THE PROBLEM OF NON-STANDARD UTTERANCES USED BY SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE AT TERTIARY LEVEL.

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1. Introduction

In this paper I shall begin by explaining why non-standard utterances used by University students who are second-language speakers of English pose a problem for language teachers involved in Academic Support/Development (ASP/ADP). I shall then go on to examine the extent to which findings of researchers in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) offer insights of value to language teachers faced with this problem. I shall conclude by suggesting areas for further research. Thus, I shall be focusing on one of the questions central to this conference, restated as follows: "What does linguistics offer the language teacher involved in Academic Support/Development?" I shall also be devoting some attention at the conclusion of the paper to the second question, restated as follows: "What do these language teachers require from linguistics?"

2. Why are non-standard utterances a problem?

A non-standard utterance is an utterance which does not conform to target language norms. The following are examples of such utterances. The first two examples are taken from the written work of students who attended courses in the Division of Language Usage last year. The last examples are from spoken English.

*** My mother gives me good advices.**
*** My father is late.**
*** I am asking for a ruler.**
*** May you please borrow me a ruler.**

Why are such utterances a problem if, in context, the meaning the student wishes to convey is quite clear and they thus serve their communicative purpose?

First of all, these utterances are a problem because they do not conform to the norms of acceptable academic English. Students are evaluated on their written assignments and examination answers and non-standard English is likely to have a negative effect on their assessment.

The fact that the same non-standard utterances are present in the written discourse of the majority of English Second Language (ESL) students gives rise to a further problem. Does the high frequency of non-standard utterances indicate that a different variety of English is being used by ESL students? If this is so, what are the implications for institutions like universities? Should they accept this variety in written discourse?

At the International Conference on Democratic Approaches to Language Planning and Standardisation organised by the National Language Project last September, two of the resolutions which came out of the workshop on English in a Democratic South Africa were as follows:

8. It is inappropriate to try to articulate/determine/ set a standard for spoken English.
9. There need be no formal setting of a written standard since written standard South African English is emerging as being close to standard international English. (National Language Project 1992: 19)

This seems to imply the acceptance of a diglossic situation in South Africa. If this is indeed the case, it has serious implications for the teaching of English from primary level. ESL learners (and teachers) would then have to learn two varieties of English, one written and one spoken.

Another question which the possibility of the existence of another variety of English raises, concerns the status of ESL students. Are they learners or users of English? Put another

way, are they in the process of acquiring English or has their language stabilized? If the latter is the case, will any tuition in standard written English make any difference to their output?

There is evidently a mismatch between ESL students' language performance and the academic requirements for written English upheld by tertiary institutions. Clearly, one or the other, or perhaps both will have to change. The current situation dictates that it is the students' performance which must change. The problem for ASP/ADP language teachers is how to effect this change, if indeed it can be effected.

3. Insights from linguistics.

I shall now turn to the findings of researchers in the field of second language acquisition and discuss the extent to which they can offer insights to language teachers faced with the problem of non-standard utterances in the written discourse of their students. I shall begin with a brief overview of the last twenty years of research in this field and then examine findings which contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon of non-standard utterances. After this I shall consider ways in which certain findings can be applied in the context of short courses conducted by the Division of Language Usage at the University of Durban-Westville.

3.1. Brief overview of SLA research.

The construct "interlanguage" has informed SLA research for the last twenty years. Selinker (1972: 214), defined interlanguage (IL) as "a separate linguistic system based on the observable output which results from a learner's attempted production of a TL norm." Learners' languages were to be regarded as languages in their own right, not governed by the same rules as either the NL (Native Language) or the TL (Target Language). Selinker suggested that five processes operated in interlanguage: language transfer; overgeneralization of target rules; transfer of training; strategies of second-language learning and strategies

of second-language communication.

Selinker also introduced the concept "fossilization". He maintained that:

> Fossilizable linguistic phenomena are linguistic items, rules and subsystems which speakers of a particular NL will tend to keep in their IL relative to a particular TL, no matter what the age of the learner or amount of explanation and instruction he receives in the TL. (1972:215)

Early research into interlanguage was largely descriptive and focused on what learners do, that is, on their performance. Error analysis was extensively used at first but failed to provide a complete perspective since it concentrated on errors and neglected learners' successes. Avoidance strategies practised by learners were also overlooked.

Researchers attempted to identify developmental sequences for the acquisition of certain structures. These studies revealed that learners were creatively constructing the L2 through a process of complexification, rather than restructuring their L1s to conform to their L2s as suggested by Selinker (Corder 1981:91).

