

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION 6

Series Editor: David Singleton, *Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland*

Silence in Second Language Learning A Psychoanalytic Reading

Colette A. Granger

MULTILINGUAL MATTERS LTD

Clevedon • Buffalo • Toronto • Sydney

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Granger, Colette A.

Silence in Second Language Learning: A Psychoanalytic Reading

Colette A. Granger – 1st edn.

Second Language Acquisition: 6

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Second language acquisition. 2. Silence. 3. Psychoanalysis.

I. Title. II. Second language acquisition

P118.2.G734 2004

418--dc21

2003008651

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 1-85359-698-1 (hbk)

ISBN 1-85359-697-3 (pbk)

Multilingual Matters Ltd

UK: Frankfurt Lodge, Clevedon Hall, Victoria Road, Clevedon BS21 7HH.

USA: UTP, 2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, NY 14150, USA.

Canada: UTP, 5201 Dufferin Street, North York, Ontario M3H 5T8, Canada.

Australia: Footprint Books, PO Box 418, Church Point, NSW 2103, Australia.

Copyright © 2004 Colette A. Granger.

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the publisher.

Typeset by Wordworks Ltd.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by the Cromwell Press Ltd.

To my family

Contents

Foreword	vi
Acknowledgements	ix
Silence in Second Language Learning: A Present Absence	1
1 Averting the Gaze: Silence in Second Language Acquisition	
Research	14
Defining Silence	14
Individual Differences	22
From Personality to Identity	28
From the Individual to the Social	31
... And Back, from the Social to the Individual.	34
The Individual and Psychoanalysis	37
2 Changing the Subject: Psychoanalytic Theory, Silence and the Self	40
The Dynamic Self	40
Anxiety, Judgement and Conflict	44
Loss, Mourning and Melancholia	47
Ambivalence: Holding On, Letting Go	55
3 Looking and Looking Again: Memoirs of Second Language Learning	64
Searching for Stories	64
Split by the Difference: Eva Hoffman	69
Public and Private Selves: Richard Rodriguez	74
The Secret Self: Patrick Chamoiseau	78
Mastering the Subject: Alice Kaplan	84
4 Reading Between the Lines: Language Learner Diaries	89
Why Diaries?	89
Reading and Interpreting the Diaries	92
5 Taking the Hint: Working with Silence	108
References	126
Index	135

Foreword

I was recently involved in the assessment and translation into French of a medical questionnaire for an international organisation specialising in epidemiology. A whole morning had been earmarked for the task, more than long enough, the organisers believed, to deal with forty short items. We started on Item 1 dead on nine with brisk enthusiasm and by our one o'clock lunchtime ... we were still on Item 1. This asked respondents to agree or disagree with the following statement:

I like who I am.

There we were, a committee made up of specialists in an extremely wide and imposing range of disciplines – medicine and translation, statistics and ethnolinguistics, sociology and psychology – completely floored by an utterance that contains only five words, all of them monosyllabic and amongst the commonest words in the language. And the really awful bit, the bit that had us avoiding eye contact with one another, drinking too much coffee and hoping it was fire-drill day, was that not only could we not translate it, we could not even understand *why* we could not translate it. Even worse, whilst we all thought we understood it, no one could say what it meant.

Reactions to this state of affairs varied. One colleague exclaimed, 'That expression is *so* American!', which obviously explained matters to his own satisfaction. Another invoked the name of Descartes. A third wondered if thirty-nine questions wasn't enough, really? We had run head-on into an epistemological labyrinth and could not find our way out, our shouts only echoing endlessly off the walls. Even those who were able to accept the idea of cultural variation in concepts of personhood at some highly generalised theoretical level had great difficulty in believing that this could result in such particularised differences in *self*-expression, that such a simple phrase could be so difficult.

It is these issues, the relationships between language and identity, between languages and the architecture of the psyche, between the individual and the ineffable, that are addressed in this remarkable book.

