

# **FREMDSPRACHENDIDAKTIK**

## **INHALTS- UND LERNERORIENTIERT**

Herausgegeben von Gabriele Blell und Rita Kupetz  
Mitbegründet von Karlheinz Hellwig

23

**JOANNA PFINGSTHORN**

### **VARIABILITY IN LEARNER ERRORS AS A REFLECTION OF THE CLT PARADIGM SHIFT**



**PETER LANG  
EDITION**

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

In the 1950s and 1960s learning a foreign language was perceived as a relatively straight-forward process. It was believed that the sole task learners needed to accomplish was to form language habits and associate certain stimuli with appropriate responses. Educators of that era reasoned that such goals could be achieved in the process of repetition and memorization of chunks of language, and required perseverance and consistency. Consequently, language classrooms placed an emphasis on accuracy and automaticity, and learner errors had to be eradicated at all costs. In fact, researchers and teachers concentrated their efforts on pinpointing those areas of language in which learners would be most prone to commit errors.

This kind of approach to foreign language learning and teaching quickly turned out to be ineffective, as learners leaving language classrooms were not necessarily able to communicate freely. Theoretical shifts in the field of psychology and linguistics also pointed to the fact that the approach simply failed to reflect the true nature of language as a phenomenon and the process of learning.

The last three decades have marked a revolution in the field of language teaching and learning. A didactic paradigm shift has taken place, and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has become the leading pedagogical approach. The attention of educators has moved to the learning process, its outcomes, and to learners themselves. The paradigm shift has also implied a very abrupt departure from the extensive study of and emphasis on errors. Consequently, the exact impact of the new paradigm on learner errors has not really been thoroughly investigated.

Naturally, none of the changes taking place in the field of language learning ever implied that language errors would disappear. As a matter of fact, all modern accounts acknowledge the existence of errors and suggest that they form an inherent part of the language learning process and its use. Language errors can also serve as a highly informative resource, to learners, teachers, and researchers, as they reflect both the current stage of learners and the ability to deal with communication problems. When learners manage to express the intended meaning despite lacking resources, their errors can also be perceived as signs of success.

Nevertheless, while the field of linguistics has relied on the study of learner errors quite extensively over the last couple of decades, the study of language errors in the context of classroom environments has remained somewhat underdeveloped. Perhaps it is the disillusionment with the behaviorist traditions of the 1950s and 1960s and their lack of success that lingers on and pushes the study of errors into a niche. This is not to say that the focus of attention should be removed from communicative competence or performance as a whole. On the contrary, communicative competence in all its facets should remain a focal point in the field of foreign language learning. However, as learner errors form a part of learner language, they should not be dissociated from its analysis. If we are to understand the nature of communicative competence, we need to comprehend the nature of errors, and not in an isolated fashion. In fact, it is crucial to investigate errors in the context of their occurrence, along with their interrelations as well as connections with other performance variables.

These deliberations give rise to certain questions. Firstly, while it may make sense to incorporate a complex analysis of errors into the study of learner performance theoretically speaking, the conditions for an appropriate implementation of error analysis remain somewhat unclear. In fact, even arriving at a definition of the term “*error*” proves to be difficult. While research in the field of linguistics has frequently associated the term with problems on the level of knowledge representation capable of creating and understanding original utterances in a given language Chomsky (1965), modern pedagogical accounts suggest that errors result from problems occurring in various areas of learner competence, “*which has developed characteristics different from those of L2 norms*” and is a “*simplified or distorted representation of the target competence*” (Council of Europe, 2001, p.155). This extends the range of the definition of an

*“error”* beyond problems with computational mechanisms underlying language to normative, or pragmatic, aspects. In addition, although numerous error categorization systems exist, most such taxonomies show substantial space for improvement. Their flaws include hazy and interdependent error categories that mix various levels of error analysis, and thus contribute to the lack of its transparency. A substantial number of existing taxonomies also fail to reflect a model of language ability or communicative competence, which leads to an arbitrary choice of error categories.

Secondly, as the recent pedagogical paradigm shift contributed to positive changes in learner performance, it stands to reason that such changes should be reflected in patterns of learner errors. Since CLT classrooms provide opportunities for meaningful interaction and communication, we can expect learners in such classrooms to express the intended meaning in a fluent way, or put differently, to be competent communicators. As the goal of foreign language classrooms is to teach an already existing language (or its variety), being a competent communicator implies the ability to produce utterances typical of the target language. At the same time, it does not necessarily imply perfect accuracy. In fact, learners are expected to commit errors. However, as the CLT paradigm assumes that learners become more aware of the process of language development, we can expect to observe the ability to utilize one’s own strengths and to cover or minimize one’s weaknesses. An increased familiarity with and the ability to rely on various learning strategies should amplify the effect. As CLT classrooms foster various facets of communicative competence, it is expected that learners show the ability to produce grammatically, lexically, pragmatically and sociolinguistically correct and appropriate utterances, at least to a degree that classroom environments can accomplish.

Thus, the goal of the study is to procure answers to the following research questions:

- To what extent has the CLT paradigm shift left its mark on the distribution of learner errors?
- What is the proper approach to the study of errors? What would constitute a successful and well-balanced system and procedure for error categorization?

In practice, examining the extent to which the CLT paradigm shift has left its mark on learner errors requires a careful analysis of learner errors, which calls for a reliable and valid categorization approach. To that end, this study provides an analysis of written learner production, which has been transformed into a corpus of 12375 words. The participants included 107 high school pupils from two different L1 backgrounds. The sample yielded a total of 1340 instances of errors and over 2000 instances of successful realizations of various aspects of language, which provide a backdrop for the analysis of errors.

