

**NATIVE SPEAKER'S INTUITIONS AND METALINGUISTIC ABILITIES:  
WHAT DO THEY HAVE IN COMMON FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF  
LANGUAGE ACQUISITION?**

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The epistemological assumption common to most theories of language acquisition is that such process concerns the relations between a human organism conceived as the subject of the process and language as the object to be acquired. Divergences arise from considerations about the abilities which should be attributed to the organism such that language as an object would be accessible to it. Or, reversely, about the properties of language on the basis of which judgements on its accessibility are to be made.

Theories such as generative grammar assign to language structural properties which are by definition not amenable to observation. Coherently with it, the organism is conceived as biologically endowed with those properties, i.e., with the principles and parameters (P&P) considered to define the range of possible languages<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, in the case of language acquisition theories which fail to specify those properties, be they behaviourist or constructivist theories, language is taken, implicitly or explicitly, as any other object of learning. This explains why they seem free from the theoretical burden of having to formulate the conditions for the language acquisition process to take place. In any case, the theoretical commitment of accounting for the fact that such process takes time and that qualitative changes take place along it cannot be left out.

The aim of this paper is, first of all, to show that, in spite of being the most important aspect of language acquisition from a phenomenal point of view, change has not been assigned a theoretical status such that it would be possible to replace naive descriptions by theoretically sound explanations. It is also my intention to put into discussion the possibility of looking at change as an effect of language on the child. Although preliminary, such a view shows itself as alternative to the assumption that the subject of the language acquisition process precedes the process, and that the notion of subject can be made coincident with that of organism. Moreover, since the effect of language functioning on the child takes place in his/her interaction with speakers of the language, adult-child interaction will be defined as a structuring relation, namely, in opposition to its current interpretations as use of language in communicative situations.

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<sup>1</sup> As far as I know, in the recent developments of generative grammar displayed in the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995) questions of direct concern to language acquisition have not been yet spelled out. That is why reference is made only to the Principles-and-Parameters Theory (P&P) in this paper.

Difficulties in accounting for change are common to both lines of investigation mentioned above. In what concerns what I have been calling learning theories of language acquisition, qualitative changes are inferred from the linguistic behaviour of the child. Such inferences are drawn from linguistic descriptions of the child's utterances at different points in the time axis. In other words, the specification of what develops comes out from the assignment to the utterances and/or their constituents of a categorial status defined within a given linguistic theory. Although the theoretical consequences of such a methodological step have been generally neglected, their consideration shows both the weaknesses of those proposals and the controversial role of description in accounting for change.

Since the object of linguistic theories is language itself, thus abstracted from its actualization into speech, linguistic categories are unable to represent the particular utterance of a particular child at a certain point of the process.<sup>2</sup> Even more important is the fact that linguistic categories cannot represent change if such notion implies transition from one state to another going from zero knowledge of language towards an idealized state of total knowledge of language. The intermediate states implied by such a notion of change would have to be accounted for in terms of partial knowledge and linguistic categories and structures cannot possibly be used for handling it<sup>3</sup>. A further implication of descriptive accounts of change would be a kind of Bloomfieldian conception of language. In other words, the end-point of such teleological process would represent the mastery of a particular language as the totality of utterances or utterance-types in a particular linguistic community.

Those issues become clearer if one turns to generative grammar in which there is no place for either descriptive procedures or the above concept of change. The state zero of the organism is, indeed, defined as the knowledge of any human possible language, i.e., under the form of an Universal Grammar(UG). The role of the child's experience with a particular language through the exposition to the speech of her/his community is reduced to the effect of both triggering UG and restricting it according to the requirements of that particular language. Transition from the state 0 (S 0) to the state of knowing a particular language, namely, to the steady state (Ss), is a process of selection rather than of development. Two questions arise from such definitions: which is the nature of the change involved in triggering and fixing of parameters? Which kind of evidence would it be supported by?