In the 1980s attention was focused on specific issues raised by research during the previous decade: language transfer, input to learners and variation. The latter issue, that is, accounting for the variable output of learners, has been perhaps the most difficult to resolve.

Other studies have examined factors affecting the learner, in an attempt to explain differential success rates in the acquisition process. Factors investigated include: age, aptitude, attitude, motivation, personality, cognitive style and learning strategies.

Recent research has focused on attempts to construct theories to

explain the acquisition process. Broadly speaking these theories fall into two groups: the nativist (learning depends on a specialized innate capacity for language acquisition) and the interactionist (both internal and external processes are responsible). Many of the models proposed cannot be empirically verified and no one theory has been able to explain all of second language learning.

Clearly, there is no simple solution to the SLA puzzle. According to Larsen-Freeman (1991:336): "It is probable that acquisition/learning is not monolithic and that there are multiple subprocesses, multiple routes, and solutions. Teachers therefore cannot seek simplistic solutions." She also points out that SLA research has not directly answered questions about teaching, although it has offered enhanced understanding of the learning process and of learners (1991: 335).

It is therefore evident that language teachers have to adopt a policy of "informed eclecticism" regarding the application of SLA research. As Spolsky (1988) has remarked:

> Any intelligent and disinterested observer knows that there are many ways to learn languages and many ways to teach them, and that some ways work with some students in some circumstances and fail with others. (This is why good language teachers are and always have been eclectic....). (Quoted in Larsen-Freeman: 336)

3.2. Insights from SLA research that enhance the understanding of the phenomenon of non-standard utterances.

On a general level, the notions of interlanguage as systematic and of the learner's active participation in shaping his interlanguage are of value to the language teacher. Thus acquisition is not a matter of simply replacing one set of habits with another. Nor is the output of the learner random and inexplicable.

Of particular relevance to the understanding of the phenomenon of non-standard utterances are error analysis, the findings of research into the effect of input on the learner's performance and the notion of fossilization.

3.2.1. Error analysis

Error analysis, as mentioned earlier does not provide a complete picture of interlanguage performance. The term "error" is regarded as "doubtful" by Ellis since the learner is behaving "grammatically", in the sense that he draws systematically on his interlanguage rules, when he produces utterances which do not conform to TL rules (Ellis 1985: 51). Nevertheless, error analysis is still useful in providing some explanation of the possible origins of particular non-standard utterances. Errors provide clues to the mental processes which give rise to these utterances. Thus taking three of Selinker's five processes as a basis for analysis, we can analyze the non-standard utterances given earlier as follows:

*** My mother gives me good advices.**

This utterance can be analyzed in terms of language transfer. The equivalent word for **advice**, which in English is non-countable, in Zulu can be used in the singular and plural forms: **iseluleko** (singular) and **izeluleko** (plural). It is significant that ***knowledges** never appears in the spoken or written discourse of students whose native language is Zulu. The equivalent word in Zulu, **ulwazi**, is non-countable.

*** My father is late.**

This utterance can be analyzed in terms of overgeneralization of target language rules. Although **My pretty sister** is semantically equivalent to **My sister is pretty**, the same is not true for **My late father** and **My father is late.** There is a failure to recognize the semantic constraint on the predicative use of **late.**

This utterance can also be analyzed from a different perspective. Buthelezi suggests that it is an example of semantic variation which she defines as

> ...a process whereby a lexical item may change meaning in various ways. For example, it may lose its original meaning and take on an entirely different one. Alternatively, the meaning may be restricted so that only part of the original meaning is implied whenever it is used. Better still, the lexical item could keep its original meaning and add new ones. (1989: 50)

*** I am asking for a ruler.**

An analysis of the above utterance suggests that not only are *linguistic* rules transferred but also rules pertaining to *usage*. In this utterance a pragmatic strategy is transferred from Zulu into English. **Ngicela**, used in polite requests in Zulu, translates into English as **I am asking.**

*** May you please borrow me a ruler.**

An utterance may contain more than one non-standard feature. In the above utterance the use of **borrow** can be explained in terms of language transfer since Zulu has only one word, **boleka**, which encompasses the meanings of both **borrow** and **lend**. The same non-standard feature may be found in the interlanguage of Afrikaans speakers for the same reason.

Leen vir my 'n liniaal asseblief.
(Please **lend** me a ruler.)

Ek will asseblief jou liniaal leen.
(I want to **borrow** your ruler please.)

