

# THE UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR APPROACH

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## **Abstrak:**

*This paper describes what Universal Grammar (UG) is, the universal of UG (parameters and principles, marked and unmarked, core and peripheral), UG and L2 Acquisition, Access to UG and L2 Acquisition, the strength and weakness of UG*

## **Kata Kunci:**

*Grammar, Chomsky, Second Language*

## **Introduction**

Since the 1950's, the focus on diversity has been replaced by a research paradigm, stemming by Noam Chomsky, in which the nature of linguistics Universals holds a central place. Chomsky's generative theory of language proposes a single set of rules from which all the grammatical sentences in a language can be derived. In order to define these rules in an accurate and economical way, a grammar has to rely on certain general principles-abstract constraints that govern the form it takes the nature of categories with which it operates. In this approach, these principles are conceived as universal properties of language- properties that biologically necessary and thus innate.

The main aim of linguistic theory is twofold: first, to characterize what human languages look like and, second

to explain why they are that way. According to Mitchell and Myles (1999), in terms of second language acquisition, what a linguistic approach attempts to do is no different; its aim to describe the language produced by second language learners, and to explain why the language they produce is the way it is.

The approach is motivated by a powerful theory of language and a well-developed model of grammar. The theory is Universal Grammar.

## **What is Universal Grammar?**

Linguistic theory aims to describe the mental representation of language which are stored in the human mind. It aims to define what all human language have in common, as well as the distinctive characteristics which make human language different from other system of communication. It also needs

to specify in what way individual human languages can differ from one another.

Universal Grammar claims that all human beings inherit a universal set of universality which control the shape of human languages can take, which are what make human languages similar to one another.

Universal Grammar is a term used by Chomsky to refer to the abstract knowledge of language which children bring to the task of learning *their native language*, and which constrains the shape of particular grammar they are trying to learn. Chomsky defines UG as the system of principles, conditions and rules that are elements or properties of all human language. In other words, it comprises a set of linguistic universals.

According to Crystal, UG is the term used to identify the main aim of those who hold that the ultimate purpose of linguistics is to specify precisely the possible form of a human grammar-and especially the restrictions on the form such grammars can take. Cook (1997) added UG is the black box responsible for language acquisition. It is the mechanism in the mind, which allows children to construct out of the raw language materials supplied by their parents.

Chomsky characterizes these universals as consisting of most three important pairs of--- principles and parameters, unmarked and marked, and core and peripheral.

## The Universal of Universal Grammar

### 1. Principles and Parameters

The term 'principles' refers to highly abstract properties of grammar which apply to language in general and which, therefore, underlie the grammatical rules of all specific languages. Although the full range of principles will not be evident in all languages, there will be no language that contravenes any principles. *Principles* are thought to constrain the form that grammatical rules can take. They constitute part of a child innate knowledge of language. Principles are particularly important in Government-Binding<sup>1</sup> theory, where it has been suggested that there are no rules, in the traditional sense, but only principles which take a slightly different form in different languages.

For Chomsky, language acquisition is not so much a problem of acquiring grammatical rules, but rather a process whereby the learner sets the values of the parameters of the principle of Universal Grammar.

One of the examples of a principle is *subjacency*<sup>2</sup>. This define the restrictions that govern how far for one phrase can be moved from 'deep' to 'surface' structure. Like:

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<sup>1</sup> Government Binding theory (GB) a model of grammar. It assumes that sentences have three levels of structure: D, S, and Logical form.