Answers to such questions are not easy to find either in the generative grammar literature or in works on learnability theory known to be inspired by the former. They may, however, be derived from the conceptual core of the theory as well as from some among Chomsky's statements about the language faculty and language acquisition.

Attention should be first directed to Chomsky's position relatively to the empirical basis of language acquisition. Coherently with the notion of possible language and with his former definition of grammar as a formal apparatus generating only possible sentences, he makes of the native speaker's intuitions the source of

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<sup>2</sup> Strong arguments against descriptive procedures in child language studies can be found already in Chomsky, 1964.

<sup>3</sup> Further discussion of questions related to this topic may be found in Atkinson 1982 and de Lemos 1982.

judgements on the grammaticality of sentences and of those judgements the sole manifestation of the tacit knowledge to be accounted for in non-empiricist views on language. This means that the native speaker's production is altogether rejected as data and, moreover, that the function of judgements on grammaticality is not to provide a list of sentences to be described. They are called upon so that a condition of falsification of hypotheses can be met (Cf. Milner 1989 among others.). It should not be forgotten that judgements on grammaticality are still considered to "provide relevant evidence for the study of language" at the period of P&P theory (Chomsky 1986: 37).

At this point, it becomes clear that the transition from S<sub>0</sub> to S<sub>s</sub> cannot be identified by means of the description of children's utterances at different points of time taken as representative of different states of knowledge of a particular language. What remains still unclear is the nature of changes and their order, since their formulation depends upon both the interrelations among parameters and the relations between a given state of knowledge and the class of possible inputs at a certain point of time. It is worth noting that one of the initial steps of learnability theories was to look for a way to remove the impossibility of assuming a systematic coincidence of the input which would falsify a given hypothesis and the state of knowledge yielding such hypothesis.<sup>4</sup> Similar problems reappear in P&P theory, as explicated in Meisel (1995):

"The triggering of parameter setting is perhaps the most difficult issue to be dealt with here, for it requires the assessment of the role of the input\_ a delicate problem for a theory of language acquisition which holds as one of his fundamental hypotheses that much of the relevant information is not contained in the primary linguistic data." (op. cit.: 18)

To sum up what could be a rather long discussion, accounting for change in generativist approaches to language acquisition would depend on demonstrating the specific effect of the input on a given state of knowledge defined as a specific subset of parameters already selected. This brings out also the question about whether or not parameters allow partial selections and can be ordered.

It should be noted that, while drawing an overview of the P&P theory, Chomsky (1995) gives recognition both to change and to the "series of states" of the language faculty:

"The language faculty has an initial state, genetically determined; in the course of normal development it passes through a series of states in early childhood, reaching a relatively stable steady state that undergoes little subsequent change, apart from the lexicon." (op. cit.: 14, italics mine)

Nonetheless such recognition does not seem to open the possibility of defining what changes from one state to the other. As early as 1976, Chomsky seemed aware of the theoretical obstacles for him to deal both with change and with the empirical counterpart of S<sub>0</sub> and S<sub>s</sub>:

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<sup>4</sup> Further discussion on this topic may be found in Wexler & Culicover 1980, Atkinson 1982, Valian 1989, 1990, Meisel 1995 and de Lemos (in preparation).

“We might proceed, in principle, to explore the physical realizations of the initial and final state and the processes involved in the change of state that take place.

In these domains, much is unknown. In this sense there many misteries here. But we have a certain grasp of the problem and can make some progress by posing and sometimes answering questions.” (Chomsky 1976: 138)

It seems to me that one way out of the problem is represented by the idealizations imposed on the process as necessary in “any serious approach of complex phenomena” (Chomsky 1986: 19). One of those idealizations concerns precisely the issue of intermediate states:

“...irrespective of maturation, order of presentation, or selective availability of evidence, the result of language acquisition is as if it were instantaneous. In particular, intermediate stages attained do not change the principles available for the interpretation of data in a way that affects the state attained”. (op.cit. 54)

On the other hand, definitions of Ss allows us to infer at least what is assumed to hold in intermediate states. From the characterization of Ss as one “that undergoes little subsequent change “(1995: 14), it is, indeed, possible only to suppose that changes are significant in intermediate states. But from Chomsky’s recent uptake of his 1965’s notion of creativity as “a salient property of the steady state” in the sense that “it permits infinite use of finite means”(1995: 15), is it plausible to think of intermediate states as characterizable by some degree of such property?