In addition, the examination of the influence which the CLT paradigm shift has exerted on learners' performance requires a comparable analysis of errors that were recorded during a time when the CLT paradigm shift was in its early stages with those observed among current pupils. The data representing pupils' performance recorded before, or in the early stages of, the shift to CLT come from a study conducted by Hecht & Green (1983) and were included in the current study for comparative reasons.

The study revealed that various types of errors as well as successful aspects of performance are correlated. This suggests that the CLT approach fulfills its ultimate goal and fosters simultaneous development of various facets of language. The data have also shown that most errors recorded among high school pupils occur in the field of morphosyntax. However, certain improvements in the distribution of morphosyntactic errors over time are observed and imply that the focus on learners and their learning process, warrants success. The data also indicate that an explicit focus on formal aspects of language teaching is necessary. A significant drop in semantic errors, in contrast, suggests that CLT is effective in supporting the development of communicative skills. While discourse organization errors were recorded less frequently than linguistic errors, though in significant quantities, explicit sociolinguistic errors were observed only to a limited degree, showing improvements in the ability to express meaning.

This thesis sets out to characterize the nature and significance of learner errors (Chapter 2), which is followed by a discussion of the concept of communicative competence, also in the context of learner errors (Chapter 3). Subsequently the recent paradigm shift and its potential impact on classroom teaching as well as on learner performance are discussed (Chapter 4). The following parts of the thesis present the results of an empirical investigation of error distributions

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among German and Polish high school pupils. While Chapter 5 discusses various methodological issues relevant to the current study, Chapter 6 offers an overview of existing systems used to facilitate the study of errors and proposes a new taxonomy for the analysis of learners' errors. The results of the analysis can be found in Chapter 7. The empirical work also embarks on a comparison of current data with data obtained in the early 1980s, when the ideological changes brought about by the CLT paradigm shift had just begun to be introduced. The thesis is then rounded up with conclusions and a discussion (Chapter 8) of didactic implications of the obtained results.



# Chapter 2

## Learner errors

### 2.1 Defining key terms

The most rudimentary definition of a language error would describe the phenomenon as an “*unsuccessful bit of language*” (James, 1998, p. 1). Imprecise as it may be, this account certainly offers a sufficient and safe starting point for any further deliberations on language errors. Especially when we consider the fact that over the years research in the field of language errors has brought about various more and less specific terms relating to language errors, such as gaps, misapplications, flaws, hitches (Austin, 1962); mistakes, slips, errors, attempts (Edge, 1989); distortions, faults (Hammerly, 1991); goofs (Burt & Kiparsky, 1972); deviances, solecisms (Burt & Kiparsky, 1972). The labels often refer to diverse language-related setbacks, caused by faulty teaching, impaired learning, gaps in competence or performance problems. Altogether the terms paint a vague picture of what language errors truly entail. The following sections aim to shed light on the key characteristics of the phenomenon of language errors.

#### 2.1.1 Relativity

What seems to be the one undeniable characteristic of language errors is their relational nature. Any given language deviance becomes an error only in the context of a rule of the code that has been broken, or in other words, when “*the learners have not yet internalized the formation rules of the code*” (Corder, 1973, p.259). As James (1998, ch. 3) points out, the choice of a “*code*” or a

reference point, such as a particular variety of the target language, can make all the difference. Although this decision may be of lesser importance when grammar is concerned, well-formedness in the phonological or semantic sense can vary, depending on the chosen variety.

Some researchers have expressed reservations about comparing learners' language with the target language per se. Selinker (1972, 1992), for example, insists that learners' version of the target language, their interlanguage, is an emerging language system that only approximates the target language and should therefore be evaluated in its own terms. Corder (1971) prefers the term "*idiosyncratic dialect*", which describes learners' language as regular, systematic and meaningful (cf. Section 2.2.3).

However, Corder (1971) also points out that individuals compare their "*dialect*" with the target language and strive to bring their language in line with its "*standard version*". In pedagogical contexts, this line of thought is intuitively easy to entertain. Language teachers are almost constantly required to engage in comparisons of learner production with the target language and learners receive feedback on whether language they produce breaches any rules of the target language. In a similar fashion, learning standards and objectives, such as the ones set out by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for example, implicitly draw educators' attention to the extent of divergence from the target language norms, e.g. "*lexical accuracy is generally high, though some confusion and incorrect word choice does occur without hindering communication*" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 112), "*uses some simple structures correctly, but still systematically makes basic mistakes – for example tends to mix up tenses and forget to mark agreement; nevertheless, it is usually clear what he/she is trying to say.*" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 114). In this context, "*incorrect word choice*" or "*mixing up tenses*" implicitly call for comparisons with the rules or norms found in the target language. In fact, James (1998) points out that learners are typically targeted on native-speaker norms.

In addition, a substantive body of research points to the fact that comparisons of target language forms and language produced by learners are beneficial and even necessary parts of language development. R. Ellis (1992, p. 232-238) emphasizes the instrumental role of cognitive comparisons of "*the linguistic features noticed in the input with the learner's own mental grammar, registering to what extent there*



