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The nativist perspective on second language acquisition

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Abstract

Two central questions in SLA research are (i) what are the properties of an L2 grammar that give rise to observed performance, and (ii) how does an L2 learner arrive at that grammar? Three arguments are offered to support the view that answers to these questions cannot be achieved without assuming that L2 learners have innate linguistic knowledge that determines the form their grammars take: constraints on grammars that are specifically linguistic, the non-randomness of the features that learners identify in constructing grammars, and selective persistent divergence from native speakers on properties for which there is positive evidence in the input.
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Keywords: Second language acquisition; Universal Grammar; Overt Pronoun Constraint; Article meaning; Phonemic contrast; Verbal inflection

1. Introduction

Below is a transcript of a typical fragment of speech from a second language (L2) speaker of English who was asked to describe a picture as if it were a scene outside his window:

(1)   This morning at 7 o'clock when I look out the window and I saw the woman buying cabbage on market stand next to my house. And that stand also sell potato and things like that and there are peoples.

This speaker produces a number of forms that a native speaker would probably not have produced: *look* with an apparently intended past tense meaning, but lacking the past tense inflection *–ed*; *market stand* lacking an article; *sell* lacking a 3rd person agreement *–s*; *potato*

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lacking a plural –*s*; *peoples* inflected for the plural where it is not required. Most of the other properties of this speaker's speech are target-like.

Two of the questions that any theory of SLA must answer about observations of this kind are: what is the nature of the speaker's mental grammar that would give rise to this performance? How did he arrive at this grammar? An emergentist approach to answering these questions proposes that L2 learners have mental capacities which, while not themselves 'linguistic', can extract grammatical representations from experience. Factors that are particularly relevant to such extraction in emergentist L2 learning are frequency of forms, cue competition, salience, interference and blocking (for Ellis, 2002, 2006), and conservatism, analogical generalisation, competition between forms and monitoring of indirect negative evidence (for MacWhinney, 2004). As O'Grady (this issue: 'The emergentist program') points out, the mental capacities that emergentists assume may well be innate and specific to humans (given that human language is species specific), but the main claim is that they are not specifically linguistic in nature.

A nativist approach to the two questions, in contrast, proposes that they cannot be fully answered without appeal to specific linguistic knowledge that does not appear to be available from experience and which does not look like the effect of general properties of mind. This knowledge must therefore be innate: Universal Grammar (UG). In the case of L2 acquisition there are three types of evidence (at least) that point to the need to assume innate, specifically linguistic knowledge to explain the properties of L2 speakers' mental grammars and how learners arrive at those grammars. Each is described in the remainder of this article. The observations made here are not new. They have already been made by other researchers who have arrived at the conclusion that there are aspects of second language speakers' knowledge and their acquisition of that knowledge that can only be explained by postulating that UG constrains L2 mental grammars.

2. L2 grammars are constrained by linguistic principles that cannot be derived from non-linguistic sources

A number of studies in recent years have identified UG-specific constraints on L2 grammatical knowledge that appear not to be deducible from L2 input, from a speaker's L1, from instruction or conscious learning, or from non-linguistic properties of mind. One example of this is a study of the 'Overt Pronoun Constraint' by Pérez-Leroux and Glass (1997, 1999). The Overt Pronoun Constraint (OPC) was originally proposed by Montalbetti (1984) as a putative general principle associated with binding in human language. It can be informally stated as in (2):

(2)   Where there is an alternation in a language between an overt/null pronoun, only the null pronoun can take a quantified expression as antecedent (e.g. *someone, nobody, which student*).

This can be illustrated by the following example from Spanish, a null subject language (examples from Pérez-Leroux and Glass, 1997). Given the context in (3), (4a) and (4b) are possible continuations. In (4a) a referential matrix subject is a possible antecedent for the pronominal embedded subject; in (4b) a quantified matrix subject is a possible antecedent:

(3)   Pedro$_j$ y Juan$_i$ están participando en un concurso.
             Peter and John are participating in a contest.
(4)   a.   Juan$_i$ cree que él$_{i/j}$/Ø$_{i/j}$ ganará el premio.
             John thinks that he/Ø will win the prize.