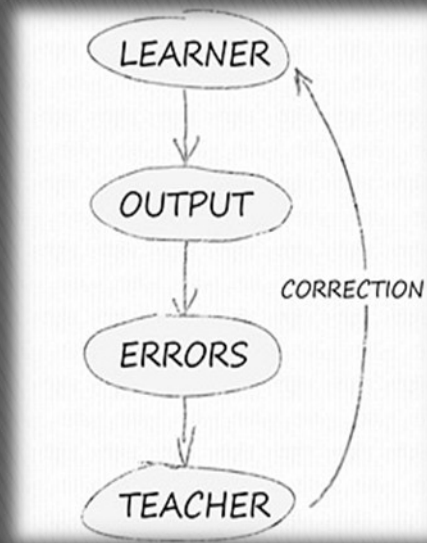# Learners Errors and Error Analysis

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## The Study of Second Language Acquisition (1994)

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# Learner errors and error analysis

- Human learning is fundamentally a process that involves the making of mistakes.
- They form an important aspect of learning virtually any skill or acquiring information.
- Language learning is like any other human learning.
- L2 learning is a process that is clearly not unlike L1 learning in its trial–and–error nature. Inevitably, learners will make mistakes in the process of acquisition, and that process will be impeded if they do not commit errors and then benefit from various forms of feedback on those errors.
- Corder (1967) noted: "a learner's errors are significant in that they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language."

# Learner errors and error analysis

✓ Learners make errors in both comprehension and production

Errors produced by
* L2 learner: "unwanted forms"

* Children: "transitional forms"

* Adult native speaker: "slips of the tongue"

# Learner errors and error analysis

## Mistakes and errors

- In order to analyze learner language in an appropriate perspective, it is crucial to make a distinction between *mistakes* and *errors,* technically two very different phenomena.
- Mistake –refers to a performance error that is either a random guess or a "slip", in that is a failure to utilize a known system correctly. Native speakers make mistakes. When attention is called to them, they can be self-corrected.
- Error –a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflects the competence of the learner (Does John can sing?)

# Learner errors and error analysis

- The fact that learners do make errors, and these errors can be analyzed, led to a surge of study of learners' errors, called error analysis.
- Error analysis became distinguished from contrastive analysis by its examination of errors attributable to all possible sources, not just those resulting from negative transfer of the native language.

# Learner errors and error analysis

▸ The study of learner errors has long been part of language pedagogy. Traditional analyses lacked of rigorous methodology and theoretical framework.

Contrastive analysis (CA) (1960's)

* Identify linguistics differences L1 and target language

* Interference "habits"

Error analysis (EA) (1970's)

* Provided a methodology

* Starting point for the study of learner language and L2 acquisition

# Learner errors and error analysis

Corder (1974) the study of errors:

(1) provided the teacher with information about how much the learner had learnt
→ reflects traditional role of EA

(2) provided the researcher with evidence of how language was learnt
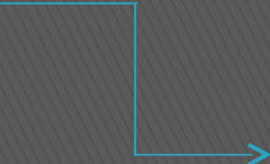→ provides new role on L2 research

(3) served as devices by which the learner discovered the rules of the target language
process of L2 acquisition

# Learner errors and error analysis

Corder (1974) steps in EA research:

1. Collection of a sample of learner language

2. Identification of errors

3. Description of errors

4. Explanation of errors

5. Evaluation of errors

Many studies do not include Step 5 . It is seen as separate issue with its own methods of enquiry

# Learner errors and error analysis

## 1 Collection of a sample of learner language

*Specific sample                                   *Incidental sample

| Factors | Description |
|---|---|
| A Language | |
| Medium | Learner production ca be oral or written |
| Genre | Learner production may take the form of a conversation, a lecture, an essay, a letter, etc. |
| Content | The topic the learner is communicating about |
| B Learner | |
| Level | Elementary, intermediate, or advanced |
| Mother tongue | The learner's L1 |
| Language learning experience | This may be classroom or naturalistic or a mixture of the two |

# Learner errors and error analysis

‣ Collection of samples: Natural samples

‣ Samples can be collected:
*cross-sectionally
*longitudinally

Elicitation:
*Clinical elicitation
*Experimental methods

‣ Ways to collect data:
*Bilingual Syntax Measure
*Free composition
*Translation

# Learner errors and error analysis

## 2 Identification of errors

✓**Error: a** deviation from the norms of the target language. This definition raises a number of questions:

1.– Which variety of target language should serve as a norm

2.– Distinction between <u>errors</u> and <u>mistakes</u>
*error: takes place when the deviation arises as a result of lack of knowledge (lack of competence)
*mistake: occurs when learners fail to perform their competence

Feature of native speaker speech:
✓Competing plans
✓Memory limitations
✓Lack of automaticity

# Learner errors and error analysis

Corder (1974):  EA should be restricted to the study of errors (mistakes should be eliminated from the analysis). Competence is homogeneous rather than variable.

3.- Concerns whether errors is overt or covert
    *Overt error: a clear deviation in form
      Ex: I runned all the day.

    *Covert error: occurs in utterances that are superficially well-formed but which do not mean what the learner intended them to mean.
      Ex: It was stopped.

# Learner errors and error analysis

4.- The analysis should examine only deviations in correctness or also deviations in appropriateness:

Ex: I want you to come to the cinema with me.

*Rule usage
*Language usage

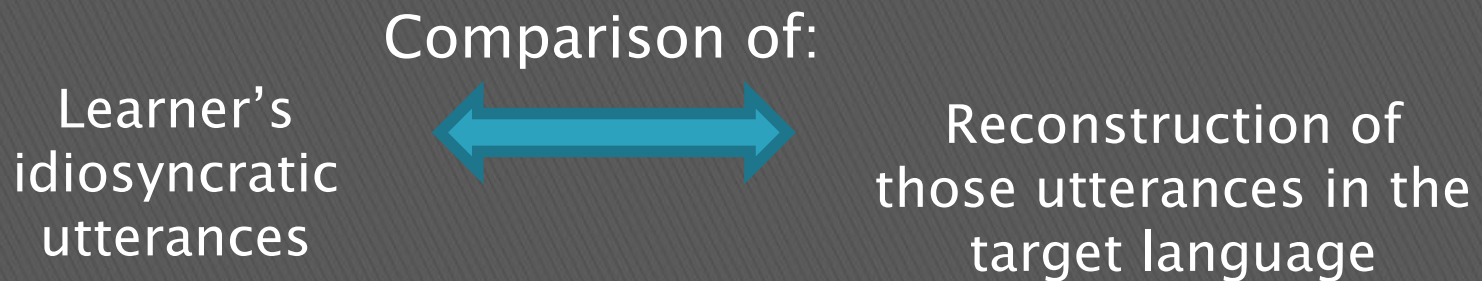Corder (1974)Procedure for identifying errors: "interpretation"

- ✓Normal
- ✓Authoritative
- ✓Plausible

# Learner errors and error analysis

## 3 Description of errors

Comparison of:

Learner's idiosyncratic utterances ⟷ Reconstruction of those utterances in the target language

## Types of descriptive taxonomies:

**\*Linguistics categories** — Auxiliary system, passive sentences, temporal conjunctions, sentential complements

# Learner errors and error analysis

*Morphology

*Syntax

*Vocabulary

General categories: allows detailed description of specific errors and quantification of a corpus of errors

In 1960's several studies were carried out:

○Richards (1971): errors made by learners from different language backgrounds (Japanese, Chinese, Burmese, French, Czech, Polish, Tagalog, Maori, Maltese, major Indian and West African languages) . Cross-sectional study

Type of errors: production and distribution of verb groups, prepositions, articles, use of questions.

Errors were not quantified

# Learner errors and error analysis

○Duskova (1969): identified 1007 errors in the written work of 50 Czech learners of English (postgraduate students of science). <u>Cross-sectional study</u>

Type of errors:

✓756 "recurrent systemic errors",

✓251 "nonce errors" (errors that occurred only once).
<u>Most common errors</u>: articles (260), lexis (233), morphology (180). <u>Less frequent errors</u>: 54 errors in syntax and 31 in word order

○Chamot's (1978;1979): acquisition of English by a bilingual French/Spanish boy. <u>Longitudinal study</u>.

Type of errors: the most frequent were omission of constituents, verb forms, sentence formation, articles, and prepositions. The number of errors were reduced over a 44-month period. Little improvement in question formation.

