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Introduction

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Theories of how second languages are learned have been approached from a variety of perspectives: sociolinguistic, educational, neurolinguistic, psycholinguistic, linguistic. Each of these approaches brings to second language studies its goals, its data collection methods, and its analytic tools. Because of this diversity, it is often difficult for researchers from different traditions to communicate with one another or to fully appreciate the significance of the questions being addressed.

The purpose of this book is to elucidate these issues from a linguistic point of view, focusing in particular on the potential relationship between second language acquisition and linguistic theory. Thus, the papers represent a range of views on this relationship and describe a variety of linguistic theories. However, they all agree on the importance of grounding second language acquisition research within a theoretical framework that will illuminate the nature of language.

There are many ways of characterizing the relationship between a theory of language and a theory of second language acquisition. In the ideal situation, this relationship is, or should be, bidirectional. The theory will guide and constrain the hypotheses that the researcher is willing to entertain and test in considering both the course of language development and the ultimate knowledge to be attained. Conversely, particular language acquisition studies will provide empirical evidence for or against specific theoretical models. We hope that this book will clarify and hence shed light on these issues.

Linguistic theory and first language acquisition

In the field of first language acquisition, most linguists would agree that this notion of bidirectionality is, at least in principle, well-established. The issue of learnability, for example, has long been among the interests of grammatical theorists, whose goal has been to characterize adult grammatical competence, especially when considering the underdeterminate input available to the child and the limited amount of time it takes to reach adult competence. The notion of bidirectionality has

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assumed even greater significance in recent theoretical developments within generative grammar (see work within the Chomskyan Government and Binding Model [e.g., Chomsky 1981, 1986], as well as Bresnan's [1978] work in lexical-functional grammar). Here the main idea is that learnability is one of the criteria for evaluating particular grammar models. In a complementary vein, language acquisition theorists have, both in their consideration of the input available to the child and in their hypothesized mechanisms for progressing from one developmental stage to another, leaned heavily on theory-specific conceptualizations of what it is the child must know innately (the initial state) and what it is the child must accomplish (the adult grammar), and thus the paths the child has to take to reach such knowledge (see Brown and Hanlon 1970; Braine 1971; Gleitman, Gleitman, and Shipley 1972; Culicover and Wexler 1977; Wexler and Culicover 1980; Hornstein and Lightfoot, 1981; Otsu 1981; Roeper 1982; Berwick and Weinberg, 1984; Hyams 1986). Tavakolian (1981, p. vii) clearly states the relationship between linguistic theory and child language acquisition.

> Linguistic theory provides a general framework within which data from child language can fruitfully be analyzed. Theoretical considerations can unify otherwise disparate and seemingly unrelated data from language-acquisition studies to provide a uniform account of children's linguistic knowledge. Conversely, theories of language acquisition constrain proposals about adult grammars by requiring that adult grammars be learnable within a relatively short period of time, that theories of adult language be consistent with what is known about children's acquisition of language, and that the acquisition process not depend on impossible learning procedures.

As we shall point out, many of the same claims can be made for second language acquisition research.

The development of second language acquisition research

The claim that second language acquisition research should be guided by theoretical models and that it should address theoretical linguistic issues is not as well attested or accepted. Much work in second language acquisition has dealt with linguistic concepts in a more or less haphazard fashion, without a firm theoretical basis. One reason for this state of affairs comes from within the field itself. The initial impetus for studies of second language learning came from contrastive analysis, a well-established field with its own traditions and interests, and the emergence of error analysis, a discipline which developed in reaction to the unsubstantiated claims made by proponents of contrastive analysis regarding

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the sources of learner difficulty in second language learning. During the 1970s it became apparent that the study of second language acquisition was a viable topic of study in and of itself; its justification no longer came from the concerns of language pedagogy, as had been the case within the framework of contrastive analysis and error analysis. Instead, its justification came from the insights that it provided about the nature of the process of acquisition (see Perdue 1982; Ellis 1985; Sharwood Smith 1985).