May you please is also a request strategy. Here we could argue

that as well as pragmatic transfer, we have evidence of transfer of training leading to overgeneralization of target language rules. Some teachers insist on the use of **may** in requests for permission directed at them. The response: "You *can* but you *may* not!" is often used by teachers without any explanation. **May** is then seen as more polite than **can** and thus its use is overgeneralized from requests for permission to all requests requiring a high degree of politeness.

A study I undertook on this particular strategy at the University of Transkei, showed that it was only used when the degree of imposition of the Speaker on the Hearer was perceived as high and when the status and power of the Hearer was perceived as greater than that of the Speaker.[1]

It should be clear from the above analysis that features of interlanguage cannot be explained simply in terms of language transfer as was first thought. We also need to remember that since we have no exact data on the conscious or unconscious processes of the mind, we are in fact only making theoretical assumptions about these processes based on the features of a learner's language performance.

3.2.2. Input

Studies carried out to investigate the effect of input on learners' interlanguage performance also shed more light on the problem of non-standard utterances.

Many studies have been carried out to investigate the relationship between the input with which learners have to work and the learners' output. A recurring finding has been the correlation between the frequency of certain forms in the input and their appearance in learners' interlanguage (Larsen-Freeman 1991: 320).

While most studies have concentrated on "foreigner talk" and

"teacher talk", a few have looked at the effect of the exposure of learners exclusively or almost exclusively to a non-standard variety of a target language. It is clear from the studies of migrant workers' language that workers who are in contact with native speakers who speak a non-standard variety of the target language do not acquire the target variety. (Lightbown 1985b: 265)

The majority of ESL students who attend the University of Durban-Westville have been taught through the medium of English by second language speakers who are very likely to have used English which contained non-standard features. Their textbooks are also interpreted for them by their teachers. Therefore, at school, they neither hear nor read the standard variety of English. These students, particularly those in rural areas, have simply not been exposed to the standard variety of English. My evidence for this contention is anecdotal and based on my experience of teaching in schools in Transkei. In addition, the study I carried out at the University of Transkei into the frequency of the non-standard request strategy **May you please,** indicated that it occurred almost as frequently in the discourse of part-time students who were teachers as it did in the discourse of students who had come directly to university from school.

Investigations into the English used by teachers in DET schools would have to be carried out to support the contention that part of the reason for the failure of students to produce either written or spoken English which conforms to the norms of the standard variety is that it does not constitute a significant part of their input. As Lightbown points out, it is essential to ascertain what the target variety actually is. (1985b: 265) Students might in fact have acquired the target language, which in this case is another variety of English.

3.2.3. Fossilization

Although Selinker regarded the notion of fossilization as central

to the understanding of interlanguage, relatively little research has been carried out in this area.

It is has proved difficult to predict which linguistic items are likely to fossilize; nor is it known whether there are certain points in the development of a particular rule or area which are more sensitive to fossilization than others.[2]

Gass argues that if the ambient speech does not provide a forum for the learner to readily detect a discrepancy between his learner-language and the target language, fossilization is likely to occur (1988:212). In the case of learners in DET schools, this would certainly explain the fossilization which appears to have taken place in both their written and spoken discourse.

It is also not certain whether fossilization is a permanent or a temporary state. Selinker, as we have seen, believes that it is a permanent state. Lightbown (1985a: 179) supports this view when she states categorically:

> What appears certain, however, is that once fossilization occurs, continued exposure is quite ineffective in changing language behaviour, and, so far, further instruction in the language seems to give learners more knowledge *about* the language without altering the fossilized interlanguage system. (Long 1981, Shapira 1978, Schumann 1978)

If she is correct then we are obviously wasting our time trying to teach students to write in standard academic English. Other researchers such as Hyltenstam (1985) and Heubner (1985) seem less certain about the permanency of fossilization. Results of my study into the frequency of **May you please** showed that this request strategy was used more frequently by first year full-time students than by first year part-time students and all senior students. However, it was used by a far smaller percentage of senior full-time students than senior part-time students. This

seems to suggest that this particular request strategy becomes "unfossilized" with greater exposure to the standard variety of English. A longitudinal study would need to be undertaken to test this hypothesis.

3.3. Application of SLA research findings to language teaching. The short courses (24 tutorials over 8 weeks) that are conducted in the Division of Language Usage (DLU) at the University of Durban-Westville include a module of approximately 6 tutorials on language usage. The approach adopted in this module is based on error analysis and consciousness-raising.

