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Interlanguage: 40 years and later

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Interlanguage: 40 Years and Later, which was held from October 5 to 7, 2012 at the Cowin Center of Teachers College, Columbia University, was organized by the Roundtable in Second Language Studies to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the *Interlanguage Hypothesis*. Ten renowned researchers shared their thoughts on the hypothesis, explored the issues, and updated the ideas. They included Elaine Tarone, Terence Odlin, Zhao-Hong Han, Silvina Montrul, Lourdes Ortega, Kathleen Boadovi-Harlig, Susan Gass, Charlene Polio, Bill VanPatten, and Diane Larsen-Freeman. Speakers had 60 minutes to give their talks, which were followed by 30- to 45-minute question-and-answer sessions. At the end, Larry Selinker, who coined the term *interlanguage*, gave the concluding speech.

Some of the speakers have personal connections with Larry Selinker. They addressed him as Larry and shared personal anecdotes with the audience. For example, Elaine Tarone recounted how the idea that learner language is systematic was originally developed by Selinker and his students: Discussions and arguments were going on in classes, in hallways, in coffee shops, and even at parties. He scribbled notes on pieces of paper sometimes—with other pieces of paper taped to them! The article was like a collage. We can see how those talks and thoughts came into that one paper just by taking a look at the number of personal communications cited in the original paper. Diane Larsen-Freeman recalled her teacher, H. D. Brown, waving the journal and saying enthusiastically that this paper might change the field. She added that he was right.

All the speakers did their homework—that is, re-reading Selinker's 1972 article—and picked up key issues and discussed them in light of their own research interests. They agreed that some of the ideas presented in the paper were revolutionary back then and that they are still with us:

separation of teaching and learning, description before explanation, fossilization, relevant data, meaningful performance, three parallel linguistic systems—the learner’s native language, interlanguage, and the native-speaker baseline for the target language—as well as linguistically relevant units of a psychology of SLA, among other things. I cannot cover all of these issues in this short report, and I hope we will see all the talks in print sometime soon.

This anniversary meeting also highlighted a big theoretical and philosophical divide among researchers and in the field itself. Some speakers such as Lourdes Ortega and Diane Larsen-Freeman strongly contested the idea of the native speaker target as the successful end state of L2 learning. They argued that this normative view of L2 learning has been given undue weight and has established—inappropriately—a monolingual bias. If we take a usage-based approach, for example, theoretically there should be no fossilization or an end state because language is always changing: The telic view of L2 learning using native speaker competence as a yardstick should be abandoned. Therefore, different kinds of success should be possible in SLA. On the other hand, some of the other speakers used such terms as “native-speaker baselines” and “native-like behaviors” and implied that L2 performance deviates from the L1 norm. These researchers are investigating learner language in relation to how and why it deviates.

Despite this divide, differences of opinion and discussions were welcomed at the conference, just as they were 40 years ago when Selinker and his students started working on the theoretical construct. At the end of the talk by Diane Larsen-Freeman, who perceives language as basically an organic entity that is nurtured and developed implicitly in a discourse community, Elaine Tarone asked her for her view on the following: The yardstick is operational in intensive ESL programs at some level as gatekeeping, and this is for the sake of learners’ interests. Explicit form-focused teaching is necessary at some point because tests are part of the political reality. Tarone thinks that teachers have two functions—teaching for the test and promoting learning. Another participant also referred to the pressure that secondary school teachers face. In other words, they need to teach for the tests because students are evaluated based on the tests and teachers are evaluated based on their students’ performance on the tests. In response, Larsen-Freeman showed understanding with regard to

all of these comments, but she still maintained that it is a fiction to think of languages just in terms of rules that learners either do or do not learn.

Some speakers made pragmatic suggestions for further development of the idea. Elaine Tarone, for example, proposed exploration of the written performance of L2 learners and teacher training to establish a better understanding of learner perspectives. Larry Selinker himself called for semantically coded corpora for the sake of a more sophisticated description of learner language. In his futuristic view as well as in his original view, description should come before explanation. Interlanguage is a hypothesis, not a theory, and as such it invites an array of thoughts and future directions. Thus, while this conference is now over, the debate will continue, and I’m sure it will help our field to move further ahead.

Interlanguage: 40 Years and Later was unusual in several ways. First, the topic was set, and all the talks were focused on one, and only one, issue. Second, ample time was reserved for questions and answers. The organizers initially offered three ways to submit questions: using a microphone, filling out a question slip, and submitting questions electronically. In the end, participants preferred asking questions directly using a microphone. It seemed as though they wanted to exploit the opportunity of the here and now, and one participant even shared some poems he had written about the talks. Third, participants and speakers did not have to be running around to get to the room they wished to be in. All of the talks were in the same main room, and speakers and participants developed a sense of community during the three days by experiencing the same presentations together.

On a less positive note, there was no question-and-answer session for the long-awaited talk by Larry Selinker. In spite of the extended time for questions and answers after each talk, more time probably should have been allocated for synergistic, productive talks among attendees with diverse views on the Interlanguage Hypothesis. Both the speakers and participants might want to start discussions and arguments on the issue in their own communities, just as Larry Selinker and his students used to do. This Teachers’ College Roundtable is a biannual event, and I am definitely looking forward to what they will plan for the next event.