

Introduction

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**Generative Perspectives on Language Acquisition:
Empirical findings, theoretical considerations and
crosslinguistic comparisons**

Edited by Harald Clahsen

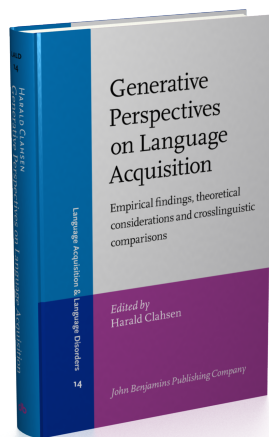
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Introduction

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Twenty years ago, the field of language acquisition research appeared to be relatively clearly demarcated and easy to access. Simplifying somewhat, we might say that researchers could, typically, be assigned to one of the following three schools of thought. One group, the so-called nativists, believed in a strong innate component for language acquisition. The second group — known as interactionists — focused on the role of caretaker-child communication for acquiring language, while the third group, the cognitivists, believed that language acquisition is driven by the same mechanisms as a person's general cognitive development.

Today, however, it is far from clear whether there still exists a field called “language acquisition” like before. The specialization of research questions and topics of empirical investigation has gone so far that we can now identify several subdisciplines of what used to be called the field of language acquisition research. Within each subdiscipline, new and highly specific controversial issues have arisen, competing theoretical approaches are being discussed, and each area has its own conferences, workshops, etc. Consider, for instance, one of the major international get-togethers for language acquisition researchers, the annual Boston University Conference on Language Development. During the last few years, there have been separate sections for “syntax & linguistic theory” and “morphology & words” (to take only two of a number of subdisciplines that have emerged over the last years.) The participants in these two sections of the BU conference are virtually in complementary distribution. That is, in the morphology section, you will typically find yourself surrounded by psychologists, whereas in the syntax section you are likely to be sitting among a group of theoretical linguists — but not *vice versa*. The methods of investigation that

are typically used within each group are different: whereas experiments with children and computer simulations are used in morphology research, the analysis of speech corpora is the predominant method in studies on the acquisition of syntax. The issues, too, are different, even though they may not necessarily be specific to either syntax or morphology, such as the connectionist-vs.-symbolist debate in morphology, or notions like “parameter setting” and “continuity” in syntax. Note that these issues are equally pertinent to the acquisition of sentence structure and the acquisition of word structure, but for some reason a somewhat arbitrary division of issues has taken place. What happens at the BU conference is, I think, indicative of a general trend towards greater specialization in language acquisition studies. Casual inspection of some major scientific journals would also corroborate this picture. Just count the number of papers on morphology that appeared in the journal “Language Acquisition” and compare it with the number of syntax acquisition papers in “Cognition” — you will find that both figures are close to zero! The reason for this is obvious: whereas “Language Acquisition” seems to have specialized in syntax, “Cognition” seems to prefer papers on the acquisition of morphology. Some acquisition researchers are rather worried about the splitting up of what used to be the field of language acquisition into several more or less autonomous subdisciplines. To prevent the field from disintegrating even further, conferences and workshops are organized at which participants are invited to “cross boundaries”, and organizers strive to provide acquisition researchers with a “unified account”, or an “integrated perspective” on language acquisition. In my experience, these attempts usually remain quite fruitless, and they have certainly not helped the field to become more coherent, or led to greater integration.

One might indeed regret the fact that it is increasingly difficult to oversee the various subdisciplines of language acquisition research. However, disintegration of the field is only one part of the story. The other part is quite the opposite, namely the integration of previously unconnected, or only loosely connected, fields of research. Consider, for example, the study of the acquisition of syntax. Some years ago, an experienced and highly respected colleague warned me to be cautious whenever theoretical syntacticians tampered with language acquisition issues. “They only use your findings if they suit their theories”, he told me, “and they won’t get their fingers dirty by analyzing or even quantifying language acquisition data.” However, all this has now changed, and the collection of papers in the present volume provides a clear testimony of this change. Syntacticians now analyze and sometimes even quantify child language data, and they use this kind of evidence along with the traditional adult

data to test their theories. Acquisition researchers, in turn, use insights from syntactic theory to make sense of their data. The days when at acquisition conferences, syntacticians would contribute by telling you amusing anecdotes about their own children seem to be over. In short, the subdiscipline of syntax acquisition research has developed closer links with theoretical linguistics, and this has led to greater integration of previously separate fields of research. For some reason, syntax acquisition research seems to be the driving force here. Other subdisciplines, such as the acquisition of morphology, have not yet developed similarly close links to theoretical linguistics.

