

The Contribution of Second Language Acquisition Research

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During the last 25 years, second language acquisition (SLA) research has made considerable progress, but is still far from proving a solid basis for foreign language teaching, or from a general theory of SLA. In addition, its status within the linguistic disciplines is still very low. I argue this has not much to do with low empirical or theoretical standards in the field—in this regard, SLA research is fully competitive—but with a particular perspective on the acquisition process: SLA researches learners' utterances as deviations from a certain target, instead of genuine manifestations of underlying language capacity; it analyses them in terms of what they are not rather than what they are. For some purposes such a "target deviation perspective" makes sense, but it will not help SLA researchers to substantially and independently contribute to a deeper understanding of the structure and function of the human language faculty. Therefore, these findings will remain of limited interest to other scientists until SLA researchers consider learner varieties a normal, in fact typical, manifestation of this unique human capacity.

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I've discovered that it is not difficult at all to learn French; where we say "cup," they say "tasse"; and so is it with the other words, too. (unknown learner)

Looking back into the development of second language acquisition (SLA) research in the last 25 years, one cannot but be impressed how much progress it has made in many important respects. Perhaps the clearest case is second language acquisition by everyday interaction, a subarea about which hardly anything beyond anecdotal evidence existed in the early 1970s. In classroom acquisition, research then could build on a certain stock of knowledge; however, in the course of these 25 years, this stock enlarged enormously in almost all domains of language, from phonology to syntax, from the lexicon to communicative behaviour. On the more theoretical side, many insights from general linguistics have made their way into SLA studies; although not everyone may accept this line of thought, there is no doubt that it has considerably changed and sharpened the field's perceptions. Methodologically, SLA research normally meets and sometimes—for example in clean statistical analysis—surpasses the standards of empirical research in other fields devoted to the investigation of language. It is not accidental that there are more and more good textbooks, and that these are more and more comprehensive. It may be an exaggeration, but if so only a mild one, to say that a new discipline has been established. There is reason to be proud.

However, as Immanuel Kant put it, the human mind suffers from the peculiar fate of being permanently haunted by questions which it cannot answer properly. It might, once in a while, also be haunted by questions such as the following:

1. Has, as a result of all of these achievements, SLA research provided a solid basis for foreign language teaching?
2. How close has it come to a general theory of SLA?
3. What is the status of SLA research within the various linguistic disciplines?

SLA research wants to discover the principles according to which people who have already mastered one language acquire another; this is a theoretical, not a practical aim. But concerns about foreign language (FL) teaching existed at the very beginning of the field; therefore, the first question appears quite legitimate. Alas, there is little doubt about the answer. Alerted by this, one might ask whether SLA researchers have at least made substantial progress in this direction. This depends on what is understood by “substantial”; but on the whole, I am not convinced that the answer to this question is affirmative, either. In general, FL teachers are very interested in SLA research; in fact, a great many SLA researchers have or had practical teaching experience. But does this fact have more than occasional and declamatory repercussions in the every-day practice of instruction? Among the many theories propagated in the field in the last 25 years, Monitor Theory is probably closest to concrete application; in fact, it has found considerable resonance in the world of education. To what extent has Monitor Theory really changed the preparation of course material, or the way in which this material is presented and processed in the classroom? I suspect the answer is not very flattering.

However, SLA research’s aim is not primarily practical: Researchers want to discover the underlying principles of SLA; they are aiming for a theory of SLA, based on solid empirical findings. Is there any such theory in sight? I am sure that some researchers might now get up and raise their hands and say “Yes, *my* theory.” They should sit down again and think for a moment about the many acquisitional phenomena that theory must account for—from vocabulary learning to pronunciation, from syntax to interactive behaviour. Although many theories have been advocated, not one has even remotely been accepted by the scientific community, and for good reason. At best, SLA research has reliably and generally explained some few specific phenomena, for example certain selected syntactical or morphological constructions, and even these explanations are arguable (as Schachter demonstrates later in this volume).

Turning to the third question, SLA researchers must simply face the fact that, among the various disciplines investigating the manifold manifestations of human language capacity, SLA research does not rank very high. This is hardly ever explicitly stated; there is some politeness in academia. But the facts leave little doubt. Second language researchers often cite work from theoretical linguistics or psycholinguistics; the opposite is hardly ever the case. SLA researchers like to invite people from other linguistic disciplines to SLA conferences; this is normally not matched by invitations in the other direction. The field's findings and theoretical considerations are normally not considered crucial arguments in other domains of language studies; in that regard, the impact of first language (L1) acquisition research is different. There are exceptions, of course, and they are gratefully noted; but they are rare; on the whole, SLA researchers are bottom dwellers in the language sciences.

