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Learning how to express temporality in a second language<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

Whenever you learn a language, you do not learn a formal system but you learn to understand others, and to make yourself understood. You do not acquire, for example, the X-bar structure of noun phrases; you learn to refer to objects and to persons, and you learn that this must be done in different ways depending on whether the referent is freshly introduced, or is maintained from previous discourse. In doing so, structures originate which theoretical linguists, or at least some theoretical linguists, would describe in terms of what they call X-bar structure. Similarly, you do not learn the tense or aspect system of a language per se; you learn how to make clear that some action is in the past, or that it is completed at some time: and in doing so, structures originate which theoretical linguists would describe as a language-specific morphological system of tense or aspect marking. But this is not what the learner is striving for: he or she wants to express certain things, and to understand what others express.

This is the perspective which guided the project I want to talk about here - the ESF-project on second language acquisition by adult learners. More precisely, I want to talk about one particular aspect of it, the acquisition of temporality. But before turning to the subject proper, it will be useful to say some words about the project in general (detailed descriptions are found in Perdue 1984, Perdue 1993). Over six years, six groups of European researchers - in London, Heidelberg, Tilburg, Paris, Aix-en-Provence and Gothenburg - studied how adult workers acquired the language of their host society by everyday contact. So, the project was concerned with language acquisition outside the classroom. The following combination of source and target languages was used:

TL    English    German    Dutch    French    Swedish

SL    Punjabi    Italian    Turkish    Arabic    Spanish    Finnish

Four learners were observed for each source-target language pair, so, we had, for example, four Italians learning English and four Italians learning German. Data collection extended over three cycles of about 10 months each. It included a number of methods, such as loose conversations

<sup>1</sup> The findings reported here are based on the joint work of a number of researchers. The empirical analysis was done by: Mangat Bhardwaj (Punjabi learners of English), Rainer Dietrich (German), Wolfgang Klein (Dutch, Italian learners of English), Colette Noyau (French and Swedish); in addition, there came important contributions by Korrie van Helvert and Henriette Hendricks (Dutch) and Daniel Veronique (Moroccan learners of French). The conclusions are based on discussions between Rainer Dietrich, Wolfgang Klein and Colette Noyau. A fuller account will appear in Perdue (1993).

(with many embedded personal narratives), film-retellings, role play, and several others.

The analysis involved quite different aspects of language acquisition, ranging from feedback signals to utterance structure, from lexical development to the way in which learners talk about time and space. In what follows, I will present what we have found out about the acquisition of temporality.

In accordance with the tenets of the entire project, the investigation of temporality had three objectives:

- (a) How do learners express temporality at a given stage of their acquisitional process?
- (b) How do learners proceed from one stage to the next?
- (c) Which causal factors determine form and function of the learner system at a given time, on the one hand, and its gradual transformation towards the target language, on the other?

These three objectives reflect a general assumption about the nature of language acquisition - the assumption that this process is characterised by a two-fold systematicity. At each point, the learner's language is not just a random accumulation of individual forms but a **system** in its own right - a learner variety which is governed by a number of distinct organisational principles. This is the first systematicity. The acquisitional process is a sequence of learner varieties, and this sequence in turn follows certain regularities. This is the second systematicity. What these two types of systematicity look like in the concrete case, depends on a number of causal factors - general cognitive principles, nature of source language and of target language, individual and social learning conditions, and others.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 The inflectional paradigm bias

There are many ways in which temporality is encoded in natural language, notably

- the grammatical categories tense and aspect
- temporal adverbials of various types
- special particles, such as the Chinese perfectivity marker le
- inherent temporal features of the verb (and its complements).
- complex verb clusters, such as to begin to sleep, etc

Studies on the acquisition of temporality, both in first and second language, typically concentrate on the morphological marking of tense and aspect, such as the acquisition of the ing-form in English or of Polish verb inflection. This "inflectional paradigm bias" is in accordance with traditional research on temporality in general linguistics. But it gives an incomplete and, even worse, a very misleading picture of the developmental process. Focussing on the morphological means to express tense and aspect marking ignores the interplay of verb inflection with other ways to express temporality, notably adverbials, and an essential part of the developmental process is the changing interaction between the various ways to express temporality. Moreover, the functioning of temporality is always based on a subtle balance of what is explicitly expressed and what is left to contextual information; again, a substantial part of the developmental process is the permanent reorganisation of this balance.

The point of this entire argument can perhaps be made clearer by a look at early - or at

late but fossilised - learner varieties. Typically, these varieties lack any verb inflection, hence morphological marking of tense and aspect. Nevertheless, their speakers manage to tell quite complex personal narratives, with a dense web of temporal relations (cf. Klein 1981, Thieliicke-Dittmar 1981; von Stutterheim 1986). The mere analysis of growing verb morphology will therefore miss important aspects of the learner's capacity to express temporality. Hence, we need a somewhat broader approach which also includes adverbials and, above all, the role of discourse factors.

