

## **Fundamentals of language Acquisition**

**Prof. BIDISHA SOM**

**Dept. of HSS**

**IIT Guwahati**

**Week 07**

**Lecture 033**

Lec 33: theoretical approaches

Welcome back. We are in Module 7. We are discussing second language acquisition. Before that, we discussed first language acquisition through various parameters of phonology, morphology, syntax, and so on. Now we are looking at second language acquisition as the language that is learned after the first language has been learned. So after the native language, or L1, or various other names, used to be in vogue before.

Let us just call them L1 first languages, so after the first language has been learned, the second language sometimes follows. These days, it is quite common to find people who are bilingual or even multilingual; this was not so prevalent before. But there were always bilinguals around. So as a result, second language acquisition as a matter of study has also had a rather long history.

It started way back in the early part of the 1900s, 1930s, 40s, and so on. So, this is what we are discussing now. Till lecture 2, we have discussed the various basic understandings of the SLA, its history, and so on. So, today I will start with the theoretical approach. So, what are the main theoretical approaches? There are many reasons because, as I just said, the SLA as a discipline has a long history.

So, there are multiple theories and multiple groups of theories, let us say. So, within each group, there are different versions of the same with slight modifications, sometimes a little bit of updating, and so on. We will try to see the broad overview as always because each of them would take a lot of time if we go into detail. So, today we will start with the

contrastive analysis, move on to other features, and end with universal grammar. We have already discussed universal grammar in detail before, so here we will just look at how universal grammar applies to second language acquisition.

But first, contrastive analysis is one of the very first theoretical approaches to understanding second language acquisition. Now, SLA was formally established sometime in the 1960s. However, the ideas have been around for a long time about how a second language affects the first language or other mental functions. We have already discussed how bilingualism or second language acquisition was not considered a very good thing to happen to anybody. It was considered a pathology, and so on.

So basically, the idea has been around, the scholarly interest was always there, but as a discipline, a systematic process of understanding this was established somewhere around the 1960s. So, because contrastive analysis predates this establishment, it also has the theoretical underpinning that predates the later theoretical perspectives. At that time, the dominant theoretical perspectives within linguistics, as well as in psychology, were structuralism and behaviorism. So, as a result of which CA we will call it CA from now onwards. So, CA was based on structuralism and behaviorism because they were the predominant theories at that time.

So, because it is based on structuralism and behaviorism, the primary focus of CA was looking at the surface structure of the languages that are under consideration. So, whichever L1 and L2 are present. The structural properties of those languages were the first things to be studied within the contrastive analysis system. So, what does it mean by surface structures? All the structures that we have discussed so far—phonology, morphology, syntax—are the surface structures. So, the structural properties of language 1 and language 2 were the first focus of the contrastive analysis.

So basically, this was a bottom-up approach, bottom-up analysis, so bottom-up as in what is there already; it is the data that the stimulus that is out there; from there, you build up the story as to what is probably happening; that is why it is called bottom-up. So, focusing primarily on the structural properties. Secondly, after you have looked at the structural properties of both L1 and L2, the next idea that followed in CA was the concept of transfer in learning. So, the properties that L1 has and the properties that L2 has involve some sort of transfer that happens from one to another, primarily from L1 to L2; that is why it is called contrastive analysis. There is a comparison and contrast that occurs between L1 structural properties and L2 structural properties.

So the idea of transfer works like this: the properties of L1 might be transferred to L2 when

somebody is acquiring a second language. Because these properties are already in place, we discussed them in the light of L1 acquisition and L2 acquisition. By the time you learn L2, another language is already in place, which is not the case with L1; so in the case of L1, there is no chance of the impact of the previously learned system, but when it is L2, another system is already in place. So, there is an opportunity and a possibility of shifting those properties from L1 to L2; that is what contrastive analysis talks about. So, depending on various factors, the transfers can be of two types.

Transfer from L1 to L2 was already taken as a given, but depending on the structural properties, the comparison between the structural properties of L1 and L2 could result in two types of transfer: positive and negative. Positive, the surface structure of L1 and L2, is similar. So, in this case, if the L1 and L2 are similarly structured, let us say their phonology is similar; I did discuss phonology. So, if L1 and L2 have the same set of phonemes, then there is no problem in learning those phonemes of the new language quickly. But if there is a slight difference between some sounds that are present in L1 and those sounds that are not present in L2, L2 has a different set of sounds that are not present in L1.

