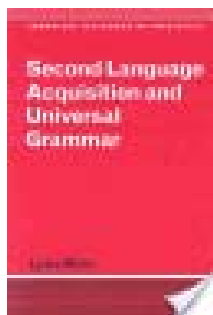# Book Reviews

Second Language Acquisition and Universal Grammar

By Lydia White (2003). Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics Series.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Paperback ISBN: 9780521796477, pp. 316.

Reviewed by: Pritha Chandra

Lydia White's book is on interlanguage grammars (ILGs) and the mechanisms used by second language learners in acquiring them. The concept of an ILG first came up in the 1970s. Researchers commonly held that ILGs are systematic, with 'errors', that on closer probe, turn out not to be random mistakes but rule-governed behavior. Therefore, while they appear to be beset by faults, these languages have grammars just like other adult grammars. The second language (L2) speakers using them therefore have complex linguistic systems underlying their linguistic competence.

White takes the debate surrounding interlanguage or L2 grammar representations a little further. She suggests that ILGs are constrained by the principles and parameters of a Universal Grammar (UG). The principles and parameters model of grammar (Chomsky, 1981) builds on the premise that there is a specialized module of human language in the brain of every normal infant. This module comprises a UG with inbuilt invariant principles (the requirement that lexical information of individual words must not be lost while building structures using them, more popularly known as the 'Projection Principle')

and parameters to allow variation between natural languages (the 'Verb-Complement Parameter' that allows languages to either have their objects to the right of the verb or to its left). These principles and parameters have for long been argued to shape the linguistic competence of native speakers of first languages (L1); they give the speakers the ability to build grammars in the face of impoverished input data in a surprisingly short duration, and without much explicit instruction. Not surprisingly, research into L2 acquisition has also largely been directed by the objective of investigating whether or not UG mechanisms are at play in this domain. A second question concerns the extent of L1 grammar mediation in learning the target L2. Since L2 learners already possess the grammar of at least one adult language, it presents the potential risk of intervention in the target (L2) language.

The literature, as many second language researchers point out, is often unclear between the roles given to UG and Language Acquisition Device (LAD) in shaping linguistic competence. As White very succinctly points out, UG is a theory relevant to the issue of linguistic competence, i.e., it is a theory on the nature of grammatical representations. It provides a hypothesis space for grammars, i.e., it constrains possible grammars in the course of acquisition. However, it is not a theory of acquisition. Unfortunately, many researchers incorrectly assume it to be an equivalent to LAD. In actuality, however, it is more appropriate to think of UG as just a part of an LDA or as a part of a language faculty. For language acquisition in general, and L2 acquisition in particular, we therefore do not just require a theory of constraints on IL representations, but also a

theory of development that would tell us how those representations are acquired.

As for the role of UG, there is a lot of work on whether parameters are at use in L2 acquisition, as for instance the research into head position or the pro-drop phenomenon (i.e., subject-less constructions) by White herself. There are broadly three approaches in this regard. The first is the 'parameter (re)setting' approach, where researchers probe for instances of parameter (re)setting in ILGs, with a certain parameter depicting an early stage L1 value and a later stage L2 value, with relevant clustering of properties. The main idea of these works is that while L1 settings prevail initially, subsequently they change into L2 settings. Then there is the 'no parameter resetting' hypothesis which states that L2 grammars are UG constrained, and fail to reset parameters. According to yet another approach, L2 settings are attainable without prior adoption of L1 settings.

White's work is a defense of the significant role that UG plays in the formation of ILGs. She illustrates with several 'poverty of stimulus' cases, where the phenomena in question are underdetermined by the L2 input and cannot be easily inferred by looking at frequency effects, or learned on the basis of instruction, analogical reasoning etc. It is also explicitly suggested that the phenomena under study work differently in the L1 and L2 domains. The subtle and abstract knowledge that L2 learners display is therefore not due to the knowledge of the L1 grammar alone.