Researchers such as Klein (1986) and Gass (1988) have pointed out that in order for grammar change to take place the learner must notice (at some level) a mismatch between his particular language variety and the target itself.

ESL students who attend DLU tutorials are generally unaware of such a mismatch. Discussions on language variety are met with incomprehension if not disbelief. The sorts of comments students receive from lecturers in academic departments at the end of essays, such as "Poor expression" are not very helpful in pointing out this mismatch.

Rutherford and Sharwood Smith consider that consciousness-raising (C-R) might facilitate the acquisition of linguistic competence. They define C-R as "the deliberate attempt to draw the learner's attention specifically to the formal properties of the target language" (1985: 274). C-R can have degrees of explicitness and elaboration, ranging from ignoring a grammatical feature entirely to detailed metalinguistic discussion. Rutherford and Sharwood Smith are at pains to point out that they are not advocating a return to the traditional teaching of grammar, or grammar-translation methodology. Nor do they suggest that C-R should replace communicative language teaching or be a substitute for the attainment of communicative skills. They see C-R as one part

of a larger pedagogical context that also embraces the other essentials for target language mastery.

The DLU language course consists of a number of different modules which lend themselves to different methodologies. In the language usage module we practise a form of consciousness-raising. When this module was designed, non-standard and apparently fossilized utterances which appear frequently in the academic writing of ESL students were selected for examination in the tutorial periods. Using error analysis, the students and teacher together attempt to work out the processes which have given rise to the production of particular utterances. The student's input is important because he is actively involved in investigating his own language behaviour. In the case of language transfer, his input is essential. In any one tutorial group the teacher may have as many as five different NLs to consider. For once, the teacher in a classroom situation, asks questions to which she does not already know the answers. The group then examines a number of examples of the standard form of the particular utterance and by a process of induction, attempts to discover what rules govern this utterance or feature.

The point has been made that error correction can be damaging when school children are acquiring a second language (Littlewood 1984:95). At this stage errors show that acquisition is happening. My contention is that the language of the students we deal with has stabilized. Errors in this case are an indication of fossilization or the acquisition of another variety of English. It is essential for students to be aware of the discrepancy between their language performance and the norms of the standard variety if any change is to take place.

Students have written in their evaluations at the end of the DLU course that they are now aware of errors they make in their written English. One student wrote: "I never knew that every language had curtain rules. Now I am able to recognize some

certein mistakes by anyone else when he or she is speaking." This year the DLU intends taking a sample of the students who attend the courses and examining the written work they produce for the various academic departments to see if there is any change in their language performance.

The DLU has been in existence for only one year and it was not possible to carry out this kind of research in 1991. The course was evaluated in terms of the examination results of the almost 600 students who attended DLU tutorials. When matched against a control group, these students were shown to have performed significantly better. This might, of course, have less to do with improved language proficiency and more to do with motivation, since the DLU courses are voluntary and so more likely to attract motivated students. We hope, however, that we contributed in a small way to their success.

4. Suggestions for further research.

Most research into SLA has been carried out by researchers in the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe. Their investigations have tended to centre on groups of immigrants who have to acquire the language of their country of adoption in order to survive. The situation we are faced with in this country, and specifically in tertiary education, is rather different. Our "learners" are not learners in the same sense. They have already to a greater or lesser extent acquired English but not in a form which conforms to the written requirements of academic English.

As language teachers we require research into specific local problems. We need to know more about fossilization, particularly whether or not it is reversible and if so how to reverse it. Researchers such as Appel and Muysken (1987) and Selinker (1972) maintain that when the interlanguage of many learners fossilizes at the same point for a certain structure, a new variety of the target language can develop. According to Appel and Muysken

"Massive second-language learning fosters language change" (1987). We need to know whether this has happened or is happening in South Africa.

Specifically, we need to know whether or not the English used by our students constitutes another variety of English. To this end we require a sociolinguistic investigation into the language behaviour of second language speakers. If these speakers are using a different variety, the implications for language teaching and language policy both at tertiary institutions and in the country as a whole are very serious.

FOOTNOTES

[1] *"An investigation into the occurrence of the non-standard request strategy may you please in the English spoken by native speakers of Xhosa in Transkei." Unpublished article submitted to the Department of General Linguistics at the University of Stellenbosch in 1989 in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the M.A. degree in general linguistics.*

[2] *The term "fossilization" in this paper is used to refer to the fossilization of non-standard items, rules or subsystems. Fossilization of target language items, rules or subsystems, of course, also occurs. Generally, however, the term fossilization is only used when referring to non-standard language performance.*

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