is a ‘gap’ between the input and her grammar ” in the “*acquisition of implicit knowledge*”. Cognitive comparisons are based on noticing, which has also been widely recognized in second language acquisition research (e.g. R. Ellis, 1995; R. W. Schmidt, 1990; R. Schmidt, 1994; Robinson, 1995; Swain, 1985b; Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Qi & Lapkin, 2001; R. Ellis, 2003). Noticing is theorized to be the first level of awareness, responsible for “*registering the simple occurrence of some event*” (R. Schmidt, 1993, p. 26). It is independent of the second level, “*understanding,*” in which a learner recognizes “*a general principle, rule, or pattern*” (R. Schmidt, 1993, p. 26). According to the noticing hypothesis, “*what learners notice in the input is what becomes intake for learning*” (R. Schmidt, 1995, p. 20). R. W. Schmidt (1990) also argues that “*noticing is the necessary and sufficient condition for converting input to intake*” implying that linguistic forms can create the basis for intake for language acquisition only if learners notice them (R. Schmidt, 1993; see also Robinson 1995, 2001, 2003). R. Ellis also suggests that “*one way of fostering*” cognitive comparisons “*is to draw learners’ attention to the kinds of errors learners typically make*” (1995, p. 95), a view supported by an array of studies (Mackey, Perdue, & McDonough, 2000; Gass & Varonis, 1994; Robinson, 1995, 2001, 2003; M. Long, 1996; Philp, 2003). Gass & Varonis (1994), for instance, claim that learners’ attention can be directed through interactional feedback towards a mismatch between their production and the target language form, which fosters development. Although M. H. Long & Robinson (1998) suggest that attempting to correct errors may not necessarily lead to consciousness-raising for students, ‘flagging’ target items in the form of highlighting, underlining or providing learners with explicit rules are definitely examples of tasks that promote noticing and raise consciousness, helping learners to notice a gap between what they know and what is produced by L2 speakers, thus promoting language development. The ideal comparison of learner and target language forms should, however, take place between a non-native speaker and his/her native speaker counterpart producing utterances in the same context (Lennon, 1991). These counterparts should ideally be individuals of a similar age-group, socioeconomic status and gender, with the same level of education, etc. Such an approach, emphasizing the similarities in the make-up of the speakers involved, as well as the intended meaning of the utterance allows keeping all the extra-linguistic variables that may influence performance constant.

Naturally, the extent to which learners are willing or able to engage in cognitive comparisons of their own language with the target language has its limits. Some learners may be reluctant to follow, for example, sociolinguistic patterns characteristic of the target language in order to maintain their subjectivity (e.g. their cultural identity, sense of value, personal principles) (Beebe & Giles, 1984; LoCastro, 1986; Ishihara & Tarone, 2009). Other learners may simply plateau at a certain level, where their skills fossilize and divergences from the target language occur (e.g. J. S. Johnson & Newport, 1989). Nevertheless, it seems that the comparative aspect of language errors is a well-accepted characteristic, which is often used to learners' advantage and should be incorporated into the definition of an error.

It is crucial to add that the concept of relativity of language errors is not only limited to breaches of the target language rules. In order to understand the true nature of a certain type of errors, or in more general terms, learners' proficiency level, not only is it essential to analyze the absolute frequency of various errors but also to take notice of the frequency of certain error types in relation to others. Additionally, it is crucial to observe the ratio of errors to correct forms. The interpretation of absolute values may change in meaning once they are placed in various contexts.

### **2.1.2 The contrasts between L1 and L2 learners**

It is a well-known fact about first language (L1) acquisition that all healthy children manage to attain perfect knowledge of their mother tongue. Over the course of their development, children become linguistically indistinguishable from other members of their community, provided they receive sufficient linguistic exposure. Even though the input may lack negative data and in itself be limited, children acquire full knowledge of their mother tongue and seem equipotential in doing so for any natural language (Schachter, 1996).

The situation second language (L2) learners find themselves in is more complicated than the one faced by children acquiring L1. Although the underlying task remains unchanged – to master the gradually accumulating linguistic entities and to organize this knowledge into coherent structures on the basis of “*finite, degenerate and underdeterminate input*” (Schachter, 1996, p. 167), L2 learners

may not necessarily approach this venture in the same way as children do. Since they already possess a set of mental representations of one language and are able to communicate in it, their needs are different.

In addition, L2 learners are cognitively mature, whereas child L1 learners are not. As Kean (1988) suggests, the brain of an adult at the onset of language acquisition is different from the brain of that same individual when the language has been learned. In other words, *“the brain of a child is not a miniature adult brain either in structure or function; brain systems underlying linguistic capacity and the functions [they] subserve change through the course of development”* (Kean, 1988, p. 65). Birdsong (1999) points out that a progressive lateralization of cerebral functions, which takes place as an individual matures, makes it impossible for language learning at later stages of life to follow the traits typical of L1 acquisition. Also, cognitive maturity increases the likelihood of choosing a different approach to solving problems and dealing with abstract concepts. Ironically, greater cognitive resources translate, in this sense, to lesser success at language learning. In support of this line of thought Pinker (1994, p 294-295) posits an evolutionary argument claiming that once the language circuitry is no longer needed, it is dismantled, as it incurs metabolic costs otherwise and has to be compensated for by other mechanisms.

In fact, researchers have long speculated over the potential relationship between the likelihood of attaining native-like proficiency and the age at the onset of second language acquisition, which has been known as the critical period (Lenneberg, 1967) debate. The general tendency suggests that while simultaneous exposure to two languages before the age of three (also known as bilingual L1 acquisition) leads to native-like competence, later exposure cannot guarantee similar effects. Although exposure to L2 between the ages of three and puberty increases the chance of attaining near-native competence, exposure past puberty (also known as adult language acquisition) is likely to result in compromised L2 (Hamann, 2009). In the cases where adult learners show lesser fossilization, greater cognitive resources are often believed to compensate for the unavailability of processes that guide child L1 acquisition (e.g. Tracy, 1994). Alternative accounts stemming from the connectionist approaches to learning, on the other hand, assume that since language learning relies on strengthening associations between nodes of information, the connections established for the L1 (or other languages), which

we accumulate with age, hinder the process of building and strengthening of new associations (e.g. N. C. Ellis, 2003) (cf. Section 2.2).

Irrespective of the perspective on language learning we choose, it should be noted that settings that depart from natural language environments, such as classrooms, give rise to contexts, in which acquisition of a second language gives way to learning of a foreign language. In such environments, the poverty of stimulus is even more pronounced, possibly hindering the process of language development.

