

SPRACHWISSENSCHAFT

# Error Analysis in the World

## A Bibliography

Bernd Spillner

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## **Introduction**

### **1. The notion of error**

The very different forms and functions of language errors people make in the communicative process have led to extensive error analysis by a variety of disciplines using various research methods. Historical linguistics investigated errors (analogies) as the mechanism for linguistic change, an approach which found favour at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with psychology and psycholinguistics (see, e.g. Mehringer & Mayer 1895). Descriptive linguistics discussed errors under the aspects of norm and deviation. It was not, however, until language error became the focus of applied linguistics that the subject became relevant to language teaching and teaching methodology, a relevance that continues to this day.

### **2. Errors in the mother tongue**

Language errors can be broached first from a purely intralingual standpoint. Here, analysis concentrates on errors in the mother tongue made both by children during first-language acquisition and by adults during everyday language use. Intralingual error investigation provides valuable insight into how language functions during the language-production process and into language-specific structural problems (e.g. the relationship between phonology and orthography).

Intralingual error analysis also opens up several other research fields. One example is the psychoanalytical approach to error investigation associated with Freud, in which errors in speech, particularly spontaneous slips, provide information about (usually subconscious) mental states, anxieties, and repressed desires. This approach to error analysis is of interest to linguists in so far as it offers explanations for the origins of error and norm deviations triggered by psychological language mechanisms.

Many of the processes responsible for errors during first-language acquisition and mother-tongue communication also have a bearing on foreign-language communication and consequently need to be addressed in foreign-language teaching methods.



### 3. Errors in communication

Approaches that go beyond intralingual error analysis include the translingual investigation of human communication (French: *langage*) and thus belong to general linguistics. Although promising studies were conducted into the psychological conditions for general human communicative processes in the past, for example in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (cf., among others, Mehringer & Mayer 1895; Ranschburg 1905; Weimer 1925; Kieling 1925), they have not been rigorously pursued since.

By comparing errors made by speakers in different languages, researchers can draw conclusions regarding the phonological, grammatical and lexical structures of the languages in question. Such comparisons highlight the principles of language structure and rules that emerge from the temporal sequence of spoken languages.

### 4. Errors in foreign-language acquisition

Interlingual studies make up the bulk of research into language errors. In simple terms, the hypothesis behind these studies is that many errors occurring during the acquisition of a foreign language are due to the incorrect transfer of structures from the mother tongue ( $L_1$ ) to the foreign language ( $L_2$ ) - or from a previously learned foreign language ( $L_2$ ) to a new foreign language ( $L_3$ ). This realisation led to the demand that, in order to prevent errors, differences (and common features) between  $L_1$  and  $L_2$  should be systematically collected and lists compiled of examples of possible language interference. Contrastive analyses thus aimed at pinpointing pitfalls in foreign-language learning and predicting errors that might occur during  $L_2$  acquisition, so that they could be countered with suitable classroom material.

Contrastive linguistics and error analysis based on interference reached their height when, following in the footsteps of Lado, linguists carried out a systematic, synchronic linguistic comparison in an attempt to ascertain the similarities and differences between  $L_1$  and  $L_2$ , determine learning difficulties and pitfalls and counter language errors with appropriate teaching methods (cf., among others, Nickel 1972; Kaufmann 1974; Kielhöfer 1975; Corder 1981; James 1998).

## 5. Error analysis in the foreign-language classroom

Language teaching traditionally presumes that language learners make some errors due to lack of competence, ignorance of rules and gaps in vocabulary, and other mistakes due to acute external influences (lack of time, stress, fatigue, distraction etc.). Errors of knowledge are attributed to systematic learning deficits while occasional mistakes are momentary shortcomings despite the learner having a firm grasp of the rules. Such differentiation continues to play an important role in error assessment today. Language-teaching methods inspired by generative grammar gave this traditional distinction a new lease of life. The juxtaposing of ‘performance mistakes v. competence errors’ carelessly vested theoretical grammatical categories with a new psycholinguistic significance. The adoption of such vague terms in language teaching was facilitated by the then fashionable catchphrase “communicative competence”, which led to a whole range of didactical neologisms such as “adjective + ‘competence’”.