### **Temporal adverbials**

Not all languages have formal devices to express tense and aspect. But all languages use a rich variety of temporal adverbials, and therefore, they are in a way more basic to the expression of temporality. This is also reflected in the eminent role which they play in learner varieties. There are three types which appear very early and are steadily elaborated. A fourth type comes in at a later stage but is then regularly used. These types are:

TAP: They specify the position of a time span on the time axis: now, then, yesterday at six, two weeks ago, on June 1st, 1992.

TAD: They specify the duration (or, not exactly the same, but a related possibility, the boundaries) of a time span: for many days, all week, from three to five.

TAQ: They specify the frequency of time spans: twice, quite often.

TAC: This class is less clearly defined, but normally they serve to mark a particular contrast: It is that particular time span, and not a different one which could have played a role. Typical examples are already, yet, only (in temporal function).

Among those four classes, the first is clearly the most important for learner varieties. In the initial stages, temporal relations of all sorts are exclusively expressed by TAP in combination with discourse principles, to which we will turn now.

### **Discourse organisation**

In a coherent text, the whole information to be expressed is distributed over a series of utterances, rather than being projected into one utterance. This distribution is not done at random but is governed by several principles which impose a certain structure on the text. In particular, they constrain the way in which information is introduced and maintained. This "referential movement" (Klein and von Stutterheim 1987; 1992) concerns several semantic domains, not just persons for which it has mainly been studied but also, for example, time and space. Thus, an utterance is usually temporally linked to the preceding and the following ones. The way in which this is done depends on the type of discourse. A narrative has normally a different temporal discourse structure than route directions or an argument. We shall briefly discuss this for the main discourse type studied here - personal narratives, i.e., oral accounts of incidents that really happened to the speaker.

A narrative in this sense consists of a **main structure** (narrative skeleton, plot line, foreground) and a number of **side structures** (background material), such as evaluations, comments, utterances which set the stage, etc. The main structure can be characterised by two conditions which constrain the referential movement, especially with respect to temporality, and define the topic-focus-structure of each utterance. They can be stated as follows (see Klein and von

Stutterheim 1992):

### **Main structure of a narrative**

Focus condition: Each utterance specifies a singular event whose time, called here TSit, falls into the topic time of that utterance. The event specification, normally by the verb, constitutes the focus of the utterance.

Topic condition: The topic time<sup>2</sup> of the first utterance is either introduced by a TAP or follows from situational context. The TT of all subsequent utterances is anaphorically given by the relation AFTER.

The first condition entails, among others, that utterances of the main structure normally have perfective aspect, and that the verb must be of the event type. The second condition entails that the TT of all utterances form an anaphorical chain. This condition has been stated in the literature (Clark 1971, Labov 1972) under various labels. We shall sometimes call it **Principle of natural order (PNO)**:

PNO: Unless mentioned otherwise, order of mention corresponds to order of events.

Both conditions can be violated. Such violations lead to side structures of different type. For instance, an utterance may serve to specify a time span, rather than have it given by the topic condition. Typical examples are 'background clauses' such as We were quietly sitting in the kitchen. Very often, subordinate clauses serve exactly this function, and this is the reason why they belong to the background. Other utterances do not specify an event, as required by the focus condition; typical examples are comments, evaluations and descriptions which interrupt the narrative thread.

We shall see later that these conditions are crucial to an understanding of how the expression of temporality functions in learner varieties.

## **2.2 Empirical base**

### **Data and informants**

Among the various types of data collected in the ESF project (see Perdue 1984 for details), personal narratives - which are typically embedded in conversations - seem to offer the richest temporal structure. Therefore, it was decided to base the study of temporality on narratives of this type. Since narratives normally do not deal with the future, it was further decided to complete the data by those conversational passages where informants speak about their future plans. In the course of the study, it turned out that this restriction to two text types is occasionally

<sup>2</sup> The "Topic time", in brief TT, is the time span about which an assertion is made in the particular utterance. Very often, this is simply the time at which the event occurred, or the state obtained. But there are some more complicated constellations between "topic time" and "event time", or, more generally speaking, the "time of the situation" TSit. It is assumed that **aspect** is in fact a temporal relation, such as BEFORE, AFTER, SIMULTANEOUS, between topic time and event time, and **tense** is a temporal relation between topic time and time of utterance. In the present context, we cannot go into these more theoretical considerations (but see Klein 1992).

too strong, because it does not provide enough material for some informants. Some learners are reluctant to tell personal stories, especially in the beginning phases where their means are all too limited. Therefore, narratives and future plans were completed by additional material wherever necessary. This material included (a) other passages from conversations, in particular passages in which informants speak about events in the past without constructing a coherent story, and (b) film retellings. The latter are not in the same way embedded in the past as personal narratives are, but otherwise, they exhibit a very similar temporal organisation.

