DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 353 787 FL 020 258

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TITLE Arguments For and Against Free Variation.
REPORT NO ISSN-0959-2253
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 6p.; For serial issue in which this paper appears, see FL 020 251.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Edinburgh Working Papers in Linguistics; n2 p76-80 1991

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Foreign Countries; *Grammar; *Interlanguage; Language Research; *Language Variation; *Linguistic Theory; Second Language Learning

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that, on one hand, there are compelling theoretical reasons to believe that interlanguage (IL) grammars are both systematically and randomly variable, and that the relationship between the two types of variation is a complex one. At any one stage of IL development, some structures may be systematically variable, but at the same time the existence of forms in free variation creates conditions conducive to systematic variation "setting in" at a later stage of development. On the other hand, the paper argues, there is no incontestable empirical evidence for free variation and concludes that the existence of free variation is based more on speculation than on empirical grounds. (Contains 14 references.) (JL)

ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST FREE VARIATION

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Abstract

This paper argues that, on one hand, there are compelling theoretical reasons to believe that interlanguage (IL) grammars are both systematically and randomly variable, and that the relationship between the two types of variation is a complex one. At any one stage of IL development some structures may be systematically variable, but at the same time the existence of forms in free variation creates conditions conducive to systematic variation 'setting in' at a later stage of development. On the other hand, the paper argues, there is no incontestable empirical evidence for free variation, and concludes that the existence of free variation is based more on speculation than on empirical grounds..

1 Introduction

There is general agreement among second language researchers that IL is systematic, but less than full agreement about either the existence of free variability or the way to interpret some of the empirical studies often cited in support of free variation (Ellis 1985; Schachter 1986). In the absence of a consensus, the aims of this paper are to assess the weight of (i) the theoretical arguments and (ii) the empirical evidence, in support of free variation.

2 Theoretical arguments

The case for free variation has been advanced strongly by Ellis (1985a, 1985b, 1987, 1988), who makes a distinction between two main types. Firstly, there is free variation arising from changes in plan during utterance production. This usually occurs when there is a high degree of psycholinguistic pressure on the learner's control, particularly in unplanned discourse. This type of free variation, which can be called *performance variation*, has not attracted a great deal of interest among second language researchers and will not be discussed in this paper.

The second type of free variation is one which Bialystok and Sharwood Smith (1985) attribute to *knowledge* and occurs because a language learner has a number of conflicting rules in his IL competence. Conflict arises because he does not distinguish between them on linguistic, situational or discourse grounds. Their co-existence is made possible by the indeterminacy which characterizes IL grammars, due to their high degree of permeability, particularly in the early stages of IL development - although there are reasons to believe that some areas of IL may remain highly permeable even at very advanced stages of Il development.

In the early stages of language learning, new forms are incorporated into the system to serve old functions. The new forms co-exist with the old and there is no differentiation in linguistic, situational or discourse function, since the learner still has to sort out the various functions which the forms are to serve. Thus, IL consists of two stages: the stage of assimilation or incorporation of forms, which is then followed by the stage of reorganisation. The first is characterised by non-systematicity; it is only during the second that systematicity 'sets in'.

The importance of free variation is that it generates the necessary psycholinguistic pressure conducive to the reorganisation of IL because the existence of forms in free variation increases the redundancy of the IL. This increases since the learner has a number of different ways of expressing the same function; hence the IL system becomes unreliable and inefficient in the way it exploits its resources.

The rise in redundancy results in the overloading of the IL system; hence it is likely to raise the chances of the system being reorganised for more efficient and reliable use of the available communicative resources. Reorganisation involves restricting some forms to either specific linguistic contexts or situations, thus rendering the IL systematic in areas that were previously random. The pressure to reorganise, and thus to reduce the scope of free variation, is a partial consequence of the violation of one of the salient principles of IL: that the language learner's grammar should not have more forms than is necessary to serve a specific function. This is consistent with what Andersen calls 'the one-to-one principle': "an interlanguage system should be constructed in such a way that an intended underlying meaning is expressed with one clear invariant form" (Andersen 1984: 59)

The idea that free variation raises the chances of the IL system being reorganised to facilitate efficient use of the learner's resources, although not empirically supported by sound research evidence, is consistent with what is currently known about human processing. For example, Schneider and Shiffrin's (1977) model, which has been extremely influential in SLA (see Ellis 1990), is based on the notion that human beings have limited processing abilities and have to deploy certain strategies in order to activate their knowledge effectively and easily.

The assumption is that, if human beings have limited information-processing abilities, language learners are likely to have more severely restricted capacity because some of their memory space (unlike that of monolinguals) will be taken up by storage of the second language. Consequently, if learners have to activate knowledge efficiently and rapidly, they have to reduce the extent of free variation in their IL system. The existence of free variation potentially distracts the learner's attention, unnecessarily slowing down the knowledge retrieval mechanism. One way of avoiding this is to reorganise the IL with the aim of reducing the extent of free variation.