At this point, it is arguable that language acquisition viewed as a selective process cannot be taken a as series of ordered states of knowledge. Parameter selection as a process triggered by the input may be instead related to the recognition of a particular language, akin to the recognition which is involved in judgements of grammaticality by the native-speaker. In the same line of argumentation, it could be said that the speaker’s intuitions regarding her/his native language amounts to a state of recognition which would function as a definition of Ss, compatible with the recognition involved in parameter selection. If such is the case, change in language acquisition would be better handled as change in the position of the speaker relatively to a particular language.

Such interpretation calls, however, for the explicitation of the child’s position prior to the steady state, namely, of an intermediate state in which the state of knowledge driven out by parameter selection does not permit judgements on grammaticality qualifiable either as correct or as complete. Hence, the problem of distinguishing recognition as a process involved in parameter selection from recognition as implied by judgments of grammaticality.

If it is true that generative theorists have never directed their attention to the need for such distinction, the same does not hold for its empirical counterpart. It is indeed well known that Chomsky (1959) starts by assigning to judgements of grammaticality provided by the “verbal community”, under the form of corrections, the basis for the child’s recognition of sentences and non-sentences of the language s/he is exposed to:

“The child who learns a language has in some sense constructed a grammar for himself on the basis of *the observation of sentences and non-sentences* (i.e. *corrections of the verbal community*).” (op. cit.: 57, italics mine)

Such a view is soon discarded in favour of “a method for selecting one of the [...] hypotheses that are allowed [...] and are compatible with the given primary linguistic data.” (1965: 30) . This method is part of the LAD, namely, part of the biological endowment. Apart from its theoretical reasons, this move accounts for the empirical fact that adults do not usually correct small children’s utterances and that, moreover, children seem impervious to corrections.<sup>5</sup>

A more important empirical aspect of the problem underlies both views: the fact that children are not native-speakers in the sense of being able to make judgements of grammaticality<sup>6</sup>. This is acknowledged also in Chomsky’s criticism of child grammars based on descriptions of utterances. It is in that context that he says:

“ [...] only experimentation of a fairly indirect and ingenious sort may provide evidence that is at all critical for formulating a true account of child’s grammar[...] Thus, for example, the child’s ability to repeat sentences and non-sentences, phonologically possible sequences and phonologically impossible ones, etc., might provide some evidence as to the underlying system he is using”. (Chomsky 1964: 343 )

Needless to say, the requirement of “fairly indirect and ingenious” experiments signals the acknowledgement of an empirical obstacle which, nevertheless, does not affect the theory as it could be the case.

Change in language acquisition as change of the child’s position relatively to language is also an implicit assumption of those among the constructivist proposals which take metalinguistic abilities either as a final attainment in the process of language acquisition or as requiring knowledge of a nature different from the one actualized in ordinary speech.

Such difference tends to be defined as the subject’s activity on language **qua** object, relying thus on the distinction between metalanguage and object-language formulated in Logics and present in Formal Semantics (cf. Lyons 1977: 14). This displacement is a controversial matter in itself. Furthermore, it brings out the question about the nature of the speaker’s relation with language in non-metalinguistic or ordinary speech activities. Since, in most constructivist proposals, language acquisition supposes an object-language to be learned or (re)constructed by the child, her/his activity on the object-language would have to be seen as metalinguistic from the start. This makes the distinction between linguistic and metalinguistic abilities impossible to be sustained.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Pinker 1989.

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion, see de Lemos(forthcoming).

