

“Inter-thought”

- Can L2 learners acquire the way of L2 thinking?

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Abstract - 概要

本講義において、筆者が提出したリアクションペーパーが、英語版では理解しづらかったにもかかわらず、日本語版では理解しやすいものになった。このことに着目して、第二言語学習者が習得過程に使用するとされる「中間言語」の考え方が、学習者の思考においても同じように言えるのか、「中間思考」という考え方はあり得るのか、ということについて論考する。

まず、中間言語の考え方の起こりとその特徴について述べ、中間言語と思考の関係性について転移・干渉の観点から考える。その後、「中間思考」について筆者の考える仮説を提示し、筆者の経験や、サピア、スロービンなどの言語観に触れながら論考する。

結論としては、第二言語学習において、中間言語を発達させるだけでなく、「中間思考」を発達させ、正しい語用や文法使用を行い、相手に伝わる流暢な言語を使用するべきである、と主張する。

1. Questions for “Inter-thought”

Difficulty of understanding English

I wrote two reaction papers for Sapir’s and Whorf’s articles for this lecture “Language and Thought.” One was a Japanese version and the other was an English version. Students had to write papers of course in English because English was mainly used in this lecture. However, because I had felt huge difficulties of English, I wrote the Japanese version at first, then translated into the English version.

There were two points I felt difficult.

One point was the less-ability of English reading. Articles of Sapir and Whorf were difficult to understand, but my reading skill is poor to read scientific books, so I understood almost nothing about their arguments from articles IN ENGLISH.

The other point was the less-ability of English writing. As Professor advised that I should study English writing, the structure of my reaction paper was difficult for readers. That is because I haven’t studied how to write academic papers.

Make sense in Japanese, Not in English

Professor said that he’d at first read the English version and hadn’t understood anything. After reading the English version, he’d read the Japanese version and understood my idea, he said. When he gave me reaction papers back, he added some comments, “Some aspects you mentioned about seemed to be true.ⁱ”

The fact, that the paper in Japanese made sense but one in English didn’t, were surprising to me because the English version was just translation of the Japanese version. The main ideas of two papers were same for me, but different for readers. Why did this happen?

As I’m still an English learner as a second language, the language I’m now writing is not perfect English but the intermediate language between English and Japanese - “interlanguage.” What interfered the readers most was my interlanguage, I think. Perhaps the paper might be understandable, as my interlanguage is improving, being close to English.

But does it make sense perfectly, just I use grammatically or structurally perfect English? I don’t think so. Even though I use perfect English to express my idea, basically my idea is still based on the way of thinking in Japanese.

ⁱ The reason why I could understand claims of Sapir and Whorf is that I read Japanese translated versions of their articles, in fact.

Perhaps, native speaker of Japanese can understand my idea easily but speakers of other languages can't, because the basic language of my idea is not their language but Japanese, according to Sapir=Whorf hypothesis.

“Inter-thought” should be exist

From the experience I presented before, I came to think that L2 learners might have an “intermediate” way of thinking between in L1 (mother tongue) and in L2 (the target language). I wonder there should be an idea of “inter-thought” because there is an idea of interlanguage.

If the Sapir=Whorf hypothesis is true, in other words, a specific language is strongly related to a specific way of thinking, the interlanguage which a L2 learner uses is strongly related to a specific way of thinking, neither a way of L1 nor a way of L2, in my opinion. I think, because the interlanguage is mixture of L1 and L2, a way of thinking L2 learners take would be also mixture. In my case, perhaps, I wrote the English version, unconsciously, with an “inter-thought”, even though I just translated from Japanese to English.

Research Questions and Methodologies

The aim of this paper is thinking about language and thought of L2 learners (on the basis of this aim, I want to know why my reaction paper didn't make sense ⁱⁱ). I use the term of “inter-thought”, and think of these research questions below.

- What is interlanguage?

Are there any claims about interlanguage and thought?

- Why did I come up this idea of “Inter-thought?”

