1 Adult language acquisition: a view from child language study

Dan I. Slobin

The learners described in these volumes face a formidable task. They have to fashion a new communicative system while they are struggling to communicate, using whatever information they can glean from their TL interlocutors. Those interlocutors are not likely to be patient and supportive, nor are they at pains to tailor their speech to the level of competence of the learner. At the same time, the communicative tasks are often vitally important: the learner seeks employment, social services, refuge - and strives to maintain face under conditions of unavoidable asymmetry and inequality. The capacity of human beings to learn under such circumstances is impressive.

Coming from the field of child language acquisition, I am struck by the successes of the adult learners more than by their failures. They have so many counts against them:

- Whatever may be the advantages of youth (critical period, plasticity, rote learning capacity, etc.), these learners have begun with some degree of 'biological handicap'.

- Their communicative needs are vastly more complex and vital than are those of preschool-age children, and their communicative tools are inadequate to those tasks.

- They cannot count on the world to provide them with food and shelter while they are learning how to communicate.

- They cannot help but process the TL\(^1\) through filters that have developed for another purpose - to perceive and produce SL sound patterns and map them onto SL conceptual schemes.

\(^1\)The following abbreviations are used: TL = target language, SL = source language; FLA = first-language acquisition of monolingual children, ALA = adult second-language acquisition of the untutored sort described in this volume.
They have learned to use language within a sociocultural matrix of norms and expectations different from those of the host society.

Yet, they do learn to communicate in the TL, going through stages of increasing complexity, flexibility, and functional range. And while some 'fossilise' along the way, others continue on—perhaps, in some instances, to eventual 'near-native' ability.

First-language learners, by contrast, have obvious advantages:

- They are young.
- Their communication is not vital to their survival.
- Their communicative intentions do not seriously outstrip their communicative capacities.
- The only 'preconceptions' they may have about the form and content of language do not interfere with the acquisition of the particular language that the world presents to them.
- They are learning the social functions of language along with the language itself.

My goal in this chapter is to ask what might be learned from a comparison of these two very different situations. To the extent that developmental patterns are similar, students of child language acquisition must re-examine the role of age-linked biological factors in accounting for such patterns. Where they differ, students of adult language acquisition are pointed to special cognitive and communicative factors in this domain of investigation. I am aware that there is a large literature on these issues. Since I do not command this literature, I offer these observations as a (hopefully) fresh view from a neighbouring discipline.

1.1 'Basic Learner Variety' and 'Basic Child Grammar'

Throughout this volume one encounters the term 'basic learner variety' to describe an initial communicative system that seems to be relatively uninfluenced by either SL or TL. It is stated at several points that this system has much in common with pidgin languages, and one wonders to what extent it is similar to the 'Basic Child Grammar' that I have proposed (Slobin 1985) as a universal starting point in FAA. All three of these systems exhibit transparent form-meaning relationships using grammatically unelaborated means. In the Basic Learner Variety, words lack grammatical inflexions and are combined in fixed order patterns to express a limited range of semantic and pragmatic functions. There are first- and second-person pronouns, one or two locative prepositions expressing generalised topological relations, sentence-level negation, a coordinating conjunction, and some temporal adverbs.

Allwood succinctly states the three most general principles that motivate the initial construction of such 'basic' linguistic systems:

(i) Simple comes before complex.
(ii) Use what you have.
(iii) Make maximal use of limited means.

Principles (ii) and (iii) clearly apply to both adults and children, and it would seem that Principle (i) does as well. But 'simple' and 'complex' must be defined with regard to the cognitive capacities of the speaker. The list of characteristics of the Basic Learner Variety includes a coordinating conjunction and some temporal adverbials. These are not found in Basic Child Grammar, which is limited to single-clause sentences anchored in the here-and-now. Speakers of FAA, however, begin with discourse needs that require sequences of utterances performing a range of discourse functions. The FAA data, for example, include autobiographical and film-elicited narratives that call for a degree of temporal and causal coherence. Adult learners are thus faced with communicative demands that do not apply to two year olds—in this instance, verbal organisation of temporally related events that are not part of the immediate situation. Having access to the cultural vocabulary of clocks and calendars, along with adult conceptualisations of temporal and causal relations, adult learners use their limited verbal means to encode content that is far from simple from a two-year-old perspective. The early temporal expressions in FAA establish reference points that are 'simple' from an adult point of view: 'when', 'now', 'tomorrow', 'eight o'clock', and the like. Grammatical marking of aspect emerges considerably later.