So there you will see some problems with adjustment. So that is what is being talked about. So positive transfer is when L1 and L2 have a similar kind of surface structure. So then it is, why is it positive? It is positive because, in this case, the transfer will help with learning the L2. So, in this case, it facilitates learning because the structure is already there, similarly for the morphological system, let us say.

So, in English, you have the inflectional morphemes to denote the time of action, aspects, or tense, and those things. So, suppose you are learning another language with a similar structure; it will simply, you know, carry this forward and help you learn. So, it will help you; that is why it is called positive transfer. Then there is the idea of negative transfer as well; that is when the L1 and L2 structures are different, and this is when the transfer of features from L1 to L2 will not only not help, but it will also hinder because you are trying to transfer L1-specific features to L2 features, and L2 does not have those features. That is what will give us a lot of errors.

and as a result of which this is this is called interference. So, in the first case, in the event of similarity, we have a positive transfer, which basically means that it helps facilitate learning L2. In the case of a difference in structure, the transfer will happen anyway, but it will result in interference because this is not a blank slate; you are already learning when there is another language involved, so it will interfere with your new language learning. So, how the contrastive analysis process really goes is that the description of L1 and L2 structural features will be first discussed in detail, and then they will be compared to find structures that might cause problems in learning L2. So, setting aside the features that are

similar, the problematic areas are where there is no similarity, where there is a different kind of structure in L1 and L2 for the same kind of purpose, let us say the same kind of grammatical purpose.

So those are the cases that might cause problems, so that has to be identified. Now, why was this to be identified? There was not only the sake of just finding out the differences, but they also had another goal, which was to create language teaching material. So, if you know where the learners are going to face problems, you will be able to create your teaching material in such a way that, by giving more attention to those details, the learners will be able to overcome those interferences. So, that was basically the idea. So, which structures in L2 needed more attention; which of the grammatical structures in L2 needed to be dealt with more attention was the ultimate goal of this.

So, Lado is one of the main proponents of this theory. So, this is where he gives you a three-type, three-way distinction between the differences. So, the easiest L2 structures are those that are already present in L1 in the same form. There are different kinds, so it is a gradient kind of structure; when you map L1 to L2, there can be three possible comparisons. One is that everything is the same.

So, for example, let us say language 1 and language 2 both have this morpheme /-s/ to denote, let us say, plural. So in that case you simply you will start using the other one. So this kind of structure will benefit quite a lot from the transfer from L1 to L2. Another structure can be a structure in L2 that does not have a similar form in L1 but has the same meaning encoded differently with the same distribution. So distribution is about where all those words can be utilized.

So, that can be another way of looking at it. So, it may not have a similar form, not the exact form, but there will be a similar kind of distribution. We will see the examples as Lado gives them one by one. and the third kind is when there is partial or no overlap. In structure, in L1, in form, meaning, and distribution.

So one is the form and meaning; both are similar; another is the form that does not have a similar form, but the meaning is the same, and the distribution is also the same; and the third is where there is partial overlap or no overlap. So these are the examples that he gives; for example, in Spanish, he gives the example from Spanish and English: the first one for the same form and meaning, different distribution. In this case, for example, in Spanish, this means "the dove" or "the white dove." In Spanish, it comes the other way, so "the white

dove" and "white doves." So in the plural, the 'the' also changes; this is where the change happens in plural in Spanish.

Here, this is singular and this is plural, so basically, it is like doves, whites, like this. Similarly, here and here. So, this marker goes on to each and every component of the sentence, but in English, that does not happen; the number comes only here. So this is what we call distribution. In both cases, the /-s/ marking denotes plurality.

So the meaning and the form are the same, but the distribution is slightly different; however, this is not that much of a problem. So this is the first layer. Similarly, the same meaning but in a different form. So here this is I and this is I.

I will go and this is I will go. So this is another case where the form is not the same, but the meaning is the same. The same meaning and different form and distribution. So in Spanish this is "agua" and in English this is "water," but here the distribution is very different. For example, in English, water can be used as a noun, a verb, and a compound. So, you can have, you know, this is water, water the garden, or as a water pipe; these are possible ways of compounding or using it as a verb or as a noun.

So, English has a very different kind of distribution of the word "water"—a simple one, a single word "water"—but in Spanish, it can occur only as a noun. So that is in the same form. In English, you do not need to change the form. The water remains the same in all these different cases.

