

SOME ASPECTS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LINGUISTIC THEORY AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

José M. Martín Morillas
Universidad de Granada

The field of Second Language Acquisition (henceforth 2LA) is currently in turmoil. Never before had there been such a proliferation of theories, hypotheses and emergent paradigms as we see nowadays (Cfr. McLaughlin, 1980; 1987). Even areas of research which had lain fallow for years have received new impetus under new theoretical frameworks, such as the advent of the theory of Universal Grammar (Chomsky, 1986) or the revolution caused by cognitive theories such as Information Processing and Connectionist Models (Parallel Distributed Processing) (Cfr. Gregg, 1990; Rumelhart and McClelland, 1986; Diederich, 1990). It is not our intention here, however, to review systematically the state of the art of the field of Second Language Acquisition (2LA). Rather, our attempt will be to single out one issue where old and new theories of theoretical and applied linguistics meet, namely the relationship between L1 and L2, as seen by the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) and the Creative Construction Hypothesis (CCH), and as reassessed by the new influence of theoretical linguistics over 2LA research, in particular the theory of Universal Grammar (Cook, 1987).

1. A BRIEF SKETCH OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS (AL)

Linguistic theory has had a conflict-ridden relationship with 2LA (Roulet, 1972). Teasing out the points of conflict would lead us to trace the history of a relationship that started out as happy affair and ended up in divorce. This is the history of the discipline that used to be called Applied Linguistics and many have rechristened as Educational Linguistics (Spolsky, 1969; Stern, 1983). The relationship was launched in the beginning as a joint-venture intended to solve problems in the

teaching of languages. To this end, teachers looked to the linguists for clear and definitive answers. As a result, linguists deployed their then-best endeavours and theories, became the guides and masters of the so-called language teaching operation, and virtually dominated the field. Hence the name Applied Linguistics: Linguistics applied (to the classroom). The name was perhaps quite accurate at the time, as both teachers and linguists had a commonly shared set of assumptions about the nature of language and the nature of learning: Behaviorism and Bloomfieldian linguistics had been wedded for a while to furnish all involved in the language sciences, either for descriptive or applied purposes, with an unquestioned framework of assumptions. It was the time when the contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH) entered the scene (Lado, 1964; C. James, 1980). Yet its strong bias toward behaviorism and structuralist doctrine undermined its tenets, for it soon became evident that such handy equations as: “different = difficult”; and “2LL = overcoming 1L interference”, which resulted in hierarchies of difficulty, diagnostic predictions of errors, and audiolingual stamping in of rote learning, were quite short-sighted (Sajavaara, 1980). The advent of the chomskyan revolution initiated a period of confusion for the then confident state of the art of AL. Chomsky helped look at language and learning (now relabeled acquisition) in a different light. Applied linguists began to question the role of structural linguistics in 2LA and the confident application of linguistic theories in the classroom. Early on Chomsky himself made very clear disclaimers about the limited role and influence of linguistic theory in 2LA (Chomsky, 1966). The chomskyan revolution made it possible for researchers to question the age-old assumptions about learning held by audiolingual methodologies. A new era of cognitive assumptions opened up. Some, although paying lip-service to the new ideas about learning, cognition, and mentalism in linguistics, still wanted to do applied linguistics in the old way: taking transformational grammar straight into the classroom. The result of this was a lack of the recognition of the learner as an altogether different entity from the one held in mind by behaviourists and structuralists. Others, paying heed to Chomsky’s own disclaimers, abstained from using linguistic theory for applied purposes or looked elsewhere for help in determining the ingredients of the language teaching operation (psychology, sociology, etc). Soon afterwards, however, the new mentalist climate in the linguistic and social sciences made headway and a new role of the learner came into being in the wake of the advent of the discipline called psycholinguistics, which played the role of the advocate’s devil of linguistic theories. As a result of, teachers began to have access to theories about the nature of information processing, the psychological reality of linguistic constructs, language acquisition processes, etc. (Slobin, 1970). It became apparent then that the term AL was a misnomer for the scope of disciplines needed for the language teaching operation had to include more

than linguistics, and perhaps very little of the latter given the fact that linguists had set their sights very high indeed and teachers regarded anything smacking of application as seriously misguided (Newmark, 1970).