# Learner errors and error analysis

## *Surface strategy taxonomy
### Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982)

Omissions

Additions

Regularizations

| Category | Description | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Omissions | The absence of an item that must appear in a well-formed utterance | She sleeping |
| Additions | The presence of an item that must not appear in well-formed utterances | We didn't went there |
| Misinformations | The use of a wrong form of the morpheme or structure | The dog ated the chicken |
| Misordering | The incorrect placement of a morpheme or group of morphemes in an utterance | What daddy is doing? |

This does not represent mental processes.

# Learner errors and error analysis

## Types of errors, Corder (1974):

1 Presystematic errors occur when the learner is unaware of the existence of a particular rule in the target language. These are random.

→ the learner cannot give any account of why a particular form is chosen.

2 Systematic errors occur when the learner has discovered a rule but it is the wrong one.

→ the learner is unable to correct the errors but can explain the mistaken rule used and type.

3 Postsystematic errors occurs when the learner knows the correct target language rule but uses it inconsistently (makes a mistake)
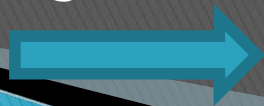
→ the learner can explain the target–language rule that is normally used.

❖ Learners must be interviewed to complete the reconstruction of the data and correction of the error.

❖ Even if the learner is available for consultation, it may not be possible to choose between these reconstructions.

Ex. My name Alberto

My name is Alberto

I am worried in my mind

❖ Many EA studies have been done informally, therefore, these results could not be quantified.