Minimally, two informants per SL/TI pair over a period of three cycles were analysed in detail. This core sample of 20 informants was occasionally completed by data from other informants, if there was strong individual variation.

To begin with, only one encounter per cycle was analysed for each informant. For some informants, this proved to be enough, since there was no salient development. In most cases, however, these analyses were then systematically completed by data from the encounters in between, up to the point at which no further variation in the expression of time was noted. We think that proceeding this way is perfectly appropriate to the phenomenon at hand. For each informant, we could draw one several thousands of utterances. But there is no point in analysing fivethousand conversational or narrative utterances in which nothing changes (with respect to the expression of time). On the other hand, it makes it somewhat difficult to give exact figures about the amount of data analysed. In no case, however, less than 500 utterances per informant were analysed.

## Text samples

Limited space prevents to give samples for each informant. The following two extracts from Tino, an Italian learner of German, give, in a way, a representative picture of what the learners' languages look like at different stages of their development.

**Text 1:** Tino, after 14 months of stay

(Interviewer: And how did this happen with the accident?)

Soo, is passiert in eine diskothek

O.k., has happened in a disco.

Kenne Sie die 'Extrablatt'?

Do you know the 'Extrablatt' (name of disco)

In Extrablatt war ein Freundin, Micki, mein, Freund, mit eine andere Bekannt

in Extrablatt was a (girl) friend, Micki, my friend, with other acquaintance

Aber diese Bekannt is ein wenige verruckt

But this acquaintance is a bit crazy

er nehme die Freundin von Micki mit seine Hände so

he take the girl friend of Micki with his hands, like that

Wenn kommt Micki, er nehme die Haare die Freundin Micki

when comes Micki, he take the hair the girl friend Micki

Und dann sie spreke schnell

And then, they speak fast

Sie sagen die schlecht Wort auch

they say the bad word, too

Und dann sie machen streit  
and then they make struggle  
Und dann sie gehen aus Diskothek  
And then they leave disco  
Sie machen nochmal die Streit  
They make again the struggle  
Aber Micki hat so eine 'ferro' mit seine Hände in die Gesicht die andere  
But Micki has kind of 'ferro' (iron) with his hands inot the face the other  
Die andere Person hat zwei Zähne wegge- kaputt  
The other person has two teeths away- broken  
Und dann diese Person hat gesagt:  
And then this person said:  
'Ich gebe dir vier Stunde oder ich schieße dich'  
'I give you four hours or I shoot you'  
So drei Uhr Nakt ich gehn nach Hause  
About three o'clock night I go home  
Micki kommt fünf Minuten später  
Micki comes five minutes later  
3

**Text 2:** Tino, after 23 months of stay

Gestern ich war bose mit mein Chef  
Yesterday, I was angry with my boss  
weil ich habe nicht mehr auf meine Kasse abonniert  
because I did no longer enter in my own cash register  
Wenn ein Tisch komm, ich nehme die Bestellung  
As soon as a table comes, I take (down) the order  
und ich muß auf die Kasse abonnieren, was sie haben bestellt.  
and I must enter into the cash register, what they ordered.  
Der hat gesehen.  
He he (boss) watched.  
Er war bose, weil ich habe nur die Kollege geholfen.  
He was angry, because I only helped the colleague.  
(Interviewers asks whether he had registered the orders by error in his colleague's cash register)  
Nee, ich habe gesag:  
No, I said:  
'Ob ich abonniert noch, ich muß vielleicht elf Uhr weggehen  
'If I register still, I must perhaps leave at eleven  
Ich muß warten, daß die Leute hat/ is fertig mit der essen  
I must wait that people have/is ready with eating  
Dann ist schon später'  
Then is perhaps later.'  
Dann er hat mir gesag:

3 Micki is shot twice but survives.

Then he has told me:

'Bis neun Du muß abonnieren

'Till nine, you must register.

Dann du kanns weggehen

Then you may leave.

Aber du hast so gemacht auch die andere Male'

But you did this also the other times.'

Aber er war bißchen besoffen

But he was bit drunk.

### 2.3 Interpretive analysis

A reasonable study of the way in which temporality is expressed and how this develops over time cannot be satisfied with counting the number of adverbials or the ratio simple form : ing-form. The fact that many ing-forms are show up in a text does not say anything about the learner's ability to mark aspect. In order to decide on this ability, we must know what the speaker, here the learner, wants to **express** by this and other means. A mere statistics of forms and how it develops over time would perhaps look impressive, but in fact be a hoax. We must also try to determine the meaning of the learner's utterances. Therefore, the analysis itself was done utterance per utterance and involved two parts. First, all linguistic devices relevant to the expression of time were registered (e.g., adverbials, morphological variation, but also violations of PNO, etc). Second, we tried to interpret the intended temporal meaning of the utterance. As any interpretation, this process is burdened with many problems, and in a number of cases, several possible interpretations had to be listed. But as analysis goes along, most of these ambiguities are slowly dissolved, and the emerging picture becomes increasingly clear and stable. We do not want to suggest that this procedure is fool-proof, and it may well be that other linguists, when interpreting the same data, would have come to different conclusions, at least in some respects. But we feel that this interpretive procedure is the only way to come to substantial conclusions about the expression of time in learner language.