On this paper, I firstly review an idea of interlanguage, then think about relationships between language and thought from the articles I've read on this lecture.

I use some examples, but the basis will be my own examples.

ⁱⁱ Of course, I know that the biggest problem of my paper was the structure of articles. However, still I believe that some other reasons exist, especially the aspect of “language and thought.”

2. What is Interlanguage?

Limits of Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis

Before we think about interlanguage, let me point out the history of BEFORE interlanguage. I have to explain about Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) and error analysis.

In the 1940's and 50's, a theory of main stream in studies of language acquiring was behaviourism. In this theory, children learn their mother tongue from mimicry / imitation and memorization. For L2 learners, audiolingual teaching was developed: students just imitate what the instructor says.

CAH is related to behaviourism, and was another main stream in studies of language acquiring then. According to CAH, each language is different from others, and the difficulty of acquiring a target language is determined by differences between L1 and L2. If the structure of L2 is similar to that of L1, learners can acquire easily, but if there are big differences, it would be difficult.

From the idea of CAH, learners make mistakes because L2 is different from L1. In other words, L1 influences the process of acquiring L2, like all mistakes. However, some researches showed that some of mistakes learners did was not influenced by their L1. Researchers could not explain the mistakes with CAH, therefore they took a different approach to analyse mistakes and errors, known as 'error analysis.'

Error analysis developed during 1970's. The aim of this approach is to identify what learners really know. Pit Corder wrote a famous article in 1967, after that error analysis became famous. There, he claimed that "when theyⁱⁱⁱ produce sentences that differ from the target language, we may assume that these sentences reflect the learners' current understanding." (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p80)

However, error analysis still focused on learners mistakes or errors, not whole language learners use. In error analysis, researchers compared learner language with grammatically correct L2, and observed errors. But learners sometimes avoid expression which learners don't know much. Therefore, researchers couldn't analyse whole aspect of learner language with error analysis, then new approach was introduced. That is "interlanguage."

The idea of interlanguage

The name of "Interlanguage" is named by Larry Selinker. He used this name for learners' developing knowledge of L2, in short, learner language itself. Interlanguage is characterized to be systematic but also dynamic.

ⁱⁱⁱ This means L2 learners in this context.

Interlanguage always changes from L1 to L2, sometimes rapidly and sometimes slowly. In other words, interlanguage is always intermediate between L1 and L2, and has different rules from L1 or L2.

One more important idea related to interlanguage is “fossilization.” This word is also named by Selinker: he used this term for that the process of developing specific language features may stop.

Language Transfer and Cultural Transfer

According to books I referred, there was no exact description about interlanguage and thought, but the term “transfer” will be helpful to think about interlanguage and thought.

Transfer is a phenomenon that L1 influences L2. There are two types of transfer, positive transfer and interference. There are many type of transfers, not only grammatical transfer, such as errors and mistakes, but also pragmatical or social-linguistic transfer.

In terms of pragmatical transfer, word choice is deeply based on cultural habits. Cultural habits related to native language transfer even when he or she uses L2. For example, one Japanese L2 learner who is praised by someone might answer “Oh I don’t think so”, in this situation, the leaner transfered his cultural habit when Japanese got praised. It is difficult for learners to learn cultural habits of L2 because such kinds of habits is deeply related to the life of native speakers target language. According to Shirai(2008), many observations about cultural transfer had been done by many researchers, and findings shows difficulties of acquiring these cultural habits unconsciously.

Giving Up?

As a conclusion of this chapter, I found that the theory of interlanguage includes almost nothing about the way of thinking. There are transfer phenomena which is pragmatic or social-linguistic, but still L2 learners speak their interlanguage based on their own native culture.

The concept of “Inter-thought” is just my hypothesis. It is obvious that I couldn’t find any concepts like this from theories which famous linguists developed. However, there are some points that I couldn’t give up about my hypothesis.

