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Linguistic Theory in Second Language Acquisition by Suzanne Flynn and Wayne O'Neil

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REVIEWS

Linguistic Theory In Second Language Acquisition by Suzanne Flynn and Wayne O'Neil (Eds.). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988. 443 pp.

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There has been much debate over the past several years about the nature of the relationship between Universal Grammar (UG) and adult second language acquisition and about whether indeed such a relationship even exists. Many second language researchers investigating this relationship have often noted that, as originally formulated, UG theory does not concern itself with nor make direct empirical predictions for second language acquisition (e.g., McLaughlin, 1987; Flynn, 1983). This "lack of concern" for SLA, however, does not necessarily derive from some disqualification from consideration inherent in UG theory itself. Gass & Schachter (1989), for example, outline how a strong position on the possible relation between linguistic theory and second language data would look, noting that such a position (which they themselves do not subscribe to)

> argues that linguistic theory, because it is a theory of natural language, must be tested against second language data to be validated. Thus any theory of language would be false if it failed to account for second language data ... Second language data can and should be used as evidence for distinguishing between linguistic theories, which, of course, attributes the power of falsification to second language data. (p. 5)

A "more moderate" position, they claim, would be to acknowledge that a theory of language could not be falsified by second language data if it were not intended to account for anything other than first

language acquisition, but could, however, be positively "enhanced" by evidence from such data. Likewise, Bley-Vroman (forthcoming), although arguing for the non-involvement of UG in adult L2 acquisition, remarks that "foreign language learning actually can in principle provide interesting evidence about the character of the domain-specific [acquisition] system" (p. 1).

Despite the conceivable differences between first and second language learners with regard to such things as prior linguistic and world knowledge or cognitive development, the null hypothesis that UG as a biological "computational system" constrains or underlies at least certain elements of what gets acquired in all human language -- whether 1st or *n*th -- remains to be disproved (for a discussion of this, see Schwartz, 1989, 1990, especially in response to what Bley-Vroman (forthcoming) has called "the logical problem of foreign language learning"). For editors Suzanne Flynn and Wayne O'Neil, it is the conviction that evidence from second language research (as well as from any other pertinent areas of study) can serve to inform a theory of UG, or linguistic theory in general, which lies at the heart of *Linguistic Theory in Second Language Acquisition.*

Such an approach, reflected in the introduction and twenty-two revised papers collected from the 1985 Conference on Linguistic Theory and Second Language Acquisition held at MIT, represents an important pioneering step in reformulating the questions of theoretical interest in a field which has largely been dominated by pedagogical concerns. By drawing upon the contributions of many prominent researchers from diverse areas of linguistic theory, this book manages to firmly integrate L2 research into "mainstream" linguistics. Nearly all of the material assumes some familiarity with generative grammar -- specifically with the Chomskian "principles and parameters" approach -- especially as it has been applied thus far to the study of first language acquisition. The volume includes a concise summary by Hale of the relevant key points of the "principles and parameters" theory, an historical overview of L2 research by Newmeyer & Weinberger, and a valuable discussion by Lust of some of the most basic issues of this theory in relation to both L1 and L2 acquisition.

In their excellent introductory chapter, Flynn & O'Neil outline some "basic assumptions" primary among which is the notion that adults learning a second language, like children learning their first, construct a computationally complex, structure-dependent (i.e., hierarchical) representation of the target grammar unavailable by induction from surface data alone. Flynn & O'Neil demonstrate (as in other work by Flynn, e.g., 1983, 1987) the inadequacy of using exclusively either one of the two major traditional approaches to second language acquisition -- contrastive analysis and "creative construction." Instead they argue for the need to reconcile the inherent contradictions of both approaches while still retaining their essential insights, namely, that although prior L1 experience seems to play some role in the acquisition of a subsequent language, there may be certain common developmental patterns or "constructive processes independent of the L1 experience" (p. 6) which all L2 learners share. Flynn's adoption of a parameter-setting framework, to capture the insights of the two approaches while accomodating their apparent contradictions, is presented in a later chapter of the book.

Since the role of parameters is crucial to the theory of UG as currently formulated, its implications for L2 acquisition comprises one of the central issues, or perhaps *the* central issue, raised by the contributing authors in this book. Following Chomsky (1981), Flynn & O'Neil define parameters as

> general organizing principles [which] isolate properties of structural variation in grammars. The particular value of a parameter will vary from one language to another, and this value must be learned in language acquisition in order to acquire a specific grammar. (p. 14)

In addition, the setting of a particular parametric value "entails a series of deductive consequences for the rest of the grammar that are hypothesized to follow automatically from this setting" (p. 15). Thus, within a UG framework, one of the crucial requirements of a theory of second language acquisition is a precise specification of how L2 parametric values and their "deductive consequences" come to be acquired, in light of prior L1 settings which may be the same or different (what the editors refer to as a "match" or "mismatch"). Although only five papers (those by Flynn, Clahsen, Travis, Jenkins, and Obler) are included in a chapter explicitly entitled "Parameters," discussion either of specific parameters or of general issues raised by parameter theory in relation to L2 acquisition may be found in most of the papers collected here, several of which I will briefly mention.

Flynn's own paper presents data on the setting (or re-setting) in L2 acquisition of the "head-direction" parameter (as formulated by Stowell, 1981).[1] Flynn claims that L2 learners are "sensitive to differences in structures between the L1 and L2, and apply the same principles that were applied in L1 acquisition" (p. 86). She uses data from native speakers of Japanese (a head-final language) and Spanish (head-initial) who are acquiring English (head-initial) to argue that when there is a mismatch between parameter settings (Japanese and English), acquisition seems to take longer, i.e., "corresponds to early L1 stages of acquisition of this parameter" (p. 86), whereas acquisition is facilitated when settings match (Spanish and English).