### 3. Lavinia, step by step

All learners, irrespective of source and target language, began with a simple repertoire of linguistic devices whose characteristics are the following ones:

1. Utterances consist either simple nouns or a verb with some nominal complements; they can be complemented by adverbials in initial or final position (sometimes, especially in answer to a question, there are only adverbials).
2. Verbs show up in a single form, the **base form**. In English, this is usually the bare stem V0, in other languages, it may also be the infinitive or even a selected finite form.
3. There is no copula.
4. Adverbials are mostly of TAP-type, i.e. they specify a position. They can be deictic (now), anaphoric (before 0) or "absolute" (Sunday, Christmas). But there is also a small number TAD and TAQ at this early point.

We shall call this repertoire the **basic variety**; its structure and its functioning will be discussed in section xx below. For some learners, this basic system is more or less the final system, too. But most develop it in the direction of the target language; this development is relatively similar; but learners differ considerably in how far they get. One learner who gets very far, is Lavinia, an Italian learner of English. Therefore, we shall take her as an example for the type of analysis done for each of the twenty learners.

Within the course of 30 months, Lavinia was recorded 14 times at approximately equal intervals. We now go through each of these encounters and briefly describe how her temporal system develops.

### LA1

In the first encounter, 6 months after her arrival in England, Lavinia's learner variety is essentially the basic system. There are two deviations from it, though:

(a) In about half of the cases, Lavinia marks the third person singular by -s, i.e., he like and he likes co-occur, often in two subsequent utterances. We can already note at this point that the rate of correct usages constantly increases although instances of the s-less form are found even in the last recording. The opposite mistake (-s for second or first person) does not occur at this point, although it occasionally shows up in later recordings.

(b) She often uses the present tense copula, and if so, the correct forms are used.

Both features point to the fact that Lavinia is about to go beyond the basic system.

### LA2

There are three past tense forms, all of them irregular: said, went, was. They are used to refer to events in the past, whereas the normal "past form" is still V0 or - very rarely - Ving. Otherwise, her system is the same as before. (There are developments in other, non-temporal respects, which are not noted here.)

### LA3

The bulk of utterances still shows the basic system (with the copula now being completely regular in the present tense). But there are two developments:

(a) In four cases, she uses present perfect forms. Consider the following question-answer-sequence:

LA3. 1 [Did you buy your furniture here?]

I have bought here

...

[Did you buy a TV set]

No, I want to buy because has broken that one

At least the first instance shows that she has no watertight functional contrast between "simple past" and "present perfect" at this point. (There is no increase in past forms).

(b) There is an isolated future tense form:

LA3. 2 [Is that all right?]

I shall see.

Finally, it should be noted that the Ving forms increase in number. But there is no hint that they mean anything different than the bare stem V0.

#### **LA4**

There is no noticeable change. We observe a number of present perfect forms (some irregular in form, like I have find, my son has write), as well as -ing-forms; but the former are used like the simple past, and the latter like V0. Still, the outer appearance of her language more and more resembles Standard English, as is illustrated by the following extract:

LA4. 1 [Do you make cakes?]

Yeah, sometime. But now, my oven isn't working very well.

When I start - I don't know - is good; I put [the oven] on six or maximum, and after two minutes, it's on the minimum.

This impression is slightly misleading, however; the contracted negations, for example, are still rote forms, and whilst the continuous form is quite appropriate here, there are other examples which show that she does not really master it.

#### **LA5**

There is no categorial change, but a distinct quantitative change: TT in the past is now dominantly marked by simple past forms - but only for **irregular** verbs (including all forms of the copula and of the auxiliary to have). There is still no single -ed-past. Consider the following extract:

LA5. 1 When I was young, I had a job in a shop, I spoke a bit [Serbocroatian].

Aspectual marking - simple perfect vs. simple past or -ing vs simple form - has not developed.

#### **LA6**

The recording contains the first occurrence of a weak simple past:

LA6. 1 she explained [it to] me on the phone

While this is still an exception, the simple past of strong verbs is regularly used (there is only a single instance of V0 with past reference).

This is also the recording with the first use of the adverbial again. She also starts using some TAP which do not show up in the basic varieties of the other informants, for example until june.

#### **LA7**

No observable change.

#### **LA8**

There are three noticeable trends:

(a) There is an increased use of regular past, cf. (her son had been to a dentist):

LA8. 1 they said "no". The pain stopped, there was no pain after this; but they said to me: ...

(b) Her use of the aspectual forms approaches the Standard; this holds for the continuous form as well as for the simple past. Consider the following two examples;

LA8. 2 monday, we went to the dentist for the last time, for some filling, and now [he] has stopped until september for a check-up.