The major aim of this book is to enhance the existing but still somewhat fragile links between language acquisition research and theoretical linguistics. With regard to previous research, this seems to be a most promising avenue for the study of syntax, and this is why the book focusses on the acquisition of syntax and on syntactic theory, specifically on Chomskyan Generative Grammar.

The theme of this book is generative perspectives on language acquisition, and this notion covers some of the basic assumptions and research questions shared by the authors of this volume. Let me just focus here on two basic characteristics of the generative research program in language acquisition; more comprehensive accounts can be found, e.g., in Goodluck (1991) and Atkinson (1992). The first one is that the child is seen as the major protagonist in language acquisition, and that the acquisition of language structure is explicable in terms of mechanisms inherent to the child. Though no generative acquisition researcher would seriously question the fact that children learn something from their parents' speech, they still maintain that children end up knowing more about language structure than was contained within the information they found in the environment. One example would be the ability to reject ungrammatical sentences for which direct information was not available from the input. This view contrasts with a popular line of thought — represented for example in the works of C. Snow, M. Halliday and their collaborators — according to which language acquisition is seen as an interactive process in which caretakers and children mutually accommodate. Generative acquisition researchers make the specific assumption that children do not have access to information about which strings of words are ungrammatical, i.e., to what is called negative evidence about the particular language they are acquiring. There are several reasons why this might be a plausible assumption. First, children cannot always trust their parents: even if parents sometimes correct their children's ungrammatical sentences, children do not receive feedback from their parents for all the ungrammatical sentences they produce. Second, caretakers differ in terms of the

kinds of feedback they provide: yet their children are similar in what they acquire about the structure of a particular language. Third, parents' corrections are not uniquely marked as corrections; it is therefore hard for the child to know what to count as a correction (cf. Marcus 1993 for more arguments and some empirical findings on this). The conclusion that generative acquisition researchers, including the ones represented in this book, have drawn is that children's development of language structure should be accounted for without relying on specific environmental requirements such as negative evidence, or specific features of caretaker behavior.

The second characteristic of the generative research program in language acquisition is the claim that with respect to knowledge of language structure, young children and their parents are not so different as one might think. This means that even though two-year olds talk differently from their parents, the system underlying their knowledge of language structure is said to be basically the same as that of their parents. Two-year olds and their parents are both claimed to represent their knowledge of language in the form of grammars, and the architecture as well as the categories and contents of these grammars are largely identical. This view contrasts with other approaches to language acquisition in which developmental mechanisms are postulated that hold for children but not for adults, or for specific well-defined developmental stages but not for the steady final state of language acquisition (cf. for example Slobin's 1985 operating principles or some of Clark's (1993) principles of lexical development). Generative acquisition researchers strive to do without such developmental principles; instead, many subscribe to what Pinker (1984) called the continuity assumption, which states that the child's learning device does not change over time and does not generate developmental patterns that are impossible in the adult language; cf., however, Atkinson (this volume) for an opposing view. The continuity assumption provides an external constraint, or guideline, for analyses of child language: all the sentences children use throughout all stages should be analyzed in terms of the same constraints that are assumed for the adult grammar, i.e., in terms of a limited set of X-bar principles and other elements of UG. Advocates of continuity would want to avoid positing specific principles or properties that hold for child but not for adult language and assuming radical changes in the child's learning device, unless they are forced to do so by empirical evidence.

The continuity assumption might be useful as a guideline for analyzing child language data, but it does not solve the developmental problem of language acquisition. Clearly, the speech of young children is different from that of

adults, some constructions develop earlier than others, and there are identifiable developmental sequences in the acquisition of language structure which hold across different individuals, some even across different languages. How can we explain development if the learning device is assumed not to change over time? The answers to this question are controversial among generative acquisition researchers. Here are three popular scenarios:

Full competence plus external developments

The first approach claims that young children when they begin to produce sentences already have full grammatical competence of the particular language they are exposed to, and that differences between sentences children produce and adults' sentences should be attributed to external factors, i.e. to developments in domains other than grammatical competence. Consider, as an illustration, Weissenborn's (1992) analysis of early null subjects. According to Weissenborn, young children leave out many subjects that are required in the adult language because they have not yet acquired the appropriate pragmatic constraints that hold for null versus overt subjects in the adult language. The grammatical constraints and parameter settings, however, are said to be the same for child and adult language. Thus, the child's grammatical knowledge is identical to that of adults, but the sentences children use differ from those of their parents due to developmental delays in other domains. In the present book, the paper by Hyams represents this view most clearly.

