

# Introducing the Basic Variety

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1 ... you have to first  
third floor go ...  
... room 312 ...  
... then you go room  
195 ...  
... then ...

2 ... room 412 ... afterwards you fill  
in this form ... you come  
then back here ...

3 ... I be probably no there ...  
... you no go to colleague ... because  
I everything know ...

4 you wait until I come back  
from break ..... eat .... yum yum .....  
... understand ...

5 ... when I back here ... you get  
from me stamp on paper ...  
... you understand ...

6 ... thank you very much  
everything's absolutely clear  
... it might be good for you, though,  
if you took a German course!

**I The Basic Variety: core properties**

From the very beginning of their language acquisition process, adult L2 learners are able to communicate. As soon as they know a few target language words, they also know how to use these words appropriately in discourse. Remarkable as this is, it has never been an area of extensive research. Some attention has been paid to the emergence of formal devices in early discourse, as in Hatch (1978), but as far as structural principles are concerned no extensive studies have been carried out. Although it might seem obvious that utterances with only a few constituents are not very interesting from a structural point of view, Klein and Perdue (henceforth K&P) prove this idea wrong.

Perdue (1996) has recently demonstrated how L2 learners are able to communicate with one-constituent utterances denoting activities and objects and that even verbless utterances with a few noun-like constituents are structured in terms of topic-focus patterns interacting with semantic constraints and scope relations. It is this 'interplay of semantic and discourse-organizational constraints' which also governs 'much more advanced learner production' (Perdue, 1996: 143, 146). Whereas L2 learners are able to apply these types of organizational constraints from very early on, there is no reason to assume that at the relevant stage words like *gehen* ('go'), *spazier* ('stroll'), *laufa* ('run'), *komm* ('come'), denoting activities corresponding to verbs in the target language, also have syntactical verb status in the learner's language. Because there is no verb-argument structure at the initial stages 'the distribution of these words here is not that of the TL' (142).

In a further stage of acquisition noun-like constituents become organized around a 'verb-like' element. Examples are utterances such as *Chaplin gehen strasse* ('Chaplin go street'), *gehen spazier* ('go stroll'), *komm strasse* ('come street'), *das frau laufa schnella strasse* ('woman run fast street'). At that point utterances are structured by phrasal patterns, too. What intrigues most, however, is what it is that urges the learner to give up the noun-based structure, and what it is that constrains the organization of 'major constituents (. . .) around the verb' (Perdue, 1996: 144). These are the core questions of the present volume.

In the main contribution of this volume K&P show that at the relevant stage all learners produce simple utterances with a few constituents organized around the verb. For all learners, no matter what their mother tongue or target language, these utterances are based on the same organizational principles. Furthermore, K&P argue that this particular organizational system is stable in the sense

that it is resistant to developmental progress. For reasons of simplicity and stability, K&P call this type of language used by L2 learners 'the Basic Variety' (henceforth BV) and one may wonder why it is that natural languages are not all instantiations of the BV.

Although the BV lacks the structural properties of fully fledged languages, such as the grammatical categories 'subject' and 'object', the lexical categories 'noun' and 'verb', as well as verb-argument structure, learners can express temporal and spatial relations. They are able to relate the time span about which they want to make an assertion to the time of utterance. In other words they can express 'before', 'after' and 'simultaneously'. They can also express duration, habituality or iterativity of time spans. They are able to distinguish between types of situation such as 'states' and 'dynamic events' and between spatial relations such as 'location' and 'change of location'.

Characteristic of the approach taken by K&P is that systematicity does not follow from strong theoretical presumptions of any kind. This does not mean that the organizational principles have no theoretical foundation. On the contrary, it is the interplay between pragmatic, semantic and phrase structure constraints with their own theoretical embedding which can account for the types of form-meaning correspondences in learner varieties.