These considerations paint a gloomy picture. But this picture is as one-sided as the glorious picture one gets when looking over the undeniable achievements of the last 25 years. Simply, considerable progress has been made; it is just not enough. In the next three sections, I will have a closer look at the present situation and why it is as it is.

What Can SLA Research Contribute to Understanding the Human Language Faculty?

I see another language as distorted English, and then, I try to work it out. (a well-known linguist)

Status Within the Linguistic Sciences

Why is SLA research at the bottom end? This might simply result from irrational but firm "caste prejudices" against the newcomer. To the extent this is the case, there is little hope of fighting against them. However, although prejudices are not completely absent from the academic world, it is perhaps too easy an

excuse to assign the field's present status to the irrationality of academia's other inhabitants. If SLA research really wants to climb some steps on the ladder, it had better look for more realistic explanations. There is one obvious candidate: that the empirical and theoretical standards in SLA research might not meet the established criteria of serious scientific work. This is surely false for the empirical side, at least in comparison to other language sciences. To a native speaker of German, for example, recent work in theoretical linguistics, whatever its theoretical standard may be, is a reliable source of surprise and amusement: It is full of strong and unwarranted statements about the grammaticality or non-grammaticality of specific constructions. Given that German is one of the best-studied languages in the world, with abundant descriptive grammars, dictionaries and people to consult, one wonders whether what is said about Warlpiri or Mohawk is much better. No SLA researcher would dare make such strong claims with so little evidence. Now, theoretical linguistics is perhaps not the most serious competitor in terms of empirical reliability. But first, its low standards in this regard do not seem to have harmed its reputation. Second, does SLA studies' empirical work score much worse when compared to, for example, typological linguistics, a field with relatively strong empirical ambitions? There are excellent typological studies, no doubt, and just as with theoretical linguistics, SLA research can only benefit from taking them into account. But how well-founded are claims about typological universals of language? Take, for example, word-order universals, perhaps the best-known case. It is most impressive to see an author say something about 500 languages, but this is still a little share of the world's languages, about 10% perhaps. It could be that these 10% are representative, but who would dare to say so without having had a more than casual look at the other 90%? How much time has such an author spent on each of the 500 languages—one day, two days? Perhaps there are excellent descriptions of these 500 languages, and it suffices to look up what the word order of some particular language is, just as one might look up whether this language has unaspirated stops or a word for

“hell.” But how many languages are really well-described? Even in the case of Latin, English, French or German—extensively-studied languages—it is extremely difficult to say what “the basic word order” is. How reliable are the available grammars of Dyrbal, Twi or Mopan in this regard? Or take a notion such as “aspect,” which underlies, for example, the distinction between English *he worked* and *he was working*. This is a notorious problem for the linguist as well as for the learner; German, though historically closely related to English, has no progressive form; hence, a German learner of English normally has a hard time understanding its precise meaning. So do linguists: There are endless studies, but no generally accepted analysis. If this is true for one of the most salient constructions in the best-investigated languages of the world, what should one think of statements on “imperfective, progressive, non-completive aspect” in, say, Estonian or Gorontalo? One cannot but have the impression that any claim on typological universals must be based on very superficial evidence, and hence should be regarded with appropriate suspicion. This is not to belittle this kind of research; quite to the opposite: How else should one proceed with these difficult issues? But, when compared to typological linguistics, SLA research need not hide its head about its empirical standards. This does not mean that the field’s empirical basis is flawless; every effort should be made to broaden and solidify it. But on average SLA research fares no worse in this regard than other fields of linguistics; in fact, in quantitative analysis SLA research ranks relatively high. Hence, inadequate empirical standards cannot be the reason for its low ranking.