Silence in Second Language Learning is an insightful, original and important work. It is insightful because it brings together two seemingly dispa-

rate topics – *identity* and *the silent period* – and shows that they are related in a profound and systematic way. It is original because, starting from this unusual juxtaposition of topics, it formulates questions that have not been asked elsewhere, calling on work in different disciplines – linguistics, psychoanalysis, social psychology, anthropology and language didactics – and weaving them into a cogently-argued synthesis. To do so requires an exceptionally wide and genuinely interdisciplinary intellectual and methodological framework, qualities that Colette Granger displays with brio whilst at the same time managing to remain readable: even when she is dealing with complex and demanding issues, she does so in a clear, energetic style in which opinions and arguments are expressed firmly, but where there is no trace of stridency. Alternative views are examined and given a fair hearing. The reader is in the presence of an inquiring and well-stocked mind whose enthusiasm is always tempered by reason.

And *Silence in Second Language Learning* is important for two main reasons:

- Firstly, there is a widespread perception that most countries in the world are going through various forms of identity crisis as a result of globalisation, cataclysmic political and social shifts, and ideological and religious realignments. Identities are being reconfigured at every level: national and international, regional and local, individual. Such developments always have linguistic repercussions of one kind or another, yet they have received relatively little attention in applied linguistics or language didactics (as opposed to anthropology and ethnology).
- Secondly, in applied linguistics circles, the expression ‘(the identity of) the learner’ is in fact a misnomer: it is not about the individual identity (the self and social person, roles and ethos ... date of birth, beliefs, occupation, tastes, etc.) of a single incorporated person. In applied linguistics discourse, ‘the learner’ is an abstraction, a generalised representation of the *learning process*. Colette Granger’s book tries to remedy this reductionism by focusing on the individual, ‘the learning, speaking individual’.

In outline, three basic premises lie at the heart of this study. Firstly, Colette Granger contends that there are aspects of language learning and acquisition that are psychical in nature. Secondly, she contends that the silent period, an objectively observable stage in the development of some second language learners, is a manifestation of those psychical characteristics and their functioning. And thirdly, she argues that psychoanalytical theory can provide the conceptual and methodological tools necessary to

identify, describe and investigate the problems and processes involved. If 'identity' and a sense of self are constructed in and through an internal monologue or, rather, an intrapersonal dialogue, what happens when the language being used changes, as is the case of a second language learner? How can I talk to my self properly in a language I do not yet master?

What groups of readers might be interested in reading *Silence in Second Language Learning*? My answers, in no particular order, would be:

- Thoughtful and reflective teachers who wish better to understand their learners and their own role in the learning process and *vis à vis* their learners. Moreover, in classroom terms at least, learner identity cannot be examined separately from teacher identity, since their roles are complementary. Teachers hungry for a humanistic appraisal of their own identities and roles – and there are quite a few of them, I believe – will find much of interest here. And, of course, teachers are often people who have as learners themselves been through the types of experience discussed here.
- People interested in psychoanalysis whether professionally or not: the professionals for the originality of the topic, others for its accessibility.
- People interested in the processes of language learning and acquisition. The silent period is an intriguing phenomenon in itself, of course, and this is an effective, critical synthesis of much work in second language acquisition, social psychology and discourse analysis. Again, this is an under-researched topic, as are the emergence and social construction of the self and identity, especially in bi- or multilingual settings.
- People interested in identity: this is a surprisingly large group, given the intense interest in identity in anthropology, sociology and politics.

I am sure that *Silence in Second Language Learning* will have a *succès d'estime*: I very much hope it will also have the other types of success it richly deserves, since it represents a major and welcome shift of perspective on language learning and 'the learner'.

Philip Riley
C.R.A.P.E.L. (Centre de Recherches et
d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues)
Université Nancy 2,
France

Acknowledgements

Interdisciplinarity is a tricky thing – to engage distinct discourses in a theoretical conversation is to ask of the reader a kind of indulgence. This book, which is about learning, has benefited from some fine teachers, whose diverse intellectual passions have encouraged, and indulged, my own. I am thankful to Alice Pitt, who introduced me to psychoanalytic theory at exactly the right moment, and who continues to strengthen my engagement with it through thoughtful enquiry and patient humour. I also thank Heather Lotherington for her enthusiastic response to my initial idea, and for her linguistic insights at different points during this project. Early on I received some useful bibliographic suggestions from Kathleen Bailey: I am grateful to her, as well as to Barbara Godard and Sandra Schecter for their attentive reading and provocative questioning of my work at later stages. To Philip Riley, whose response to and suggestions for the manuscript have been most generous and helpful, I owe a particular debt of thanks.