## II The BV and the human language faculty

The approach of looking at learner varieties as systems in their own right has found its proponents within the framework of 'creative construction' (Dulay *et al.*, 1982) and 'interlanguage theory' (Selinker, 1972). Within this tradition of second language research it is assumed that L2 learners process L2 data on the basis of language learning mechanisms which are part of the human language learning faculty. Other researchers such as Schachter and Rutherford (1979) have argued for the role of crosslinguistic influence. They provide evidence for the role of L1 typological properties as part of the inherent structural characteristics of the learner system. Hence, utterances by Chinese learners of English, such as *Irrational emotions are bad but rational emotions must use for judging* or *These ways almost can classify two types*, are not to be interpreted as ill-formed English passives, but rather as realizations of underlying L1 topic-comment structure. Within this tradition of looking at learner varieties as coherent linguistic systems, the BV has a particular status. It is a simple language system, in terms of its organizational principles. Form-function correspondences are determined by three types of constraints:

*phrasal constraints* which define the patterns in which lexemes may occur, *semantic constraints* which attribute arguments to particular positions (controller first) and *pragmatic constraints* which organize information in connected discourse (focus last). The BV, however, is more than just a simple language system. It is a highly functional means of communication which is similar for many learners for a long period. As such it is a 'genuine manifestation of the human language faculty' (Klein, 1997: 5) which means that the limited set of organizational principles inherent to the BV belongs to the genetical endowment of our species. Compared to fully fledged languages, Klein considers the BV even to be 'the core manifestation of the human language faculty' (Klein, 1997: 5). Hence, 'rather than taking [fully fledged languages] as a point of departure and working back in trying to understand how acquisition works' (K&P, this volume: 000), the study of second language acquisition has the best prerequisites to provide insights into the nature of the human mind.

One might argue about the exact form of the particular constraints. Comrie (this volume), for example, doubts whether NP-V-NP order is typical of the BV in all L2 settings. He suggests that it may reflect salient word order of the target languages that were part of the project, i.e., English, German, Dutch, French and Swedish. On the other hand, if saliency were responsible, one might ask why children learning German and Dutch choose NP-NP-V as their main pattern of utterance structure (Klein, 1974; Clahsen, 1988; Jordens, 1990). Furthermore, with Turkish learners of German and Dutch and Punjabi learners of English there is a shift from L1-induced NP-NP-V to NP-V-NP. The question is, do they really shift or do they use both NP-V-NP and NP-NP-V as alternatives in different conditions?

Discussions about the actual form of the constraints, however, do not affect the central role of the organizational principles in learner varieties. In fact, one may expect similar principles to be found in simple varieties of fully fledged languages, such as telegraphic speech, headlines and captions. With respect to case marking in German headlines, for example, the principle of 'degree of control' seems to interact with principles of 'fore- and backgrounding' (Jordens, 1992). This explains why in verbless utterances such as *Den HSV fest im Griff* (the-ACC Hamburg SV firmly in-the grip) the accusative is used. The entity which is in control, i.e., the agent, is marked with the nominative. This entity is implied by *Griff*. Since it is not expressed, the structure only has the accusative NP. In *Der HSV fest im Griff von Hajduk Split* (the-NOM Hamburg SV firmly in the grip of Hajduk Split), however, the agent is backgrounded as

part of the *von*-phrase. This explains why the only NP which is left foregrounded is marked with the nominative.

### III The linguistic status

As far as its formal properties are concerned, K&P argue that the BV can be seen as an I-language, i.e., an instantiation of UG. It is a stable system that is the result of the human language faculty and second language input. Within Chomsky's minimalist framework the BV can be characterized as an I-language in which all (formal) features are weak. This is why it has no inflectional morphology and no movement. In order to become a fully fledged language, particular features have to be 'strengthened' either by the identification of principles underlying manifestations of movement or by the acquisition of morphology.

Bierwisch (this volume) goes into the question of whether the BV of L2 learners originates from the same human language faculty as is the case with fully fledged languages of L1 learners. He argues that the BV essentially differs from the way in which I-languages are instantiations of UG. For Bierwisch the BV, and thereby second language learning, is based on general cognitive strategies, whereas I-languages are based on resources which are language-specific. As opposed to K&P's argument of the BV being a simplified version of a normal I-language, Bierwisch argues 'if strong features are expensive, and hence avoided by L2 learners, there is no reason why this tendency to avoid strong features should not be equally effective in L1 acquisition, and hence a driving force in language change' (p. 000). In SLA research, Bierwisch's position is a familiar one (see, amongst others, Felix, 1985; Bley-Vroman, 1989; Clahsen, 1984). However, it has never been discussed with the formal precision of the properties of an I-language and the types of constraints inherent to the BV.

