners of second languages is explored, and it is found that the errors cannot adequately be explained in terms of the theory of language interference. A new rationale for these errors can come from an investigation of the perceptual strategies common to error analysis, and thus it is postulated that researchers and educators should shift their emphasis away from interference theory toward error analysis theory. One of the immediate consequences of promoting the error analysis theory is that language teachers must be made aware of the role that the processes of lexical incorporation, inchoation, and causation play in the acquisition of language. Another consequence lies in the realization that language teachers must provide the learner with pertinent semantic information in order to allow him to adequately process speech events. (Author/LG)

ABSTRACT

LEXICAL RELATIONSHIPS AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

The nature of common language errors are explored and it is found that they cannot be adequately be explained in terms of the theory of language interference. It is demonstrated that a new and more exciting rationale for these errors can only come from an investigation of the perceptual strategies common to error analysis. One of the immediate consequences of this finding is that language teachers must be made keenly aware of the role that the processes of lexical incorporation, inchoation, and causation play in the acquisition of language. Another consequence can be found in the realization that language teachers must provide the learner with pertinent semantic information in order to allow him to adequately process speech events.

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INTRODUCTION

Foreign language teachers have always been cognizant of lexical errors as they have had occasion to encounter them repeatedly in their classrooms. To eradicate these errors they have appealed to a program of exercises which are based on a contrastive analysis of the target language and the native language of the learner. Unfortunately, at times they have achieved little or no success in this effort and this suggests that perhaps some fundamental aspect of their etiological approach is in need of revision. This suspicion is borne out, and I might add even consistently overlooked by those who favor the interference theory, by errors which are not solely limited to linguistic contact in foreign language instruction. Consider, for example, the following pairs of words which represent common errors in language learning.

a) sit/set, rise/raise, lie/lay, teach/learn
b) push/pull, loan/borrow, say/tell
c) bring/take, come/go
d) tear/break

By limiting their interest to the study of languages in contact, of which the foreign language classroom is an example, educators have overlooked

the similarity that this phenomenon shares with other aspects of linguistic behavior. In the field of psycholinguistics, for example, these same lexical relationships provide a source of difficulty for the child who is acquiring his native language. In sociolinguistics, these errors emerge as speech variants in both social and regional dialects. From a perspective of diachronic linguistics, these forms appear as natural vocabulary replacements within a language or language family. In language teaching these forms appear as errors in the speech of the students acquiring a new language, and in makeshift languages they occur as special forms created to bridge the gap between disparate languages.

All of this naturally leads to the basic question of why such errors should occur in the first place. Surely they cannot all be conceived of as performance errors, nor can they be consistently analyzed as products of language interference. In this paper, I contend that such "common errors" are best understood in terms of content analysis (Richards, 1971a;b). In particular, I argue that such errors are the product of learning strategies.

CAUSATIVE VERBS

The fact that "teach" and "learn" are confused by language learners deserves theoretical explication. Why do speakers of American English dialects say "He learned me grammar" instead of "He taught me grammar"? Why is it that in Danish the word "laernen", means both "teach" and "learn"? A linguistic explanation for these questions can be found in

the concept of "causative verbs". These verbs, Lakoff (1965) argues, are derived from an abstract underlying representation in which the verb cause appears. Hence, the sentence "He taught me grammar" is derived, in essence, from the construction "He caused me to learn grammar". The only difference between these sentences is that on the surface structure level the verbal phrase cause to learn is lexically incorporated into the verbal item "teach" (Gruber, 1965; McCawley, 1968). This explanation may account for the linguistic analysis of the data, but it does not explain why the pedagogical problem exist. The answer to this question has to do with learning strategies. When the language learner confuses these two words, he does so for the following reasons: First, these words already share an intrinsic grammatical and semantic relationship. Second, he develops the pattern "He learned me English" from other causative patterns where the process of lexical incorporation takes the unmarked form, viz.

"he boiled the water" from "he caused the water to boil"

"he broke the glass" from "he caused the glass to break"

The strategy, then, is a simple one. The language learner has generalized the unmarked pattern since it already represents a basic productive rule in the grammar.

CONVERSE LEXIAL RELATIONS

Another kind of lexical error can be found in the words "push/pull". These words create quite a problem linguistically. This is especially

true of speakers of a creole language, and this fact led me to believe that this was a unique phenomenon. Such, however, cannot be the case as native speakers of English continue to confuse these words and push when they should pull and vice versa. A partial answer to this problem can be found in the work of Gruber (1965) who noted that these words are characteristically associated with certain prepositions, i.e. push away versus pull towards. It may be argued that language learners confuse these forms because they do not have adequate information to process these prepositional forms and arrive at a reliable linguistic strategy, and, as a consequence, this leads to cross-association (George, 1972). But, this is not the complete story. Native speakers of English still confuse these lexical items because they do not all share the same point of reference. Instead of pushing the door away from themselves or pulling the door towards themselves, a situation in which the agent is the point of reference, they have elected to do the converse and used the door as the point of reference. In order to facilitate the proper use of these lexically related forms, the language teacher and the course designer should not only mention the prepositions characterically associated with push and pull , but they should also establish and clarify the intended reference of such actions.

DIRECTIONAL VERBALS

A third area of concern for the language teacher can be found in the commonly confused words come and go. At times it appears that the language learner can't tell whether he is coming or going. Why

should this happen? A linguistic explanation for this phenomenon can be found in the work of Fillmore (1966) who noted that these words imply adverbs of location. One can say come here or go there in a face to face conversation, but not the opposite, i.e.*come there or *go here. Furthermore, the point of reference for these adverbs of location is directly related to the speaker. This is evident in a telephone conversation where the speaker imagines himself to be physically located at the other end of the conversation and speaks about coming there rather than going there. If the language learner either disassociates the adverbs of location from their verbs of motion, or if they do not relate them to the speaker in terms of a point of reference, then confusion will follow and result in language errors. To avoid such problems the foreign language teacher should insure that such lexically related items as push/pull are taught with their adverbs of location, and with their points of reference fully clarified.

LEXICAL INCORPORATION

The final case of common language errors occurs when the verbs break and tear are confused. Thai students confuse these words because in their own language both are expressed by one and the same word, viz. break. But such appeal to linguistic interference does not explain why speakers of Hawaiian creole also confuse these words when borrowing them from English where both break and tear occur. Why, it should be asked, does a creole speaker say "I broke the paper" instead of "I tore the paper"? Or, for that matter, Why should he say "I broke the egg" instead of "I cracked the egg"? The answers to these questions can be found by means of a closer analysis of the data which reveals that

in English the act of breaking requires a special verb form and that this form is sensitive to the nature of the object being broken. Hence, soft materials like cloth and paper are torn, and brittle objects such as glass and egg shells are cracked , etc. These insights into the semantics of the verbal system of English has numerous implications for language teachers. The most notable one is that it requireds language teachers to expose their students to the specialized meanings or semantic domains of verbs and the idiosyncratic use of the process of lexical incorporation in English.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have demonstrated that in the past linguists and language teachers have placed a heavy emphasis on interference theory, and,as a consequence, they have failed to notice that the errors that they were dealing with are, in essence, "common errors". To adequately explain this phenomenon, researchers and educators should shift their emphasis away from interference theory and toward error analysis. In this way they will be enlightened about the strategies that the language learner brings to the language acquisition task. Furthermore, they will also become cognizant of the fact that when a language learner has insufficient information to process linguistic information, this leads to errors which could have been prevented by means of judicious teaching. Finally, it also demonstrates that much more research is needed in the area of error analysis and perceptual strategies that educators have heretofore realized.

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