LINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE LEARNING: THE UNIVERSAL APPROACH

1. INTRODUCTION

Typological universals → study of the world's languages to find common features, e.g. word order → surface structure → are identified *externally* → describe linguistic performance

Universal grammar a set of highly abstract linguistic principles, which exist in the mind, e.g. movement of constituents → is viewed *internally* → theory of linguistic competence

2. TYPOLOGICAL UNIVERSALS AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

2.1. Linguistic typology and language universals

Cross linguistic comparison of specific features such as articles, relative clause constructions, etc.:

- **Absolute universals:** Features present in all languages
- **Frequency universals:** A feature found in a large number of languages, but be missing form some
- **Implicational universals:** The presence of one feature implies the presence of another or others

A fundamental concept, underlying much grammatical work in typology is markedness, e.g., *a/an*. In general, however, markedness has been considered in terms of implicational universals:

> A structure X is typologically marked relative to another structure, Y, if every language that has X also had Y, but every language that has Y does not necessarily have X.

For example:

people [who lend their cars to friends for dates]
cars [which people lend to friends for dates]
friends [who people lend their cars (to) for dates]
dates [which people lend their cars to friends for]

These types of clauses could be arranged in a hierarchy:

1 2 3 4
Subject < object < indirect object < other prepositional objects

2.2. The role of typological universals in SLA

To what extent do the constraints that govern natural languages also govern learner language systems?

Learners seem to find it easier to acquire typologically unmarked structures than typologically marked structures.

3. AIMS OF LINGUISTIC RESEARCH

3.1. What constitutes knowledge of language?

Linguistic theory aims to describe the mental representations of language that are stored in the human mind (**explanatory adequacy**)

GOVERNMENT AND BINDING THEORY

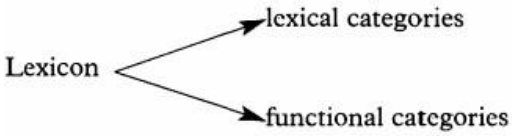
principles → unvarying and apply to all natural languages; have to be learnt

parameters → a limited number of open values which characterize differences between languages

MINIMALIST PROGRAM (Chomsky, 1995)

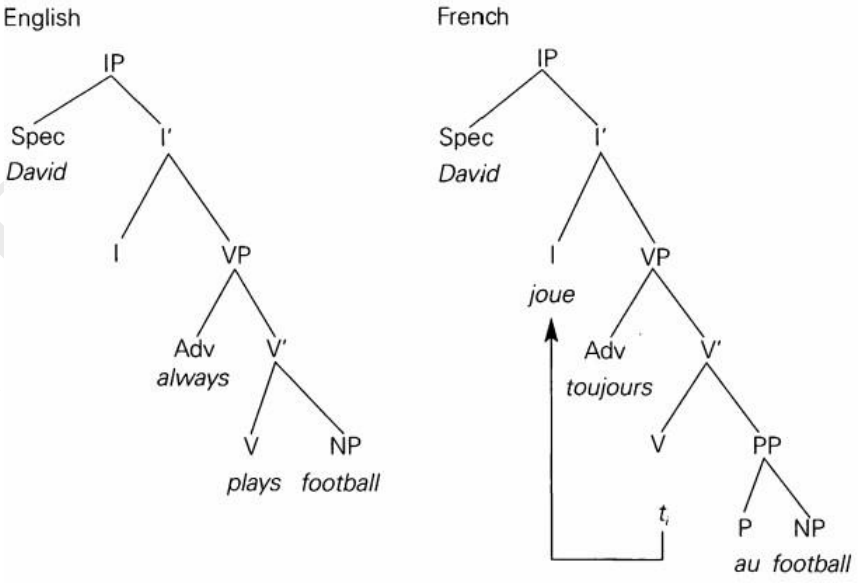
a **computational procedure** which is invariant across languages → includes abstract principles

a **lexicon** (the word store) which consists of lexical and functional categories



→ parameters is contained within the lexicon, primarily within functional categories ➔ the lexical parameterization hypothesis

e.g., features associated with functional categories can be either weak or strong:



Chomsky: a language is not a system of rules, but the identification of which syntactic categories are required in the L2 and specifications for parameters