Clearly, one could not use the simple past in the last utterance.

LA8. 3 ... woman who work/who has been working

Here, she apparently corrects to the (contextually appropriate) continuous form of the present perfect.

(c) TT in the future is now often marked by will or shall.

This recording also contains a first occurrence of habitual use-to:

LA8. 4 you used to work

## LA9

There are now a number of correct usages of the continuous form, such as

LA9. 1 Now I am waiting for an answer ... I am waiting because he asked me for the/mine national insurance number, and [I] didn't have one.

Note the correct didn't.

LA9. 2 Now, I am going for the interview

In addition, there is a first occurrence of the prospective:

LA9. 3 we are going to pay

She also has worked on her repertoire of adverbials. The first yet shows up, and she has complex constructions like any time now.

## LA10

No major change, but the first already is used. There are now many forms of the prospective, still in the present (is-going-to).

## LA11

The present perfect now regularly used as an aspect, as in

LA11.1 The career officer has been there for thirty years

In the context where this utterance occurs, neither the simple past nor the present could be used. This recording also gives evidence that she indeed uses the prospective as an aspect rather than as a tense variant to the simple future:

LA11.2 I was going to say I know people who doesn't speak/don't speak to me because I can't speak English

Finally, there is a first clear pluperfect:

LA11.3 I don't know if I had understood the question very clearly

All of this gives evidence that she is now close to mastering the English aspect system and its interaction with the tense system.

## **LA12**

No noticeable change, but the first negated future is used:

LA12.1 but if I don't pass the exam, I won't be able to work

## **LA13**

As a rule all aspect and tense forms are correctly used, including the continuous form in all tenses (except the future, but this is probably accidental). We say "as a rule", because there are still some instances of backsliding to the basic variety.

## **LA14**

This last conversation, which was recorded about six months after LA13, shows close-to-perfect mastery of the English temporal system. This does not necessarily mean that her competence is indeed at the level of a native speaker: there are occasional errors, and it may well be that she misrepresents some aspects of the English system. But if this is the case, it does not become apparent from her production. Judging from what she says and how she interacts in English, she has reached the target - at least as regards the expression of temporality.

What has been illustrated here in some detail for Lavinia, has been done for all twenty informants. In the next section, we will generalise over these individual findings.

## **5. General results**

### **5.1 Commonalities and divergencies**

As one goes along the development of these learners, one notes a number of peculiar, accidental, and sometimes odd features, notably in the choice of the particular lexical items which they successively acquire. But there is also a large amount of commonalities, notably in the development of structural properties. It will be helpful to start with a short list of some of those

common features:

1. In the beginning, all utterances of a learner, irrespective of SL and TL, typically consist of (uninflected) nouns and adverbials (with or without preposition), rarely a verb and never a copula. That means, there are hardly any explicit marking of structural relations, such as government, and **there is no way to mark temporality by grammatical means**.
2. The strategies to express temporality at this point are very similar - both in the way in which they use individual lexical items and in the way in which they use discourse strategies and contextual information. For example, calendaric adverbs are used to locate a situation in time, and boundaries are marked by some lexical items such as begin - finish.
3. Among the various domains of temporality, priority is given to localisation of the event in time.
4. Among the various interacting ways to make temporal constellations clear, pragmatic devices precede lexical ones and these in turn precede grammatical ones. When tracing the development of our fourty learners, one almost gets the impression that at least for a great deal of them, the acquisition of a lexical item is only necessitated because pragmatic means do not suffice, and grammatical means are worked out - in some cases - because lexical means do not suffice.

There is also a number of differences among the learners. They are partly, and in a very obvious way, caused by the peculiarities of the target languages, and also by the different living conditions of the learners. But the by far most salient difference can be characterised by the slogan "fossilisation - yes or no?". Some learners stop their acquisition at a level which is very far from the language of their social environment and may be even beneath what one would assume to be necessary for everyday communication. Others go on and come very close to the target: No one really achieves native-like competence, but some learners, such as Ayshe (TL German) or Lavinia (TL English) do not lag very much behind at the end of the observation period, and it is at least not unplausible to assume that they eventually achieve it. What we note, therefore, is the following fact:

5. There is strong similarity in the **structure** of the acquisition process, but considerable variation in the **final success** (and also, a point not mentioned here, in its **speed**).

In the remainder, these general observations will now be worked out in some detail.

## 5.2 The overall structure of the acquisitional process

In general, the acquisitional process, as observed here, gives the impression of being continuous and gradual, without really sharp boundaries between the various learner varieties. But when looked at from some distance, it appears that a decisive step in the development is a learner system which has been called here "Basic variety" and which, in this and similar forms, has been observed in a number of other studies (Klein 1981; von Stutterheim 1986; Schumann 1987). Accordingly, we can divide the entire acquisitional process into three major steps: A. Pre-basic varieties; B. Basic variety, and C. Further development.