By contrast, two-year-old speech lacks such temporal adverbials, since these notions are not 'simple' for pre-schoolers. However, when available in the language, aspect markers are readily acquired. Basic Child Grammar is not limited to uninflected word forms. Rather, 'operating principles' for segmentation of the input are active from early on (Peters 1985, 1993; Slobin 1973, 1985). When a grammatical inflexion is perceptually salient, and mappable onto an available conceptual relation, it becomes part of the child's productive repertoire.
in the initial phases of grammatical development. With regard to
verbs, such inflexions tend to express aspect (ongoing, result) and, in
some instances, anteriority (Weist 1986). Grammatical inflexions also
appear on nouns in early grammar, typically marking the agent (erga-
tive) or patient (accusative) participants in highly agentive-causative
contexts (the ‘Manipulative Activity Scene’ of Slobin 1985).

The only comparable finding in the data presented in this volume
seems to be early use of the English progressive suffix, -ing, by Pun-
jabi learners. This is a perceptually salient and completely regular
inflexion. The fact that it is readily detected by learners suggests that
analytic operating principles continue to function in adulthood. How-
ever, these verb forms appear to be used for rather different discourse
purposes (Bhardwaj et al. 1988) – again showing that what is con-
ceptually ‘simple’ may be quite different for children and adults.
In this case, ‘simple’ should be replaced by something like ‘conceptually
salient,’ as determined by the organisation of temporal expression in
the SL.

We might say, then, that early child learners readily extract per-
ceptually salient grammatical elements and map them onto the most
salient contextually-determined contexts (such as agency, control, re-
sult). Early adult learners are much more limited in their extraction
of such elements, and, when they do succeed in isolating a form, it
is mapped onto a SL semantic/pragmatic concept that tends to be
discourse-determined. For the child, the construction of the gram-
mar and the construction of semantic/pragmatic concepts go hand-
hand. For the adult, construction of the grammar often requires a
revision of semantic/pragmatic concepts, along with what may well
be a more difficult task of perceptual identification of the relevant
morphological elements.

1.2 Conceptual complexity

Sometimes, however, adult and child learners show striking parallels
in the order of development of grammatically marked notions. This is
most evident, in the present study, with regard to the development of
locative prepositions in the five TLs, parallelling a study by Johnston
and Slobin (1979) of the FLA of English, Italian, Serbo-Croatian, and
Turkish. In both ALA and FLA the earliest adpositions (pre- or postpo-
sitions) mark basic topological relations of neighbourhood, contain-
ment, and support, and the latest forms mark projective notions of
‘between’ and ‘front/back’ with unfeatured objects (i.e., objects that
do not have inherent orientations). The parallels, though, cannot be
attributed to the same underlying factors. In the case of FLA one
appeals to cognitive development: the projective notions simply are
not available to very young children. But in the case of ALA all of the
relevant cognitive machinery is in place. Why, then, should learners
have difficulty in discovering the necessary prepositions for spatial
relations that they already command in the SL? There are at least
two possibilities: (1) adult learners retain a scale of conceptual
complexity, based on their own cognitive development, and at first search
the TL for the grammatical marking of those notions which repre-
sent some primordial core of basicness or simplicity; and/or (2) these
most basic notions are also used with relatively greater frequency in
the TL. We do not have the necessary data to decide between these
options. It is likely that speakers, generally, have less recourse to the
encoding of complex notions, and that learners are simply reflecting
the relative frequency of occurrence of various prepositions in the in-
put. (Note that if this is the case, the account based on cognitive
development might not go through for child learners.) Or it may be
that the complex relations are, indeed, communicated above some
threshold of frequency and that learners ‘gate them out’ due to their
complexity. In this case, cognitive factors play a role in both FLA
and ALA, but for different reasons: the complex notions are not avail-
able to very young children, while they are available but not accessed
in early stages of ALA. What is called for is detailed study of the
frequency of occurrence of linguistic forms in the input, along with
descriptions of the communicative contexts in which those forms are
used. Thus far, the lack of such information is a critical gap in studies
of both FLA and ALA.

1.3 Problem-solving strategies

Another interesting parallel between the two sets of studies is a com-
mon interim solution for the encoding of ‘between’, using a word
meaning ‘middle’. Here we have nice evidence for the retention by
adults of FLA strategies. Perdue (1991:413) proposes that this solu-
tion is based on the strategy: Decompose more complex relations into
simpler ones. Such strategies have frequently been proposed for FLA
(e.g., Slobin 1985), and are probably general approaches to problem
solution across ages and domains.
The FLA and ALA studies of spatial terms also single out the importance of semantic transparency of grammatical morphemes. Johnston and Slobin found that the 'back' relation was more readily acquired in English and Turkish, where the adposition literally refers to the body part, 'back', and Carroll and Becker report in this volume that some learners of German used Rücken 'back' for this relation, even though the term does not occur in locative expressions in German. Once again, Perdue (1991:412) proposes a strategy that can be attributed to both child and adult learners: Use semantically 'transparent' form-meaning relationships.