Full competence plus maturation

The second approach assumes that UG principles and most of the grammatical categories are operative when the child starts to produce sentences. Differences between the sentences of young children and those of adults are explained in terms of maturation. The claim is made that there are UG-external learning constraints which restrict the availability of grammatical categories to the child up to a certain stage and are then successively lost due to maturation. Consider, for example, Wexler (1994) who argued that the feature TENSE matures at around the age of 2;5, and Rizzi (1993) who suggested that the constraint which requires all root clauses to be headed by CP in adult language is not yet operative in young children, but that it matures at the age of approximately 2;5. With these maturational hypotheses, Wexler and Rizzi tried to derive a set of observed differences between children's and adults' sentences from a single source. The maturation hypothesis is represented in several contributions to the present book. Rizzi's account is adopted in the study by Haegeman. A maturation-

tional hypothesis is also assumed by Harris & Wexler. The theoretical issues involved are explicitly discussed in Atkinson.

Gradual structure-building plus lexical learning

The third approach shares with the two other views the assumption that all UG principles are available to the child from the onset of acquisition. However, the grammar of the particular language the child is acquiring is claimed to develop gradually, through the interaction of available abstract knowledge, e.g. about X-bar principles, and the child's learning of the lexicon. This view does not violate the continuity assumption as the child's learning device does not change over time. Rather, grammatical development under this view results from an increase in the child's lexicon, i.e., in the set of lexical and morphological items which the child has acquired. Three studies in the present book argue in favour of this approach: Radford, Meisel & Ezeizabarrena and Clahsen, Eisenbeiss & Penke.

All the papers in the present book consider child language development, and the focus is on monolingual children; only the paper by White explicitly addresses issues of bilingual language acquisition. The volume attempts to provide a cross-linguistic perspective on the issues under consideration. Chapters 1 to 10 present new evidence from the acquisition of six different languages (in order of appearance): English, German, Basque, Italian, Dutch, and French. Chapters 11 and 12 (Platzack, Roeper) are mainly theoretical contributions which rely on existing evidence, (in Platzack's paper taken from Swedish and in Roeper's from different Germanic languages). The final chapter (Atkinson) provides an overall commentary focussing on the issue of continuity in grammatical development.

Child English

Harris & Wexler argue, on the basis of spontaneous speech data and an elicited production experiment, that English-speaking children go through a stage at which the finite inflection on verbs, in particular the third person singular present tense, is optionally used. They also found that in negative sentences, *do*-support is optional, and that in sentences without *do* the main verb is likely not to be marked for TENSE, i.e., sentences such as *he not goes* are extremely rare. In previous work, Wexler (1994) argued that children acquiring French, German, Dutch, and Mainland Scandinavian go through a stage at which both finite and nonfinite verbs appear in the root clause, but in different word orders: finite verbs raise to some higher functional projection and non-finite verbs do

not raise. Wexler explained this pattern in terms of maturation: the TENSE projection has not yet become obligatory in every root representation, and thus infinitival verbs are possible in such circumstances. The purpose of the present paper is to demonstrate that English-speaking children also go through the optional infinitive stage.

Radford suggests a three-stage VP>IP>CP model in which functional architecture is gradually created through lexical learning or, to use his term, minimal lexical projection: the acquisition of a new type of lexical or morphological item will lead to the projection of a new phrase. Like Harris & Wexler, Radford postulates a stage of early English at which functional categories such as IP are optionally projected, but in contrast to Harris & Wexler, Radford argues that this is preceded by a stage at which the child's grammar does not generate any kind of functional categories, but only lexical projections. This is an extension of the small clause hypothesis Radford originally proposed in his (1990) book. In the present paper, he provides an analysis of Case marking of subjects as well as of early negative and interrogative sentences in the small-clause stage, and he argues that the small clause stage seems to exist in the acquisition of languages other than English (Mauritian Creole, Spanish, Welsh).

Hyams offers a new treatment of null subjects in early English, and she reports some new findings on the development of DPs in child Dutch. She proposes to maintain the full competence hypothesis of syntactic development, and to explain child/adult differences in terms of an underdeveloped pragmatic component. Specifically, the claim is made that young children do not have a pragmatic principle of Tense/Definiteness interpretation (= Rule T, by analogy with Rule I of Reinhart 1983) which would force them not to use infinitives in contexts in which adults would use finite (i.e. tense-marked) verbs and which would disallow indeterminate NPs in contexts in which adults would use definite NPs. Instead, as long as the pragmatic principle has not been acquired, children's grammars are said to generate underspecified inflectional categories, such as INFL without tense features and Det without definiteness features. In this way, she accounts for the major characteristics of early root infinitives and early DPs.