<sup>2</sup>A term used in extended GB theory to refer to a type of condition which restrict the applications of a transformational rule. It states that a constituent cannot be moved across more than one bounding node.

a. *What did Randy think?*

b. *What did Randy think his brother had one?*

are grammatical because they involve limited movement of the *wh* element (what) from the deep structure object position

*Randy thought-----*

*Randy thought his brother had won-----*

Another example of principle is *structure-dependency*.

a. *she bought a new car yesterday*

b. *My friend bought a new car yesterday.*

c. *The friend that I met in Australia last year bought a new car yesterday*

We know that '*she*', '*my friend*', '*the friend that I met in Australia last year*', are the same kind of groupings and perform the same role in the sentence. This kind of structural grouping is called *phrase*, and example above, we are dealing with a *Noun-Phrase*. In fact all languages in the world are structured in that way, consists of NP and VP

Some universal principles are 'parameterized', that is they permit a finite set of options, which individual languages draw on and which this define how languages differ.

It is used for a specification of the variations that a principle of grammar manifests among different languages. Parameters also deal with language structure. An example of parameter is *head-parameter*.

The *head-parameters* deals with the way in which phrases themselves are structured. Each phrase central element, called *head* (in the case of NP) the head is the noun, in the case of VP, the head is Verb. For example, in the NP *the girl with blue trousers*, the head noun *girl* appears to the left of the complement with blue trousers. In the VP *hit the girl*, the head *hit* appears to the left of its complement *the girl*.

In fact English is a *head-first* language, because the head of the phrase always appears before the complements. Japanese is a *head-last* language, because the complements precedes the head inside phrase.

Another example of parameter is *pro-drop*. Languages vary according to whether they forbid the deletion of subject pronouns. English, does not normally delete pronouns because a subject required for every sentence and the subject cannot be inverted with the verb in declarative sentence. This is not true of Spanish, as pro-

drop language, allows empty subject and subject-verb inversion in declarative sentence

*Is the President of the United States.*  
*Esta' el Presidente de los Estados Unidos*

## 2. Markedness (marked and unmarked)

The term of markedness refers to the idea that some linguistic structures are special or less basic than others. For example, the use of break in *she broke my heart* can be considered marked in relation to the use of break in *she broke a cup*. SLA researchers are interested in markedness because it can help to account for patterns of attested L2 acquisition.

UG also provides a basis for the determining *markednes*. This is an analytic principle in linguistic whereby pairs of linguistic features, seen as oppositions, are given different values of positive (marked) and negative or neutral (unmarked). This distinction refers to the presence versus the absence of particular linguistic feature. There is a formal feature marking plural in most English nouns, for example; the plural is therefore 'marked', and the singular is 'unmarked' for example *dogs* ----- *dog*

## 3. Core and Peripheral grammar

Universal Grammar theory maintains a distinction between *core* and *peripheral* grammar. According to McLaughlin (1987), core grammar

refers to those parts of the language that have grow in the child through the interaction of UG with the relevant language environment. Peripheral grammars are those that are derived from the history of the language, that have been borrowed from other languages, or that have arisen accidentally.

In UG, the degree of markedness depends on whether a feature is part of the 'core' or 'periphery'. The *core* features of languages are those that govern by UG, while *peripheral* features are those that are not. Core features are considered unmarked because they require minimal evidence for the acquisition, whereas peripherals are considered unmarked, since they require much more substantial evidence.

## Universal Grammar and L2 Acquisition

It has been clear that appeal of the UG model has been in the field of the first language acquisition, it might not be so obvious at first sight what is usefulness might be in the field of second language acquisition.

Chomskyan theory has been concerned almost exclusively with the acquisition by the child of a first language. Indeed, in his early writing Chomsky seemed to believe that second language learning used other faculties of the mind than did first language learning and so fell outside the domain of the Universal Grammar theory.

Another problem is methodological problem, for example concerned with the over-reliance on grammaticality judgment tests and the relative lack of longitudinal studies. A further problem concerns the definition of 'adult'. This is considerable importance, as a UG-based theory of L2 acquisition is a theory of adult language acquisition. Child L2 learners are assumed to have the same access to UG as L1 learners. The key issue is whether adult learners are also guided by UG.