In addition, regardless of the language learning model behind the process of adult L2 acquisition (or learning), its outcomes remain not nearly as impressive as that characteristic of child L1 acquisition. As a matter of fact, there are crucial differences between L1 and adult L2. While many adult L2 speakers learn to communicate effectively in foreign or second languages, the overwhelming majority are not able to gain native competence of the target language. It seems that very few adults attain L2 grammars with *“the same level of mastery as that achieved by every normal child”* (Schachter, 1990, p.160). Rather, the non-native representation of L2 grammar typically remains incomplete, which may not necessarily hinder communication. Yet it certainly can. Schachter (1996) speculates that grammatical competence of L2 learners is distributed normally, that is, it follows a bell-curve, while in the case of L1 learners, skills are distributed in a relatively uniform fashion. Results also indicate that adult L2 learners fail to master L2 phonology to a native-like level (e.g. Moyer, 1999). In addition, some studies suggest that sociolinguistic aspects of language, such as the choice of speech act (e.g. Cohen & Olshtain, 1993) or semantic formulae used (e.g. Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Murphy & Neu, 1996), distinguish L2 learners from native speakers.

Incidentally the occurrence of both erroneous and correct versions of certain forms also distinguishes the production of adult L2 learners from the one typical of native speakers, although, this is not to say that all native speakers are completely free of performance errors. The mere fact that an L2 learner is able to produce the correct version of a certain form does not necessarily predetermine constant perfect performance with no errors in that form. Many researchers claim that learners' L2 is variable in that at any stage of development a learner may use different forms of the same structure. This variability may be to some extent random.

However, as it is possible to estimate the probabilities with which different forms will occur (depending on e.g. the addressee and the availability to plan), some studies claim that the variability of errors in learners' L2 is largely systematic. For instance, learners may regularly produce forms such as double markings of verbs in interrogatives (e.g. *\*Does your sister likes coffee?*) or regularly select a number of deviant forms that occur in some context only (e.g. *\*My brother lives in San Francisco but work in Portland*) (R. Ellis, 1984b,a). Schachter (1996) suggests that this phenomenon is primarily associated with morphemes of little semantic load, which may have little consequence for communication. Nevertheless, it contributes to the degree of perceived non-nativeness of the L2. The patterns of learner errors may also change over time on a regular basis, which suggests that the variability is developmental. It should be noted, however, that some researchers dispute the connection between error variability and competence, suggesting that it is performance related (cf. Gregg, 1990).

Additionally, since all adult L2 learners are equipped with the knowledge of a prior language, their L1 may inhibit or facilitate the process of L2 development, depending on the underlying similarities and differences that characterize the two languages. The closer the two languages are in similarity, in terms of syntax, phonology and lexicon, the higher the likelihood of learning success (Schachter, 1996). Naturally, L1 also exerts a strong influence on production itself (for more information see Section 6.2.3).

### 2.1.3 Errors vs. Mistakes

It is a common misconception that the term *mistake* can be used as a synonym of the word *error*. In fact, two different assumptions underlie the two notions, the core of which lies in Chomsky's distinction (1965) between competence and performance. Under competence, Chomsky understood the abstract and hidden representation of language knowledge capable of creating and understanding original utterances in a given language. In this sense, competence pertains to the computational system, or in other words, the morphosyntactic aspect of language. Performance, on the other hand, from Chomsky's standpoint, is seen as an imperfect reflection of competence affected by the processing complications that result from language use.

Although the split between competence and performance has never been accepted by all linguists (e.g. Stubbs, 1996), it carried important implications for the study of language errors. It was Corder (1967, 1971) who linked errors with failures in competence and mistakes with failures in performance. From Corder's point of view, mistakes are of limited significance to the learning process, as they do not reflect defects in actual knowledge. The learner is usually immediately aware of them and could correct them. Errors, on the other hand, are seen as competence-based and reflect a lack of knowledge that could not be self-corrected. In fact, by 1971, Corder labeled competence-based errors as the core of the learner's idiosyncratic dialect.

In this sense, the term *error* implies a fault within the computational system and pertains primarily to morphosyntactic aspects of language. This, in turn, explains certain trends in generative linguistics research, which center on the investigation of learners' competence, measured through (although not solely) morphosyntactic errors. From this point of view, performance problems play a lesser role; breaches of conventions that dictate how to use language and knowledge accumulated through general learning mechanisms, which do not result from the shortcomings of the computational system, also remain topics of lesser concern to generative linguists.

In pedagogical contexts, however, the term *competence* has been widened beyond formal aspects of language. Although the notion certainly pertains to morphosyntactic skills, *competence* usually extends beyond the formal system. In fact, discussing competence in the context of sociolinguistic or pragmatic, or even intercultural knowledge is typical (for more information see Chapter 3).

Certain accounts that deal with the error-mistake dichotomy avoid drawing parallels to the competence-performance distinction. James (1994), for example, basing on Krashen's Monitor Model (1982) and, more specifically, on the acquisition-learning distinction, suggests that the factor determining whether learners make errors or mistakes lies in the nature of gaining knowledge, which in principle can follow one of two paths. On the one hand, knowledge can be acquired, or in other words, be the product of subconscious processes that resemble the ones children undergo when they acquire their first language. On the other hand, knowledge can be learned, i.e. be the product of formal instruction. Learned knowledge results in conscious metalinguistic knowledge.