Child German

Clahsen, Eisenbeiss & Penke investigate phrase-structure development in terms of the lexical learning hypothesis and the notion of underspecification. Three theoretical claims are made and tested on longitudinal data from five monolingual children. First, early child grammars may generate underspecified phrase-

structure positions, i.e. positions with fewer features or feature specifications than the corresponding positions in the adult grammar. This accounts for subtle differences between child and adult German with respect to verb placement. Second, new features and feature specifications are added to existing syntactic positions as a result of the child's learning of lexical and morphological items. This explains developmental correlations between lexical acquisitions, e.g. inflectional paradigms, and syntactic properties, e.g. verb and subject raising. Third, functional categories gradually emerge based on X-bar Theory and lexical/morphological evidence from the input. This accounts for developmental dissociations in the creation of functional categories.

Penner & Weissenborn argue that there is evidence for a complete DP structure in German from the very first stages of acquisition. This evidence, they argue, supports the full competence (= strong continuity) assumption. They present a detailed analysis of the subtle differences in the DP-system of adults between Standard German and Bernese Swiss German and argue that differences in the order of acquisition of these systems can be explained by assuming that some kinds of input data are more easily accessible to children than others. Specifically they claim that syntactic parameters which involve a root/non-root distinction can be set relatively early, because the input data that is required to set these parameters is highly salient, whereas paradigmatically encoded information, e.g. concerning inflection, is less easily accessible from the input. This leads to the expectation that possessor raising to Spec-DP should emerge early in development in both varieties of German, because, with respect to possessor DPs, there is a root/non-root contrast in the input which is said to be easily accessible. The acquisition of the Standard German possessive marker, however, should be delayed due to its morphological defectiveness. The authors present longitudinal data from two children to demonstrate that these expectations are actually borne out.

Child Basque

Meisel & Ezeizabarrena's study is based on longitudinal data from two bilingual children (Spanish/Basque) and one monolingual Basque child. They present several findings on the acquisition of subject-verb agreement and object-verb agreement which they interpret in terms of gradual structure-building plus lexical learning. In the earliest phase represented in their data, Meisel & Ezeizabarrena did not find any evidence for AGR-projections; the children use default forms of finite verbs, there is no agreement paradigm of distinct affixes and no verb raising across negation. This system has changed in what they call phase 3. At

this point in development, children have acquired the subject–verb-agreement paradigm, and they raise finite verbs across negation, indicating that AGRS-P has become syntactically active. Meisel & Ezeizabarrena also found that subject agreement emerges before object agreement, and they point to Georgopoulos (1991) for a similar claim about the typology of agreement systems. They rely on the Extended Projection Principle, a principle of UG that makes explicit reference to subjects, but not to objects, to explain why subject agreement emerges earlier than object agreement.

Child Dutch

Haegeman investigates the development of early clause structure in Dutch, based on longitudinal data from one child, Hein, between 2;4 and 3;1. Haegeman shows that the sentences with non-finite verbs that Hein uses do not contain *wh*-phrases, subject or object clitics and hardly any negatives. She derives these properties from Rizzi's (1993) maturational hypothesis, according to which root infinitives are truncated structures that do not project a CP-layer, and she argues that alternative approaches that treat root infinitives as full CPs (cf. e.g. Boser *et al.* 1992 for German) fail to account for the observed characteristics of early root infinitives.

Child Italian

Guasti takes a striking fact about early English and develops this into a cross-linguistic investigation. In a previous study, Guasti, Thornton & Wexler (1995) found that English-speaking children produce adult-like affirmative questions, while at the same time negative questions contained many errors, e.g. no subject–aux inversion, double auxiliaries, etc. For the present paper, Guasti has replicated this study on early Italian, with different results: Italian children produce adult-like affirmative and negative questions from the beginning. Elaborating on Rizzi (1992), she assumes that adult Italian differs from adult English with respect to the features specified in the Comp-position: $\langle +\text{Infl} \rangle$ in English, and $\langle +\text{Infl}, +\text{V} \rangle$ in Italian. With respect to child language, Guasti assumes a default strategy of placing negation inside the projection containing the $\langle +\text{V} \rangle$ feature. In Italian, this can easily be achieved in questions since both IP and CP contain the feature $\langle +\text{V} \rangle$, and thus children perform like adults in Italian questions. In English negative questions, the clitic negation *n't* which is attached to the auxiliary needs to be raised to Comp. This, however, violates the default strategy as Comp does not have any $\langle +\text{V} \rangle$ features in English. This

conflict is claimed to be the reason for the errors English-speaking children produce in such cases.