Another reason for the reluctance to see the relevance of second language acquisition research as a source of illumination in the resolution of theoretical concerns comes from outside the field, and it arises from a basic misunderstanding of what second language acquisition researchers do. Second language acquisition is concerned with: (1) what is acquired of a second language; (2) what is not acquired of a second language; (3) the mechanisms which bring that knowledge (or lack thereof) about; and ultimately (4) explanations for this process in terms of both its successes and failures. Earlier work in the field of second language acquisition focused on acquisition from a pedagogical perspective, in the sense that the goals of research were ultimately to refine our knowledge about classroom practices. With such a focus, at least in the United States, second language acquisition (SLA) and English as a Second Language (ESL) were often considered to be one and the same discipline. But currently, most scholars engaged in second language acquisition research view the field as an autonomous discipline with its own set of questions and issues and its own research agenda and goals.

With regard to the pedagogical focus of second language acquisition, Pankhurst and Sharwood Smith (1985: editorial) state:

> Such an endeavour is undoubtedly useful, but has led to a diminution of the more fundamental goal of understanding how a second language is acquired, of understanding how the language acquisition skills interact with other cognitive skills in the unique situation where the learner already has the advantage (or disadvantage) of a relative degree of conceptual maturity, and a fully implemented realization of Universal Grammar in his first language.

As is apparent from the chapters in this volume, the goals of linguistic-oriented second language acquisition research are not pedagogical; they do not directly impinge on questions of language pedagogy, language teaching methodology, or classroom behavioral studies. This lack of focus on pedagogical concerns does not come from the belief that these concerns are uninteresting or without value; instead, it stems from the belief that sound pedagogical practice must be anchored in in-depth knowledge of the capabilities of second language learners and the processes and strategies that they need for language learning to take place.

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Linguistic theory and second language acquisition

Second language research has developed into an independent nonapplied discipline (see Sharwood Smith 1985), focusing on the sources of the learner's hypotheses about the target language, the paths the learner takes to reach ultimate proficiency, and the characterization of the knowledge underlying that ultimate proficiency. Thus, it comes as no surprise to find that in recent years there has been a surge of interest in the ways in which particular approaches to linguistic theory inform us about how second languages are learned. This is seen in work by Adjemian (1983), Bley-Vroman (in press), Felix (1985), Flynn (1983, 1987), Gass (1979, 1986), Hilles (1986), Rutherford (1983), Schachter (1988), van Buren and Sharwood Smith (1985), White (1985a, b), and Zobl (1986a, b). The guiding assumptions are exactly those of first language acquisition research – a theory of language acquisition must be constrained by knowledge of what a grammar consists of, and a grammar of a language must be something that humans are capable of constructing, given the general characteristics of the information available to the learner.

Granted, these beliefs must be justified by data that are of interest and relevance both to those involved in theory development as well as to those involved in discovering and characterizing the process of second language acquisition itself. While it is impossible to know what findings future research might produce, it *is* possible to characterize existing positions and to point out some of the areas of recent and/or current focus.

There are presently two major perspectives from which to view the relationship between theories of language and theories of second language acquisition: One involves claims regarding the impact of a theory of language on the development of a theory of second language learning, and the other involves claims regarding the use of second language data to test or develop a theory of language.

The first perspective, involving the impact of a linguistic theory on an acquisition theory, essentially contends that an adequate model of second language acquisition is quite impossible without a coherent theory of language, as Chomsky (1981) has argued in the case of first language acquisition research. We illustrate this position with a discussion of Universal Grammar (UG), since it is the theory most commonly applied to second language data. The fundamental claim of the first position is that characterizing the process of language acquisition is impossible without knowing what language consists of (see Chapter 1). So many of the abstract and complex properties of language cannot be determined from a mere inspection of utterances or surface sentences. The problem for acquisition is this: How do learners come to incorporate this abstract

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knowledge given that they are only exposed to surface structures? As regards child language acquisition, this problem is solved if one takes the position that these abstract principles are innate, not learned. Thus, it is assumed that children come into the world equipped with the principles necessary for language learning. The raw data to which they are exposed serve to establish the language specifics of a given abstract principle. In Chomsky's words:

> UG is taken to be the set of properties, conditions or whatever that constitute the initial state of the language learner, hence the basis on which knowledge of language develops.

For second language learners, the situation of learnability is similar, but not identical. It is clear that the evidence learners have from the input is insufficient for the appropriate determination of second language grammars. And yet there must be some explanation of why second language learners do come up with grammars that are more complex than the data they receive would warrant. It is here that researchers using the UG paradigm appeal to an explanation similar to that which has been proposed for child language acquisition: Second language learners have access to universal principles – either indirectly, through the facts of their native language, or directly, in much the same way as do child first language learners. Thus, a theory of second language acquisition must elucidate the interaction between innate linguistic principles and input so as to explain how a learner can arrive at a grammar of the target language (see, for example, the work of Flynn 1983; Liceras 1983; White 1985a, b).