### 5.2.1 Stage A. Pre-basic varieties

Pre-basic varieties are the learner's first attempts to make productive use of what he or she has picked up from the new language. Essentially, they can be characterised by four properties:

1. They are lexical: they mainly consist of bare nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbials and a few particles (notably negation). Verbs are used "noun-like", i.e., more or less like nominalisations; there is no clear sign of grammatical organisation, such as government. There is also a number of rote forms which, for this purpose, can be considered to be individual lexical items.
2. There is no functional inflection. This does not exclude that inflected forms are used, for example present tense verb forms; but either there is only one such form, and if there are several, they are in free variation.
3. Complex constructions, if there appear at all (and except rote forms, of course), are put together according to pragmatical principles, such as "Focus last", etc. (cf. Klein and Perdue 1992). This also applies to text organisation: If there is any coherent sequence of utterances, there are no explicit linking devices such as anaphorical elements; what is obeyed, however, is PNO - the "principle of natural order".
4. They are heavily context-dependent; but with the exception of deictic pronouns, which appear before anaphorical pronouns, there is no structural context-dependency: Context operates in a very global fashion.

For the expression of temporality, this means that all there is are some adverbials, or rather adverb-like expressions, notably "calendaric noun phrases" such as sunday, morning, nineteenhundertseventy, etc. - and, of course, PNO. Basically, the localisation of the situation is left to the interlocutor.

We do not note, incidentally, that the learners' language at this point is a kind of "re-lexification", in the sense, that utterances consist of a word-by-word replacement of source language constructions. Their language is "constructive", poor as the constructions may be. There is hardly any source language influence.

Among our forty learners, only a few (such as Angelina or Fatima) were observed at this stage, because the encounters started at a point where most of them had already reached the subsequent stage. (This, to be clear, is something we cannot prove: It might well have been the case that the other learners started in a very different way; but it seems highly unlikely).

### 8.3.2 Stage B: The Basic Variety

#### **The form of the basic variety**

At some point in their development, all learners analysed in this study (except a few who, such as the Turks with TL German, received some initial teaching) achieved a variety with the following four properties:

1. Utterances typically consist of uninflected verbs, their arguments and, optionally, adverbials. There is no case marking, and, with the exception of rote forms, there are no finite constructions. In contrast to the pre-basic varieties, the way in which the words are put together follows a number of clear organisational principles which are neither those of SL nor those of TL (for details, see Klein and Perdue 1992).
2. Lexical verbs show up in a **base form**, and there is normally no copula<sup>4</sup>. The form chosen as a base form may differ. Thus, most learners of English use the bare stem (V<sub>0</sub>), but also Ving is not uncommon. Learners of other languages may use the infinitive (German, French) or an even a generalised inflected form (as often in Swedish). The Turkish learners of Dutch use the infinitive, the Moroccan learners of Dutch the bare stem.
3. There is a steadily increasing repertoire of temporal adverbials. Minimally, it includes:
  - (a) TAP of the calendaric type (Sunday, (in the) evening);
  - (b) anaphoric adverbials which allow to express the relation AFTER (then, after), and also typically an adverbial which expresses the relation BEFORE;
  - (c) some deictic adverbials such as yesterday, now;
  - (d) a few TAQ, notably always, often, one time, two time, etc;
  - (e) a few TAD, normally as bare nouns, such as two hour, four day, etc.
 Adverbials such as again, still, yet, already do not belong to the standard repertoire of the Basic variety.
4. There are some **boundary markers**, i.e., words (normally verb forms), which allow to mark the beginning and the end of some situation, such as start, finish; they are used in constructions like work finish, "after working is/was/will be over".

These are the common features of the Basic Variety. There is some individual variation; for example, we occasionally find a subordinate conjunction, typically when which helps to express temporality. But all in all, the picture is quite uniform, and Basic varieties only differ with respect to the richness of the lexicon.

### **The functioning of the basic variety**

The examples quoted above look very "basic", indeed, and they do not give the impression that the Basic variety, as characterised above, provides its speakers with powerful means to express temporality. It does not allow for tense marking nor for aspect marking, hence the linguist's pet categories for the expression of time are entirely absent. Compared to the rich expressive tools for temporality in any of the languages involved, be it source language or target language, this seems to impose strong restrictions on what can be expressed.

This impression is premature. What the basic variety allows, is the specification of some time span - a RELATUM -, its position on the time line, its duration and (if iterated) its frequency. The event, process or state to be situated in time is then simply linked to this RELATUM. All the speaker has to do now, is to shift the RELATUM, if there is need. More systematically, we can describe the functioning of the basic variety by the following three

<sup>4</sup> There is often a copula in quoted speech, though. If anything, this shows that learners at this point have a clear idea that there could be, or should be, a copula - they just do not integrate it into their own productive language. Basic Varieties are not bad imitations of the target - they are languages with their own inner systematicity.

principles.