Free variation is seen by Ellis (1985b, 1988) as one of the important phases of IL development because it is a precursor of systematicity. The most appropriate method of investigating free variation is through a longitidinal design, because there are some areas of language where forms may persist in free variation for a considerable length of time. It is therefore necessary to see whether or not such forms do subsquently become systematic.

3. The empirical evidence

Having assessed the weight of the theoretical arguments in support of free variation, we will now turn to the empirical evidence. Tarone (1988) reviews a number of studies and comes to the conclusion that they do not satisfactorily support the case for free variation, for the following reasons:

(i) they are cross-sectional and not longitudinal;

(ii) they attribute IL phenomena to random variation before exhausting the potential sources of systematic variability;

(iii) none of the studies was originally set up to investigate free variation.

3.1 Cross-section v. longitudinal

In a longitudinal study of a Laotian learner, Huebner (1979) reports that the subject seemed to use new forms to serve pre-existing functions, resulting in free variation. The main strength of Huebner's study is its duration, which enables him to see the extent to which forms enter into free variation before systematicity sets in. It satisfactorily meets one of Tarone's criticisms.

The study by Gatbonton (1975), cited in Ellis (1985b), does not provide incontestable evidence. If free variation is a transitional stage prior to systematicity, then it is essential to use a longitudinal design rather than generalise about stages of IL development, as Gatbonton does. In spite of her cross-sectional approach, she proceeds to posit two stages of IL development: the 'acquisition phase' and the 'replacement phase'.

Tarone is critical of another study (Wagner-Gough 1975), which reports that Homer, the research subject, used progressive and simple verb forms interchangeably to realise the same function. Tarone argues that Wagner-Gough does not investigate the effects of linguistic context, which has been shown to influence second language performance (Ellis 1988).

To summarise: the evidence provided in studies of free variation (with the exception of Huebner 1979) is contestable, since the 'stages' of IL development are based on generalisations from cross-sectional research.

3.2 Potential sources of variability

In the light of the possibility of the analyst erroneously describing variation as non-systematic, Ellis (1988) identifies five conditions that have to be met before variation can safely be described as random:

(i) the two forms in question occur in the same situational context;

(ii) they perform the same illocutionary function;

(iii) they occur in the same discourse context;

(iv) they occur in the same linguistic context;

(v) their manner of production provides no evidence of any difference in the amount of attention being paid to form.

These conditions provide a framework for determining the existence of free variation - a welcome development, since it attempts to preempt analysts who might otherwise

overhastily describe as "random" variation which might turn out to be systematic when some, if not all, of the five factors are taken into account.

Ellis's proposal highlights the fact that claims about free variation can only be made once all potential sources of variability have been eliminated; if not, they will reflect not what is found in the data but rather the limitations of the analytical tools.[1]

3.3 Original research aim

Tarone's third criticism (Tarone 1988), that none of the studies were originally designed to study *free* variation, is more difficult to understand. It is true that the 75 empirical investigations she cites - reporting variation in phonology, morphology, syntax and pragmatics - had sought to identify various factors (e.g. linguistic context, attention to form, planning time) which might bring about *systematic* variability in IL performance. However, it seems logical that having set out to investigate systematicity and having exhausted the factors that might create it, one is then - and only then - entitled to conclude that any variation must be random; random variation is in this sense dependent, logically and methodologically, on systematic variation. Free variation exists, as it were, by default; it is shown to be present as the result of analysis that has demonstrated the absence of systematic variation.

However, even if the controversy about whether it is possible to investigate free variation has been resolved, it remains essential to decide at what stage of IL development the analysis should begin. For example, Schachter (1986) is not prepared to consider forms occurring before the onset of systematicity, while Ellis is clearly interested in forms occurring prior to that because it is exactly in such areas that free variation is likely to be found.

4 Conclusion

Theoretically, then, it appears that the existence of free variation accords with what is known about ILs, particularly their instability. Instability creates the conditions for free variation, while at the same time the violation - thorough redundancy - of basic principles of IL development limits its scope. Empirically, however, the case for free variation is not strengthened by the claims emanating from cross-sectional studies. What is needed are longitudinal studies - paradoxically, those seeking to investigate *systematic* variation, since free variation can only be established as a consequence of research into systematicity.

Note

More generally, the weakness of some of the evidence cited by Ellis (1985b) in support of free variation may be demonstrated by analysing data on such variability in his own production, e.g. his "haphazard alternation" between *who* and *that* in non-restrictive relative clauses (Ellis 1985b: 121). The evidence is unconvincing because it derives mainly from intuitive understanding of his own production (Preston 1989); it would have been more robust if he had tested the accuracy of those intuitions against empirical evidence. However, it is only fair to say that neither Ellis nor most of the studies he cites justify the existence of free variation solely on the basis of intuition; rather, such examples are intended to supplement some of the studies reviewed.

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