

# Conservative Pattern Accumulation in Foreign Language Learning

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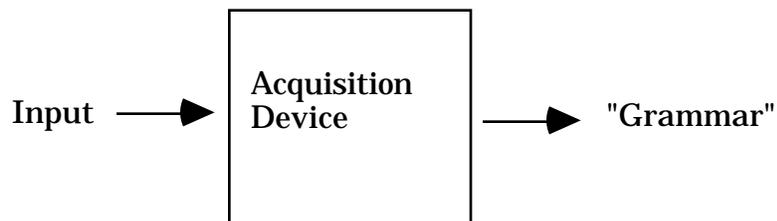
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## 1. Introduction



### Desirable features of acquisition theory:

#### For child language development:

- i. guaranteed success (under ordinary circumstances)
- ii. little room for variability in outcome
- iii. little place of input structure (correction, frequency, etc.)

#### For SLA:

- i. no guarantee of success
- ii. accommodation of variability, including near-natives
- iii. compatibility with our increasing knowledge of
  - (a) input/task structure
  - (b) attention/motivation

### Suspicious facts about foreign language learning:

Clustering failure

“Stage seepage” / optionality

Difficulty in showing “triggering”

Difficulty in acquiring “subtle facts” about constructions

“The adult relies on the native language to provide a general idea of what language is like and proceeds by accumulating peripheral facts, rather than by setting parameters and deducing consequences. The end result can be a system of knowledge which, while weakly equivalent to the native language grammar in certain areas, has a quite different origin and, presumably, a different psychological status.” [emphasis added] Bley-Vroman 1991, p. 42

## 2. Pattern acquisition

- Syntactic patterns are phrase structures: configuration of (sub)categories.
- The initially available attributes for defining categories come from either:
  - The native language
  - The L2 input
  - [Other sources (instruction, earlier language experience, etc.)]
 This (rather than UG) is the major constraint on the system.
- A given element is both an instance of a category and one or more subcategories;
  - man* is a noun, a common noun, etc.
  - admired the anteater* is VP, a finite VP, a past tense VP, an *admire*-VP.
  - besuchte der Mann seinen Freund* is both a S and an  $S_{inv}$ .
  - Gestern besuchte der Mann seinen Freund* is an instance of both patterns:
    - Adv S
    - Adv  $S_{inv}$
- Since two patterns can be true of the same input, two patterns can coexist, perhaps with varying strengths.
- Categorization depends on noticing (and, perhaps, on understanding).
- Since noticing is important, there will be frequency and salience effects. Different learners will notice different things. Input will have a much greater effect than in child language development.
- As an instance of human categorization, we may expect the usual categorization phenomena—for example, basic levels and prototypes.
- Deductive relationships (as given by UG) among patterns or from (abstract or concrete morphological) features to patterns do not exist.
- Relationships among patterns may be registered (perhaps like GPSG metarules). A metarule may relate, for example,  $S_{inv}$  and  $S_{uninverted}$ .
- Pattern acquisition is in general conservative. Patterns are not acquired which have not been encountered. (But human whimsy and perversity also exist.)
- (In the spirit of conservatism), if two patterns are both compatible with the input, the more specific pattern receives the stronger reinforcement.
- Many cases of UG-based constraints on extraction can be handled by conservative pattern acquisition. This requires the ability to notice “holes”, represented, say, as slash-categories. No NP/NP pattern like *NP and \_\_* is observed in the input. The pattern relative clause (“B-rel”) can consist of *that* + S/NP, but no additional hole is formed at the B-rel level. (This depends on a particular analysis of relatives.) The *that*-trace effect is very hard to learn.

### 3. Situating pattern acquisition in linguistics and applied linguistics.

#### A. Language as Patterns: The view of Charles C. Fries.

- Pattern: a two-part concept
  1. An arrangement of form classes, signalling
  2. A particular structural meaning

*I ate fish* and *I ate well* are not the same pattern.  
*John is easy to please* and *John is eager to please*  
 would not be not the same pattern.
- View of second language learning
 

What is being learned:  
 An inventory of patterns: arrangements of words with their associated structural meanings.