The distinction between learning and acquisition implies that there are four possible types or states of language knowledge, which lead to either errors or mistakes. If a learner has neither learned nor acquired a target language form, the result will be an error. Clearly, in such cases the knowledge of and about that specific language form, explicit or implicit, is plainly not existent. In a completely opposite setting, if learners have both learned and acquired a target language form, the sheer amount of knowledge related with that form increases the chances that the outcome will be correct. In such a context, mistakes can happen, however the explicit metacognitive knowledge can be used as a quick correction source. The cases in which target language forms have either not been acquired or learned, increase the likelihood of deviance. If a learner has acquired, but not learned, a form, they are no longer in a state of total ignorance and can avoid errors. They may, however, make occasional mistakes, as they lack the proper explicit knowledge associated with that form that would allow for a quick correction. A situation where a learner has learned but not acquired a TL form, on the other hand, can lead to errors. However, the learner may be able to correct or avoid these using their learned explicit knowledge. Interestingly, target language form can refer to various types of knowledge. In this sense, the term “*error*” refers to unsuccessful language on various levels and extends beyond morphosyntax.

Naturally, the parallels drawn between errors-mistakes and acquisition-learning have to be taken in with a dose of skepticism. On the one hand, the contrast between acquisition and learning has resonated strongly in pedagogical contexts, since it can provide an intuitive explanation of the occasional lack of success of error correction and direct teaching (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). On the other hand, the criticism mounted on Krashen for the vagueness of the ‘learning’ and ‘acquisition’ definitions as well as the problematic nature of their interaction makes the concepts somewhat inapplicable.

Unfortunately, the haziness of the theoretical distinction between an error and a mistake becomes even more pronounced in practice. Here assessing whether a deviant form is an error or a mistake is often reduced to determining whether that form can be corrected by its author. However, a corrigibility test of this sort is virtually impossible to conduct. First of all, even if the author of an error can sense that there is something wrong with the erroneous form they produced, they may simply lack the ability to correct the error. Secondly, a learner can be convinced

that an erroneous form is correct until someone hints at the error. James (1998) suggests a relatively clear, practical solution. He classifies all language errors, or “*deviances*” into slips, mistakes, errors and solecisms. Whereas slips of the tongue or pen can be detected and corrected quickly by the author him/herself without any external help, the author can only correct mistakes once the problem is pointed out to him or her. First-order mistakes can be distinguished from second-order mistakes in that the former require “*a simple indication that there is a deviance*”, while the latter call for “*additional information in the form of the exact location and some hint as to the nature of the deviance*” (James, 1998, p. 83). Naturally, determining the borderline between “*a simple indication*” and “*additional information*” may be tricky, but the terminology certainly provides a starting point for an objective analysis.

The treatment of errors in James’ terminology, on the other hand, requires further learning. In other words, learners committing language errors need to receive additional explicit or implicit input relevant to that error and convert it into intake. The last category, solecisms, represents the breaches of correctness rules prescribed by grammar books or language purists. They often conflict with the language used by native-speakers and their intuitions.

### 2.1.4 Measures of deviance

The knowledge of and experience with the target language that are called upon in the process of identifying errors rely heavily on the ability to analyze certain language cues. According to Hymes (1972, p. 281) any correct utterance needs to be:

- “*formally possible*” in that it does not breach any grammatical rules;
- “*feasible*” in that it does not overburden the cognitive system and its processing power;
- “*appropriate*” in that it does not breach sociolinguistic rules of language use; and
- in line with what “*is in fact done*”.



As Hymes (1972, p. 282) puts it, “*a sentence may be grammatical, awkward, tactful and rare*”. Thus, the correctness of any utterance, or to be more exact, its degree, seems to lie in the extent to which it fulfills the requirements placed on production by each of these aspects. In a similar fashion, James lists grammaticality, acceptability, correctness and infelicity as “*measures of deviance*” (1998, p. 64), or factors that qualify some language forms as errors. In other words, the four dimensions provide us with means to identify errors in that they indicate the areas of language in which rules are breached. However, these criteria are neither meant to deliver a full account of specific causes of learners’ errors, nor to offer a thorough classification of language errors (cf. Chapter 6).

According to James (1998), grammaticality refers to the grammar of a language, or the set of logical and structural rules that govern the composition of sentences, phrases and words. James suggests that appealing to the grammar of a language is frequently the most objective attempt to decide whether a form is correct, since there is no context in which an ungrammatical form can be correct. If we agree that a certain form can be used in a certain context, then the form is no longer ungrammatical, but well-formed.

Unfortunately, James’ account of grammaticality is not entirely accurate. In fact, context or interpretation can impact the perception of grammaticality. For example, the English grammar dictates that the progressive aspect cannot be used to describe states unless they are temporary. While utterance (a) is grammatical and acceptable, utterance (b) is incorrect:

- (a) He is being silly.
- (b) \*He is being tall.

An item such as “*He is being intelligent.*”, on the other hand, can only be considered grammatical provided that the individual level predicate becomes reinterpreted as a stage level predicate, i.e. if the speaker/hearer believes that intelligence is a trait that can be activated at certain instances. In this sense, grammaticality of the sentence depends on the context of its use. In fact, grammaticality should rather be perceived as the acceptability of certain utterances.

Lyons (1968) suggests that acceptability pertains both to linguistic factors and ones unrelated to grammar, which may militate against a certain form. An acceptable utterance is “*one that has been, or might be, produced by a native*

speaker in some appropriate context and is, or would be, accepted by other native speakers as belonging to the language in question" (p. 137). Deciding whether a form is acceptable can require a closer inspection of the context in which the utterance has been produced – not necessarily the underlying grammatical rules. For example, "*Pele wore a green dress.*" is grammatically correct and could be an acceptable form in the context of a dress ball or carnival celebration (James, 1998, p. 67). However, if uttered in the context of a football match, the sentence becomes semantically erroneous and, thus, unacceptable.