Apparently less obscure from the point of view of the speaker is the rendering of the difference through the opposition between conscious vs. unconscious activity and/or knowledge. That explains why metalinguistic ability is also commonly referred to by the English expression "awareness of language" (cf. E. Clark 1978) and with the French expression "conscience metalinguistique"(cf. Bonnet et Tamine-Gardes 1984). Nevertheless, both expressions seem ambiguous in the sense that they may be read both as conscious activity on language as an object of attention and/or reflection, and as linguistic knowledge made accessible to the speaker her/himself such that it can be made explicit .

It is far from clear what is meant by qualifying the ordinary use of language in production and comprehension of utterances as unconscious. The same holds as far as the language acquisition process is concerned , given that such process is, in some way, linked to ordinary comprehension and production. A possible reading of the term "unconscious" in this context is "implicit". Namely, knowledge that the investigator can infer from the child's use of language but that is not yet accessible to the child at that particular stage. Or, in other words, what the child knows without knowing that s/he knows. The problem at this point is how the child comes to know that she knows what she knows.<sup>7</sup>

The above discussion takes a different direction if one turns to the phenomena which have given rise to issues such as metalinguistic ability, awareness of language, conscious access, etc. As mentioned above, it is generally recognized that the child (or the pre-schooler?) is unable to provide judgments of grammaticality. In contrast, a large set of speech phenomena have been considered as evidence for the child's growing concern with her/his own speech in which regards both its communicative efficacy and its formal aspects. Some of them- re-starts, adjustments, elicited corrections and self-corrections- have been classified as monitoring behaviour( cf. Levelt et al. 1978) . Others, such as playing with sounds and with words, have been taken as practice and others yet- for example, comprehension of puns and riddles-, as evidence of the ability to deal with homonymy and recategorization of words and structures(cf. E. Clark op. cit.: 31).

The above picture shows that there is some disagreement about which phenomena are to be considered evidence of metalinguistic skills and about which skills are really metalinguistic. Speech monitoring is, on the other hand, largely accepted as such, given that it involves assessment, being thus a sort of implicit judgement of acceptability. It is, indeed, speech monitoring which brings about the notion of control and, together with it, the problem of relating it to the language acquisition process both temporally and functionally.

Levelt et al.(op. cit.: 12) treat this problem more like a paradox. According to them, conscious attention to performance is required only during the acquisition of a complex skill, i.e., before its automatization. The reverse seems to occur in language acquisition: the more linguistically mature the child, more aware of language s/he is

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<sup>7</sup> For Karmiloff-Smith(1996, 1992 and other works) internal representations of knowledge become accessible to the subject when, as a result of their being successively redescribed by internal metaprocedures, they finally receive an abstract form . Since her position differs radically from the current approaches to conscious access, for lack of space, it will not be possible to include it into the present discussion.

and less fluent s/he appears to be.<sup>8</sup> Such conclusion seems to corroborate the criticism made above: if subject and object are given in advance, how can one avoid the assignment of a previous knowledge or metalinguistic skills, and/or conscious attention from the start?

Bonnet & Tamine-Gardes (op. cit.) take a different position towards temporal and functional relations between language acquisition and metalinguistic skills. Based on Lyons' (op.cit.), they attempt to associate "conscience metalinguistique" with the reflexive nature of language to argue for the hypothesis that "des formes élémentaires de connaissance et de conscience metalinguistique apparaissent dès les premiers niveaux de son acquisition et sont solidaires de son évolution ." (op. cit. :8). Such association, however, fails to account for the different position held by the child/speaker while evaluating her/his own speech., i.e., for the possible effect of reflexivity on the child/speaker's move to the position of evaluating her/his own speech as if it were that of someone else. It does not seem enough to associate the reflexive nature of language to the fact that it can be used to talk about language. That the speaker can be dislocated to the place where s/he can listen to her/his own utterance seems to be a condition to talk about language.