Both Bierwisch and Meisel (this volume) raise specific questions with regard to the characterization of the BV as an I-language. L2 learner languages seem to have properties which do not occur in I-languages. Meisel, for example, argues that in L1 acquisition of German, non-finite verb forms never move, whereas in L2 acquisition infinitival verb forms do occur in verb-second position (p. 000). Furthermore, he notes that, if the BV has the status of an I-language, why should it not be analysable 'in terms of the same categories and relations as fully fledged languages?' (p. 000). Finally, Meisel discusses developmental differences between L1 and L2 acquisition. If UG is available to L2 learners, why does fossilization occur?

From an entirely different point of view, Comrie (this volume) also discusses the question of whether the BV can be seen as a real language. Whereas, according to Comrie, native languages have both a social (communicative) and a cognitive function, the BV only functions communicatively: 'One has to be very proficient in a second language before one is prepared to use that language, rather than one's native language, as one's basic conceptual tool' (p. 000). Hence, he characterizes the BV as a 'second-language pidgin' which serves as 'a highly efficient system of communication' (p. 000).

#### IV Issues in second language research

Within the coherent framework of its organizational principles, the BV has the potential to provide answers to long-standing questions.

##### 1 *Why do learners fossilize?*

The BV provides an explicit account of what constitutes a simple language system in terms of the organizational principles involved. It represents 'a potential fossilization point' due to the fact that it is not only a simple but also a stable system. The BV is a type of interlanguage system in which conflicts between constraints, i.e., possible sources of instability, are avoided. For example, Dative Movement does not occur in the BV of English and Indirect Object Cliticization does not occur in the BV of French because these types of movement are in conflict with the constraint theme before relatum in target position (SEM3; K&P, this volume:000). Bierwisch (this volume), however, has his doubts whether learner varieties would not allow constraints to be in conflict. If that were true, so-called psych verbs should be absent from the BV across interlanguages. Psych verbs such as *please*, *remind* or *convince* in utterances like *The proposal pleased John*, *The book reminds me of my childhood* and *The argument convinced Bill* violate the constraint according to which 'The NP-referent with highest control comes first' (SEM1; K&P, this volume: 000). The same would hold for verbs such as *receive* or *borrow* in utterances like *She received a letter from her sister* and *He borrowed a book from his colleague*. Here the constraint 'Controller of source state outweighs controller of target state' (SEM2; K&P, this volume: 000) is violated. Finally, utterances such as *The box contains three apples* which violate the principle of 'Theme before relatum in target position' (SEM3) ought to be absent from the BV. Whereas Bierwisch wonders whether these predictions are borne out, there is empirical evidence from foreign language learners of English who are unwilling to

accept utterances violating the semantic constraints just mentioned. This holds for utterances with the psych verbs *surprise* and *strike* as in *The news surprised me* and *John strikes me as pompous* violating SEM1, as well as for utterances such as *This tent sleeps five people*, *The pond is leaping with frogs* and *This lake drowned our cat* violating SEM3. Finally, learners seem to avoid the violation of SEM2 with verbs such as *receive*, *buy* and *borrow* by leaving the 'controller of the source state' unexpressed. These observations from foreign language learners have been interpreted *post hoc* in terms of markedness conditions. Within the framework of the BV, however, they provide empirical evidence for the claim that learner varieties tend to be systems in which conflicts between constraints are indeed avoided.