The situation is more ambivalent on the theoretical side, in particular because there is less agreement on what “high theoretical standards” are. However, the concepts and theories that underlie present-day SLA research are no less well-defined, less clear, or less consistent than those of normal descriptive linguistics. In fact, the key concepts are more or less the same. There are good reasons to argue that notions such as “passive,” “tense,” “case role” are not particularly well defined; however, this is in no way specific

to SLA research. In typological linguistics, it is often unclear what, for example, “accusative” or “subjunctive” means in a particular language, say in Guugu Yimidhirr as compared to Eipo. But this uncertainty has never been detrimental to the reputation of these linguistic disciplines; therefore, it should not be detrimental to that of SLA research. So, as compared to the vast majority of work done on language and languages, there is no reason for SLA research to hide because of low theoretical standards. But can it live up to the scientific level of, for example, Montagovian formal semantics or Chomskyan generative grammar? Opinions may vary greatly here. The field’s work, on the average, is indeed considerably beneath the level of logical semantics, with its rigidly defined concepts and systems; however, in this regard, logical semantics is exceptional within linguistics, comparable only to the mathematical study of formal languages and maybe some areas of computational linguistics. The immediate comparison should perhaps be to research in the tradition of generative grammar, especially because ideas from this field have also played a considerable role in recent SLA research. Many feel that work in that tradition is theoretically way ahead of what SLA researchers are doing. I incline to share this view, although the case is perhaps less clear than it might be. In the initial phases, generative grammars were relatively rigidly defined, their formal properties were clear, and it was comparatively easy to test the consequences of particular theoretical assumptions. Over the years, and in particular with the increasing move from specific rules to more general principles, on the one hand, and from language-specific description towards universal properties of grammar, on the other, theoretical as well as empirical statements have become increasingly fuzzy. It is not at all clear what notions such as “subject, small pro, theta role, weak feature,” to mention but a few, really mean, and whether they are used consistently by different authors, or by the same author in different publications. However, for the sake of the argument, assume that generative grammar in its most recent, minimalist version is theoretically far ahead of SLA research. Would it help

the latter climb some steps in the rank order to rigidly adopt this, or some other, theoretically more advanced, framework?

No one really knows; but I do not believe it. First, numerous attempts have been made in this direction in the past 10 years. However, one cannot say that they have found strong repercussions in other areas of linguistics: No theoretical linguists have ever changed their views because of some findings from SLA research; at best, they would say that such findings corroborate these views, but even this is rare. Second, development in theoretical linguistics is fast: As soon as some version of the latest theory has found its way into empirical work on SLA, it is outdated in its own field; work on “parameter-setting” is a good example. Third, it is hard to apply theoretical linguistics’ framework to some central SLA phenomena, say vocabulary learning or problems with the use of tenses. Theoretical linguistics in this sense is confined to some highly selective morphological and syntactical properties. Fourth, and most important: SLA research’s low ranking is not fundamentally connected to its empirical or theoretical standards; these could surely be improved, but on average are no worse than those in other areas of language studies. The field ranks low because it has nothing interesting to say to people in these other areas.

Why should analysing of the odd productions of the second language (L2) learner—this distorted, flawed, ridiculous, chaotic mimicking of “real language”—be able to produce something new, something principled, something fundamental about a particular language’s function and structure, about human languages in general, about the very nature of the human language faculty? No matter how much SLA researchers improve their theories and empirical work, nothing will change very much as long as they do not demonstrate that they can make an independent, genuine, substantial contribution to the study of the human language faculty.

There is no reason why the investigation of an activity so common as SLA should not be able to make such a contribution. The fact that it hasn’t, or at least that it is not seen as doing so in the academic world, results from a particular way of looking at

SLA. This view results first from the fact that the field has its primary origin in practical problems of language teaching, and second from its particular perspective on the object of linguistic investigation in general. These two points are closely interconnected.

Two Views on SLA Research

Like many other disciplines—in fact, like any scientific endeavour—the study of SLA has its origin in practical concerns: problems of L2 teaching. This origin has naturally led to a particular view on SLA. Two assumptions constitute this view:

1. There is a well-defined target of the acquisition process: the language to be learned. This “target language,” like any “real language,” is a clearly fixed entity, a structurally and functionally balanced system, mastered by those who have learned it in childhood, and more or less correctly described in grammars and dictionaries.
2. Learners miss this target to varying degrees and in varying respects; they make errors in production as well as in comprehension, because they lack the appropriate knowledge or skills.

I shall call this view the *target deviation perspective*. It is the teacher’s task to erase or at least to minimise the deviations; it is the researcher’s task to investigate which “errors” occur when and for which reasons. As a consequence, a learner’s performance in production or comprehension is studied not so much in its own right, as a manifestation of the learner’s capacity, but in relation to a set norm; not in terms of what learners do but in terms of what they fail to do. SLA research considers the learner’s utterances at some time during the process of SLA to be more or less successful attempts to reproduce the structural properties of target-language utterances. The learner tries to do what the native speaker does, but does it less well.