Clahsen, on the other hand, uses data from studies that tested two parameters on verb form and placement to argue that the rule systems developed by adult L2 learners lie outside of what a theory of UG would allow. He notes that (a) the acquisition of both correct verb placement and an agreement system are developmentally (and in fact causally) linked in child L1 acquisition but not in adult L2 acquisition and that (b) the availability of particular lexical and morphological items induces (or "triggers") the proper restructurings in child L1 grammars but not in adult L2 grammars. Clahsen argues, therefore, that adult L2 acquisition must follow from general learning strategies rather than from UG.[2]

The role of "word-order parameters" or, more specifically, of headedness, direction of case assignment, direction of theta-role assignment and direction of predication (Travis, 1984; Koopman, 1984) is discussed in the paper by Travis. She suggests studying the nature of L2 impairment in the agrammatic speech of Broca's aphasics, who acquired their second language as adults, in order to see if they still have intact representations of hierarchical structure as evidenced by word-order. In an astructural language system, she claims, "parameters of word order [which are formulated in terms of c-command, government, and X-bar theory] would have no relevance" (p. 98). Finding such structural evidence, on the other hand, would lend support to the hypothesis that UG was involved in the acquisition of the second language.

Other specific parameters are discussed in relation to L2 acquisition in the papers by Jenkins (on a VP configuration parameter), White (variation in permissible proper governors; bounding nodes), Liceras (preposition stranding) and Haegeman ("the modal parameter"). More general discussion of parametric variation in L2 theory is found in the papers by Obler (on neurolinguistics), Lust (on the relationship between linguistic theory and empirical studies), Gair (on markedness), Eckman (on the relationship between UG and a language-typological approach), Macedo & D'Introno (on pidginization) and Rutherford (on competing theories of L2 acquisition). The paper by Mazurkewich, while not concerned with a specific parameter or discussion of parameters, investigates the marked/unmarked distinction (hypothesized to be a component of parameter theory) in the acquisition of gerunds vs. infinitives by L2 learners of English .

In general, these studies attempt to locate L2 research more precisely within UG theory (or outside of it, as in the case of Clahsen), by investigating the nature of the interactions among UG or biologically innate linguistic principles, the input available to the L2 learner and (as shown especially in the paper by Felix) other more generalized cognitive abilities of human adults. Were one to take the stronger position outlined earlier on the role of L2 data in linguistic theory (and judging from their introduction, I think Flynn & O'Neil would), then another goal emerges as well. That is, to show that if one claims that "UG no longer exists" in adults because L2 learners appear to violate one or another of its precepts, one is neglecting the possibility (or likelihood) that the parametric construct in question may itself be improperly formulated and that L2 data could be used to inform, refine or otherwise "enhance" a more correct reformulation in much the same way that L1 data are currently used.

A more relevant question from this perspective may thus be not whether UG remains "active" or "accessible" beyond a certain age (or beyond L1 acquisition), but precisely what in language UG applies to, given that it has never been claimed to account for *everything* in language acquisition; rather, UG is necessary primarily to constrain and account for phenomena of a largely syntactic nature for which little or no surface evidence is available to the learner. This issue brings us to another set of papers in the volume (by Broselow, Singh & Martohardjono, and Aitchison) which address L2 acquisition in other components of the grammar, such as phonology, morphology and the lexicon, and which raise the much broader question of how these levels of grammar are to be incorporated into a coherent, unified theory of language, in general, and a theory of UG, in particular.

It could turn out, then, that while perhaps crucial in some respects, UG may not have much to say about some of the things which give L2 learners headaches and which language textbooks devote so much of their space to: inflectional paradigms, vocabulary (and lexical subcategorization) and language-idiosyncratic elements, such as articles in English or formal vs. informal discourse levels in Japanese. UG, as a computational system, may facilitate the relative ease of interpretation (i.e., "computing") of anaphoric relations, for example, but it may be hard-pressed to aid in the acquisition of 3rd-person-singular -*s* in English, a process which may rely instead on some other learning mechanism (that apparently deteriorates with increasing age!). The importance of L2 data may thus lie in contributing, along with data from L1 and neurolinguistic studies, both to a more correct description of the various levels or components of UG and their interaction as well as to delimiting the scope of UG.

One of the most important contributions of this book is the introduction's rather neat delineation not only of a set of minimal requirements for a theory of second language acquisition, but also of a set of questions and issues to be addressed in future research -- "the right set of questions" at "the right level of analysis" (p. 18) -- which the editors have distilled from the papers collected in the volume. This convergence of ideas constitutes a kind of L2 critical mass which may well ensure that many of the questions raised in this volume will set the research agenda for second language acquisition in the foreseeable future. As such it certainly establishes the book as a basic reference text for theoretical issues in second language acquisition.

Notes

[1] All parameter references are as cited in the papers themselves.

[2] Clahsen has since modified his position somewhat, arguing that L2 learners do have access to principles of UG only "insofar as these principles have instantiations in the speakers' native language" (Clahsen, 1989, p. 12)..

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Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know by Rebecca L. Oxford. New York: Newbury House, 1990. xxii+342 pp.

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One of the most important developments in applied linguistics in recent years has been the renewed interest in cognitive strategies. The strategies approach to communication/language learning seeks to discover the ways in which the learner conduces the communication/language learning processes. By analysing learners' overt forms of behavior, research on communication