Others have contributed to my thinking through their writing and in conversation. Among these are Deborah Britzman, Mary Leigh Morbey, and my colleagues in the doctoral programme in the Faculty of Education at York University, in particular Chloë Brushwood-Rose, Trent Davis, John Ippolito, Sara Matthews and Karleen Pendleton-Jiménez. Peggy Warren, in the Scott Library at York, has provided important bibliographic assistance, and the staff of the Resource Sharing Department, especially Gladys Fung, Julie Pippo and Samantha McWilliams, have performed, more times than I can remember, the magic of obtaining hard-to-find texts in record time.

One of the delights of any journey is that, whether or not the destination is known, there are unexpected moments at each bend in the road. For me there have been many such moments. One was given to me by Dale Smith, whose observation of a silent kindergarten pupil was one of the seeds that grew into this work, and another came from Ronald Conrad, who suggested many years ago that I could write. I thank them both.

The following publishers have kindly granted permission to reproduce copyright material: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. for passages from *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* by Sigmund Freud, translated by Alix Strachey; Dutton (a division of the Penguin Group, USA, Inc.) for material

from *Lost in Translation* by Eva Hoffman; and Pantheon Books (a division of Random House, Inc.) for material from *Beast in the Nursery* by Adam Phillips.

Finally, I owe a sincere debt to those I love: to my children, Paul and Emma, for their love and for the reminder that it's a good thing to read a recipe book, too, once in a while; to Manuel and Martin for generously sharing their father and their computer; to my friends for the gifts of companionship, laughter and encouragement that endure over time and distance; and to Alberto Mendelzon, whose affection, intelligence and humour give pleasure to my work and to my life.

Introduction

Silence in Second Language Learning: A Present Absence

*One does not inhabit a country; one inhabits a language.
That is our country, our fatherland – and no other.*

Émile M. Cioran
Anathemas and Admirations, 1986

A five-year-old child newly arrived in Toronto, whose first language is not English, attends his all-English kindergarten for several months without speaking. The teacher tries hard to interest him in the brightly coloured building blocks and other toys, art materials and books, but he remains passive, distant, silent. His silence is disturbing. His teacher is concerned, but she is also wise: she waits. Then one day the class takes a trip to the zoo. In the section devoted to reptiles, the boy spots a reticulated python, wrapped several times around a branch inside a large, glass-fronted display case. The boy darts over to his teacher, grabs her hand tightly and pulls her hard, insistently, away from her conversation with another student, over to the glass case. He points at the python and shouts, over and over, 'Me know this! Me know this! This my home, teacher, this my home!'

Dale Smith
Personal communication, 1997

When the story of that young child's awakening into English was first related to me by his teacher, I wondered how she might have felt when, after months of silence, her student finally began to speak. I was curious about how the child himself might have felt, speaking out for the first time in a new language. But most of all I wanted to think about the meaning of the period during which the child had not spoken: his months of silence. How did he live? What was he doing? Who, indeed, was he?

This study grew out of that curiosity. My original intention was to interrogate the experience of that boy, and others like him, who dwell for a time in the solitary space between a first and a second language. I wanted to articulate my curiosity about a component of the highly complex and individualised process of second language acquisition (SLA)¹ – a phenomenon referred to by linguists as the silent period, and generally defined as a span of time of varying length, during which some beginning second language

(L2) learners do not willingly produce the language they are learning. This silent period, so described, parallels to a substantial degree the first year or so of life prior to the beginning of speech in the mother tongue. During this time, according to Rod Ellis, 'children go through a lengthy period of listening to people talk to them before they produce their first words' (Ellis, 1996: 82). The pre-production stage of the first-language learner is distinguished from the L2 silent period both by cognitive development and by physiology. Ellis (1996: 82) writes that in the first language a 'silent period is necessary, for the young child needs to discover what language is and what it does'. The vocal apparatus also has to develop sufficiently for language production. By contrast, in second language acquisition the development of the physical apparatus has been achieved, and a language (and therefore, presumably, some knowledge *about* language) has been acquired.