Three reasons make the target deviation perspective so natural and attractive, in fact, almost self-evident. First, already mentioned, it is the natural perspective of the language teacher: Language teaching is a normative process, and the teacher is responsible for moving the student as close to some norm as possible. If the student misses this norm in one way or another way, this error must be corrected. Nothing could be more sensible.

Second, it is also the natural perspective of all of those who had to learn an L2 in the classroom: That means practically every language researcher. It is very difficult to get rid of the perspective that the teacher's red ink burned into the mind: there is language to be learned, it is very well defined, and you missed it. This normative experience has also deeply shaped the way in which linguists usually perceive the object of their efforts—a point to which I will return in the next section.

Third, the target deviation perspective provides the researcher with a simple and clear design for empirical work. There is a yardstick against which the learner's production and comprehension can be measured: the target language, or actually what grammar books and dictionaries say about it. What research measures are the differences between what the learner does and what the set norm demands. As a rule, therefore, the research design is a (much subtler, and often highly refined) elaboration of the "red ink method": Errors are marked, counted, and statistically analysed. One may count, for example, how often Spanish and French learners of English omit the subject pronoun in classroom tests, and any significant difference may be attributed (everything else being equal) to the influence of the L1. Alternatively, one might also look at the individual error and try to analyse how it came about; that is, quantitative analysis and hypothesis testing can be replaced or complemented by more qualitative approaches. All of these methods are well-established in the sciences; there are certain standards in their application, and when these standards are met (as they usually are met in SLA research), there is not the least methodological objection. But this analysis, no matter how well done, does not explain what the human

language faculty does; it tells to what extent and perhaps why a person's usage differs sometimes from a certain norm. At the very best, it tells us where and why our species-specific capacity to learn and to process languages does not work under particular circumstances, but does not tell us much about its structural and functional properties. Therefore, people who want to understand this faculty and its specific manifestations do not find these results relevant.

The alternative to the target deviation perspective is to understand the learner's performance at a given time as an immediate manifestation of the capacity to speak and to understand: The form and function of these utterances are governed by principles, and these principles are those characteristic of the human language faculty. Early attempts in this direction are reflected in notions such as Selinker's "interlanguage," Nemser's "approximate systems," and related terms. But these notions still rest on the assumptions of "the real thing"—the target language and, similarly, the source language—and of systems in-between, systems that only just miss the "real thing." The view I have in mind—*the learner variety perspective*—is somewhat more radical. It goes back to early attempts to analyse the language of adult foreign workers in Germany (Klein & Dittmar, 1979); much the same idea is found in Bley-Vroman (1983). The learner variety perspective can be characterised by three key assumptions (Klein & Perdue, 1997, p. 307):

1. During the acquisitional process, the learner passes through a series of *learner varieties*. Both the internal organisation of each variety at a given time and the transitions from one variety to the next are essentially systematic.
2. A limited set of organisational principles of different kinds are present in *all* learner varieties. The actual structure of an utterance in a learner variety is determined by a particular interaction of these principles. The kind of interaction may vary, depending on various factors, such as the learner's source language. With successive input analysis, the interaction

changes over time. For example, picking up some component of noun morphology from the input may cause the learner to modify the weight of other factors to mark argument status. From this perspective, learning a new feature is not adding a new piece to a puzzle which the learner has to put together. Rather, it entails a sometimes minimal, sometimes substantial reorganisation of the whole variety, where the balance of the various factors successively approaches the balance characteristic of the target language.

3. Learner varieties are not imperfect imitations of a “real language”—the target language—but systems in their own right, error-free by definition, and characterised by a particular lexical repertoire and by a particular interaction of organisational principles. Fully developed languages, such as English, German, French, are special cases of learner varieties. They represent a relatively stable state of language acquisition—that state where learners stop learning because there is no difference between their variety and the input—the variety of their social environment.

In other words, language acquisition, and SLA in particular, is not to be characterised in terms of errors and deviations, but in terms of the two-fold systematicity it exhibits: the inherent systematicity of a learner variety at a given time, and the systematic way in which such a learner variety evolves into another one. To understand the acquisitional process, researchers must try to uncover this two-fold systematicity, rather than look at how and why a learner misses the target.