According to Chomsky, a theory of language (or the language faculty) must go beyond observational and descriptive adequacy and incorporate an account of explanatory adequacy: i.e. Linguistics must address the question How is language acquisition possible? Linguistics becomes the study of the abstract knowledge that characterizes the competence of an ideal speaker seen in the light of the conditions that make it possible for a child to acquire such abstract knowledge, especially given the indeterminacy, degeneracy and poverty of the stimulus (the amount and kind of language input received by the child). Viewed in this light, acquisition of this knowledge can only be possible if one assumes that the child at stage zero is already in possession of a set of abstract conditions or principles that make it possible for him/her to construct a grammar given minimum exposure. Such conditions make up a series of fundamental principles that guide him/her in his/her learning task. Such principles are species-specific and purely linguistic. They are pre-wired as part and parcel of a language-faculty located in the mind-brain, the LAD (language acquisition device). The principles contain in a nutshell, in an implicative state, a Universal Grammar. All languages are but "versions" of UG. The versions are arrived at by "parametrizing" the values of the principles of UG. (For instance, one principle dictates that languages have a +/- value for the occurrence of "Subject of V". Some languages (the majority) fix the value on the plus side, while other languages are more flexible, leaving open the possibility for there being a Pro-Drop Rule (subject ellision). Thus, unlike English, Spanish is a Pro-Drop language.) Despite the fact that Chomskyan linguistics proper for many teachers became irrelevant as a direct application of its principles, (Lamendella, 1969), it became clear nonetheless that many of its "Implications" were seen as enlightening (Spolsky, 1969); Newmeyer, 1982). (But the controversial nature of Chomsky's assumptions has not gone unnoticed. See Hacker, 1990 for a critique). Learners were no longer regarded as generalizing rote imitators, but rather as hypothesis-testers capable of creatively making up their own Interlanguage systems (Adjemian, 1976). Errors were attempts at getting things right, at making LAD-led guesses at the target language system (Corder, 1981; Richards, 1974). The consequences for the language teaching operation are obvious: teachers are suppliers of input, not stampers of habits. Hence the appeal of so-called non-interventionist teaching strategies (cfr. Krashen's (1985) Monitor Model and Natural Method; see Martín Morillas, 1990, for a review). Teaching became synonymous with "facilitation" of learning. Supply input and the LAD will take care of it all (this is the gist of the creative construction hypothesis (cf. Dulay and Burt, 1974).

However, this new confidence in the implications of mentalistic linguistics for AL was again questioned by critics who took issue with the tenets of Chomskyan linguistics. The new criticism arose from the quarters of anthropology, cultural studies, functional linguistics and sociolinguistics. The gist of the criticism revolved around the competence-performance distinction and the idealized speaker-hearer. Dell Hymes (1985), with his concept of Communicative Competence seriously questioned the theoretical foundations of the whole of the chomskyan framework of assumptions. He passionately argued for a functional view of language: language is not just a code but a system of communication embedded in a socio-cultural milieu. There arose a debate between formalists and functionalists, with the orientation of syllabus design at stake (Cfr. Yalden, 1987; White, 1990). Says G. Leech on this score: “

“Whereas formalists tend to explain linguistic universals as deriving from a common genetic linguistic inheritance of the human species, functionalists see it as deriving from the universality of the uses to which language is put in human societies; whereas formalists are inclined to explain children’s acquisition of language in terms of a built-in human capacity to learn language, functionalists explain it in terms of the development of the child’s communicative needs; whereas formalists study language as an autonomous system, functionalists study it in relation to its social function”. (Leech, 1983).

Understanding the implications of communicative competence became therefore of paramount importance for applied linguists. Non-interventionism in the classroom took on a new shape by incorporating the notion of “negotiable comprehensive input” (Chaudron, 1982). That is to say, input must be authentic, communicatively-oriented and turned into “intake” through negotiation of form-meaning interactive experience. Earlier, researchers had argued that acquisition (ie authentic assimilation of input into intake) could never take place in the classroom because input there is primarily non-communicative, non-negotiable and code-oriented. Classroom experience was claimed to lead only to the development of a type of competence called Learning. Performing when learning (not acquisition) has occurred is only possible by relying on mental translation (through translation buffers or Monitoring) . With the advent of communicative-based methodologies, researchers found evidence that acquisition may occur in the classroom and learning may be turned into acquisition (cfr. Scarcella and Krashen, 1980).

Thus, throughout the evolution of AL we see a parallel polarization in terms of : (a) application-implication; (b) code-communication; (c) intervention-non-intervention. At the beginning, there was a high correlation between application, code-emphasis/awareness, and intervention. Language teaching was code-oriented (formalist linguistics), had no autonomy from linguistics; and was maximally

interventionist (audiolingual methodology). Through an intervening period of reassessment due to the impact first of Chomskyan linguistics and then functional linguistics, we see now a reorientation towards implications (insights) from a multitude of disciplines (linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, anthropology, brain sciences, cognitive theory, cultural anthropology, educational (counselling) theory, etc). Finally, communicative methodology has clearly shifted towards non-interventionist objectives, emphasizing strategic and metacognitive aspects and learner autonomy designs (Rubin and Wenden, 1988).