My wish was to explore the question of whether the silent period might also be a psychological phenomenon, a non-linguistic as well as a linguistic step in the continuous process of self-concept formation and re-formation. But mostly I wanted to try to foreground the relationship between individual identity and self-concept, as expressed in and by the silent period, and the process of second language acquisition. Words and worlds are threads woven together into the fabric of lived experience: what happens, I wondered, when they become unravelled?

The first thing that happened, and it happened quite early on, was that my own tidy little wish came undone. First, I was surprised to discover that, while a number of reasons have been offered by way of explanation for this stage of L2 acquisition (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Lightbown & Spada, 1996; Saville-Troike, 1988), one of its most striking features is that it does not seem to occur in all learners. Moreover, when it does occur it varies, in degree and in duration. The silent period is more idiosyncratic than I had imagined, and consequently not as clearly conceptualised or described as I had anticipated. Indeed, so variable is it that, in contrast with its apparent equivalent, the necessary and universal pre-verbal period in first language acquisition, Ellis describes it as 'not obligatory', since an second language learner 'already knows about language' (1996: 82). And linguistic research bears out this conceptualisation of a silent period as a typical, yet nevertheless variable and non-universal, occurrence in second language acquisition (Gibbons, 1985; Naiman *et al.*, 1978; Saville-Troike, 1988).

The idiosyncrasy of the silent period suggests that the numerous phenomena that second language acquisition (SLA) research groups in the category 'silent period', and perhaps even the concept of silence writ large, are not quite transparent. The question asks itself: precisely what might it

signify that a stage in a learning process is not obligatory? In this particular context, what does it mean to say that the previous acquisition of a first language renders a silent period unnecessary in the learning of a second? If it is truly redundant for an individual who already 'knows about language', given that such knowledge is by definition a necessary precondition to second language acquisition, no second language learner should ever undergo a silent period. And yet many do – perhaps more than we know or can readily determine. Depending on the definition applied (and specifically on the lack of consensus about how long or short a period of silence should be to constitute a 'silent period' as such), it can be argued that *all* second language learners go through a pre-production period that might, again depending on definition, be labelled a silent period.

In the light of the position I take in this study, namely that silence in second language acquisition is a much larger phenomenon than what is named the silent period, these questions, however interesting, are not central. And so, taking at face value, for the moment, Ellis's assessment of the silent period as non-obligatory, I surmise that knowledge of a first language is a necessary, but perhaps not a sufficient, condition for the elimination of a silent period in second language learning. That it occurs at all, however idiosyncratically, must therefore be attributable, at least in part, to something else.

As well as being a series of intra-personal cognitive stages, SLA is without doubt also a social process. It takes place within the individual, certainly, but that individual is moving at all times through a world populated, and articulated linguistically, by others. In the case of the second language learner, that world and its population may differ in many ways from the environment in which the first language was acquired. Such differences might well impose on the learner demands that are new, complex, and even – in ways that are social as well as linguistic – incomprehensible.

But first language acquisition is a social process too. Even the Chomskyan (1972) view of an innate capacity for language does not claim that language development is possible in the complete absence of social contact. In fact, the cognitive work that Ellis (1996: 82) refers to as the discovery of 'what language is and what it does' can take place only in an environment where language is present and available to be discovered. From the perspective of language as a social phenomenon, then, might there be fewer, or different, reasons for a silent period in the acquisition of a second language than in the acquisition of a first?

The silent period, along with its unpredictability, is a troubling issue, not only for linguists but also for educators. Given that they often encounter

second-language learners (whether by design in the case of second language instruction, or by accident when a student's mother tongue is not the language of instruction), it follows that teachers too, at least from time to time, find themselves confronted by the silence of the second-language learner. What are they to do? How are they to understand this silence – as cognitive or affective, desirable or problematic, deliberate or unconscious, guileless or manipulative? How might they respond to it? And how might they engage with it pedagogically? To explore these questions is part of the work of this study. Yet to begin such an exploration involves asking what purpose the silent period might serve: what precisely is silence in second language acquisition, and what is that silence being used by the learner to do?