- I. At the beginning of the discourse, a time span - the initial Topic time  $TT_1$  - is fixed. This can be done in three ways:
  - (a) By explicit introduction on the informant's part (e.g. when Italia "when I was in Italy"); this is usually done by a TAP in utterance initial position;
  - (b) by explicit introduction on the interviewer's part (e.g. what happened last Sunday? or what will you do next Sunday?);
  - (c) by implicitly taking the "default topic time" - the time of utterance; in this case, nothing is explicitly marked.

$TT_1$  is not only the topic time of the first utterance. It also serves as a RELATUM to all subsequent topic times  $TT_2, \dots$

- II. If  $TT_i$  is given, then  $TT_{i+1}$  - the topic time of the subsequent utterance - is either maintained, or changed. If it is maintained, nothing is marked. If it is different, there are two possibilities:
  - (a) The shifted topic time is explicitly marked by an adverbial in initial position.
  - (b) The new topic time follows from a principle of text organisation. For narratives, this principle is the familiar PNO "Order of mention corresponds to order of events". In other words,  $TT_{i+1}$  is some interval more or less right-adjacent to  $TT_i$ .

This principle does not govern all text types. It is only characteristic of narratives and text with a similar temporal overall organisation - texts which answer a quaestio like "What happened next?" or "What do you plan to do next?". Even in those texts, it only applies to "foreground sequences", i.e., to the main structure of the text. In other text types, such as descriptions or arguments, PNO does not apply, nor does it hold for side structures in narratives, i.e. those sequences, which give give background information, comments etc. For those cases, changes of TT must be marked by adverbials.

Principles I and II provide the temporal scaffold of a sequence of utterance - the time spans about which something is said. The "time of situation" of some utterance is then given by a third principle:

- III. The relation of the "time of the event" TSit to TT in the basic variety is always "more or less simultaneous". TT can be contained in TSit, or TSit can be contained in TT, or TT and TSit mutually contained in each other, i.e., they are really simultaneous. In other words, the basic variety allows no aspectual differentiation by formal means.

This system is very simple, but extremely versatile. In principle, it allows an easy expression of when what happens, or is the case - provided (a) there are enough adverbials, and (b) it is cleverly managed.

Therefore, one way to improve the learner's expressive power is simply to enrich his vocabulary, especially (but not only) by adding temporal adverbials, and to learn how to play this instrument. Exactly this is done by one group of learners: They never really go beyond the Basic variety, but they steadily improve it in these two respects. About one third of our learners belong

to this group<sup>5</sup>

But there is a second group of learners who indeed leave this poorly but sufficiently furnished house and start the long march towards the target language. This further development, which has been illustrated for Lavinia above, is much less homogeneous, and in a way, it is somewhat misleading to speak of a "third stage"; it is rather a group of stages which, however, also show some commonalities.

### 5.2.3 Stage C: Development beyond the Basic variety

Basic variety is relatively neutral with respect to the specificities of the target language: except for the choice of the particular lexical items, its structure and function is more or less the same for all learners, irrespective of SL and TL. It seems plausible that the Basic variety reflects more or less **universal** properties of language. This changes, and has to change, as development goes on: The learner has to adopt the peculiarities of the language to be learned. As a consequence, it becomes more difficult to identify **general** properties of this development. But this does not mean that the further way of the individual learners is entirely idiosyncratic. Four common features were observed in the development of the advanced learners:

1. Initially, there is co-existence of various morphological forms without appropriate functions. The learner would use, for example,  $V_0$  and  $V_{ing}$ , or various present tense forms, or even complex periphrastic constructions, without a clear and recognisable functional contrast - be it the one of TL or some learner-variety internal contrast. In a slogan: **Form precedes function**, more precisely: formal variation precedes functional use.

What this seems to hint at, is the fact that in cases like these ones, language acquisition is not dominantly driven by functional needs but by some other factor. We shall return to this point shortly.

2. Further development is slow, gradual and continuous. There are no distinct and sharp developmental steps. This applies, on the one hand, to the increase of vocabulary, in particular, of temporal adverbials which strengthen the learners' communicative power. It also characterises the way in which full control of the appropriate functional use of forms is achieved: For a long time, we observe co-existence of correct and incorrect usages, and learning is a slow shift from the latter to the former, rather than the product of a sudden insight. In this respect, **language acquisition resembles much more the slow mastering of a skill, such as piano playing, than increase of knowledge, such as the learning of a mathematical formula.**

This may seem a trivial observation; but it is in remarkable contrast to predominant views of the process of language acquisition. Learning a language is not tantamount to an increase of knowledge.

<sup>5</sup> The fossilised learners described in Klein (1981) or in von Stutterheim (1986) are of exactly this type: They have become, so to speak, masters in playing the one-string guitar.

