Qualitative Data – I’m not totally sure what kind of data are qualitative; would a questionnaire seen on page 70 of our book qualify as qualitative data?

Perhaps the best way understand qualitative data is to think about it as the inverse of quantitative data. If you’ll recall, quantitative data are made up of entities that a researcher can either count or measure. For example, if you’re examining how well a second language learner uses English determiners correctly, you might gather some essays and count up all the places in which a determiner should be used and then count up all the times each subject used determiners grammatically. In another example, you might measure students’ proficiency by measuring their scores on a standardized exam. In the first case, you’re counting; in the second case, you’re measuring.

Those types of data are quantitative.

In contrast, qualitative data comprise information that you don’t count or measure. You can look for patterns and find general patterns, but you’re neither counting nor measuring. For example, you might track how well students are doing in class by having them keep journals; from there, you can read the journals to determine if there are common concerns or common patterns of behavior, or attitudes. In another example, you, the researcher might spend month observing a group of people and take lots and lots of notes. The basis of your research then becomes the notes that you took, which describe what you’ve observed, and how you described the subjects’ behaviors. Again, if there’s no counting or measuring, then the data are qualitative. Finally, the sort of linguistic data we examined in class regarding Portuguese-American language and the child-language data produced by Kyle (remember him? See your notes!) – these data are qualitative.

Now let’s turn to page 70 and look at the questionnaire that begins at bottom of the page. The first set of questions asks students to indicate why their taking a French class. If we decide to add up the frequencies with which students select each answer, then we have quantitative data; we’re counting. In the second type of question (at the top of page 71), we have some open-ended questions; these data are qualitative.

Interlanguage

To understand interlanguage, it’s helpful to think of second language acquisition as a pathway whereby the person acquiring moves closer and closer to native-like use of the target language. This person’s interlanguage is her output at any point along this pathway. Her interlanguage represents the linguistic system for the target language that she has in place at any given time along the pathway toward native-like L2. The interlanguage is very often an “imperfect” version of the target language; nevertheless, it is systematic. Again, it reflects her grammatical competence of the TL at a particular stage in her acquisition process. It follows, then, that interlanguage is not fixed; it often changes over time. There are cases, however, in which a person trying to acquire a second language “gets stuck” in the process. Her interlanguage does
not change after while. This event is known as fossilization: fossilization arises when the person no longer acquires new knowledge about the target language.

*By the way, the textbook includes a pretty nice glossary of important terminology; it begins on page 514. The glossary is good place to visit when you get stuck on a particular concept. The definitions are brief but they can help you understand important ideas better.*

### How behaviorist Contrastive Analysis (CA) relates to Error Analysis (EA)

To begin, let’s remember what contrastive analysis is all about: in applying CA, we examine the grammar of language A, we examine the grammar of language B, and then we compare these two grammars. What are we looking for? We are looking for places in which these two grammars are similar and where they are different. More specifically, CA encourages us to focus on those aspects of the two grammars that are the most different: by understanding these differences, we can potentially predict what will be hard for speaker of language A when he decides to learn language B. The larger the number of differences, and the more divergent the two grammars are, the harder it will be for the speaker to “learn the habits” of the new language. In CA, we rely on what we know about linguistics to predict and explain how SLA works.

Error analysis builds on CA, but is different. Whereas CA is focused on the differences between the two grammars – that is, comparing two abstract systems of knowledge – EA focuses on actual language behaviors. What we do in EA is keep track of the errors during the second language acquisition process, with the idea that these errors provide us with insight about how the subject’s grammatical knowledge of the target language. In EA, we rely on errors as the focus of our explanations; we use those errors to explain how SLA works.

### Habit formation vs. cumulative learning

Habit formation and cumulative learning actually work together; both ideas are part of the behaviorist framework in psychology. According to behaviorists, what we observe people do is not a matter of any sort of internal abstraction such as the “mind”; rather, we act primarily as a matter of responding to stimuli around us. Actions that we repeat over and over are a matter of forming particular habits – and this would include language behaviors. Under this framework, the using a language is a matter of learning a very large collection of habits; this collection of habits makes up the cumulative learning that is the language – at least in this framework. It’s very important to note that behaviorism plays a very, very small part in how we understand language today in the 21st century; while a small number of linguistic behaviors might be responses to particular stimuli, the prevailing view of language requires us to acknowledge the existence of a human mind – which is an abstraction – as well as the existence of internal functions that can not be directly observed, even by an MRI. Language is, in great part, a cognitive abstraction that lives in minds of its users.

### Phonetics vs. regular spelling

In linguistics, we use phonetic transcription to represent the way in which language sounds. The most common system is that used by the International Phonetic Association, the IPA ([http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/IPA/](http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/IPA/)). We use this system of transcription for a very simple reason: it
was designed so that each symbol represents one and only one sound, and so that each sound used by speakers of any language is represented by exactly one symbol. For linguists, using this sort of exact, precise system is absolutely critical so that there is NO ambiguity when we represent speech on a page. In contrast, so-called “regular spelling” is very imprecise. For example, there are several ways to represent the sound [e] in English: we have “h-a-y” for hay, “t-h-e-y” for they, “w-e-i-g-h” for weigh, etc.

Understanding the basics of transcription is part of the course that is the prerequisite for this class – either LING 3311 or LING 5300. If you’re having trouble with reading the phonetic transcriptions in this course, you need to refer to your materials from LING 3311 or LING 5300 and review these facts. You can also get a PDF version of the IPA symbol chart at the IPA’s website; it’s at http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/IPA/ipachart.html. I’ve also added a link to our course website for you to download; you’ll find it under “Course Documents.”

Looking for patterns between different languages
Analyzing speech patterns

The good news about this “muddy point” is that we won’t be doing lots and lots of this in our course. All the same, it’s important to know the basics of how one conducts such an analysis.

You begin by looking at the output – which are interlanguage forms, right? – and compare these to the intended target form (from the target language). Next, you decide if the IL form is equal to the target form or not; if it is, then the speaker has presented evidence of achieving the target. Great! If not, then you need to start keeping track of what the difference between the two forms might be. For example, maybe the target form ends with a consonant (as in cup or big) but the second language speaker tacks on an extra vowel sound, creating [kp] or [big]. After you list these differences, you need to organize your observations; group together similar data and try to describe what is going on. From there, you should review all of your descriptions and see if there are larger patterns at work in the data.

As you can surmise, the best way to improve your ability to understand these sorts of interlanguage situations and analyze second language speech patterns is to practice additional problems. I’ll see if I can’t find one to work on either in class or as a matter optional review (for those who’d like to do it).