Not that it is uninteresting or unimportant to investigate errors and deviations: quite the opposite. Such an investigation tells one a lot about the learner’s problems, their causes and how they can be avoided. No reasonable person can take this to be irrelevant. But it will never lead to a real understanding of how the human language faculty works when exposed to new input; that is, a real understanding how language acquisition, and SLA in particular, functions. Nor will it yield substantial information

about the nature of the human language faculty itself. This is the reason SLA work ranks low within the linguistic sciences. Maybe it does find out something, maybe its findings are even reliable and of practical importance, but it contributes little to the general aim of linguistics.

But can it make such a contribution without leaving its field proper? After all, it is concerned with learners and what they do with their language faculty: that is, with learner varieties, very elementary ones and very advanced ones; as soon as the target language is reached, its job is done. But can the investigation of learner varieties constitute a substantial, fundamental contribution to the investigation of the human language faculty? Yes: In fact, learner varieties are the normal manifestation of this capacity, and “real languages” are just a special case, defined on social and normative rather than on structural grounds. However, this is not the way in which a language researcher or the person on the street would commonly see this.

The “Real Language Hoax,” or: Learner Varieties are the Normal Case

There are many ways to look at language, and linguistic thought in the 20th century in particular is anything but uniform. The two dominant currents in this century, classical structuralism and generative grammar, have defined the primary object of their efforts in somewhat different ways. The following two famous passages, though somewhat simplifying their authors’ positions, illustrate the point:

La linguistique a pour unique et véritable objet la langue envisagée en elle-même et pour elle-même. (deSaussure, 1916, p. 317)

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shift of attention and interest, and errors (randomly or characteristic) in

applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance. (Chomsky, 1965, p. 3)

In deSaussure's view, the object to be investigated is a social entity, a "*fait social*"—a system defined by inherent structural relations between its elements; there is nothing specific to the individual speaker in this system. In Chomsky's view, the object of investigation is an individual entity—the knowledge that the ideal speaker has of the language; there is also a social dimension, but it is not of primary importance. In actual fact, however, the difference is much smaller than it looks. Under both views, the object of investigation is an ideal entity. Neither deSaussure nor Chomsky would deny that there is social variation, that speakers speak in different ways, but they abstract away from this variation. DeSaussure would surely not say that "*la langue*" exists anywhere and anyhow except by virtue of the fact that its speakers know it; where should it exist? Any "*fait social*," religious convictions, values, norms, they all are nothing but belief systems in peoples' minds. Similarly, the ideal speaker's knowledge must be knowledge of something—the language of some community, "*une langue*." This knowledge must not be incomplete, or imperfect, or false: It must be the perfect reproduction of some external language.

DeSaussure, Chomsky, indeed all researchers customarily take perfect mastery of a language to be the crucial case, and a perfect speaker's linguistic knowledge—a speaker who has mastered a "real language" to perfection—to be the primary object of the linguist's efforts. But what does it mean that a speaker masters a language perfectly well; what must this knowledge be like in order to qualify as native? The common *façon de parler* in these matters somehow implies that there are "real, fully-fledged languages," such as English, Latin or Kilivila, and that speakers "know" them to a greater or lesser degree. But this is a myth. Neither is there a structurally well-defined "external language": A point repeatedly made by both sociolinguists and theoretical linguists. Nor is the perfect internal representation of such a structurally well-defined and stable entity the normal case: It is a myth. This is clear to everybody who ever tried to answer the

most frequent question posed to any linguist (“How many languages do you speak?”) or the second-most frequent question (“How many languages are there on earth?”). I always say “5,000” (to the second question); the only person not happy with this answer is myself, because I know that there is no such clearly-shaped and well-defined entity as “a language,” let alone 5,000 of them. The honest scholar feels obliged to explain that there are no clear borderlines, that there are many dialects and registers, that it is arbitrary whether one counts Frisian and Dutch, Dutch and Standard German, Standard German and Swiss German as variants of one and the same language or not, that “a language” is a dialect with an army and a navy, and so forth. No layman wants to hear this, understandably so. Most linguists don’t want to hear it, either, not understandably so. Say there are 5,000 languages on earth; there are 193 countries. This means that there are—on average—26 languages per country, with a range between 1 and several hundred. Two semesters of statistical training inform the linguist that this does not necessarily mean that every inhabitant of a country speaks 26 languages (on average). Multilingualism of a country does transfer to multilingualism of its inhabitants. But it would be equally silly to conclude that monolingualism is the norm. *The normal case is that every person has varying knowledge of different languages:* That is a good way to state the facts for the layman who believes that there are well-defined entities called “languages.” But there aren’t; a “real language” is a normative fiction. Really, human beings, equipped with this species-specific mental capacity called human language faculty, manage to copy, with varying degrees of success, the ways in which other people speak. They develop learner varieties—one, two, many. In some cases, they push this process to a degree where their own competence to speak and to understand does not saliently differ from that of their social environment (or, perhaps, a special group within their social environment, such as schoolteachers). Then, linguists speak of “perfect mastery,” but this perfect mastery is just mastery of a special case of a learner variety, in which neither the learner nor native speakers notice any difference, or at least