How SLA works (should work):  
 Not a theory of child language development:  
 “It is a mistake to think that mere listening to a language is enough for anyone but a child to learn it.” (Robert Lado, in Fries & Lado 1958, p. xv)
- Methodological proposal.
  1. The pattern is presented. Attention is drawn to its salient features. (using the words “Observe” or “Notice”). “Observe the position of TO and ME.” This results in “understanding”. Examples are given.
  2. The structural meaning of the pattern is made “habitual” through exercises in which the vocabulary is varied, but the pattern remains constant.

#### B. Construction-specific syntax and semantics: "special constructions"

*Long live the king!*

##### Construction grammar

Examples from Fillmore, Kay, and O’Connell (1988)

Formal idioms.

(vs. substantive idioms)

Syntax is unique: it is also hard to assimilate it to the general “core” of English sentences. Need a “conventional pairing of structure and meaning”, which is specific to the construction (though not “unmotivated”.)

- a. **The bigger the better.**  
**The** more carefully you do your work, **the** easier it will get.
- b. Jane and Mary are **third cousins three times removed**.
- c. I barely got up in time to eat lunch, **let alone** cook breakfast.  
 (cf. also German *geschweige denn*)

From Fillmore et al.'s conclusions:

It appears to us that the machinery needed for describing the so-called minor or peripheral construction...will have to be powerful enough to be generalized to more familiar structures, in particular those represented by individual phrase structure rules.

### **Construction-specific semantics of “ordinary” sentences.**

(Examples from Goldberg 1995; often basing her discussion on earlier work: Jackendoff, Lakoff, Pinker, etc.)

#### Ditransitives

I tossed John the ball.

\*I pushed John the ball.

\*I drove Chicago the car.

#### The caused-motion construction

Pat heaped mashed potatoes onto her plate.

(Pat heaped her plate with mashed potatoes.)

\*Pat heaped mash potatoes.

?\*Pat heaped her plate.

\*The mashed potatoes heaped onto her plate.

#### Resultatives

I brushed my hair very smooth.

He roared himself hoarse.

\*He talked hoarse.

The river froze solid.

\*The river froze itself solid.

#### The way construction.

He dug his way out of prison.

\*Frank dug his way out of prison but he hasn't gone yet.

\*?She ran her way to New York.

#### Other cases of particular conventional pragmatics/discourse function

Why don't we go to the movies?

Don't you want to go to the movies?

What John dislikes most is shaving himself.

**Conclusion:** The grammar licenses individual constructions by virtue of general rules (learned, arguably, with principles-and-parameters techniques). But individual constructions also have particular properties. It must be possible for speakers to “break out” individual constructions and assign meanings/pragmatics/discourse functions to them.

• **Core and periphery: the concepts of the Chomsky school**

Chomsky argues that not all of language need to be accounted for by the theory of principles and parameters. Some things are idiosyncratic facts of the language and do not necessarily conform to the general patterns. However, workers in generative grammar have not typically been interested in peripheral constructions and have avoided irreducible peripherality wherever possible.

Still, Chomsky observes about the periphery:

"...outside of the domain of core grammar we do not expect to find chaos. Marked structures have to be learned on the basis of slender evidence too, so there should be further structure to the system outside of core grammar." Chomsky LGB p. 8.

The syntax of *not* and of *do*-support as peripheral

**Baker** (1991) proposes that the English periphery contains the following stipulated parts:

- a. A "special-purpose verb phrase headed by *do*."
- b. Modals, *have* and *be* can use the general-purpose phrase as the special purpose phrase
- c. There is a rule moving finite verbs obligatorily to the left of *not* and this rule requires a special-purpose verb phrase.
- d. Unstressed finite (auxiliaries) move to the left-periphery of their phrases

"English is an Infl-lowering language, pure and simple, and that those English phenomena which mimic the core of French are to be accounted for not by core grammar, but by rules of the periphery."  
p. 428

The core of language is generated by a system given by UG and learned (in childhood) via some principles-and-parameters device

Nevertheless, we have construction-specific knowledge. The constructions may be provided by core grammar. Construction-specific knowledge can be very subtle, and presumably some aspect of the language faculty permits these subtle aspects to be learned.

There are also peripheral constructions, and the language faculty must have a way of representing them and of acquiring them.

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