It is undeniable that external factors can be responsible or partly responsible for errors. However, every language error is manifest in performance and every error is associated with competence. Practical error analyses also demonstrate that occasional performance mistakes do not occur at random but in situations where difficulties are inherent in the language system or where there is no firm grasp of the rules. The distinction between these two types of error is therefore not helpful in the foreign-language classroom.

Another tradition in language teaching has been the practice of regarding error as something generally negative, as a deviation from the norm and a misdemeanour requiring remedial action. Today, on the other hand, foreign-language teachers are advised not to correct students and interrupt their flow when they are speaking. The process approach in foreign-language teaching even extends this treatment of language errors beyond conversation to written language production:

*Generally, it was assumed that if students were engaged in writing about topics they had chosen themselves and were empowered to make decisions about the shaping and polishing of their own texts, final products would improve as a natural consequence of a more enlightened process. Since both teachers and students found it more stimulating and less tedious to focus on ideas than on accuracy, composition instruction entered a period of ‘benign neglect’ of errors and grammar teaching (Ferris 2002:4).*

In its approach to errors, foreign-language teaching methodology should neither encourage pidginised communication nor doggedly strive towards language perfection at native-speaker level, but find a compromise between the two.

## **6. The domain of error analysis**

For a long time error analysis has occupied an important position in applied linguistics and in foreign language teaching. Its theoretical concepts and the empirical research have been closely related both to the contrastive hypothesis and interlanguage hypothesis.

According to contrastive linguistics, errors produced during the process of foreign-language acquisition are thought to be caused largely by unconscious transfer (in the mind of the learner) of mother tongue structures to the system of the target language. According to this hypothesis, if there are considerable contrasts between the two language systems, there is a high probability of negative transfer, resulting in errors within target-language performance. Errors in the second language demonstrate existing language contrasts and thus indicate learning difficulties. Such errors, however, can also be regarded through error analysis as being caused by structural learning contrasts. Systematic contrastive analysis therefore allows the development of preventative teaching strategies and materials to counter these errors.

The interlanguage hypothesis of second-language acquisition is based on the assumption that the transition from zero knowledge to native-speaker or near-native-speaker competence is not abrupt but proceeds in typical steps, which are, to a certain degree, predictable (cf. e.g. Arabski 1979; Selinker 1992). In this approach, errors are indicative of the different stages of competence. The reason for teaching measures, such as correcting and preventing errors, is to facilitate the learner's transition from one level to the next.

These two competing theories of foreign language learning have in common that they take into account the predictability of deviant language performances during the process of acquisition; for both, empirical error analysis is an essential methodical instrument; in both cases, errors are relevant for diagnosis and the evaluation of the process of language acquisition, as well as for the development of therapeutic or corrective language teaching methods.

The importance of error analysis demands that a bibliography be compiled listing analyses of errors in many source and target languages. There is indeed no lack of empirical investigations with scrupulous documentation of error data for different learning situations, learner ages, learning material, teaching methods, source languages and target languages.

Unfortunately, a lack of data synthesis has meant that there is little proof of which linguistic-error variables have a direct bearing on success in foreign-language learning or teaching. There has also been a lack of comparative evaluation of the empirical data with regard to a general typology of errors. Even if research differs in theoretical assumptions and methodical approaches, it is still possible to compare effectively a considerable proportion of error-analysis results. For languages such as English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Russian, we have at our disposal error data from learners of many different mother tongues; this material could be compared with regard to ‘universals of language contact’ (Spillner 1986, 154), processes such as ‘code switching’, and interlingual constants of foreign-language learning. The intention of this bibliography is to stimulate such comparative research.

But its aim reaches even further. During the controversy between ‘contrastive linguistics’ and the ‘interlanguage hypothesis’, discussions about the analogies and differences between mother-tongue acquisition and foreign-language learning largely neglected an old tradition of error analysis: the analysis of errors within the mother tongue, both in child language and in everyday adult language performance. Error analysis within this scope provides important insight into the function of language during the process of speech production (oral and written) and into structural problems of specific languages (e. g. the relationship between the phonic and graphic systems). At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, psychological and psycholinguistic literature (e.g. Kiessling 1925, Meringer/Mayer 1895, Ranschburg 1905, Weimer 1925) published some very interesting results, especially concerning the causes of errors and their role in linguistic changes.