3. **Tense marking precedes aspect marking.** All SLs of this study have grammatical tense marking, and only some of them have grammatical aspect marking; but the latter allow to mark aspect by various types of periphrastic constructions. In both cases, tense comes first. It is true that learners of English may have perfect forms and notably progressive forms at an early stage, and the extent to which these forms are observed depends on the TL. But in no case do we observe an early functional use of these forms.

This is in strong contrast to what has often been assumed (and disputed) for pidgins and pidginised language varieties and for first language acquisition. The learners of the present study do not feel a particular urge to mark aspectual differentiation.

4. **Irregular morphology precedes regular morphology.** In all languages involved, past tense formation, is very simple for the regular forms, and irregular past is often a nightmare. Still, the learners of our study tend to overlook the simple rules of the former and to start with the complexities of the latter. There is one clear exception - the Turkish learners of German. But their acquisition is influenced by explicit teaching in the classroom.

This points to the fact that the acquisitional processes observed here are not so very much characterised by "rule learning", such as "add -ed to the stem" but by picking up individual items of the input and then slowly, slowly generalising over these items. Irregular verbs are typically frequent and the morphological differences are perceptually salient, compared to a regular ending such as -ed, which may be hard to process for many learners. **Second language acquisition, as observed here, is inductive and heavily input oriented.**

Obviously, these four properties of acquisition beyond the Basic variety simplify the real picture: Reality shows a number of peculiarities in the learners' individual development. But still, the overall tableau is very clear.

### 5.3 Causal considerations

In this subsection, we will briefly discuss why some learners fossilise at the level of the Basic variety, whereas others go beyond that stage.

The advantages of the Basic Variety are obvious: It is easy, flexible, and serves its purpose in many contexts. And these advantages may be sufficient for many learners to maintain it, with some lexical improvements. But not all do. Two reasons might push further development.

First, the basic variety strongly deviates from the language of the social environment: It may be simple and communicatively efficient, but it stigmatises the learner as an outsider. For first language learners, the need for such **input imitation** is very strong; otherwise, they would not be recognised and accepted as members of their society. For second language learners, this need is not necessarily so strong, although this surely depends a lot on the particular case.

Second, the basic variety has some clear shortcomings that affect **communicative efficiency**. Four of these come to mind:

(a) The absence of some "subtle" adverbials, such as again, yet limits the expressive power of the system. This, of course, can be overcome simply by learning of these words, without changing the system as such (much in the same way in which new nouns are learned).

- (b) The Basic variety does not allow its speakers to mark at least some types of aspectual variation. There is no way, for example, to differentiate between he was going and he went.
- (c) The pragmatic constraints on the positioning of TT easily lead to ambiguities. Suppose there are two subsequent utterances without any temporal adverbial, and suppose further that  $TT_1$  - the topic time of the first utterance - is fixed. Where is  $TT_2$ ? If the two utterances are part of a static description, then  $TT_2$  is (more or less) simultaneous to  $TT_1$  - there is normally no temporal shift in, say, a picture description. If the two utterances belong to a narrative, then it depends whether both utterances belong to the "foreground" or not; if so, then  $TT_2$  is AFTER  $TT_1$ ; if not,  $TT_2$  is simply not fixed. So long as the speaker is not able to mark the difference between "foreground" and "background", for example by word order, misinterpretations are easily possible, and are indeed often observed in learner utterances, to the extent that the entire temporal structure of the text becomes incomprehensible.
- (d) There is no easy way to discriminate between "single case reading" of some situation (event or state) and "habitual" or "generic reading". An utterance such as when Italy, I go Roma can mean "when I was in Italy, I once went to Rome", but also "when I was in Italy, I used to go to Rome". In both cases, TT is in the past; but it may include one or many TSits. Learners may feel the need to discriminate between semelfactive and habitual reading, and do so by an initial adverbial normal(ly), which, when interpreted literally, often sounds somewhat odd (normal, go disco).

All of these problems affect the efficiency of the basic variety, and may easily lead to misunderstanding and even breakdown of communication (cf. Bremer et al 198...). If the learner considers it important to increase his communicative capacity, he has to improve the system. This can be done in two (not mutually exclusive) ways. He can either try to adopt as many rules of the target variety as possible. Or he can try to turn his Basic variety into a sort of "fluent pidgin" and learn how to make optimal use of it. The latter way leads to a more or less fossilised but relatively efficient version of the Basic Variety, the former towards the norms of the language of the social environment.

Note that only the problems mentioned under (a) and (b) mentioned above are easily overcome by progressing towards Standard English. The problems mentioned under (c) are not directly affected by such a progress, because the pragmatic constraints are the same in the basic variety and in the fully developed language, and English does not formally discriminate between "habitual" and "semelfactive", either.

Our observations about development beyond the Basic variety, as summed up above, clearly indicate that the first factor, the subjective need to sound and to be like the social environment, outweighs the other factor, the concrete communicative needs: Learners try to imitate the input, irrespective of what the forms they use really mean, and it is only a slow and gradual adaption process which eventually leads them to express by these words and constructions what they mean to express in the target language.

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