## 2 When do constraints of the source language come into play?

The BV leaves room for crosslinguistic influence only in the early stages of acquisition. Furthermore, with reference to Broeder *et al.* (1993a; 1993b) and Schenning and van Hout (1994), K&P note that the source language generally comes in where the target language system has alternative ways of expressing the same content. When more options are available, L2 learners seem to take the alternative closest to their L1. This seems to hold for head-complement and complement-head structure in Dutch. In Dutch, complex NPs have complement-head structure in compounds as in *afdelingshoofd* (department head), while they have head-complement structure in NP PP phrases as in *chef van de afdeling* (head of the department). Broeder (1993) has observed that in L2 Dutch, Turkish informants prefer to use compounds or complex NPs with complement-head structure as in *sigarettenwinkel* (cigarette shop), *winkelbaas* (shop boss), while Moroccan subjects choose the NP PP equivalent with head-complement structure as in *winkel van sigaret* (shop of cigarette), *baas van winkel* (boss of shop). This also holds for such complex NPs with pronominal possessives as *zijn boek* (his book) vs *het boek van hem* (the book of his) and complex NPs with nominal possessives as *mijn vader's broer* (my father's brother) vs *de broer van mijn vader* (the brother of my father). Here, Turkish informants have no problem in acquiring pronominal possessives with complement-head structure such as *mijn tas* (my bag) and *zijn familie* (his relatives). Moroccans, however, use personal pronouns instead of possessives as in *hij vrouw* (he wife) and *mij koffertje* (me case). Finally, in those cases in which Turkish learners use nominal possessives, they also use the complement-head structure of the less frequent Dutch alternatives with a preposed genitive NP

*vader zus* (father sister). The Moroccan subjects, on the other hand, choose the more common NP PP equivalent with head-complement structure *broer van vader* (brother of father). If the learner's option in these cases is adequately represented in terms of head-complement vs complement-head structure, one may also expect L2 learners of Dutch and German to choose between either SOV or SVO structure as their basic phrasal pattern. The data seem to suggest that this is true. NP-NP-V is found in Turkish learners of Dutch and German and not in Moroccan learners of Dutch or in Italian learners of German. The same holds for Punjabi learners of English who seem to use the NP-NP-V pattern, too. Use of L1-similar structures here may be induced by the fact that English also has instances of complement-head structure. Examples are nominal compounds such as *dishwasher* and *can opener* and possessives such as *my father's book*.

Schwartz (this volume) particularly discusses the claim of the BV that all L2 learners at some point in acquisition 'create interlanguages that are at the core structurally identical' (p. 000). On the one hand, she argues for variation due to L1 influence. The use of SOV by Punjabi and Turkish speakers as well as the use of subordination by Spanish-speaking learners of L2 French (p. 000), she sees as evidence that L1 grammar imposes analyses on the target language input data. Furthermore, she argues that structural similarities of the BV of L2 learners 'reflect properties of the [target language] input' (p. 000). Both these arguments are legitimate. They urge the closer analysis of, for example, SOV L1ers acquiring SOV L2 as opposed to SVO L2. It would be interesting to see if, as Schwartz puts it, L1 grammar 'gives way' to the phrasal patterns of the BV 'in blatant disregard of the input' (p. 000).

### *3 How to explain development towards the target?*

Given K&P's claim that learner languages tend to stabilize at some point at which constraints are not in conflict, the question remains as to what mechanisms may propel further development of the language acquisition process. As K&P argue, answering this question may provide insight into why it is that natural fully fledged languages are as complex and as diverse as they are.

Earlier research on the acquisition of word order in German has shown that learner languages develop along similar lines of progression, in that all learners appear to go through the same stages of acquisition (see Meisel, Clahsen and Pienemann, 1981; Clahsen *et al.*, 1983). The question of how to explain the order of acquisition has attracted much research. Essentially, there are two



opposing views to explain development: on the one hand, the use of differing strategies operating on surface structures (see Pienemann, 1987; Clahsen, 1984); on the other hand, the restructuring of the underlying system (see Jordens, 1988; Schwartz, 1996). In both cases the question of the driving force has never been explicitly posed, probably because 'exposure to the target language' is regarded as trivial. However, since the actual route can be described in terms of ordering conditions according to which the acquisition of Y implies the acquisition of X, there is at least reason to question why it is that X is learnt before Y. If it is the use of strategies which determines L2 learning, ordering could be explained by degree of complexity. If there are structural reasons at play, ordering could be explained by the notion of 'prerequisite knowledge'. Hence, for example, having learnt verb-argument structure, headedness (particle rule) has to be learnt before verb movement, verb movement has to be learned before or simultaneously with finiteness and verb-second (inversion) has to be learnt before or simultaneously with verb-end. The fact that 'exposure to the target language' is seen as the driving force becomes evident from the use of notions such as 'triggering' or 'parameter setting'.