When intralingual error analysis is devoted to the mother tongue, it gives access to several additional research fields. One of these fields is the psychoanalytical branch of error analysis, which is closely connected with the name of Sigmund Freud and his school. In this approach, errors, especially slips of the tongue and slips of the pen, give insight into unconscious psychic dispositions, fears and repressed desires. This type of error analysis may be important for linguistics

insofar as it offers possible explanations for error causes, for psychically conditioned mechanisms of linguistic deviance.

Moving further into the field of medicine are activities of error analysis dealing with disorders of speech and language. These problems include disorders of articulation, dyslexia, aphasia, speech disorders due to psychotic disease or mental illness. For the physician and psychologist, errors are an important means of diagnosis; and for the speech therapist they form the basis of methods of individual therapy.

Errors are a major source of knowledge for the linguist. Besides the observation of language acquisition in early childhood and of language disorders in clinical linguistics, error analysis is the most important empirical method to gain information about the function of cognitive processes in language production and language perception. The failure of productive or receptive verbalization resulting in a linguistic error provides insight into the 'normal' cognitive process of speech production. Because of their importance for other types of error analysis, a selection of publications in this field has been listed in this bibliography.

The domain of general and theoretical linguistics also gains from error data. Based on a comparison of errors that speakers commit in various languages, inferences can be drawn about the phonological, grammatical and lexical structures of these languages, about general principles of language and about linguistic constants resulting from the sequential and temporal order of phonetic languages. In this respect, error analysis is relevant for systematic research in linguistic universals. Finally, error analysis is of significance in explaining linguistic change. Comparative-historical linguistics already explained spontaneous language change on the basis of the psychically caused 'analogy' as a deviance from a phonetic law. Meringer/Mayer (1895) were interested in slips of the tongue in everyday communication as a reason for diachronic language variation. It can therefore be seen that linguistic errors are of major interest to very diverse fields of linguistics.

While the contrastive and interlanguage hypotheses of foreign-language acquisition compete with each other, both have at heart that it is possible to predict deviations from the norm in language production; both theories deploy empirical error analysis as an essential methodological tool; errors are important for assessing the language-learning process and level as well as for developing therapeutic and corrective teaching strategies. This orientation has resulted in a plethora

ora of publications on error analysis, which has become almost impossible to keep track of. (Spillner 1991).

## **7. Systematic error analysis**

A critical appraisal of the mass of publications on foreign-language error analysis shows that research has reached very different stages of development depending on the field. It is expedient to base such an evaluation on a systematic approach to error analysis. This is best accomplished inductively according to methodical steps of coherent error analysis. The table below sketches systematic steps for error analysis without giving a strict chronological order.

### **7.1 Identifying and localising errors**

The first step of every error analysis involves identifying an error in a text (Kasper 1975). In a written class test, this step generally involves the teacher underlining with red ink part of an expression. This seemingly simple procedure, however, is preceded by two complex acts. The teacher first has to compare the entire text systematically with language norms and detect any deviations. To do so, the teacher has to call upon his/her in-depth knowledge of L<sub>2</sub>, if necessary backed up by standard reference works (dictionaries, grammar books, specialized dictionaries of orthography, pronunciation, prosody, style). As all natural languages display diatopic, diastratic and other variations, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between norm and variety. Moreover, the norm is fluid and is subject to language change and language reforms: what is unacceptable one day may in a few years' time be an accepted variety or norm.

The second obligatory step in localizing errors entails reconstructing speaker/writer intention. In other words, the teacher has to know or deduce what the student is trying to express. With some exercises, such as translation or dictation, the intention is fixed; when students are required to express themselves freely, however, the intention can sometimes only be ascertained through context or by asking the student. For example:

Being poor, the government took advantage of the unemployed. (Who is poor?)

This example shows that statements might be incorrect even though they do not seem to deviate from a grammatical or lexical norm. The problems language

teachers face when they try to localise errors are therefore fraught with much more difficulty than generally presumed.

