

Universal Grammar in Second Language Acquisition: Can we have our cake and eat it too?

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Is the accessibility question is the right question to ask. Here, my answer will be: No it isn't, but yes, it is.

I believe that the term "accessibility" is something which originated in the 1986 work of mine and my coworkers Sascha Felix and Georgette Ioup. When I asked for money to pay for the data collection for that study, I recall stating in the application that we would do this study (and perhaps a one or two others like it), and we would then have the answer to the access question. Indeed, I recall that Robert King, who, as Dean of our college at the University of Texas, did grant the funds for our study, was particularly impressed that the answer to such an important question with such far-reaching implications could be obtained for just a few hundred dollars. He was, after all used to applications from other fields for studies which cost many thousands and which could give answers to only tiny pieces to big puzzles. Well, as you know, the "accessibility" question was not easy to answer. In a way, this is because it has not turned out to be the right question, for two main reasons. First, our conceptualization of language development itself and of UG has changed. Second, if the alternatives to UG are taken seriously, as they must

be, not only for logical reasons but also because the general macroscopic character of the phenomenon makes them seem initially plausible (as we see in the quote in Chomsky's suggestion that learning a second language is like learning pole vaulting), then the possibilities begin to multiply and extend to many as yet poorly understood areas of human cognition. And here, too, changes in the conceptualization of language has affected the interpretation of the alternatives.

First, the metaphor of "access" suggests that native language development is some sort of "figuring out" task: you are given data and have to "figure out" a grammar. UG is a source of information useful in this task. Indeed, if you have "access" to this crucial information, you will succeed in this task, but without it you cannot. Young children learning their native language have this "access," while adults learning a foreign language may or may not have access. So, learning the grammar is a task, and UG is a tool. A workman with good tools gets good results, one with bad tools gets bad results. We can look at the results and see whether the appropriate tools were used. This information-source conception of UG and the task conception of acquisition were quite pervasive in earlier linguistic theory. One sees it in statements of Chomsky and others.

But, the task-and-tool metaphor is now felt to be simplistic or just wrong. Largely, this is because language development is being thought of in the same way as other developmental processes. We do not conceive of the infant as being confronted with the "task" of figuring out a way to recognize faces, or of figuring out how to walk. Language development, like development of facial recognition or bipedal gait is not something you DO, but something that happens to you. Again, refer to the Chomsky quote which Jürgen showed us yesterday. Development is unaccusative, not unergative. By the way, at this level, connectionists and generative linguists actually share a common view. So, the access question was hard to answer because it was based on the wrong conception of acquisition.

The second reason why the "access" question was not easy to answer as formulated is the

complexity of the other sources of "information" are available to adults.

As an example of the complexity of alternatives: in my original FDH paper, I suggested that the L1 knowledge might play a part in two distinct ways: both through "expectations" about the L2 based on the observable superficial structural patterns in the L1, and also through the mental "representation of the L1 grammar" itself. This idea that the starting place for the L2 grammar might be the "mental representation of L1 grammar" is similar to current "full transfer" views within theories which hold "full access"-- though, of course, such full-access views do not have a place for expectations based on cognitive analysis superficial L1 structures. I further said that UG itself has two functions in the L1: first, as a means by which the grammar was constructed, and second, as a set of principles which "control its day-to-day operation" (as I put it in now-outdated language). I proposed that, within the framework of the FDH, principles of this latter type (or having this latter function) would indeed "be accessible to foreign language learning or even operate directly on the foreign language grammar".

Also, ten years ago, I, like many others, considered that the mental representation of the grammar might possibly be "compiled out" or "proceduralized" into a set of rules of some sort, and the nature and degree of this compilation was itself unclear. Perhaps, we thought, L1 knowledge consisted, in part, of a set of objects like phrase structure rules, or even structure specific transformations, which might, in effect, form an L1 construction inventory which could be accessed in L2A, which would preserve, as a kind of palimpsest, a record of the moving hand of UG in its construction, thus giving a kind of a pale imitation of UG in SLA. Add to these complexities the availability of the poorly understood mechanisms like "analogy" which are thought to operate in general human cognition and even within language, if Chomsky's conjectures about the periphery are taken seriously.

So, even at the time, though many interesting particular questions could be asked about UG in SLA (and UG in the representation of native language knowledge), the single big question "is there access to UG" was essentially unanswerable in that simple form.

But, recently, as our concept of linguistic knowledge has moved toward minimalism, the original formulation of the alternatives itself seems to be incorrect, even taking into account its full original subtlety. The distinction between access to UG in the acquisition of a grammar vs. UG's ongoing use in regulating the grammar is now unclear. Even the distinction between constraints and learning procedures is becoming blurred. And, the idea that the mental representation of a grammar might (eventually) consist of a set of constructions (whether "compiled out" or not) is explicitly rejected by all researchers in the now-dominant linguistic research program. Thus, the question of whether a foreign language learner might come to a such a set of constructions (a perhaps an "incorrect" set) by some other route is very hard to pose coherently.

Finally, notions like "impairment" and "partial access" have further blurred the issues, requiring even UG-based theories to have some alternative mechanisms of acquisition when the strong deductive mechanisms of UG fail.

So, is UG access a good question now? Was it ever? No, definitely not. Too simplistic to do justice to the complexity of the issues and the alternatives. And now, anachronistic in its conception of language as well.