In sum, both FLA and ALA are characterised by the use of strategies based on perceptual salience and conceptual accessibility. Basic problem-solving approaches, or 'operating principles,' may well be available throughout the lifespan.

1.4 The role of TL typology

In all cases of language acquisition the learner is both guided and limited by typological features of the language being acquired. As I have suggested elsewhere (Slobin 1991, 1993), the speaker makes conceptual choices – on-line – in the course of formulating utterances in accord with the grammaticalisation patterns of the particular language. That is, in learning a language one also learns a sort of 'thinking for speaking' in which grammaticalised notions are most readily accessed.

Languages can be classified typologically in terms of such patterns. Reference to space provides a clear example, as elaborated by Leonard Talmy (1985, 1991). He has suggested that there are basically two distinct ways in which languages allocate information between the main verb and supporting elements ('satellites') in a clause. Consider verbs of movement, as expressed in languages for which we have both FLA and ALA data. In languages like English, German, and Dutch, the verb simply indicates the fact of movement – e.g., go, with possible specification of manner, using verbs that conflate movement and manner – walk, run, swim, fly, etc. It is the job of the satellites to the verb – in these languages, verb particles – to specify direction, e.g., walk in, run up to, swim across. Talmy suggests that if we take the basic message of a movement-event communication to be that an entity has moved along a path in a specified direction, we can say that these languages are satellite-framed, since it is the satellite that conveys this core information. By contrast, languages like Spanish, French, and Italian are verb-framed, because the core information is generally conveyed by the verb alone, using verbs that mean 'enter', 'exit', 'ascend', 'descend', and the like. The encoding of manner is optional in such languages, and is expressed by a satellite – typically a gerund or prepositional phrase serving an adverbial function (e.g., 'enter running', 'descend with a jump').

This typological division is clearly reflected in pre-school narratives that we have gathered in English, German, and Spanish (Berman and Slobin 1993). Children learning satellite-framed languages make early and abundant use of directional particles, whereas children learning verb-framed languages make early and abundant use of verbs of motion – for describing the same situations. Carroll and Becker report in 1.4.4 of this volume a similar distinction in the present ALA study: "The means developed in the earliest stages by learners of French is verb-based, while the system of reference of learners of Dutch, English and German show a prevalence of prepositional forms and forms which are verbal prefixes in the TL. Indeed, in the earliest phases, adult learners, like one year olds, use Germanic directional particles alone, with no accompanying verb, to encode direction of movement (e.g., away from source ruts, weg, upward auf), whereas learners of French use verbs (e.g., away from source sorti, parti, upward monte). Thus, in both FLA and ALA, the learner is sensitive to the predominant grammaticalisation patterns of the language.

1.5 SL influence on ALA

There is obviously one critical way in which L2 acquisition cannot be compared with L1: children can experience no 'transfer' or 'interference' from a previously acquired language. All of the reports of the ESF project are rich with documentation of SL influence, and I have used such data as evidence of 'thinking for speaking' (Slobin 1991, 1993). I have claimed that each native language has trained its speakers to pay different kinds of attention to events and experiences when talking about them. This training is carried out in childhood and is exceptionally resistant to restructuring in ALA. Two examples, one from the domain of time and the other from the domain of space, are instructive.

Consider the Italian- and Punjabi-speaking immigrants to Britain. Italian and English are both 'tense-prominent' languages – that is,
every finite clause must be grammatically marked as to its deictic relation to the moment of speaking. And the Italian immigrants readily acquire English past-tense forms. This makes it possible for them to construct narratives from a situationally-external perspective, relating a succession of past events as seen from the present, as is done in Italian. These speakers make far more frequent use of tense-marking than of the English progressive aspect. Punjabi, by contrast, is an 'aspect-prominent' language, and the Punjabi immigrants make heavy use of the English progressive to narrate events 'from within,' from the perspective of the protagonist, in analogous fashion with the narrative use of the Punjabi imperfective (Bhardwaj et al. 1988; Huebner 1989).

In the domain of space the influence of Punjabi on learners' early organisation of English is striking (Becker et al. 1988). In Punjabi, spatial locations are regions named by nouns, analogous to English expressions such as on the top of the pile and at the back of the house. The Punjabi learners of English often treat prepositions as nouns, producing forms such as put the on please, put the down chair, and pull the up. English relational terms have apparently been re-analysed as names of locations. In addition, Punjabi focuses on states as the results of processes. This pattern also transfers to English. For example, a newspaper lying on a table is referred to as put in the table by a Punjabi-speaker. The investigators suggest that 'he imagines that the newspaper was put there by someone. In Punjabi one says exactly the same thing' (ibid:73).