For some grammaticality is a prerequisite for acceptability. However, James (1998) suggests that the relationship between grammaticality and acceptability is somewhat more complex. Utterances which are either grammatical and acceptable or ungrammatical and unacceptable are the less problematic combinations of these two dimensions – they are either perfectly correct or unacceptable precisely due to their ungrammaticality. The problem lies in the cases where an utterance is ungrammatical but acceptable, or the other way around. Borsley (1991) gives an example of a grammatical and unacceptable sentence, "*The horse raced past the barn fell*", arguing that constructions of this type confuse the "*perceptual mechanisms*", or in Hymes' (1972) terms, lack feasibility and consequently are rejected as unacceptable. Naturally, the unacceptability of the sentence is merely the result of Borsley's subjective judgment. Despite the fact that the parsing of this sentence may require increased processing and reanalysis, it is by no means impossible to achieve. Thus, the example hardly makes a case of an unacceptable utterance. Although Borsley (1991) finds it doubtful that utterances of ungrammatical and yet acceptable nature exist, Milroy & Milroy (1985, p. 74) claim that even this combination of grammaticality and acceptability occurs. For example, although the utterance "*This is the house \*that its roof fell in.*" is ungrammatical, it is used and accepted, or at least unnoticed, in informal speech.

Extending Lyon's (1977) idea that ungrammaticality is one source of unacceptability, James (1998, p. 71-73) searches for additional factors potentially contributing to unacceptability. He identifies eight such sources:

1. "*failure to fit the intended context*", where an utterance is semantically and grammatically correct, but does not correspond to the situation, e.g. "*Pele wore a green ?dress.*".

2. “*reference to an inconceivable situation*”, or as Borsley (1991) describes it, expressions which “*conflict with our views of how the world is*”, e.g. “*My lawnmower ?thinks that I don’t like it.*” In this example, the lawnmower, as an inanimate object is not attributed the ability to think. Naturally, in certain contexts statements of this type will be accepted, e.g. as a joke, as personification, or in fiction.
3. “*an unusual way of referring to a nonetheless conceivable situation*”, e.g. “*Who are you wearing?*” instead of “*Who designed your dress?*”.
4. “*flouting customary collocations*”, where the preferred order of a pair or a sequence of words is violated, e.g. “*the ?white and black cat*”, “*?chips and fish*”.
5. “*producing unusual grammar or phonological configurations*”, e.g. “*He was finishing doing computing approaching retiring.*”
6. “*producing hard to process syntactic or phonological complexity*”, e.g. structure embedding such as “*The flea the rat the cat the dog chased killed carried bit me*” or “*She sells sea shells by the sea shore*”, where certain type of information, such as multiple NPs kept relatively far away from their accompanying verbs or certain phonological sounds building into too much of complexity occurs in too high of an density.
7. “*upsetting the balance of sentence parts*”, e.g. “*Eat the porridge your sister has so carefully cooked you up*”.
8. “*breaking rules (...) superimposed on the language by purists*”, e.g. stranded prepositions “*What did he write such a long letter about?*”.

“*Correctness*”, according to James (1998, p. 74) refers to “*prescriptive normative standards*”. Some utterances may be judged as acceptable and even used by native speakers only to be rejected as incorrect after some metalinguistic deliberation about “*explicitly learnt canons*” (James, 1998, p. 74).

Finally, James (1998, p. 76) refers to sociolinguistic errors as *infelicities*, following Austin (1962), and suggests four types of language problems at the level of pragmatics:

1. *gaps*, which arise when “*the speaker lacks in his L2 repertoire the linguistic means for performing the desired speech act*”;
2. *misapplications*, which arise when the performed act is pragmalinguistically correct, however, it does not take into consideration the sociolinguistic rules;
3. *flaws*, which arise when the sociolinguistic aspects of the act are correct, but its “*linguistic execution is imperfect*”
4. *hitches*, which arise when “*the execution of the speech act is cut short*”.

In this sense, James combines prescriptive standards, learned through experience, with grammar suggesting that it is both the formal system and the use of language that govern the production of correct utterances as well as the assessment of correction. This account clearly departs from Corder’s definition of errors.

### 2.1.5 Defining language errors

Taking the preceding sections into consideration we can now arrive at a definition of a language “*error*” that is more specific than an “*unsuccessful bit of language*” (James, 1998, p. 1). First of all, utterances can receive the status of language “*errors*” only in relation to other forms that are perceived as correct. In other words, an error results from a violation of a rule that belongs to a certain target language or its variation. Although generative grammarians equate the term “*error*” with competence flaws and thereby concentrate primarily on violations of morphosyntactic rules, the scope of the term “*error*” in educational contexts should extend to manifestations of problems occurring on levels of language use, such as lexis, sociolinguistics and pragmatics. This implies the necessity to incorporate the definition of correct language Hymes (1972, p. 281) provides, which suggests that an error can occur if an utterance breaches morphosyntactic rules of the target language, overburdens the cognitive system and its processing power, breaches sociolinguistic rules of target language use or is simply not produced in that form by the speakers of the target language.

### 2.1.6 Identifying Errors

Although language is a system governed by a set of rules, it is not uncommon for native speakers to disagree when it comes to acceptability of certain language forms (e.g. Lennon, 1991). Whereas some utterances may be rejected by all native speakers unanimously, other forms may be perceived as erroneous by some native speakers only. The reason behind this disparity originates in the complex nature of the error detection process. Even though detecting errors seems to require not more than a single “*correct/incorrect*” decision, in reality its nature is best described as “*complex behavioral performance*” (J. M. Carroll et al., 1981, p. 380).