any difference they would consider of particular *social* importance. It is not the cognitive representation of something (“a real language”) fundamentally different from the representations of other learner varieties.

Normally, a speaker’s language faculty also allows developing and storing many different learner varieties at the same time. All are manifestations of the human language faculty; investigating them can inform one not only about the nature of the acquisition process but also about the nature of the human language faculty itself. They do not enjoy the same social and normative reputation as a “real language.” But this does not mean that a “real language” is more important for an understanding of the human language capacity than other learner varieties that are “less perfect”: This perspective is surely not the received one.

Can Learner Varieties Really Tell Something About Human Language Capacity?

Der Sineser hat sich durch seine steife Einsilbigkeit den Weg zu aller weitem Kultur verschlossen; aber die Sprache des Huronen oder Grönländers hat alles in sich, sich zu der Sprache eines Plato oder Voltaire zu erheben. [The Chinese, by his stiff monosyllabicity, has precluded himself from any further culture; but the language of the Greenlander and the Huron has any chance to rise to the language of a Plato or Voltaire.] (Adelung, 1806, p. xxv)

One might laugh at Adelung’s odd idea that a language should have a rich morphological structure in order to qualify as a serious language. But one wonders whether the common view of “real languages” is so far from a perspective that an L2 learner’s way of expression as a highly imperfect manifestation of the innate capacity to learn and to use “a language”: a manifestation that is restricted, flawed, poor in its structural and lexical possibilities, and hence simply not of particular interest to anyone who wants to understand the nature of the human language capacity. This view, though understandable, is wrong for at least two reasons. First, even if learner varieties were imperfect manifestations, this

still would not mean that studying them cannot be highly instructive for an understanding of the underlying capacity. To deny this fact would be as ridiculous as saying that biology should not deal with more elementary forms of life, such as bacteria, molluscs, or the humble fruit fly, but should only devote its attention to life in its most advanced, most complex manifestations, for example, the gentle tiger or the human being. In fact, it is precisely the study of elementary forms which has advanced biology to its present rank within the sciences; these forms do not show everything possible in the evolution of living organisms, but they are more transparent in their structural properties and processes.

Second, learner varieties vary considerably. After all, they reflect a continuum of simple to very complex forms; hence, they also differ in what they can tell us about the human language faculty. There is no reason to assume that the learner variety of a very advanced learner of German, who speaks it with a strong accent, distinct traces of English word order, wrong choice of prepositions and without any case marking on nouns, is a less perfect manifestation of the human language capacity than Standard German as spoken by its native speakers, or at least the more educated among them. This learner's variety of German is just not like what the German grammar books want, nor like what the indigenous population speaks if it speaks as the grammar wants it to. It is "imperfect" because it deviates from a norm; this norm can be set by a descriptive grammar, or by the habits of some social group. The fact that this variety is "imperfect" has nothing to do with the nature of the human language capacity; after all, German could be like this learner variety. (Maybe it should.)

The case is different for very elementary learner varieties—say, the variety of a learner who has just arrived in a country and knows nothing but a few nouns, a verb or two, and some rote forms. Investigating such a learner's production may be not very rewarding; most of the potential of the human language capacity cannot apply. Still, some of the latter's properties may be visible even at this elementary level. One might ask, for example, what

happens if the learner tries to put two words together: Is this done completely at random, does it follow the principles of the first language, or are there some universal constraints? Investigation becomes more and more instructive, the more complex and richer the learner variety gets.

