

The antecedents of task behaviour: A dynamic systems account of task motivation

Zoltán Dörnyei
University of Nottingham

The behaviour of language learners in various communicative tasks is determined by a wide range of variables, from personal characteristics (e.g. L2 proficiency, motivation and willingness to communicate) to task organisational and situational factors (e.g. the composition of the task participants working together, the structure of the task, the expected task outcome and the availability of sources of support such as the teacher or relevant language materials). These interrelated factors can be seen to form a dynamic system in the sense that they cannot be studied meaningfully in isolation because their impact/role is always dependent on the constellation of the other variables.

In spite of this obvious complexity underlying task behaviour, past research has identified a number of consistent and powerful tendencies in explaining task-related phenomena. This does not necessarily contradict a dynamic systems perspective, because complexity theory does recognise the significant role of 'attractor states'. These are preferred patterns to which the system is attracted (hence the name); not every system reaches such settled states, but if there are strong attractors in place, a relatively wide range of starting points will eventually converge on a much smaller set of states because the process unfolds in the direction of the attractor. In other words, powerful attractors act as stabilizing forces, and this stability, in turn, translates into consistency and predictability in system behaviour.

In my talk I will examine some of the most salient attractors/attractor states in task behaviour, with a particular emphasis on participant features related to motivation. I will argue that the most effective attractors involve an optimal combination of diverse (cognitive, motivational and emotional) factors, and the resulting constellations can be seen to operate as integrated units. It is these units, I believe, which may be of special interest for future research on task-based language teaching.