# Learner errors and error analysis

## 4 Explanation of errors
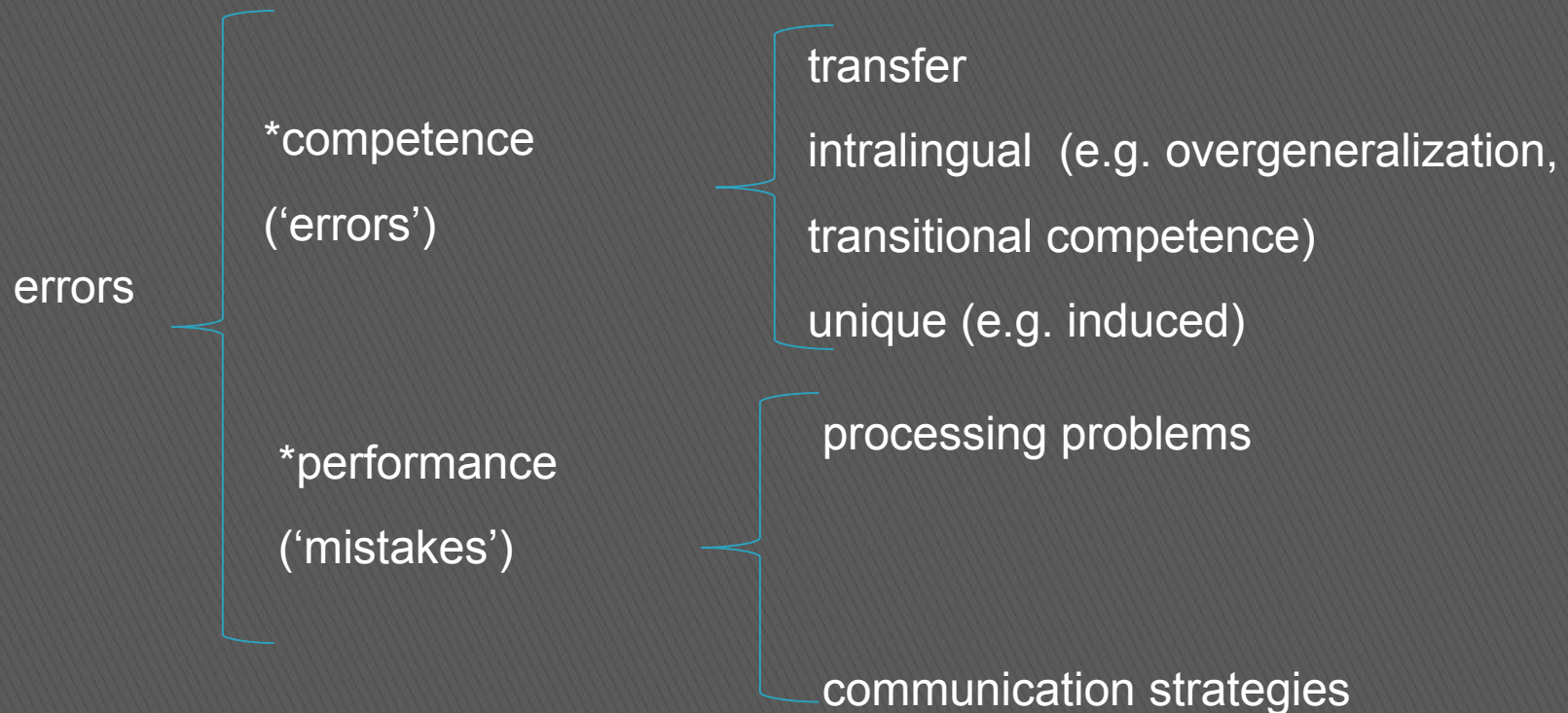
Establishing the source of error

**Error source**
Taylor (1986)

❖Psycholinguistic (nature of L2 knowledge system, and difficulties to use it in the production)

❖Sociolinguistic (ability to adjust the language in accordance to social context)

❖Epistemic (lack of world knowledge)

❖Discourse structure (problems in the organization of information into a coherent text)

# Learner errors and error analysis

Psycholinguistics sources of errors:

errors
- *competence ('errors')
  - transfer
  - intralingual (e.g. overgeneralization, transitional competence)
  - unique (e.g. induced)
- *performance ('mistakes')
  - processing problems
  - communication strategies

# Learner errors and error analysis

Richards (1971b) Causes of competence errors

1 Interference errors occur as a result of the use of elements from one language while speaking another.

2 Intralingual errors reflect the general characteristics of rule learning such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply.

3 Developmental errors occur when the learner attempts to build up hypotheses about the target language on the basis of limited experience.

Celce-Murcia (1977) finds "curious" the distinction between intralingual and developmental errors.

# Learner errors and error analysis

Lott (1983) Transfer errors:

1 Overextension of analysis: learner missuses an item because it shares features with an item in the L1 (ex. Italian learners use "process" to mean "trial")

2 Transfer of structure: learner utilizes some L1 feature (phonological, lexical, grammatical, or pragmatic) rather than that of the target language.

3 Interlingual/intralingual errors: a particular distinction does not exist in the L1 (ex. the use of "make" instead of "do" by Italian learners because "make/do" distinction is non-existent in Italian)

# Learner errors and error analysis

Richards (1971) Intralingual errors:

1 Overgeneralization errors: learner creates a deviant structure on the basis of other structure in the target language. (ex. He can sings)

2 Ignorance of rule restrictions: application of rules to contexts where they do not apply (ex. He made me to rest. He asked/wanted/invited me to go)

3 Incomplete application of rules: involves failure to fully develop a structure (ex. You like to sing?)

4 False concepts hypothesized: the learner fails to comprehend fully a distinction in the target language (One day it was happened)

# Learner errors and error analysis

Burt (1974) classified errors by:

1 Developmental (i.e. those errors similar to L1 acquistion)

2 Interference (i.e. those errors that reflect the structure of L1)
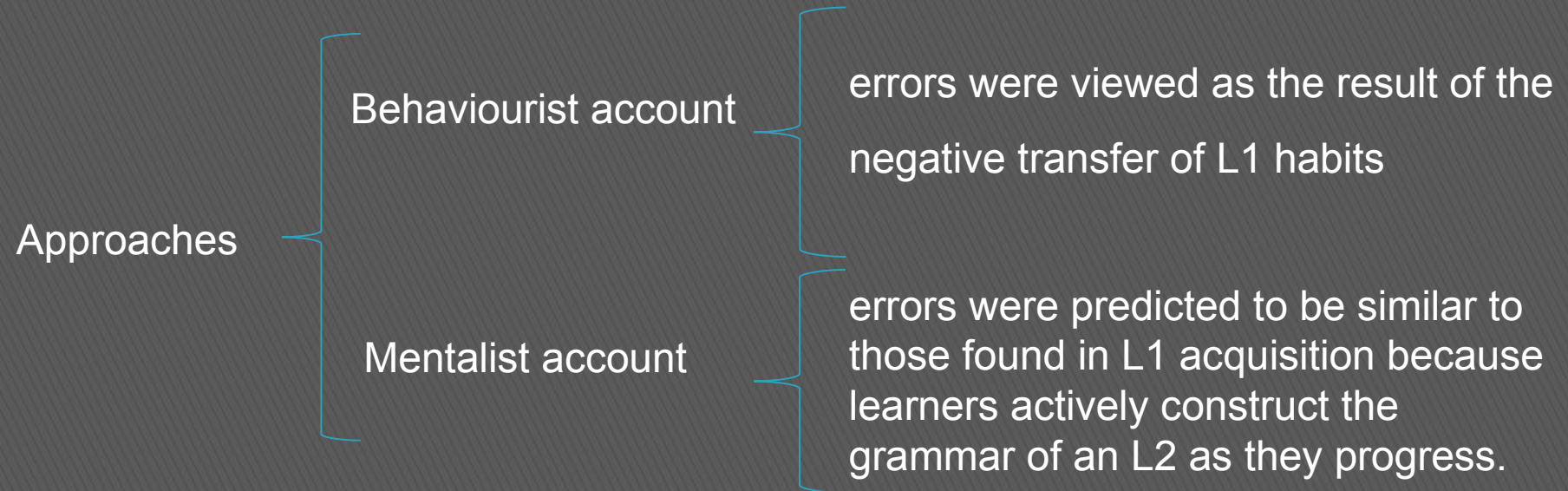
3 Unique (i.e. those errors that are neither developmental nor interference)

Induced errors:
Learners are led to make errors by the nature of the instruction they have received (ex. Use of any to mean none.)

# Learner errors and error analysis

Psycholinguistics sources of errors:

Behaviourist account — errors were viewed as the result of the negative transfer of L1 habits

Approaches

Mentalist account — errors were predicted to be similar to those found in L1 acquisition because learners actively construct the grammar of an L2 as they progress.

❖ Due to lack of agreement in errors classification Flick (1980) proposed the use of factor analysis which uses the patterns of correlation between scores on different variables to identify underlying factors.

# Learner errors and error analysis

## 5 Evaluation of errors

Considers the effect errors have on the person(s) addressed

addressee's comprehension of the learner's meaning

addressee's affective response to errors

Addressees = Judges

Native speakers (NS)                    Non-native speakers (NNS)

# Learner errors and error analysis

Judges may be asked to evaluate:

- Comprehensibility of the sentence containing errors
- Seriousness or naturaless of errors
- Degree of irritation

Questions of errors evaluation:

1 Are some errors judged to be more problematic than others?

2 Are there differences in the evaluation made by NS and NNS?

3 What criteria do judges use in evaluating learner's errors?

# Learner errors and error analysis

Type of errors

Global: affects overall sentence organization (ex. wrong word order, missing or wrongly placed sentence connectors, syntactic overgeneralizations.)

Local: affect single elements in a sentence (ex. errors in morphology or grammatical functors.)

*NNS judges seem to be specially hard on morphological and function errors in comparison to NS judges. But they evaluate lexical and global errors less severely than NS judges. NS tend to judge lexical errors more seriously than grammatical errors.

Intelligibility

Acceptability — Error gravity

Irritation criteria

# Learner errors and error analysis

## The limitations of error analysis

1. Weaknesses in methodological procedures

2. Limitations in scope

**Error analysis**

- ✓ fails to provide a complete picture of learner language
- ✓ most studies are cross-sectional in nature
- provides a partial picture
- ✓ takes no account of what learners do correctly or their development over time

# Learner errors and error analysis

## Conclusions: a reassessment of EA

- ✓ EA replaced CA

- ✓ First serious attempt to investigate learner language in L2.

- ✓ It is continuous to be practiced as a mean for investigating a specific research question.

# Errors Analysis Contributions to SLA Research

✓ It has made substantial contributions to SLA research: EA is one of the first methods used to investigate learner's language.

✓ It has served as a tool for providing empirical evidence for the behaviorist/mentalist debate of the 1970's.

✓ It supports the claim of the "creativeness" of much learner language.

✓ It recognizes that errors were not something to be avoided but were an inevitable feature of the learning process.

✓ Everything the learner utters is by definition a grammatical utterance in his dialect (Corder 1971)

✓ It helped make errors respectable.