In the field of psychology “*detection*” usually encompasses the ability to differentiate between signal and noise, or in other words, between some information, or stimuli, being present or absent. Successful signal detection depends on an array of psychological determiners such as experience, psychological state (e.g. fatigue), or expectations (Green & Swets, 1966). In the context of language, errors form “*signal*” or an anomaly that needs to be detected and possibly corrected. Any given language form can be judged as either erroneous or correct (if not unanimously than by majority of judges), which is reduced to four possible outcomes: a *hit* (the judge or the teacher detects an “*error*” while an error is truly present), a *miss* (the judge claims “*correct*” when an error is present), a *false alarm* (the judge says “*error*” when no error is present) and a *correct rejection* (the judge says correct when the form really is correct). In the context of language learning, hits and correct rejections are desirable, whereas false alarms and misses are problematic. If we take into consideration what modern pedagogical methods dictate, we may dispute whether hits and misses are, respectively, necessary and problematic under all circumstances (see the principle of functional error tolerance e.g. in the Niedersachsen Kerncurriculum: Niedersächsisches Kultusministerium 2006a), but this certainly does not change the fact that false alarms, or in other words errors invented by the teacher, are of no pedagogical benefit to the pupils.

The decision process behind the detection of language errors essentially has two components. On the one hand, it depends on personal judgment. Some individuals may think that all errors should be identified or marked in some way, perhaps giving the learner a chance to notice their gaps in knowledge or problems. This may not only lead to the correction of all errors, but even extend to already

correct, or at least acceptable, forms. Other judges may feel that unnecessary corrections are counterproductive in that they e.g. discourage the pupils or limit their willingness to communicate despite risks. These individuals may choose to be more conservative, omit some errors as a result, but they are not at risk to engage in “*overmonitoring*” of the output.

On the other hand, the decision process behind error detection depends on the judge’s knowledge of and experience with the target language. The wider the knowledge and awareness of the target language, the more information the judge can rely on to guide them through the decision making process and thus the higher the likelihood of a hit or a correct rejection. For example, since grammar rules tend to be relatively well-defined and stable (more than e.g. sociolinguistic rules), spotting grammatical errors, especially the ones that break general grammar rules (James, 1998, p. 208), may require different kind of target language knowledge and could, therefore, comprise an easier task. In this sense, grammatical errors, especially the “*severe ones*”, e.g. “*I didn’t brought*”, become stronger stimuli, i.e. errors easier to detect. Naturally, it is quite difficult to state with absolute certainty that some types of errors are more severe than others (cf. Section 2.1.7).

Numerous empirical studies prove how complex the task of error detection is. Hughes & Lascaratou (1982) presented what they thought were 32 sentences containing errors and 4 error-free sentences to a panel of thirty judges, ten of whom were Greek teachers of English, ten native speakers (NS) of English and ten native speaker non-teachers. They found that some of the correct sentences (e.g. “*Neither of us feels quite happy.*”) were judged erroneous by two Greek teachers, three NS teachers and five of the non-native speakers (NNSs). Lennon (1991) presented 208 sentences, with ambiguous errors, to a panel of NSs. Only 107 sentences were unanimously rejected or accepted by all six judges and there was little agreement as for the remaining sentences. In addition, McGarry (2004) points to the fact that fewer NS teachers tend to overtly correct pronunciation and grammar of a NNS unless there is a severe break-down in communication or unless correction is explicitly requested. Hahne (2001) shows that NNS tend to be incorrect in their assessment of errors more often than NS are. Hahne’s participants frequently conclude that correct sentences are semantically or syntactically incorrect and perceive semantically and syntactically incorrect sentences as correct.

The problems with error identification also touch upon the extent to which errors are overt. While covert errors are superficially well-formed but do not match the intentions of the learner, or in other words, are right by chance, overt errors are explicitly incorrect (Corder, 1973, p. 272). Chomsky (1965) also suggests that covert errors occur when the forms produced by non-native speakers match the forms that native-speakers would produce in the same context. However, the intended meaning differs.

Notably, Medgyes (1989) suggest a relationship between the degree of overtness of errors and achievement or reduction strategies. Learners tend to rely on achievement strategies when expressing their intended cannot be realized in the most natural way. Reduction strategies, on the other hand, involve less output on the side of the learner than originally planned, as the learner lacks the required linguistic resources. Errors that result from achievement strategies will naturally be more detectable than the ones stemming from avoidance strategies. However, Medgyes concludes that the number of errors resulting from reduction strategies depends on what the learner tries to avoid. Should the individual attempt to avoid certain forms, yet succeed at putting their message across, few overt errors will occur. Achievement strategies touch upon what Hammerly (1991, p. 86) refers to as faults, which occur when learners “*venture beyond what they have learnt*” and “*attempt to express ideas that require the use of structures that they have not learnt*” (Hammerly, 1991, p. 72). Edge (1989), on the other hand, refers to this phenomenon as attempts, which happen when learners fall back on compensatory strategies in the face of gaps in knowledge or problems in performance.

### 2.1.7 Error gravity

Determining the degree of seriousness of an error — its gravity — allows to maintain a healthy distinction between trivial errors and ones that really matter (James, 1998). However, assessing the seriousness of a language error can frequently turn into a rather complicated venture. Therefore, it is helpful to invoke a number of criteria that aid the error gravity judgment.

*Conformity* or *generality*, which refer to the general rules and formal features of language, can often form the basis for the decision process. James (1998) suggests that the degree of generality of a broken language rule may be essential for the

assessment of its gravity. Breaking a more specific rule, e.g. a lexical one, may seem less serious than breaking a more general grammatical rule, which applies to a larger number of instances. However, as the rules underlying certain areas of language, such as grammar, are more specifically defined than others, such as sociopragmatic rules, relying on conformity extensively may often lead to a biased gravity judgment (Hecht & Green, 1983).