Theoretical problems are evident in both that theory of language and the model of grammar that together inform L2 theory. As we have seen, the details of the model of grammar are constantly changing. From a theoretical point of view, however, the situation is even more complicated than is the case for L1 acquisition. It is complicated by a number of factors, such as:

- \* L2 learners are cognitively mature;
- \* L2 learners already known at least one other language.
- \* L2 learners have different motivations for learning a L2

### **Access to UG in L2 Acquisition**

In fact, even if the UG hypothesis is correct for L1 learning, there are still a number of logical possibilities concerning its role in L2 learning.

#### *(a) No access hypothesis*

This hypothesis describes that L2 learners no longer have access to

the principles and parameters of UG; general learning strategies replace UG. The assumptions are adults fail to achieve full linguistic competence; 'wild' grammar can occur. A number of theorists support a no-access view. They say that adult L2 acquisition is very different from L1 acquisition. This difference arises because whereas L1 learners make use of their language faculty, adult L2 learners resort to general learning strategies.

#### *(b) Full access hypothesis*

It describes that L1 provides learners with a 'quick' setting for the L2 parameter if the value is the same otherwise, the L2 learner proceeds in the same way as the L1 learner. L2 learners have full access to UG principles. The main assumptions are L2 learners will be able to attain full linguistic competence; there is no critical period blocking L2 acquisition. Flynn adopts this position, she argues that UG continues to underpin L2 learning, for adults as well as children.

#### *(c) Indirect access hypothesis*

It explains that L2 learners have access to UG but this is partly blocked by the use of general learning strategies. The major assumption is that L2 and L1 acquisition in part; adults fail to achieve full linguistic competence;

adults manifest similar and different linguistic behavior to children.

The proponents of this position claims that learners only have access to UG via their L1. They have already accessed the range of principles applying to their L1, and set parameters to the L1 values, and this is the basis for their L2 development.

*(d) Partial access hypothesis*

It describes L2 learners have full access to UG principles but can only access those parameters operative in their L1; they may be able to reset L1 parameters by means of general learning strategies. The main assumptions are L2 and L1 acquisitions are the same in part; adults fail to achieve linguistic competence; no 'wild grammars' are evident.

### Summary

When applied to SLA, how successful can the UG theory claim to be? UG-based approaches to SLA have been criticized for exactly the same reasons as the theory itself.

#### 1. Weaknesses

When applied to SLA, how successful can the UG theory claim to be? UG-based approach to SLA have been criticized for exactly the same reasons as the theory itself. It has left untouched a number areas which

central to our understanding of the second language process.

a) Linguistically, this approach has in the past been almost exclusively concerned with syntax. Even if the recent interest in phonology, morphology and the lexicon should redress the balance somewhat, semantics, pragmatics and discourse are excluded.

b) The UG approach has been exclusively concerned with the developmental linguistic route followed by learners when learning an L2. The social and psychological variables, which affect the rate of the learning process are beyond its remit and therefore ignored.

c) Another weakness of UG approach is methodological. According to Mitchell and Myles (1999), the theory is preoccupied with the modeling of linguistic competence, and the study of naturalistic performance is not seen as a suitable window into mental representations of language.

#### 2. Strengths

a) It has been very useful as a sophisticated tool for linguistic analysis, enabling researcher to formulate well-defined and

focused hypothesis, which could then be tested in empirical. This powerful linguistics tool has been useful in describing not only the language produced by learners, but also the language to be acquired as well as the first language learner. The work carried out by second language acquisition researchers within this framework is also feeding into our general understanding of human language, the principle aim of UG theory, as second languages are obviously examples of such human languages.

- b) This approach has been useful, not only as descriptive tool which contributed to establishing some of the facts about second language acquisition, but it has also met with some success in explaining those facts. For example, this approach has informed our understanding of the stages L2 learners go through, and of the systematicity shown by L2 learner.
- c) There is little doubt that UG approach to second language research meets the criteria of a good theory, by making clear and explicit statements of the ground it aims to cover and the claims it makes, by having systematic procedures for theory evaluation,

by attempting to explain as well as describe other theories in the field.

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