At this point, it seems plausible to reassert that theories of language acquisition make implicit assumptions on the child's change of position as a speaker during the process. Despite the attention paid to the position from which language is "objectified", the other position(s) are only acknowledged through being qualified either as unconscious in constructivist proposals or as impossible to be theoretically handled in generativist approaches.

Another set of well known phenomena can shed light on this issue. One of them has been already mentioned during the discussion of the child's relation to the so-called input in generativist approaches. Namely, the child's imperviousness to the adult's correction in a given moment of the acquisition of a particular aspect of the language. Imperviousness to correction and adult's correction itself are obviously concomitant to the presence of errors in the child's speech and to their being left unnoticed to the child.

Detached from other data, such phenomena give empirical support only to the hypothesis that there is a position from which the child is unable to recognize either her/his own errors or the adult's attempts to correct them. If, however, they are put into relation:

- firstly, with the fact that errors seem to occur after a period of apparently correct speech;
- secondly, with the fact they are followed by a period when speech, besides being generally correct, can be submitted to self-correction,

There is much more to be said. In fact, such cycles, known as U-shaped developmental curve in the psychological literature( cf. Strauss 1982) have been presented and discussed by many students of language acquisition such as Bowerman

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<sup>8</sup> Further discussion on fluency in child speech can be found in Scarpa 1996.

(1982, among other works), by myself (de Lemos 1982, among other works) and Figueira (1984, among other works).

The point to be made now concerns the first part of the cycle, namely, the period when the child's speech is taken to be only apparently correct, regarding a particular subsystem or aspect of the language, given that errors incident on the same subsystem are found in the subsequent period. To which position relative to language this first period can be linked?

It is important to notice that it is not enough to define such position as one in which language is not objectified: the same could be said about the position corresponding to that part of the cycle where errors and imperviousness to correction are found. The hypothesis I have put forward (cf. de Lemos 1981, 1982, 1995, and elsewhere; cf. also Peters 1983 and elsewhere) is that the apparent correction characteristic of this first period results from the child's incorporation of fragments of the utterances with which the adult interprets her/his actions. In this sense, it could be said that the child's first position as a speaker is circumscribed to his/her relation to the other's speech.

Both errors and imperviousness to correction found in the second period point to the child's move out of the other's sphere. This does not mean, however, an autonomous position: errors such as overgeneralization, i.e. predictable from a structural point of view, as well as unpredictable bizarre expressions, are present in this period and can be traced back to relations between the fragments previously incorporated from the other's speech. Those relations give rise to restructuring processes that I have interpreted as metaphorical and metonymic processes (cf. de Lemos 1992), following the steps of Jakobson(1963). This movement of language beyond its own normative borders gives support to the hypothesis that the child's position in that second part of the cycle is one of being submitted to language functioning.

Only at the third part of the cycle a "correct" speech corresponds to the possibility of self-corrections or, in other words, to the possibility for the child to hold the position of interpreter of his own speech. Within such a perspective, the expressions "metalinguistic ability" and "metalinguistic awareness" become inadequate to characterize such position since their use does not entail the assumption that language acquisition is a process of subjectivization the product of which is the speaker being divided into the positions of being interpreted and being the interpreter. If it can be said that the child is first interpreted by the other/adult and then by the language, her/his division as a speaker shows that s/he remains in the position of being interpreted by the language of which the interpreter(the other and her/himself) is a reflex. That is why those positions cannot be ordered and change can be only conceived as resulting from the insertion of a human organism into a symbolic functioning which is responsible for its functioning as a subjectivity. In this sense change of position and the apparent ordering of the three positions mean different relations holding among them such that one can be subordinated to another at different points of the process.

By assuming such a view on language acquisition and on language functioning, it becomes impossible to consider adult-child interaction a communicative exchange involving (at least two) homogeneous individuals whose intentions and meanings are



accessible and transparent to each other. On the other hand, it becomes possible to assign to adult-child interaction a more important role in language acquisition as the locus of linguistic and discourse functioning where structuring relations take place and the infant starts its journey as a speaker.

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