*Coherence* of utterances or the “*conceptual relatedness of propositions*” (James, 1998, p. 162) can heavily impact the perception of error severity as well. The notion implies potential breaches of *comprehensibility*, another error gravity criterion, which focuses on the comprehension of content, but not necessarily on the accuracy of the form, of a message, although the formal organization of a message can massively impact comprehensibility (e.g. “*The flea the rat the cat the dog chased killed carried bit me*”). Comprehensibility can refer to either *intelligibility* or *communicativity* of a message (James, 1998, p. 212). *Intelligibility* indicates the accessibility of the basic, literal meaning. When access to the basic meaning is impaired, errors become more severe than when the intended form and meaning remain (relatively) intact. Some studies have tried to find evidence for the prevalence of intelligibility over e.g. conformity (Hughes & Lascaratou, 1982; Olsson, 1977) in the process of error gravity assessment and the relative success of communication is a measure many researchers insist on (e.g. Khalil, 1985; Galloway, 1980; Hughes & Lascaratou, 1982; Dordick, 1996; Schinschke & Weinert, 2008).

*Communicativity*, on the other hand, covers the access to pragmatic forces, connotations and implicatures (James, 1998, p. 216), which result from general learning mechanisms and thus are not necessarily the focus of research in the field of e.g. generative grammar. Nonetheless, knowledge of this kind does play an immense role for in language teaching contexts. Intelligible forms can often lead to cases of miscommunication, which carry unintentionally infelicitous pragmatic forms. The seriousness of such deviances is naturally greater than the gravity of formal errors and so is the likelihood for the resulting communication problems to be misperceived on the social level as e.g. an insult, irritation or embarrassment. Errors of this kind result most likely from sociopragmatic or pragmalinguistic issues and are related to yet another error gravity criterion – *appropriateness*. The Common European Framework of Reference (Council of



Europe, 2001) ties appropriateness with the knowledge of linguistic markers of social relations, politeness conventions and register differences.

Finally, virtually all pedagogical contexts require consulting *curricula* for an objective error gravity judgment. Through its detailed skill descriptors the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), for example, illustrates performance standards at different proficiency levels, thereby establishing norms and stages in language development, which can regulate the relative expectations and evaluation of error gravity. However, as Hecht & Green (1983) point out, language development is hardly ever linear, which makes establishing reliable stages in language development problematic.

Despite the existence of the above-mentioned criteria, educators and researchers may find it difficult to operationalize the often vague and abstract suggestions into a clear procedure for error gravity evaluation. Considering the fact that language errors are common, present or even persistent in the lives of most learners and teachers, this is not optimal. If guidelines for error gravity evaluation are unclear, learners and teachers are left with their own experience and intuition to rely on, allowing for a substantial degree of individuality in judgment. In fact, this seems to be a general trend – studies show that errors are indeed far from being “*absolute linguistic entities*”. Rather, they are relatively “*flexible, norm-bounded constructs whose limits shift from judge to judge across speech communities*” (Rifkin & Roberts, 1995, p.531). Some researchers suggest that NSs of a certain culture, e.g. French, may hold different attitudes toward the same types of errors committed in their native tongue than NSs of a different language, e.g. Spanish (Rifkin, 1995; Rifkin & Roberts, 1995). Consequently, a significant variability in error gravity assessment is likely to be expected.

Determining exactly what errors committed by learners are the most serious ones has been a continuing effort of researchers as well as instructors. The work has principally relied on the assumption that certain language errors could actually be considered as more serious than others depending on how strongly they disturb a native speaker’s (NS’s) comprehension of a nonnative speaker’s (NNS’s) utterances (e.g. Dordick, 1996; Rifkin & Roberts, 1995), or how accepted they are by NSs (James, 1998). The inclusion of NSs’ judgment into the procedure of error analysis can be considered a valid measure, especially taking into consideration the fact that they are experts in the field of their mother tongue. For this reason alone, a

native speaking judge evaluated the data collected for the purpose of this study (for more information see Section 5.4). Nonetheless, even with the help of NS judges establishing a clear hierarchy of errors in terms of their seriousness can pose a difficult task in practice.

The investigation of error severity assessment experienced its heyday in the 1980s and 1990s and resulted in an abundance of studies (e.g. Davies, 1983; Hughes & Lascaratou, 1982; James, 1977; Sheorey, 1986; Turner, 1980; for a broader review see Rifkin & Roberts, 1995). Nonetheless, generalizing their results has proven to be difficult, if not impossible. On the one hand, James (1977) found that NNSs rate errors more severely than NSs, a result further supported by Hughes & Lascaratou (1982) and Davies (1983). The latter concluded that NNSs mark forms based on their accuracy, whereas NSs focus on the intelligibility of language. Sheorey (1986) and McCretton & Rider (1993) also found NNS teachers to be less tolerant of errors than their NS counterparts. On the other hand, in more recent studies Salem (2004, 2007) found NSs to be the less tolerant judges, especially of advanced grammatical and lexical errors, as opposed to NNS teachers.

Dordick (1996) concluded that lexical and verb errors interfere with comprehension the most, contrary to grammatical errors (e.g. word order problems) which, with the exception of tense confusion, contributed least to incomprehensibility. Chastain (1980) has also shown that lexical errors interfered with comprehensibility more than grammatical errors. Khalil (1985) observed the same tendency - semantic errors were more likely to reduce intelligibility than grammatical errors. However, McCretton & Rider (1993) found errors in lexis not to be as disturbing as grammatical verb form distortions, perceived alike both by NSs and NNSs.

The inconsistency of investigators' findings has made it difficult to define the bad, the worse and the worst error types and most likely results from methodological problems. Neither do most studies include a full spectrum of errors produced in communicative settings, nor are clear and specific definitions of error types as well as the classification procedure provided (cf. Rifkin & Roberts, 1995). In addition, stimulus materials used in error gravity studies are hardly ever presented in a communicative context, thereby creating a validity problem. All in all, the exact role of factors determining the perceived gravity of errors, such as the NS/NNS dimension and error type, still remains unclear. In practice, this implies that teachers may experience uncertainty about how to react to errors.