So this is another one. Then you have a different form of partial overlap in meaning. So in Spanish, there are different kinds of words for the concept of "leg" in English. So in English you have "leg," but in Spanish, "leg" refers to the leg of a human, the leg of an animal, or the leg of a race. So, for the last leg of the race in English, you can still use the word "leg" itself. So, English has only one word, whereas Spanish makes a distinction between all three different kinds of places where the concept called "leg" can be used, and they also have different forms.

So, this is another case that is slightly more difficult because the learner has to figure out where to stop using the word and where not to. Similar form, different meaning; this is what is called false friends or homophones. So "asistir" means "to attend" in Spanish, but in English, it is "to help," or "to assist" somebody. So these are different kinds; these are

different layers when you compare Spanish and English. These are the different types of comparison that Lado gives.

Now, on the basis of this, there are errors that were explained away; because of this kind of distinction in the comparison, there are different kinds of errors that occur. However, like all theories, this also had drawbacks in that it could not explain many of the errors. That was one big drawback of this theory. So, eventually, contrastive analysis made way for later theories, most importantly the error analysis theory. So, among the leading scholars in contrastive analysis are Charles Price and Robert Lado; of course, there are many more, but these are the main names.

Now, after this came error analysis; error analysis emerged around the 1970s, and this happened because of the different kinds of problems that CA faced, including the inability to explain various kinds of errors. So, this major shift here, however, is not only to explain the errors but also how you explain the errors. The shift here primarily happened in the domain of what your point of departure is. In CA, the point of departure was the surface structure, the sound, the words, the morphology, and so on. In case of error analysis, the focus shifted to the internal ability or internal process of the learner.

So, the reason for this was that by that time mentalism was already present, Chomsky's universal grammar had already been proposed, and it was quite popular. So, the idea had the whole focus shifted to the inner workings of the human mind, and that is why the focus of error analysis also shifted to the internal ability of the learner to create language. So, this is based on the description and analysis of the actual learner errors in L2 rather than on idealized linguistic structures because the CA was looking at the structural properties of the two languages as they should be, but not exactly as the learners had produced them. This is a very important distinction. Here they were looking at the data itself, like the data that the learner had produced, the kind of L2 the learner produced; on the basis of that, they were looking at the possible theories as to how to look at it.

So, because of this, in the meantime, mentalism, as I just said, was already there. So they focused on the underlying rules because universal grammar addresses the underlying rules. So here, this theory is also focused on the underlying rules rather than on the surface forms. So, Corder is one of the biggest names here. So, he kind of pulled out errors from the dark dungeon as a bad thing.

He said that errors are not bad habits. This need not be eradicated because errors tell us how the human mind is producing the new language and how the human mind is creating an understanding of the new language in the learner's mind. That is the main point that is

important in this. Because errors point out the underlying system that one is using. What is the system that he is using? As a result, they are windows to the learner's mind. So, errors in this case are not markers of interference because, in CA, the idea was that errors happen because the L1 is trying to interfere with the L2 structures, and hence you have a problem; you have errors as an output.

But here the idea is not of interference but of how the person is trying to figure out the entire thing, and how L2 learning is actually following certain underlying rules. And what are those rules we will be able to know from the errors that they make. That is the idea. So, this is a kind of list that Ellis provides for the entire process. So, the collection of samples from the learner's language and the identification of the errors also involve a division made between systematic errors and mistakes.

So, systematic errors are the ones of interest here because they are the errors that tell us about the rule the person is following. So, because they will, the same kind of mistakes will happen across domains. But mistakes they separate out because mistakes are those that might be, you know, a momentary lapse of memory or other kinds of, you know, problems with pronunciation and stuff. So, that is not important. An important feature is a systematic error that needs to be described following this.

So, the description of errors is based on language and grammatical level. For example, you can talk about auxiliaries. So, what are the systematic errors that learners of English as an L2 are making within the domain of auxiliaries? So, that is how the description goes. And then an explanation of errors, evaluation, ambiguity, and so on. So a detailed description of the errors that the learner is producing in a specific language when they are learning it in L2, and then understanding them through some kind of underlying rule, is the main idea.

One of the main leading scholars in this is Pitt Corder. And this is the main publication that we are talking about. Then another important idea was that of the interlanguage (IL). So, this is also based on a similar kind of concept, that is, EA. Interlanguage refers to the intermediate stages of a learner's language acquisition. So, when you start learning an L2, you go from very low proficiency to high proficiency, and in between, there are many stages.