Even though it is obviously the case that exposure to the target language has an influence on the way in which learner languages develop, one may still wonder whether it constitutes the actual driving force. Since the BV is an extremely functional means of communication with a high degree of stability, one should expect intrinsic reasons for development to exist. Crucial for the development of the BV are, according to K&P, 'discourse contexts (. . .), where its constraints come into conflict'. In such a situation the learner has two possibilities: either to "override" one of the constraints, or (. . .) develop specific means to accommodate the "competition" (p. 000). In the latter case, as Comrie (this volume) puts it: 'the language may develop syntactic complexity as a means of indicating what is being sacrificed, such as a passive voice to indicate that the subject is not the agent' (p. 000).

The passive as a means to overcome a conflict between constraints seems to play an important role as a driving force in second language acquisition. In a study by Zobl (1988) on the acquisition of English by L1 Japanese speakers, the acquisition of the passive turns out to have enormous consequences with respect to the structure of the current interlanguage system. It is the acquisition of the passive that makes Japanese learners 'realize' 'that the initial assumption of free word order for direct objects in the English VP is untenable' (van Buren, 1996: 202). This insight is

what van Buren calls a 'catastrophic learning experience'. It leads to a fundamental restructuring of the current interlanguage system into a system with strict adjacency. In general, it leads to the restructuring of a non-configurational language into a configurational language in which, for NPs to occur in non-base positions, movement is required.

Another example of a conflict leading to complexity is given in Perdue (1990). Here, it is shown that in an utterance such as *a dame qui a volé le pain* (is the woman who has stolen the bread) it is the violation of the constraint of chronological order which motivated development of the *passé composé* (see K&P, this volume: 000).

The examples given illustrate that conflicts between constraints are a prominent driving force towards target language complexity. Another motivation for syntactic development is the need to solve structural ambiguities. This is, I assume, the reason why learners progress from a system of non-finite utterance organization – in which major constituents are organized around the verb – to a system in which these constituents become categorized in terms of their syntactic functioning. Categorization in terms of syntactic functions such as subject, object, predicate, noun, verb, adjective etc. is a means of solving structural ambiguity. It implies hierarchical structuring. Hierarchical structure can be acquired inductively. As Klein (1991) pointed out, this is due to the fact that the process of acquisition is accumulative in nature. Furthermore, I assume that substitution also plays a major role in identifying hierarchical structure. It exemplifies the way in which constituents are grouped together at different levels of syntactic complexity. Hierarchical structuring is crucial for language development, in that it provides learners with a tool which is both highly efficient and communicatively powerful. It allows learners not only to get rid of structural ambiguities, but also to make use of structural dependency (as in *wh*-questions) and recursivity (as in embedding).

## V Summary

Research of the BV is the study of the mechanisms driving second language acquisition. On the basis of a detailed analysis of the learner languages of 40 adult immigrant learners of English, German, Dutch, French and Swedish, K&P show that the BV is a simple language system in which linguistic principles that are part of I-grammar interact with organizing principles of a pragmatic and semantic nature. These principles, they argue, are universal across L2 learners and as such they may belong to 'the genetic endowment of our species' (K&P, this volume: 000). This analysis of the

structure of learner languages is reason for Klein to regard fully fledged languages as 'borderline cases' in the sense that they 'exploit the structural potential of the human language faculty to a particularly high extent' (Klein, 1997: 5). By contrast, however, learner varieties as studied in second language research are to be considered as 'a genuine' and even 'the core manifestation of the human language faculty' (Klein, 1997: 5).

## VI References

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