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## TOWARDS AN ECOLOGY OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Like any other scientific enterprise, the study of language acquisition (LA) evolves: the issues which dominate its agenda, the consensus on what constitute its 'data', the hypotheses that motivate its research programmes—all wax and wane in the cycles we know and expect in human affairs. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century thinking in language acquisition research was showing signs, we believe, of a new kind of convergence. This volume aims to explore how a number of contemporary approaches and insights in LA research might be coherently interrelated through a perspective that can be called *ecological*. While much research on LA continues to consider the individual acquirer largely in closed-system terms, there is growing attention to the acquirer's extensive interaction with their environment—spatial, social, cultural and so on. Recent studies in such diverse fields as discourse analysis, linguistic anthropology, robotics, and cognitive semantics underline the heuristic value of the perspective promised in our title: ecology of language acquisition. In this introductory chapter we first offer an ecological critique of some dominant paradigms of LA research. We then go on to suggest how an ecological perspective motivates new approaches to acquisition issues, and how it informs each of the contributed chapters which follow. Our hope is that readers of all theoretical persuasions will find in this volume ideas, arguments and insights which, even if not woven into a fully-fledged theoretical fabric, at least point a way to fruitful theoretical reassessment.

### 1. LANGUAGE ACQUISITION RESEARCH: ASSUMPTIONS TO BE QUESTIONED

We begin by examining a number of influential ideas which to a greater or lesser degree underlie most established approaches to the study of LA, even if they no longer clearly inform the theoretical disciplines upon which LA research draws. Because they have often tacitly underpinned research designs and interpretations, we will refer to these dominant ideas as assumptions.

Assumption 1: Languages are clearly distinct from one another, with monolingualism as the societal norm.

The conceptions of language which inform Western science reflect a Western monolingual view of society and socialization, as has been pointed out by, for example, Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (1996) and Nayar (1994). This view has been traced continuously back to a Judeo-Christian (and biblically-enshrined) understanding of the 'curse' of Babel (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996, pp. 437-438). The dominant Western understanding is captured in the maxim: "one person, one nation, one state, one language"—an ideological position which polarizes to the "mother-tongue fascism" elucidated by Hutton (1998). Coherent with this normative view is a concern with and drive towards language codification. As James Milroy (1999) points out, much of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century linguistics depended on the study of "major languages that have been regarded as existing in standard, 'classical' or canonical forms" (p. 16). Although it was made clear several decades ago (Weinreich, Labov & Herzog, 1968) that linguistic theory was in thrall to the idea that elements of a language are uniform (when in fact they are often variable), the belief in some invariant, authoritative form of any language has generally persisted in scholarship as well as in Western culture at large. However, such a belief may not be universal (again, see the discussion by Milroy, 1999, p. 17).

Against the background of a monolingual world view it is not surprising that most studies in language acquisition assume—if tacitly—a large measure of isomorphy between linguistic, political and cultural communities. A logical consequence is the essentially categorical distinction that is reflected in the terms 'L1' and 'L2' (...Ln). It is the monolingual who constitutes the 'pure' case for study (Chomsky, 1986, p.17). The tendency in much acquisition research has been to treat the 'L1' or mother-tongue as the object of 'normal' acquisition, while any other language in an acquirer's life is seen as the occasion for acquisition experience of a different and potentially problematic kind.

Under the hegemony of monolingualism, the complexities of multilinguals' language behavior are marginalized (Kachru, 1996). Yet statistically only a minority of the world's children acquire language in an environment that is 'monolingual', and as Edwards (1994) puts it: "to be bilingual or multilingual is not the aberration supposed by many [...]; it is, rather, a normal and unremarkable necessity for the majority in the world today" (p. 1).

Few researchers have proposed views of the interrelations between languages through their acquisition and use in 'multilingual' environments. Haugen (1972) underlined the importance of seeing 'a' language as existing only in and through its speakers, calling attention to what he called "the life environments of languages", and proposing the notion of the "ecology of language" (p. 343)—a notion since taken up by several scholars including Edwards (1994, p. 136) and Mühlhäusler (1996). However, the programme outlined by Haugen remained essentially taxonomic, without addressing acquisition. He concluded his discussion with a number of "ecological questions" for any given "language", of which the first is: "What is its classification in relation to other languages?" (1972, p. 336). He further proposed a "typology of ecological classification" to relate a language to the others in the world (*ibid.*, p. 337).

The monolingual view is reflected in the theoretical proposals of generativists, who—following Chomsky (1965; 1986)—have framed the goal of primary language

acquisition as the (undifferentiated) 'competence' of a speaker in a particular language without considering the variety of meanings such a concept might have for members of a particular social group. Children may be encouraged or discouraged in the acquisition of a particular vernacular or *lingua franca*, depending on the ideologies and personal preferences of parents, peers and communities. The acquisition of the correct phonology, lexis and morphosyntactic forms of a language is therefore in large measure a result, not of individual motivations, but of the particular socially and culturally concerted activities in which children participate and which make language a *normative* phenomenon (Itkonen, 1991).

Assumption 2: Language acquisition is a human ability that is to an important extent preprogrammed in the human brain.

Lenneberg (1967) saw human language as a species-specific activity, with biologically determined mechanisms of perception, categorization, and so forth. This notion informed much of the research on language ability in the decades which ensued. In some of the speech research the claim was advanced that human speech ability is based in a neurobiologically separate 'module' (see e.g. Fodor, 1983). Whether the 'specialized language engine' hypothesis is more or less strongly formulated, it was a dominant paradigm in late 20<sup>th</sup>-century linguistics, finding its most influential expression in Chomsky's *Universal Grammar* (UG). UG simultaneously addresses the essential form of human languages and the process by which in childhood they are acquired. The UG theory claims that children "know innately" the principles of various possible subsystems that human languages may possess, the manner in which they interact, and the parameters associated with them (Chomsky, 1986, p. 150). UG is thus the language faculty of the child's mind which processes real-world language data and outputs a grammar of the particular language instantiated in the child's environment. UG's concentration on commonalities among the natural languages is forcefully underlined in the claim: "there is only one human language, apart from the lexicon, and language acquisition is in essence a matter of determining lexical idiosyncrasies" (Chomsky, 1989, p. 44). While UG is not explicitly concerned with the acquisition of second or subsequent languages, the possibility that post-primary acquisition proceeds in essentially the same fashion has been explored at some length (see e.g. White, 1989; Cook, 1985; Broselow & Finer, 1991; Flynn, 1993), with recent discussions according UG a full role in post-primary acquisition (e.g. Epstein, Flynn & Martohardjono, 1996). However, as Deacon (1997) has convincingly argued, the characteristics of UG need not be attributed to an evolutionarily anomalous 'language module', but to a species-specific general symbolic capability resulting from the co-evolution of language and the human brain. Cognitive linguistics emphasizes that language is grounded in our particular experience and embodiment (e.g. Ungerer & Schmid, 1996). A further alternative approach to explaining language acquisition is that it arises from the exposure of comparatively simple developmental mechanisms to a complex total environment (see Ellis, 1998).

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