So, those are the intermediate stages where you are making changes. So, gradually you make changes in the initially simple sentence structure; eventually, you understand the morphology of the language, and eventually you are able to use it properly, and so on. We have already seen that these stages may not map one-to-one onto L1 acquisition. But L2 acquisition has its own structures, and because those structures are based on stages, those

stages are sometimes called interim grammar; however, the more common name is interlanguage. So this is the intermediate stage between the initial stage and the final stage.

So, this is also considered a creative process driven by inner forces. This is characterized by influence from both L1 and L2. However, this is not considered to be a bad case of L2 or too much interference from L1. The main difference here is that IL is a third system.

It is a third space between L1 and L2. It is not a bad version of L2, or an approximation of L1, or anything. It is a different form altogether. So, the primary characteristics of IL, of course, have adequate literature on this; one can look it up, but these are the basic characteristics of IL: systematic, dynamic, variable, and reduced form. Systematic, as the name suggests, IL, the interlanguage or interim grammars, follows a systematic pattern, generally, typically, overall. Of course, there are variations—individual variations—or, depending on languages, there might be slight changes here and there, but overall there is a systematic pattern through which interlanguage progresses from the beginning to the end structure.

Similarly, it is a dynamic system of rules that learners have in their minds, which changes frequently; that is why you have stages of interlanguage. Interlanguage is not one fixed state; it is many states before the final L2, you know, ultimate attainment stage is achieved; those are the in-between stages. So, this is a dynamic process constantly in flux, and that is another important thing. Variable because differences in context sometimes exist, even though it is systematic; it still has room for variability. Those variabilities are based on different patterns of language use, the reason for which they are used.

For example, if you do not need to use the language beyond a few specific domains, then it might have some impact on the interlanguages that the person will go through, as opposed to, let us say, you are learning your L2 to be able to read the literature in that language and to be able to write in that language; that could be one goal. Another goal could be just to get by in a foreign country. So, depending on those factors and on the pattern of use, the variabilities might be seen and reduced; of course, it is less complex in grammatical structure. Because that is the whole point, once you have achieved the entire complex grammatical structure, you are a good speaker of the L2.

So that is why the intermediate stages will have less complex grammar. One of the most important names in this domain is that of Larry Selinker. Then we move on to our monitor model. This is another very important milestone in second language acquisition research, and one of the biggest names has proposed this. So, this was proposed by Krashen. So, the idea here is that this is also based on the understanding of the internal mechanism, as opposed to the previous models; though they also used the internal mechanism underlying

rule-governed phenomena, they were not doing it explicitly as implied.

But in the case of the monitor model, Krashen explicitly used the language acquisition device, the idea of the language acquisition device, to create an understanding of the monitor model and to propose this model. And this model remained quite influential in the US, particularly in the domain of language teaching. In fact, even today many scholars refer to Krashen's theories, not only this but also the updated later models as well. So, Krashen has remained very influential and relevant in this field. But anyway, going back to the monetary model, this was also very important for language teaching domains, and it remains so; the 80s and 90s were a very important time for this theory.

So the main hypothesis of the model is that the primary distinction is made between acquisition and learning. That is our overtly expressed distinction that this theory makes between acquisition and learning. So acquisition is subconscious; acquisition is what happens for L1. So, when you are learning your L1, it is almost like a subconscious process, or you may not be conscious at all when you are learning the language. So, that is what he considers acquisition, and this is not the same as when you are learning a second language.

A second language is conscious. This is something we also discussed before: there is a voluntary effort needed for learning a second language. So, that is the distinction he makes as well. He talks about how this second language should be called learning, while the first language can be considered acquisition. And then the monitor hypothesis states that what is learned is available only as a monitor for the purposes of editing or making changes to whatever has already been produced. So there is a monitoring process that is included in the learning in the domain of learning, not in the domain of acquisition.

So there is a kind of whatever you learn that is based on that monitoring hypothesis. Then there is this hypothesis of natural order that he talks about. This is something we have also seen before in terms of when we discussed morphology. The same kind of theory can be applied to second language acquisition as well.

So there is a natural order through which we learn the rules of a language. In this case, there is a natural order. So you will learn some of the most complex ones first and the easier ones last. So there is a natural order. Input hypothesis, one of his most important contributions, discusses the idea that depending on the kind of comprehensible input, it has been one of his most important contributions and something that has been heavily debated; the input must be comprehensible.