White (2003): cross-linguistic variation:

- Which functional categories are realized in the grammar → Det in Japanese
- Features of a particular functional category can vary from language to language → DP in

English, French

- Features vary in strength → *Infl* in English and French

The Minimalist Program & telegraphic nature of children early utterances:

- **(Strong) continuity hypothesis:** children have all the functional categories (e.g., IP, CP) intact from the beginning but are not in evidence (i.e., null realization)
- **Weak continuity hypothesis:** children build their grammar gradually as they learn the lexicon of their language and project the relevant structure
- **Maturation hypothesis:** functional categories mature over time, that is, come 'on line' at specific ages

3.2. How is knowledge of language acquired?

Logical problem of language learning → on the basis of messy input, children create a mental representation of language which not only goes beyond the input they are exposed to, but is also strikingly similar to that of other native speakers of the same language variety → UG

L2 learners, too, are faced with the problem of having to construct a grammar based on limited input:

- **UG does not constrain L2 grammars:** L2 grammars are fundamentally different from L1 grammars because they are not constrained any longer by UG → resort to general learning mechanisms → 'wild' grammars
- **Second language grammars are constrained by UG:** L2 is one example of a natural language → constrained by UG in the same way as native grammars are
- **UG is impaired:** only the principles and parameters activated in the learners' L1 will be available → parameter resetting is impossible

3.3. How is knowledge of language put to use?

Performance → the domain of a theory of language use, in which linguistic competence is only one aspect, and psycholinguistic factors such as the brain's information-processing capacity also come into play.

4. UG AND L2 ACQUISITION

Whether UG is available to L2 learners or not (**access-to-UG problem**) → which sub-components of UG might be available or not to the L2 learner (**initial state**)

4.1. Hypothesis 1: No Access to UG

There is a critical period for language acquisition during children's early development → Adult L2 learners resort to other learning mechanisms ; **Fundamental Difference Hypothesis** (FDH):

- Fossilization is frequently observed in case of L2 learning.
- Equipotentiality expresses children are capable of learning any language.

4.2. Hypothesis 2: Full Access to UG

The whole of UG is available to second language learners, in the same way as it is to L1 learners; L2 is one example of a natural language → it is constrained by UG

4.2.1. Full access/no transfer

There is no such thing as a critical period after which UG ceases to operate → learners should be able to reach the same level of competence as native speakers
If there are differences, they are performance-related rather than competence-related;
There is a disconnection between the L1 and the developing L2 grammar → the starting point is UG and nothing is transferred from L1

4.2.2. (Full transfer)/full access

L2 learners are thought to transfer all the parameter-settings from their L1 in an initial stage → revise their hypotheses when the L2 fails to conform to these L1 settings
➔ UG is accessed via the first language in a first stage, and directly thereafter when the L2 input cannot be accommodated within L1 setting

4.2.3. Full access/impaired early representations

Learners can reset parameters to the L2 values, but initially, *learners are lacking functional categories altogether*

Minimal Trees → both L1 and UG are available concurrently. However, only lexical categories are transferred from the L1 → Functional categories develop later in response to L2 input (not L1)
Valueless Features → both lexical and functional categories are transferred early on from L1 BUT functional categories lack values such as feature strength and are present as syntactic markers only

4.3. Hypothesis 3: Partial Access

L2 grammars are constrained by UG but some parts of it are not available any longer, e.g., functional features that are not realized in the first language cannot be acquired

4.3.1. No parameter resetting

Learners only have access to UG via their L1: they have already accessed the range of principles applying to their first language and set parameters to the L1 values → if the L2 possesses parameter settings that are different, they will have to resort to other mechanisms

Schachter is also a supporter of the *indirect access hypothesis*, which she combines with the notion of a critical period for L2 acquisition:

there is a critical period for the successful acquisition of L2 principles and parameter settings, if these have not been operative in the learner's L1. Schachter calls this critical period a *Window of Opportunity*

4.3.2. Impaired functional features = The failed functional features hypothesis = representational deficit hypothesis = the interpretability hypothesis

Not all parameter settings will be available to learners → uninterpretable functional features cannot be reset in the L2