

Comparative Perspectives on Language Acquisition

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Comparative Perspectives on Language Acquisition

A Tribute to Clive Perdue

Edited by

**Marzena Watorek, Sandra Benazzo
and Maya Hickmann**

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Introduction: New Comparative Perspectives in the Study of Language Acquisition – Clive Perdue's Legacy

Marzena Watorek, Sandra Benazzo and
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Introductory Remarks

This volume is a tribute to Clive Perdue (CP), who passed away on 14th March 2008. It was the strong wish of his colleagues and friends to honour his memory by bringing together chapters from representative members of the scientific community at large in the field of second language acquisition. It is their hope that this collection will highlight the major influence of CP's contribution to this field on the international scene and his particularly central role on the French scene, where he was one of the main founders of this field as a discipline in its own right.

Born on 18th October 1944 (Bedford, UK), Clive Perdue received several degrees from the University of Oxford (BA 1968, Master of Arts 1971) and from the University of Paris 8 (*Licence* and *Masters de Linguistique Générale* in 1969–1970, *Doctorat de Troisième Cycle en Linguistique* in 1978, *Doctorat d'Etat en Linguistique* in 1990), where he was then appointed Professor in Linguistics in 1992. In order to best situate his work, two central points should be mentioned from the outset. First, among his many responsibilities over the years, he was the Scientific Coordinator of the international program *Second Language Acquisition by Adult Immigrants*, initiated by Wolfgang Klein at the Max-Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (Nijmegen, The Netherlands) under the auspices of the European Science Foundation (ESF, Strasbourg, 1981–1988). It is common knowledge in the community that this project

(still well known as the ESF project) was a major force in structuring research on second language acquisition in Europe and beyond. The network of researchers that was created at that time continues to be active and the program itself still lies at the forefront of current language acquisition research nowadays. We return to this point in some detail below.

Second, in order to understand the historical context of CP's work, we must go back to the 1970s and 1980s when a research team became interested in a field that did not yet exist in France. At this time CP taught English in the English Department of the *Centre Expérimental de Vincennes* which later became the University of Paris 8. He was a very active member of this group whose objective was to study language acquisition in the perspective proposed by Corder (1967). This proposal was the first one to view the productions of second language learners (L2) as the manifestations of a coherent linguistic system in which learners' errors were not considered as simple deviations from a target linguistic system, but rather as reflecting rules underlying their own system. According to this view, simply comparing L2 productions to the source and target language systems (SL and TL) does not suffice to account for the logic and organization of this original linguistic system. CP took on the task of making Corder's work known. In number 57 of the journal *Langages*, edited by CP and Remy Porquier in 1980, three of Corder's major papers were translated and published in French. It is also in this framework that an international conference was organized in 1979.¹ In the proceedings of this conference, which were published in the journal *Encrages* of the Department of English Studies at Paris 8 with a preface by CP and Remy Porquier (1979), one finds the fundamental questions that have guided CP's research during his entire life:

How does one learn a foreign language? By what processes is this learning constructed? Are these processes specific? Are they in particular different from the processes that take place during first language acquisition? What factors determine and promote this learning? What are variable and invariant patterns? How should one examine this learning process? How should one describe it? How should one analyze it? How should one explain it? What language do learners speak? Can one speak of an L2 "learner's language"? How should one describe this language? What is the status of this intermediate language among other linguistic systems? What are the factors and variables that influence its use?

It is obvious that this research is interdisciplinary. It stands at the cross-roads between linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, education, language teaching and still other disciplines. It touches on a great number of questions (including old ones): language acquisition; the status of natural languages; questions concerning norm, dialect, linguistic variety; bilingualism, multilingualism, diglossia, linguistic dominance; language-related politics, teaching policy, etc. (Perdue & Porquier, 1979: 4, our translation)