Child French

Hamann, Rizzi & Frauenfelder examine subject and object clitics in the speech of one monolingual child between 2;0 and 2;10. Their data demonstrate that this child shows mastery of the correct positioning of clitic forms from the beginning of data collection. The authors also found that this child acquires subject clitics prior to object clitics. Finally, subject clitics appear to be restricted to tensed clauses, rarely occurring in root infinitives. The paper discusses the implications of these findings for Rizzi's (1993) truncation hypothesis and for the linguistic analysis of Romance clitics.

White investigates the acquisition of French clitics by two five-year old children in a bilingual setting with English as their first language. Her empirical findings are largely parallel to those of Hamann, Rizzi & Frauenfelder: clitics are placed in the appropriate clitic positions, subject clitics appear adjacent to finite verbs, and subject clitics are acquired before object clitics. White adopts Sportiche's (1992) idea that clitic pronouns head their own projections. This implies that French has clitic projections, whereas English has not. The early acquisition of (subject) clitics in her bilingual children, however, and the parallels with monolingual French children suggest that the children's knowledge of English did not have any negative effects on their acquisition of French clitics. The paper discusses the implications of this finding for approaches to second language development.

The two subsequent papers, by Platzack and by Roeper use previous empirical findings and reanalyze them from the perspective of the Minimalist program of Chomsky (1995).

Platzack relies on findings from a wide range of subjects - monolingual children, aphasics, bilingual adults and language-impaired children - all with reference to Swedish data. Platzack infers a markedness hypothesis from Chomsky's theory: overt movement is more costly and thus more marked than invisible or covert movement. Assuming a universal Spec-Head-Complement order for all phrases (cf. Kayne 1994), he predicts that because it is unmarked and does not involve any overt movement, the various groups of subjects he is concerned with will fall back on this basic word order and will have difficulty acquiring other orders. In this way, Platzack explains delays in the acquisition of verb second, the use of verb-object orders in the acquisition of SOV languages, the use of preverbal negation in the acquisition of Swedish, etc.

Roeper focusses on another aspect of Chomsky's theory, namely the idea of feature-based projections, and applies it to acquisition. According to Chomsky (1995), UG no longer contains a fixed set of categories NP, VP, PP, etc., but instead makes use of a so-called merger operation which, in principle allows for an infinite set of possible phrase markers to be generated, corresponding to the features associated with individual lexical items. Roeper argues that Chomsky's theory allows us to represent the underspecified functional categories that children develop in the course of acquisition, as well as micro-steps in phrase-structure development in which children create syntactic positions with lexically-specific subcategorizations.

In the final chapter, **Atkinson** critically discusses some central issues of generative studies of children's syntactic development focussing on the particular variant of the Full Competence Hypothesis argued for by Ken Wexler and his collaborators (Poeppel & Wexler 1993; Wexler 1994; Harris & Wexler, this volume). Atkinson argues that methodological arguments supposed to support the FCH ("Assume full competence from day zero, and you will not have to explain development") are in fact dubious. Atkinson also claims that the empirical evidence for the FCH is not as sound as Wexler makes us believe and that the "optional infinitive" stage is preceded by an earlier stage at which there is no evidence for any functional categories in the child's grammar. Furthermore, Atkinson criticizes structure-building models, particularly Radford (this volume) and Clahsen, Eisenbeiss & Penke (this volume), for not making explicit enough the developmental mechanisms that lead the child from one stage to the next. Atkinson himself feels that the maturation of functional categories remains an interesting option which has not been discounted.

Most of the chapters in this book have grown out of a research workshop held at the University of Essex, 18-20 March 1994. The main purpose of this workshop was to bring together researchers studying language acquisition from a generative perspective and to discuss their latest findings. In addition, the participants of the workshop discussed future perspectives for cross-linguistic acquisition research specifically in the European context, and, as a result, they have launched an initiative for setting up collaborative research projects on language acquisition in Europe.

The workshop and this initiative would not have been possible without financial support from the Research Promotion Fund of the University of Essex and an additional grant provided by the British Academy. Thanks are also due to my colleagues in the Department of Language and Linguistics at Essex,

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