For example, in a large crosslinguistic and longitudinal research project, we examined how 40 adult learners picked up the language of their social environment by everyday communication (Perdue, 1993). We regularly registered and analysed their production over about 30 months. This production, and the way in which it evolved, varied in many respects; but it also showed a number of striking similarities. One of the core findings was the existence of a special language form we called the *Basic Variety*. All learners, independent of source language and target language, developed and used it; about one-third of them also fossilised at this level—that is, they learned more words, but they did not complexify their utterances in other respects, particularly in morphology or syntax. Like any form of human language, the Basic Variety has a lexicon—a repertoire of minimal meaningful expressions and compositional rules, rules which allow the speaker to construct more complex expressions from simpler ones. In the Basic Variety, most lexical items stem from the target language. They are uninflected and, although they occasionally vary in form, this variation is not accompanied by functional variation; in other words, there is no functional morphology. By far most lexical items correspond to nouns, verbs and adverbs; closed-class items, in particular determiners, subordinating elements, and prepositions, are rare, if present at all.

We noted 3 types of rules according to which these lexical items were combined into larger units:

1. Phrasal: these rules have to do with the lexical category (noun, verb, etc.); if a verb (i.e., the uninflected verb stem) governs two arguments, then it is normally placed between these arguments.

2. Semantical: Rules that relate to semantic properties of the arguments; thus, the argument that exerts the strongest control over the situation is normally placed first.
3. Pragmatical: Rules relating to specific pragmatic functions, such as topic-focus structure, the introduction and maintenance of information, etc.; in the Basic Variety, the focal element is regularly in last position.

In the production of a concrete utterance, these organisational principles interact: Normally, they go hand in hand, but sometimes, they also get into conflict, and these conflicts turn out to be germs of further elaboration. (I shall not discuss this further here, but see Klein & Perdue, 1997, for a detailed presentation and the articles by Bierwisch, Comrie, Schwartz, and Meisel in the same issue of *Second Language Research* for a critical discussion.)

In the present context, two facts about the Basic Variety are particularly remarkable. First, all speakers in our sample used it at some time; in fact, many stopped at this level. If this is correct in principle, then the properties of the Basic Variety cannot be derived from the particular languages involved, except for the choice of lexical items: The Basic Variety must somehow reflect principles dictated by the human language faculty. Second, it is highly efficient for communicative purposes. Any communicative problem is usually due to a lexical gap, rather than to the absence of a particular morphosyntactical feature. Note that there is no functional inflection whatsoever: no tense, no aspect, no mood, no agreement, no case marking, no gender assignment; nor are there, for example, any expletive elements. Still, people tell, for example, very complex stories, just by clever use of some adverbials, some particles with temporal meaning, and pragmatical principles. In other words, much of what Adelung (1806) and others have felt so constitutive of "a real language," and much of what constitutes a classroom acquisition is simply absent, but this does not seem to matter much. After all, there are languages, such as Mandarin Chinese, which, some traces aside, also lack functional inflection, without apparent harm to their speakers.

Two lessons spring from this. First, researchers probably overrate the role of particular structural properties of “real languages.” Sure, German has this complex system of noun inflection (“I would rather decline two beers than a single German noun,” Mark Twain purportedly said), and Spanish has a complex system of verb forms, and Sanskrit has a complex system of everything. But the existence of such features is in no way a constitutive trait of the human language faculty. Second, why do some manifestations of the human language capacity have these, and other, complexifications, whereas others do not? Where and why are they necessary, where are they just decorum, faithfully handed down from one generation to the next without any deeper reason, highly esteemed by linguists, but utterly detested by second language learners? The study of learner varieties, of their internal systematicity and of their systematical development over time allows us to address and to eventually to answer these questions. It is SLA research which allows us to get a more realistic picture of what is essential and what is peripheral in the human language capacity.

Conclusion

This is just a theory. But I need facts. (from a detective novel)

In the introduction, I raised three questions concerning the present state of SLA research: What has it achieved for language teaching? How close is it to a theory of second language acquisition? What is its status within the chorus of disciplines that deal with language? To all of these, my answer was quite skeptical. Subsequently, I tried to explain why this work had so little impact on linguistics in general. The reason, I argued, is simply that so far, it has nothing of real interest to contribute to a deeper understanding of human language. Researchers must consider learner varieties as primary manifestations of our innate language faculty, no less important than so-called “real languages.” They are not just bad copies of some target, from which they

deviate to varying extent, but objects in their own right: A “real language” is just a special case, in which a learner variety does not perceptibly differ from the way in which the learner’s social environment speaks; as a research object, it is not privileged in any way. I now briefly return to the two other questions.