3. Two reasons, “Still, I believe ‘Inter-thought’ ”

As I showed in the chapter before, there is no similar idea of “Inter-thought” in the theory of interlanguage. Yet I believe that L2 learners take “Inter-thought” when they use interlanguage. There are two reasons to support this idea. Of course, I didn’t do any observation to support my idea, and I don’t have enough knowledge about linguistics. But some points I learned from this lecture and my own experiences will help me.

a. Style of languages directs the way of thinking

As Sapir claimed, even if the object to explain is same, because each language has own style, the way of explaining will be different. From this point of view, when we use interlanguage to explain something, the style of the interlanguage changes the contents, in my opinion.

Slobin did observations focused on the tense and aspect of English, Spanish, German, and Hebrew. He used same sequences of picture for every subject, the result was, however, that the way of using tense and aspect differs from each language.

I also did an observation of same sequence of picture in Japanese. It was interesting that ways expressing in Japanese and in English are different, especially the way of topic / subject choice differs between Japanese and English.

Think of differences of English and Japanese. English is subject-oriented language, Japanese, on the other hand, is topic-oriented language. I, as Japanese user, tend to take a same subject, change aspects to change the topic of the sentence. On the other hand, native English users tend to change subject by sentences.

This difference, topic-oriented or subject-oriented, is very important for native users to understand each language easily. For L2 learners, these kind of knowledge is very useful, and at the time learners use target language with this knowledge, learners use their “Inter-thought.”

Japanese speakers, topic-oriented people, write English with an idea of subject-oriented: not to use same subject many times. If that learner knows the knowledge of rule / style of language, he or she pays attention to the form of sentences. At that time, learner have to change his or her idea based on native language(Japanese) to fit the style of target language(English).

THIS would be the “Inter-thought”, the thought based neither on Japanese nor on English, but on interlanguage. To summarize, “Inter-thought” is fixed thought to the style of target language.

b. When high-level learners use L2, they can understand L2 as L2.

The claims below are all my experiences. But I think this is more convincing, because the idea of “Inter-thought” is perhaps my own idea.

At the beginning of this semester, I had lots of reading assignments in English. The early days, I read them by translating into Japanese. At that time the mode of my thinking was based on Japanese.

While reading many many assignments I became able to read them with no translation. Of course, there were some words that I couldn’t understand, but without the process of translation I could understand most of the contents.

I believe, at that time, my mode of my thinking became “Inter-thought.” I understood English articles with my interlanguage ability, and there was no require to translate, so my mode of thinking was not based on L1 or on L2 but interlanguage.

I think, while I read many English articles, I processed something, such as style of English, English way of thinking, in my brain, and make them habits which can automatically appear anytime. This automation process is linked to the idea of connectionism, if the learned knowledges are used many time, that knowledges become habit.

In chapter 2, I wrote that “(some research) findings shows difficulties of acquiring these cultural habits unconsciously”, using the claim of Shirai(2008), however, this means that cultural habits can be acquired consciously. If we use this kind of cultural habits consciously many times, we’ll come to use them unconsciously. “Inter-thought” means this habit-automation-process, in my opinion.

4. Conclusion

Then, why did my article become difficult to understand? Through this paper, I found some reasons.

First, there was strong interference of my L1 - Japanese. Second, I wrote my articles with the thinking mode of Japanese, so the style of my interlanguage became Japanese style. Third, I didn't use English as English, in other words, I didn't think in English but in Japanese. For these reasons, and with my poor ability to organize English essays, my reaction papers got B-.

As I am still learner of English as second language, I have to improve my interlanguage and bring it up close to the target language, English. However, when we, learners, develop the fluent usage of the target language, we should consider "Inter-thought" as well as interlanguage.

Acquiring grammatical rules and lexical knowledges is not enough to communicate with each other. Learners who want to use L2 fluently need to acquire the correct rules how to choose proper words, and the specific way of thinking for the target language is needed to choose proper words. In this way, bringing "Inter-thought" up close to the way of thinking of target language is very important to acquire the second language.

Then, I wrote this paper with my poor interlanguage and poor "Inter-thought", so again, this paper would interfere the readers. I'm really sorry for that.

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