What it means is that it should be understood and that there should be enough of it. So,

basically, until and unless you have adequate input that is comprehensible, easily understandable, and in adequate amounts, the person learning the L2 will not be able to learn it properly. So, the idea is that input has to be comprehensible and sufficient. Of course, this has been a very complicated idea and has been debated a lot, but this is what he provided. And the necessary grammar is also automatically provided.

All of these should be part of what he calls "input." And then the affective filter hypothesis; this is also important. The person's affective state is also important. In fact, this was later on picked up by many other researchers and have been discussed in detail. Pica, for example.

But input may not be processed if the affective filter is up; this is what we call it. So, there should be no affective filter while learning; if that is in place, then we will not be able to learn. So, if individuals are inhibited, then learning will be affected; of course, Krashen is the proponent of this theory. And then, regarding our universal grammar and Chomsky's proposal, we have already discussed this in detail, so we are not getting into the primary ideas. The basic idea was that our principles and parameters have an underlying universal grammar that is available to everybody. So, the primary thesis when we are bringing universal grammar to second language acquisition has been around whether the understanding of UG is available while you are learning a second language (L2).

Because UG was available in the beginning, your L1 acquisition made good use of it. Is it still available for use in the SLA? That has been the main question that has existed for a very long time. So the primary divisions that they make are these three domains, three main important ideas within this. The initial state in SLA, the nature of interlanguage, how it changes over time, and the final state. So the beginning, the intermediate stages, and the final stage are three stages, and what is the role of universal grammar in all of this? So the initial stage, as the name suggests, is the beginning of the SLA journey. So once principles and parameters are set to L1, we have already seen that, as per universal grammar, understanding L1 or acquiring L1 is largely based on these factors.

So your parameters are already set, the principles are already there, and the parameters have been set. This is the scenario in which L2 makes an entry. So it is already set to L1. Now those parameters may adversely affect their L2 if they are different. For example, let us take the example of Hindi and English in terms of postpositions and prepositions.

So in English you have prepositions, in Hindi you have postpositions, and many other languages also have them. So in English, you have "on the table," and in Hindi, "table ke upar." So the preposition and postposition parameters are different from this. So if this is

the case, then your L2 SLA would be affected; second language acquisition will be affected.

This is how it is explained. So, there are debates about whether the learner still has access to UG. So, this is, of course, a very hotly debated area. There are various stages of access that have been proposed by many scholars, but we are not getting there; this is due to a paucity of time. So, whatever the case, depending on who is proposing, there have been many theories: some say that we have full access to UG even when we are learning our L2, some say that there is no access, and there are many other theories that say there is partial access.

So, this is around which the idea is based. And then there come our interlanguages in between the initial stage and the final stage; we have intermediate stages. So, the principles and parameters will define interlanguage as IL1, IL2, IL3. So, the stages of the interim grammars after the initial state and this is where your parameters are set to the new language.

So, this is the idea. So, here this is what was called interim grammar in the 60s and 70s. So, if the learner has access to UG, then IL is resetting the parameters according to the new inputs, and that is what most of the researchers are converging on: that at least there should be partial access if parameters are to work. So, you initially utilized your L1 parameters for L2. And eventually, if you have the UG still there, you will be resetting the parameters for L2 depending on the kind of input that you are getting, and thereby you will go to the final state. The final state is relevant, of course, only in the case of SLA because this entire thing is because in the case of L1, this will not be relatable; this will not be relevant. Why? Because irrespective of whichever language you are speaking, all native speakers of a language are expected to master that.

There is no difference between one native speaker and another native speaker in the universal grammar that this paradigm identifies. So all native speakers are equally competent, but that is not the case with L2 speakers. So in L2, this is a very important concept that there is a final state, and this might be different from one speaker to another. So not all learners may have the same final state.

Now, what will this depend on? This will depend on various factors. So what the final state speaker 1 achieves versus speaker 2 or 3 will depend on these parameters and factors. So one of them is, of course, the degree of access to UG, different input in qualitative terms

and then the relationship between L1 and L2 might also decide the level of transfer, and so on. So there are multiple factors that play a role in attaining our final state with respect to SLA from the universal grammar perspective. And of course, the leading scholar in this domain is Chomsky, and there are many other researchers who have contributed to this.

I will add their references at the end, but of course, Chomsky is the main focus. So this is where we complete this segment. In the next lecture, we will discuss some other theories from the functional perspective. Thank you.