Like the methodological problems in SLA research, some of which I will enumerate below, the complexities of an individual's experience as an second-language learner – and the difficulties of interpreting that experience and the silence within it – arise at least in part out of two interrelated issues. First, neither language acquisition nor the study of it is a tidy process. There is a kind of muddiness inherent both in the research methods in question and in the subject (that is, the topic) under investigation, which is not easily explained – or 'researched' – away. Relatedly, this muddiness arises, I propose to a significant extent, out of a widespread tendency to overlook or avoid another element – another 'subject' – that may be messier and more complex than either language learning or language research and that to me seems crucial to the assessment of individual differences in language acquisition. This element is the learning, speaking (and at times silent), individual. More specifically, it is that individual's self, or self-concept, which remains unnamed in at least two ways: first by SLA research which, to a substantial degree, floats on the already-cloudy surface of personality rather than diving into the murkier depths below; and second by the subject him- or herself, the language learner who, as I will argue later, simply cannot do the naming. The problem becomes how to study something that linguistics describes and measures, that pedagogy (both in practice and in theory) often perceives as an empty phenomenon, that the individual subject cannot explain despite – or because of – being immersed in it, and that 'common sense' denies has importance at all.

Moreover, as a focus of study, the silent period in the context of second language learning (and silence qua silence in any context) is inherently problematic. After all, whether transparent or not, whether informed by prior knowledge or not, whether obligatory or not, it is by definition, in some sense at least, silent. And in Western cultures whose naturalised,

common-sense operating principles favour performance over contemplation, participation over inaction, and – what is most relevant here – speech over silence, there is something peculiar, even counter-intuitive, about investigating something that in a sense is not there. It is a struggle to reconstruct silence, not as an absence, an emptiness that must be filled with something else in order to be meaningful, but rather as an investigable actuality. Nevertheless, this is the position I take: that, however counter-intuitive it might seem, the ‘emptiness’ of silence within second language learning is imagined and not real. For, just as silence is part of language itself, encoded and unencoded, lying both within and outside speech at the levels of phonology, syntax and discourse, as well as in the sense that begins to approach what I am addressing here, of ‘things not said’ (Schmitz, 1994), silence in general and the silent period in particular are significant aspects of second language acquisition.

If there is more to the silent period than the mere absence of speech, there is also a sense in which something seems to be absent from linguistics’ explanations of it. Where SLA research disappoints, in my view, is in its reluctance to recognise adequately and explore deeply the multiple non-linguistic levels on which L2 acquisition functions. Here I am not referring only to aspects or characteristics such as age, gender, motivation, attitudes or learning styles, which have certainly been named, counted, categorised, defined and described in various and often useful ways. As well as listening for ‘things not said’, my aim is to consider the subjective experiences of some of the persons who are ‘not saying’ those things. The term *personality*, which is commonly put forward both as comprising such traits as self-esteem, affect, anxiety, extroversion and motivation (Brown, 1994a; Naiman *et al*, 1978), and as informing choices made by learners in some circumstances (Harder, 1980), perhaps comes closest to what I want to examine, but even it is not quite adequate. Rather, just as linguistics itself, for example, distinguishes between surface and deep structures of syntax, such that surface structure is based on what lies, metaphorically, beneath it, so I seek to look at deeper aspects of individuals, aspects that ground the ‘surface structures’ of self-esteem, extroversion and personality in general. And this goal invites, again, that more fundamental question: what is the significance of silence in the process of learning to speak?

My second and more daunting discovery, in addition to the idiosyncratic aspects of the silent period itself, was this: just as there is more to the silent period than a mere absence of speech, silence itself within the second language acquisition process is a much larger phenomenon, and more multifaceted, than the silent period as such. For example, Ron Scollon and Suzanne Scollon’s study of interethnic communication (Scollon & Scollon,