### Methodical steps of error analysis

Steps	Identification of error	Description of error	Cause of error	Impact of error	Teaching strategies to remedy the error
<b>Analysis aims</b>	Localisation in text	Linguistic taxonomy	Identification of source of error	Impact on communication	Pedagogical error description
<b>Methods</b>	Comparison with norm; reconstruction of intention of communication	Description and classification according to linguistic categories	Identification of external influences; hypotheses on psycholinguistic processes	Identification of reactions to communicated message and of disapproval	Correction; diagnosis; evaluation; constructive comment; therapy; prevention
<b>Heuristic question</b>	Where in the text? Deviates from what?	Where in the language system?	Why?	What are the questions regarding understanding?	Evaluation from pedagogical stance? What teaching methods?
<b>Relevant disciplines/ fields</b>	Linguistics; communication sciences; linguistic prescription Code switching	Descriptive linguistics	Psychology; psycholinguistics	Communication sciences; sociolinguistics; pragmatics; docimology	Foreign-language teaching methods; psychology; language-teaching research Corrective feedback

## 7.2 Error classification

A browse through the over 9000 studies on language errors published to date reveals that around 80 percent of them deal with the description and linguistic classification of isolated errors. Errors are grouped taxonomically in categories such as syntax, prepositions, aspect, lexical error, orthography and pronunciation. These categories generally also appear in the correction comments.

Although such classification within the language system may shed light on linguistic problems, for example typological questions, it is of little use in the foreign-language classroom and of no use to the learner. At best, the teacher can

use it as a tool in order to compile error statistics for every exercise or class test and thus determine where the main problems lie or see whether there is a correlation between the errors and class materials or group of learners.

### **7.3 Error causes**

Errors have many different causes. External influences such as stress, noise, lack of time and alcohol consumption are enough to make the normal speaker commit mistakes which under ‘normal’ circumstances he/she would not have uttered. It can, however, be presumed that the errors a speaker makes when subjected to external influences do not occur at random but at points of inherent language difficulty. It goes without saying that errors can also be caused or at least encouraged by teaching itself, when, for example, teaching materials are poorly organised, the teaching method is faulty or teaching behaviour wanting.

Those engaged in error analysis must also bear in mind that it is very difficult to reconstruct psycho-cognitive processes. Questioning the speaker retrospectively is also often unhelpful. Humans in general make very difficult laboratory subjects: even under identical conditions, language production can never be replicated.

It is therefore only possible to forward hypotheses on the causes of errors. These hypotheses, however, become more plausible if they can stand up in different contexts and with different speakers (Spillner 1977). The main categories of study into the causes of error – other than the external influences already mentioned – are the structures and comparisons of the languages in question (mother tongue, target language, perhaps existing knowledge of another foreign language) and the cognitive strategies of the speaker/writer and learner.

The hypotheses that help determine the cause of language errors are therefore those that depict the mental processes involved in human language production.

#### **7.3.1 *Language-related error causes***

Some language errors are caused by the very nature of human language and the general processes of language production. These can be traced back to the linear, sequential arrangement of spoken and written language. In such cases, the mental time shift between language planning and realisation can lead to errors due to continuing response to language segments (perseveration) and the expectation of language segments (anticipation). For example:



\*Außendienstmitarbeiter (... mitarbeiter)

\*Que *fait-on* avec un stylo? *Écrit-on* dans le cahier. (On écrit...)

\***Brandbreite** (Bandbreite)

\***bycycle** (bicycle)

In addition to syntactic errors, mental slips can arise through semantic, phonetic or graphemic similarities. For example:

\*He suffers from hypotension (hypertension).

Another type of error occurs when similar language segments are blended (contamination). For example:

\*Er machte einen schlechten Sperz (Spaß/Scherz).

Such error causes, which are often neglected in the analysis of errors, are not only common in everyday conversation but also very present in the foreign-language classroom.

### **7.3.2 Errors caused by the L<sub>2</sub> system**

Individual languages have their particular system-related difficulties that can lead to errors both in first-language and foreign-language acquisition – though with some differences. Such difficulties can be found in complicated morphology (irregular conjugations or plurals of nouns), interfixes in German compounds, the semantic difference between *ser* and *estar* in Spanish, the complex forms of address in Japanese, the syntax of modal particles in German, etc. A particularly problematic area is the relationship between written and spoken forms. In French, the rules governing spelling-to-sound correspondences are relatively simple, whereas the sound-to-spelling rules are very complicated. A learner therefore finds it relatively easy to read out a written French text but very difficult to write down a spoken text, for example in dictation. In Spanish, both directions are comparatively simple, whereas in English they are highly complex and the potential for error considerable. Such language-specific structural problems must be recognized as potential error causes in foreign-language teaching. They are, however, generally independent of the learner's first language and can therefore not be treated as contrastive.