And yet...

One way to judge whether a question is the right one is to ask whether it makes coherent sense. That's what I've been asking so far. Another way is to ask whether asking the question is productive. { In linguistics, we used to ask about rule ordering on the assembly-line of transformations. That, we now see, is not the right question. It's not even a storable issue these days., Yet, it was the right question, and had it not been asked we would have been nowhere near as far as we are today. The present questions are also the wrong questions, but, we hope,

also the right questions. }

So has UG accessibility been the right question, in the sense of productivity and advancement of knowledge? Unquestionably yes. UG access has turned out to be a great question. It has led to a tremendous flood of research, we have knowledge of second language acquisition today which we could not dreamed of having ten years ago, and this is largely because we asked the access question. I will not review this body of impressive achievement. If you're in this audience, you know about it. And, it has had implications well beyond the narrow confines of the UG in-crowd.

And, I think we should still be asking it, but instead of, or as well as keeping the big question in mind, we should concentrate on more manageable sub-issues which will eventually illuminate the big picture.

To do this, let me put the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis in a positive way, saying what foreign language learning is rather than what it is not. First, foreign language learning is characterized by piecemeal, construction-by-construction or pattern-by-pattern acquisition rather than being based on UG-deductive processes. Second, it is based on the first language and on the second language input. Third, it also makes use of processes which are, in effect, outside the language module.

From this perspective, what does one need to make the access question more precise?

On the first point. Construction-by-construction learning. In the first instance we need theoretical work: a way to reconstruct the notion of construction within current theory. We need this even if foreign language learning *_ever_* is inductive and construction-by-construction (for example in a theory in which an impairment in the central deductive system would make ordinary syntactic development impossible or a theory in which the inability to reset an incorrectly reset parameter might then cause the recruitment of such mechanisms). Defining construction in a the context of a linguistic theory in which the notion explicitly rejected is not

easy. But only if we have it does it make sense to entertain the idea of construction-by-construction acquisition while maintaining the idea that a foreign language is somehow language. Three approaches have suggested themselves: one is to assimilate the notion of construction to whatever device is necessary to describe truly "peripheral" structures ("Long live the king!"). Another is to somehow recruit the mechanisms which can learn prescriptive rules, as suggested by Beck. Yet another is to import wholesale an alternative grammatical theory, such as that of Construction Grammar and then conceive of a grammar as licensing a set of constructions rather than as licensing a set of derivations.

Second, we need to continue to pursue the question of clustering and deductive learning, that is, acquisition which is not construction-by-construction. Does it happen? Under what circumstances?

Third, at least we who think construction-by-construction acquisition is the primary mode of L2 learning need to continue work in investigating particular structures. It makes perfect sense to ask: what about the constraints on the dative? What about the passive? What about pseudoclefts? What about multiple wh-questions? Of course, this type of research is already the focus of much that goes on, both within and outside the UG camp.

Fourth. The position of the native language. This must remain a focus, obviously. And it will, since at least several hold that the representation of the L1 grammar is the starting point for SLA.

Fifth, we should continue to ask about knowledge of subtle properties of the target language which are clearly underdetermined by the input can be attained by L2ers. This has resulted in some of the most fascinating research among all that inspired by the access question.

Sixth, we need more work on the effect of explicit positive evidence and of explicit negative evidence. It is hard to overestimate the importance of the adverb studies of White and her colleagues, which have made ripples way outside our own little corner of the lake.

The seventh point is closely related to the sixth. We must take much more seriously the consequences of the theses of modularity and of encapsulation. Bonnie Schwartz has urged this point often, but, alas, to little effect. The fact is that many obvious proposals for an account of foreign language learning, even those within a UG framework, propose things which in effect deny at least the strongest versions of modularity and encapsulation. What are the philosophical and empirical consequences of such moves? Here, we are also at the interface UG-inspired research and research on the more general cognitivist and "applied" side, where the much-debated learning-acquisition distinction and the increasing interest in attention, understanding, and the effect of instruction mirror questions of modularity and encapsulation.

Finally, let me just make a plea to remember that any adequate theory of foreign language learning must take seriously the problem of variable outcome and frequent cases of what we informally call failure. This is at least part of the logical problem of foreign language learning.

[handout]

Why UG access is NOT the right question.

- Task-and-tool view of language learning is wrong. Child language development unaccusative, not unergative. It happens to us, we do not do it.
- Alternatives to UG must be taken seriously, but the alternatives are complex and poorly understood; and early statements of them are based on an outmoded conceptualization of language.

Why UG access IS the right question.

- It is immensely productive. By asking it and by keeping it always active, we have a coherent research paradigm which produces quantities of important results, though it does not provide an answer to the question.

Areas to investigate, keeping the Big Question in mind.

1. **Construction-by-construction acquisition** needs a theoretical basis, situating it in Language.
 - a. Periphery
 - b. Viruses
 - c. The objects licensed.
2. **Deductive learning, clustering.**
3. Acquisition of **particular constructions**
4. Position of **native language**, nature of transfer
5. Manipulation of evidence including explicit **instruction** and **negative evidence**, investigation on input structure (including **corpus analysis**)
6. **Underdetermination**
7. Implications of **modularity** and encapsulation
8. The macroscopic picture: **variability and lack of "success"**