2. RE-ASSESSMENT OF AN OLD ISSUE: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN 1LL AND 2LL

Looking at it hindsight, it is easy for us nowadays to question the assumptions and methodology of contrastive analysis (see Martín Morillas, 1989 for a review). The basis of the criticism may be summed up in the following way (Sajavaara, 1981): (a) the supereding of structuralist principles in linguistic descriptions; (b) the lack of trustworthy criteria of comparison; (c) the problem of equivalence; (d) the theory of interference; (e) the fact that the degree of typological difference between L1 and L2 is not proportional to the strength of interference; (e) the lack of independence of linguistic descriptions from theoretical constructs or from the models used in the contrast; (f) the abstract nature of many comparisons; (g) the static view of the learning process; (h) the failure to predict learner behaviour.

In his early article "Exculpation of Contrastive Linguistics", published in 1971, Carl James had already taken it upon himself to defend the relevance of CA for the language teaching operation. Other authors followed suit (Marton, 1981). In relation to interference theory and the charge by critics that the mother tongue is not the only source of errors, and that other sources of errors may not be predicted by CA, and that ignorance is the real cause of deviant linguistic behaviour by 2L learners, James claims that CA never held that L1 is the only source of errors. He quotes Lado himself (1964) as pointing out that "these differences are the chief source of difficulty ...; the most important factor determining ease and difficulty in learning the patterns of a foreign language..". After considering the pros and cons of Error Analysis as the best alternative to the problems of CA, James maintains that a combination of a priori and a posteriori error examination, together with a determination of the psycho- and socio-linguistic basis for the strategies underlying error-making behaviour (as set out by Selinker, 1970) would be the best approach to the problem. Still, according to MacLaughlin (1987) it remains to be proved that: (a) interference is an inevitable consequence of bilingualism; and (b) that 2LL

involves processes different from those of 1LL. Rather, the evidence seems to favour a position for a basic similarity. Also, he claims, there is no evidence that simultaneous bilingual acquisition in children requires special language processing devices. And yet, one could argue that only a small minority of speakers achieves native-like competence. This seems to suggest that 2LL is more difficult. One could argue that only the minority have been able to reactivate the latent language faculty; and that the failure by the majority to do so is simply due to non-linguistic factors: motivation, environment, attitudes, etc. But the paradox is deeper: it is difficult to account for the fact that 2LL and 1LL are similar processes if it is demonstrated that a large majority of learners fail to achieve native-like competence. Again, it is easy to find relevant studies showing that there is a difference in kind between 1LL and 2LL. The issue is not easily resolved. With the advent of the theory of Universal Grammar, researchers have attempted to reassess the issue of 1L-2L relationship in the light of the principles of Universal Grammar (L. White, 1985; Newmeyer, 1982; Muñoz-Liceras, 1984; Rutherford, 1982). Thus, it is claimed from these quarters that there is evidence that 2LL is governed by principles similar to those of 1LL: for example, Japanese learners of English are sensitive to the rule that prohibits right-movement extraposition of constituents (e.g. *That it surprised Ed Mary amused that Peter had called) even though Japanese does not have rightward movement. Therefore, this learner language knowledge reflects the reactivation of a UG principle at work. There is also evidence that “parametrization” values (Gass, 1979; Zobl, 1984) result in a difference between marked and unmarked structures (Eckman, 1977). An unmarked structure is one which reflects a typologically more universal tendency; a marked value is a tendency towards the exceptionality, or one value that necessarily depends on the prior occurrence of another obligatory one. For instance in Arabic and Persian, an oblique pronoun from a prepositional phrase may be relativized (cfr. English *The table that the girl put the shoes under *it* is there). Compared with subject or object pronoun relativization, this is a marked structure within the hierarchy of relativization. One contrastive analysis interpretation for the occurrence of sentences such as the ungrammatical one given above would be negative transfer. But an alternative UG account would explain the typological tendency in the languages of the world to have resumptive pronouns in oblique relativization. The existence of Markedness is now tied to the old issue of difficulty and difference, but cast in a completely different format: using the principles of UG, one can hypothesize that: a) those areas of IL2 that are different from L1 and are more marked than L1 will be more difficult; b) the areas of L2 that are different from L1 but are not more marked than L1 will not be more difficult.

Thus, to sum up, the rash oversimplification by Dulay and Burt (1974) that 1LL = 2LL, led to a tension between two opposing assumptions about the relationship

between old knowledge and new knowledge, the constraints of age and the strength of interference. The opposing paradigms have become somewhat dissolved into a new understanding that the difference between first and second language learning may not be one of kind, but of quality, as we must recognize a host of factors impinging on 2LA. Interestingly enough, however, the role of 1L has been reassessed and found at work in an abstract manner in the theory of parametrization and markedness of UG. It is precisely on this point where the recent generative theory differs from the old one, for nowadays the theory of Universal Grammar does claim a connection between theoretical linguistics and applied purposes. In this manner, the baby which had been thrown with the bathwater ("the role of 1L") has been brought back into the picture once again, this time disguised in more sophisticated garb than the duller, narrowly-conceived contrastive analysis hypothesis.

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