### 7.3.3 Interference errors through incorrect transfer

Errors made during foreign-language acquisition and practice often have an interlingual root. Comparisons between the mother tongue and foreign language can cause linguistic interference. The learner is subconsciously aware of mother-tongue structures and transfers these, sometimes incorrectly, to the target language. For example:

L<sub>1</sub>: Spanish L<sub>2</sub>: German

\*Phot**maschine** (< máquina fotográfica)

\*Hier verkauft **sich** Brot (< Aquí se vende pan)

L<sub>1</sub>: Italienisch L<sub>2</sub>: German

\*Pub**blikum** (< pubblico)

L<sub>1</sub>: French L<sub>2</sub>: German

\*Die Mutter brachte **seine** Kinder jeden Tag in die Schule (ihre)

L<sub>1</sub>: German L<sub>2</sub>: English

\*She **had** her book **lost** (...lost her book)

\* his creative **phantasy** (imagination)

Errors in the foreign-language classroom can also be explained by interference from L<sub>2</sub> on L<sub>3</sub>.

L<sub>1</sub>: German L<sub>2</sub>: English L<sub>3</sub>: French

\*example (exemple)

L<sub>1</sub>: Spanish L<sub>2</sub>: English L<sub>3</sub>: German

\*seine Schuhe (shoes)

Though not all errors of this type can be predicted by contrastive analysis, hypotheses on language interference provide in many cases a plausible explanation.

## 7.4 Error impact

Error analysis largely fails to address the communicative consequences of language that deviates from the norm. The most important question is whether the

error in question interferes with communication and causes misunderstanding. If in doubt, the researcher can test responses empirically by the use of questionnaires. Sometimes errors are unintentionally funny or socially inappropriate (for example incorrect form of address, ‘du’ instead of ‘Sie’ in German, use of taboo or loaded vocabulary, impoliteness). If errors interfere with meaning or are very inappropriate, they have to be included in the teacher’s error evaluation.

## **7.5 Teaching strategies to remedy errors**

The steps outlined above form the basis for evaluating and applying the findings of error analysis in the classroom, in particular the methodical reflections on error identification, the hypotheses on error causes and – for the subsequent assessment of the error – the above-mentioned criteria of error impact. The complex task of developing a teaching strategy to remedy errors can be systematically structured according to the following key terms:

- *Error correction* with comments on error causes and impact.
- *Error diagnosis* (learner oriented, teacher oriented, method oriented, teaching-materials oriented).
- *Error evaluation* (consideration of causes and communicative impact, teacher reflection on norms and deviations, proximity to norm, persistence of error).
- *Error therapy* (learner-specific practice: awareness of error causes, comparison of languages).
- *Error prevention* (methods and materials to prevent or reduce future errors)
- *Reflections* on teaching methods, teaching materials, curriculum, teaching behaviour, learner behaviour
- *Corrective feedback*

## **8. Composition of the Bibliography**

This bibliography is the continuation of the first volume published with Benjamins in 1991.

Some older publications on error analysis included in this second volume were not accessible in 1990. Unlike the 1991 volume, this new volume contains many publications dealing with code switching and corrective feedback.

Today, open-access publications allow the publication of papers from many more countries than before. It is also very easy to find publications on the internet.

For example, universities and colleges in China publish hundreds of periodicals. Although they are written in Mandarin, most of the journals concerning foreign language teaching are also published in English or have at least an English abstract. On the internet they are accessible under **<http://en.cnki.com.cn>**. In most cases, this error bibliography provides a direct link to the English version. For instance, the article ‘Native Language’s Negative Transfer in College English Writing and its Pedagogical Implications’ written by Zhang, Chung-liang can easily be accessed under: **[http://en.cnki.com.cn/Article\\_en/CJDTTotal-DBDS20070615](http://en.cnki.com.cn/Article_en/CJDTTotal-DBDS20070615)** .

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