

Book Reviews

Second Language Acquisition and Universal Grammar

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

Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press.

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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 is 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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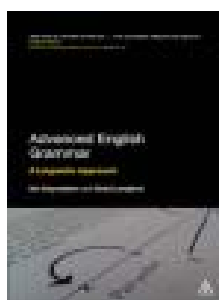
Advanced English Grammar

By Ilse Depraetere & Chad Langford (2012).

New Delhi: Bloomsbury

ISBN: 1441149317, 9781441149312, pp. 376

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

authors take care to show the relationship between time and tense, and the different type of mapping possible between them, such as present tense to talk about future time etc. In a clear departure from traditional approaches, the book aims to teach the students that “choice of tense... follows from a few basic generalizations related to how time is perceived in English”, referring to the underlying perceptual factors responsible for language structures. ‘Modals and Modality’ is a detailed chapter; it discusses the different ways to use modal verbs to communicate either epistemic or non-epistemic meaning. The discussion brings out the equation of modal meaning with respect to temporal reference and aspectual distinctions, thus creating a holistic picture of the rules governing the function of verbs in this language. The last chapter on discourse is short and crisp. At the end of the chapters, there are exercises on each chapter, which is of great use to the language teacher as these exercises can be used in classroom teaching as well as by the students themselves to sharpen their skills.

On the whole, this is a very welcome book that fills a gap between traditional grammar approach and pure linguistics analysis, and is written in a style that steers clear of the intimidating prose of linguistic analysis and the prescriptive nature of traditional grammar. It is perhaps because of the long teaching experience of the authors that there is a conversational attitude in the writing that can be expected to be student-friendly. Though the book is primarily addressed to the non-native learners of advanced level English, it could also prove useful for the native speakers as a reference book, owing to the systematic analysis of the underlying rules of the language. The idea of a nagging necessity of teaching language through linguistic theories is not entirely new, and books with this approach have been fruitfully engaged to fill the gaps (Wardhaugh, 2002). All in all, this book provides the readers with a refreshing viewpoint of the traditional method of teaching English and a linguistic

analysis of language. In addition, there is companion website to accompany the book, from where users can download resources.

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Masti Ki Paathshala (in Hindi)

By Kamalanand Jha (2009).

New Delhi: Publication Department, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.

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Reviewed by: Parmanand Jha

Stephen Spender, the celebrated British poet, in his famous poem, ‘An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum’, portrays, with down to earth realism, the depressing faces of school children confined within the four walls of the school classroom. On the room wall are the pictures of Shakespeare, the Tyrol Valley and a map of the world—all far removed from the interests and concerns of the children coming from a socially and economically backward background, and whose world is represented by

the foggy world of slums. Spender concludes the poem, emphasizing that education should help these children re-establish contact with nature and life. Kamalanand Jha's *Masti Ki Paathshala* not only vindicates Spender's views to a considerable extent, but further examines various issues and concerns underlying school education in India. Based on the personal experience of Jha's stint as a school teacher, and his findings as a research scholar at JNU, the book covers all the aspects of teaching school children. The fourteen chapters of the book, divided equally into two parts, have a nice introduction. The first part focuses on issues such as the relevance and role of course books, question-oriented education, self-image of teachers and students, cultural context of modern education and the role of children's magazines. The second part of the book examines the challenges and relevance of homework, and suggests interesting methods of teaching poetry, story, drama, essay, social sciences and grammar.

Course-Books, Jha believes, are fundamental to teaching but they should be child-oriented; related to children's lives and backgrounds; completely free from communal, political or sectarian biases; and be taught by trained and competent teachers who understand the psychology of children and rise above class and caste contempt. Jha's concern for a proper training for teachers so that they may create targeted support programs in schools for children coming from underprivileged backgrounds stands vindicated by a recent survey conducted among more than a lakh of class 5 students in 6602 schools across India under the aegis of NCERT. "After fairly exhaustive questions in Mathematics, Environmental studies and language, it was found that the performance of students from scheduled caste and scheduled tribe backgrounds was rather worse than that of students occupying the general seats." (The Telegraph, 14 September. 2012).

Jha favors attempts to encourage inquisitiveness in children rather than disciplining them into silence. In one of the chapters, *Aadhunik Shiksha ka Nachiketa*, Jha frankly admits that education for children has become a source of boredom in place of an interesting and delightful activity. When scoring marks becomes the be-all and end-all, the whole purpose of imparting education is reduced to an exercise in futility. Jha's views are fully corroborated if one reads Anil Thakkar's remarkable defense of the poor performance of Indian students in the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) on the grounds "that a standardized test can produce any sort of objective picture of students' abilities is a ridiculous proposition." (Times of India: Counter View, 7 September 2012).

Cultural disconnect, according to Jha, has led to a gnawing gap between tradition and modernity—the biggest irony of modern education. Only by striking a balance between traditional and the modern strategies of teaching can we make our education meaningful and relevant. Jha mentions educationists such as Gijubhai Badheka, Prakash Chandra Shukla, Anil Sadgopal, Krishna Kumar and Rama Kant Agnihotri, whose contributions to the field of education have been significant and have generated fruitful debates and discussions all over the country. Books authored by them have helped tremendously in honing the skills of teachers. Jha suggests three specific magazines (*Eklavya* from Bhopal, and *Primary Shishak* and *Bharatiya Aadhunik Shiksha* by NCERT) that may improve the standards of teaching substantially. The last chapter of the book condemns banning of books or portions thereof due to vested interests, and strongly advocates a shift of marginalized materials to the centre.

Part 2 of the book begins with a realistic account of the challenges faced in the teaching of Social Sciences, and offers strategies to handle them. History teaching, Jha holds, requires objectivity

and impartiality on the part of teachers who must also have a historical insight. Geography and Civics can be made more interesting by relating them to the children's 'immediate surroundings, and through group activities and team work. While assigning homework, the teacher must take note of the different levels of students in the same class. The next five chapters explore innovative methods to make the teaching of poetry, short story, drama, essay and grammar more interesting and delightful. Traditional methods of teaching these genres have also been critically examined. Jha concludes by asserting that many of the old methods need to be dispensed with in favour of new ones which make the students stay connected and enjoy what they read.

Masti ki Paathshala is indeed a seminal work, which presupposes that education grows out of, and is impacted by the socio-economic-cultural environment. Education, as Stephen Spender says, should instill in students the spirit of freedom and enjoyment. Jha wants to add the elements of fun and frolic in the teaching methodology so that we allow children to retain their childhood and learn the lessons simultaneously.

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