It has previously been pointed out in Bley-Vroman's influential 1983 paper that "work on the linguistic description of learners' languages can be seriously hindered or sidetracked by a concern with the target language" (p. 2) and that "learner's system is worthy of study in its own right, not just as a degenerate form of the target system" (p. 4). Therefore, several UG/

SLA researchers, White included, emphasize on the need to consider ILGs as a separate arena of study. In more explicit terms, this amounts to considering whether ILGs are natural language systems, instead of merely comparing L2 learners to native speakers of the L2. Researchers have variously tried to argue that if the focus in on properties of the ILGs, one may arrive at interesting results that show that L2 learners arrive at grammars that account for the L2 input (though not in the same way as the grammar of the native speaker). The questions, then, are (a) whether the ILG is a 'possible grammar' and (b) how learners arrive at these grammars in the face of impoverished data. Some researchers argue that L2 learners arrive at their target grammars using a completely different set of analyses than L1 speakers of the same language. To illustrate, while learning how to form questions, they do not use displacement of the wh-phrases, instead opting for a base-generated analysis for them. L2 learners, according to these authors, thus choose very different learning mechanisms from the ones chosen by L1 speakers.

In sum, White's work is a defense of a nativist account for L2 learning. It is a very clear exposition of theoretical assumptions and novel empirical evidence indicating the significant role of innate mechanisms in language learning. In recent years, a number of alternatives have been proposed in opposition to Chomsky's 'representational nativism, commonly known as 'emergentism' (see O'Grady 2010 for a comprehensive survey). Contemporary emergentism often tries to explain linguistic development by reference to the operation of simple mechanisms (essentially inductive generalizations) that extract statistical regularities from experience. White, while endorsing the view that language acquisition mechanisms are not limited to innate biological principles, shows us how UG based studies can lead us to a better understanding of language

learning. She also makes a very strong case for why ILGs should be studied in their own right, instead of relating them to the adult native grammars of the same languages. This study can therefore be considered as a landmark in the study of L2 learning.

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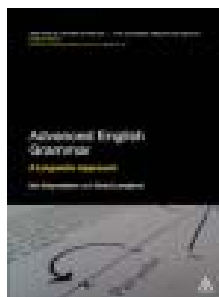
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Advanced English Grammar

By Ilse Depraetere & Chad Langford (2012).

New Delhi: Bloomsbury

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Reviewed by: Bidisha Som

Learning and teaching language as a cognitive activity has been part of most literate societies since ancient times. The debate about the correct method of teaching language is also old, perhaps starting with the Greeks (Horrocks, 2010). The modern world has seen various waves of theories regarding language teaching methods, the most traditional among them being the grammar translation method. The book, "Advanced English Grammar: A Linguistic Approach" is the fruit of labour of two experienced teachers of English language who have tried to bridge the gap between traditional method of teaching English, and a thoroughly linguistic analysis of language. This was an effort to make clear to the students "that there is a logical system underlying the rules they were learning by rote memory", which is apt for the target population of this book, namely advanced learners of English.

The book is neatly laid out in six chapters. After discussing the primary notions of various grammatical forms and functions in the first chapter, the authors move on to describe the important notions in English grammar from a linguistic analysis vantage point. An important aspect of the design and choice of topics in this book is that it discusses the relevant notions of language structure that will help the student better grasp the concept rather than burden them with linguistic theories and terminologies. The chapter on 'Verb and its Compliments' addresses some main basic notions of verb morphology in the language, including the classification of verbs into lexical and auxiliary verbs, and the passive and complement structure of verbs. 'Nouns and the Noun Phrase' (or the noun morphology) covers the expected ground of modifiers, determiners and subject-verb agreement. The treatment of the 'genitives and possessive determiners' in this section is a welcome surprise, and has been dealt with clearly and with adequate examples. 'Tense and aspect' is discussed in a separate chapter in great detail. A significant aspect of this chapter is that the