No scientific endeavour can be pleased with the mere discovery of some facts, interesting as these may be. What researchers eventually are aiming for is a set of general principles, from which the individual observations can be deduced: “a theory.” Now, this term can be understood in various ways; more often than not, it is just a label for a collection of more or less well-motivated speculations. In this sense, there are many theories of SLA. However, if the term is meant to be more than “just a theory,” it is fair to say that researchers do not have a theory of SLA. Is the learner variety perspective, defended in the preceding section, such a theory, or is it at least close to such a theory? The answer is “no,” for two reasons. First, it is just a way of looking at a range of linguistic phenomena, an approach that eventually leads to a deeper understanding of the acquisition process and of the human language faculty. But as such, it does not state strong general principles which cover all known evidence and correctly predict new findings, as a serious theory, say the theory of gravity or quantum mechanics, does. Second, it seems misguided to look for a comprehensive theory of SLA. The phenomena to be covered are simply too divergent; it would be like the quest for “a theory of nature.” Someone who sets out to learn a new language has to acquire all sorts of new knowledge and skills. Suppose you are in a German pub, you just had a beer and you want another beer, then the most straightforward and therefore the best way to express this is “Noch ein Bier, bitte!” You may learn this as a rote form, a particular useful one in this case. But if you want it to be part of your productive competence, if you want to do this in the same way in which a native speaker does it, then you must learn a wealth of things; you must learn: (a) the sound-meaning coupling of these four words; (b) that “noch” does not mean “still” in this case, but something like “another one”; (c) to pronounce the long vowel in

“Bier” without any diphthongisation, as normally done by speakers with English as a source language; (d) to omit some parts of the underlying full expression (it is an elliptical construction); (e) to mark the accusative—something simple in this case, because it is identical with the nominative, but more difficult if you happen to order wine (where you have to say “einen Wein” rather than “ein Wein”); (f) to use “bitte” appropriately (in German, as a first turn, but also as a third turn, in response to “thank you”); and so on and so on. A great deal of this knowledge concerns entirely peripheral properties of German. There is no deeper reason why /i:/ is not slightly diphthongised in German (except in some northern dialects), or why the final /r/ in “Bier” is usually vocalised, rather than, for example, flapped or retroflex. These are just things you have to learn piece by piece. Such piecemeal learning may also obey some general rules; however, should this be the case, the underlying principles are surely not the same as those that tell you what the precise range of usages of some lexical item is, or which elements you can omit in an elliptical utterance, or when you should say “bitte” and when you had better not. If one really wants to understand what happens, and what ought to happen, when people learn a language, all of this must be investigated. But I do not believe that there can be a universal, meaningful theory of the entire processes that happen when someone learns a language. Hence, it seems pointless to strive for “a theory of second language acquisition.” No such theory is possible if it is not to become void of content and hence uninteresting. This does not mean, however, that the aim of research efforts should be merely a listing of facts. What are needed, therefore, are *partial theories*; that is, theories that state the principles behind what happens in particular areas of knowledge acquisition. One may hope that one day some of these partial theories will converge without losing their empirical content.

When I said that a great deal, if not most, of what has to be learned concerns “peripheral properties,” this does not mean that these properties are unimportant; they are just not essential to the understanding of the human language capacity. Whether the German word “Getränk” covers alcoholic as well as non-alcoholic

beverages, whether the voiceless stops in this word are aspirated or not, whether it is “der Getränk, das Getränk, die Getränk”—all of this does not matter when one wants to understand the principles which underlie the function and structure of human language. But it is utterly important if you want to speak German like a native speaker, or as some norm wants to have it. Then, you must precisely copy these features, funny and idiosyncratic as they may be, because deviation is punished. Precisely these features are those that seem most difficult for adult learners, in contrast to children; the age effect in language learning is essentially observed for peripheral properties. In any event, this is the point where the “target deviation perspective” has its legitimate place. Therefore, I do not believe that the two perspectives I contrasted above are mutually exclusive. No perfect replication is possible without taking something for the norm. If SLA researchers want to understand why some learners miss this norm in certain ways, then they must study the errors; the better they have understood the reasons for these errors, the better they can systematically intervene in the learning process. But this perspective tells little about the nature of the human language capacity, and it tells little about the principles of acquisition. To this end, learners’ productions and comprehension must be analysed in their own right: Learner varieties must be seen as independent, as normal manifestations of the human language faculty; SLA researchers are the ones that study them and uncover the principles that determine their structure and their function.

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