A weaker version of the first position would be that linguistic theory, or a particular linguistic model, while not essential for characterizing the process of second language acquisition, provides indirect insight into the nature of the knowledge of the second language. This indirect insight may serve as only a basis of comparison between the knowledge of the language eventually gained by the first, as opposed to the second, language learner. Bley-Vroman (in press) and Schachter (1988) are among the advocates of this position.

The second perspective, involving the relation between linguistic theory and second language acquisition data, 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. The underlying assumption is that a comprehensive theory of language must account for all language systems that involve human processing mechanisms. The strong position (as seen in the work of Gass 1979; Gass and Ard 1980; Eckman, Moravcsik, and Wirth, 1983) is that 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.

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A more moderate position is that a coherent theory of language would be enhanced by evidence from second language data, although the theory itself is not intended to account for anything other than the facts of primary language acquisition and as a result cannot be falsified by second language data. Enhancement can be of many sorts. For example, second language data may shed light on the way native languages are organized (cf. Ritchie 1978; Kellerman 1979, 1983, 1987; Broselow 1988). In this vein, Kellerman has argued that the organizational structure an individual imposes on the native language is one of the factors that determines those aspects of the native language which can be transferred in a second language situation, and that knowledge of such organizational structure can only be determined from the study of second language learner strategies. Thus, by considering which aspects of one's native language are transferred in which language learning situations and which are not, one can gain insight into the ways humans organize language. Similarly, Broselow (1988), using phonological data from second language learners, contends that errors which can be argued to stem from the transfer of native language rules or principles "provide evidence for particular analyses of the native language grammar, evidence that may not be available from the study of the native language alone" (p. 295).

In another example, investigations of the ways learners handle conflicting and competing language data and the generalizations they then make can also shed light on language theory. An important difference between first and second language acquisition from the point of view of linguistic theory is that in second language acquisition, learners are confronted with the dynamic interplay of two (or more) linguistic systems. In fact, a central question of second language acquisition is concerned with the ways in which conflicting language information is ultimately resolved (see Bates et al. 1982; Gass 1986, 1987; Harrington 1987; McDonald 1987).

We expect that as the field of second language acquisition research develops, it will eventually become clear to all that the relationship between linguistic theory construction and second language acquisition research development is a symbiotic one and mutually beneficial. We believe that the authors of the articles in this volume have made significant contributions toward elucidating the benefits to be achieved.

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PART I: THEORIES OF ACQUISITION

The two chapters in this section deal with the relationship of second language acquisition to a theory of language. The first chapter, by Kevin Gregg, is concerned with general issues of that relationship, whereas the chapter by Robert Bley-Vroman takes a specific theory of language (Universal Grammar [UG]) and examines it within the context of second language learning.

Gregg's chapter looks at traditional concepts in the second language literature. Specifically, he points out that we must have a clear idea of the domain of inquiry of second language acquisition before attempting to construct a theory of it. He argues from a Chomskyan perspective that in characterizing second language knowledge, as in characterizing primary language knowledge, it is necessary to differentiate between competence and performance. Competence is the knowledge that we have about our language, knowledge which goes beyond what we produce, to include the recognition of ambiguities, ungrammatical utterances, and so forth. Thus, while as native speakers of English we know that a sentence such as "I saw the man that you met yesterday" is grammatical and are freely able to produce it, we also know that a sentence such as "I saw the man that you met him yesterday" is not standard English. Information about grammatical and ungrammatical sentences is included in what is called grammatical competence. Performance, on the other hand, refers to what we actually produce, or our linguistic behavior, and can be more closely aligned to ability. While one's performance in a second language clearly depends on one's knowledge of the second language, these two aspects of language are not identical.

Gregg claims that the domain of inquiry of second language acquisition research is to characterize the linguistic competence of second language learners. This being the case, he argues that such concepts as variability in L2 (second language) performance are beyond the scope of a theory of linguistic competence. Thus, to account for the acquisition of linguistic competence, one needs a theory of language, for we cannot understand the acquisition of something without an understanding of what that something is.

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