The investigators conclude (Bhardwaj et al. 1988:86):

The influence of the lexicogrammatical systems of both the SL and the TL can be observed in the acquisition process. The picture which emerges is quite a simple one - an adult acquirers tries to discover in the TL a system that is similar to that of his SL, and if he does not discover any, he tries to construct one; but since it is the TL material he has to use, the outcome is invariably a hybrid which is an autonomous system (often consisting of loosely or tightly integrated sub-systems) which partakes of some features of both the 'parent' systems but is identical to neither.

These ALA findings - along with many others scattered throughout this volume and the 1988 final reports - suggest that SL influences are particularly salient with regard to certain types of semantic domains. It seems that those grammatical categories that are most susceptible to SL influence have something important in common: the categories have no direct reflection in one's perceptual, sensorimotor, and practical dealings with the world. To be sure, all human beings put objects in locations, experience sequences of events that have particular temporal contours, and so on. Indeed, animals do the same. But only language requires one to categorise events as ongoing or completed, objects as definite or indefinite, locations as topological or projected, and so forth. That is to say, although the dimensions are universal, the categories may exist only for purposes of talking about situations in terms of such dimensions. There are other categories, however, that seem to be less dependent on purely verbal categorisation. I would imagine, for example, that if your language lacked a plural marker, you would not have insurmountable difficulty in learning to mark the category of plurality in a second language, since this concept is evident to the nonlinguistic mind and eye. Or if your language lacked an instrumental marker it should not be difficult to learn to add a grammatical inflexion to nouns that name objects manipulated as instruments. Plurality and manipulation are notions that are obvious to the senses in ways that, for example, definiteness and relative tense are not. You may have difficulty remembering to use these markers on every occasion - as Chinese speakers of English do not always mark the plural, to take one possible example. But this is a matter of automatising attention, which may be difficult in adulthood. What I am proposing is that some grammaticalised categories may be obvious on nonlinguistic grounds. For such categories, the problem in ALA is not to make the proper conceptual distinction, but to treat it as obligatory. (As I suggest below, children may be especially adept at automatising the application of grammatical rules.)

To return to the conceptual grounds for grammatical marking: there is nothing in everyday sensorimotor interactions with the world that changes when you describe an event, for example, as She went to work or She has gone to work, or when you refer to the same object in successive utterances as a car and the car. Distinctions of aspect, definiteness, voice, and the like, are par excellence, distinctions that can only be learned through language, and have no other use except to be expressed in language. They are not categories of thought in general, but categories of thinking for speaking. It seems that once our minds have been trained in taking particular points of view for the purposes of speaking, it is exceptionally difficult to be retrained.

We find then, in these observations, an echo of the old debates
on 'linguistic relativity and determinism.' Wilhelm von Humboldt himself made comparable suggestions with regard to second language acquisition early in the last century. He wrote (1836/1988:60):

To learn a foreign language should therefore be to acquire a new standpoint in the world-view hitherto possessed, and in fact to a certain extent this is so, since every language contains the whole conceptual fabric and mode of presentation of a portion of mankind. But because we always carry over, more or less, our own world-view, and even our own language-view, this outcome is not purely and completely experienced.

Taken from this perspective, the studies reported here also have a message for the study of FLA. The ESF investigators repeatedly return to the embeddedness of language in social practice and cultural norms — both those of the SL and the TL communities. Ethnographically-based investigations of child language can play an important role in situating language in culture. We need to understand not only the grammatical structures of SL in accounting for its influence on TL acquisition, but also the entire sociolinguistic matrix that SL speakers bring to the task of ALA. (See, for example, papers on inter-ethnic communication in Gumperz 1982a,b.)

1.6 The interactive task

It is obvious that ALA is situated in quite different kinds of interaction from FLA. On the one hand, many of the interpersonal settings must be intimidating and non-supportive to the learner. On the other hand, the adult learner has means to make use of TL speakers that may not be available to preschool age children. These issues are raised with vividness in the chapters by Simonot et al. and Allwood, and child language researchers have much to learn from these approaches to 'ways of achieving understanding' and 'feedback in language acquisition'. As Simonot et al. stress, it is necessary 'to treat understanding as an essentially interactive process that is negotiated constantly between any two participants and not as an activity that takes place inside, or is solely determined by, the learner's own thought processes' (Part II:1). And Allwood introduces the category of feedback not only as a system that the learner has to acquire, but also 'as an instrument for the acquisition of other parts of language' (Part II:2). (For parallels in children's acquisition of Scandinavian languages, see Plunkett and Strömquist 1992.)

We do not know precisely when it is that child learners are aware of themselves as learners and can attend to their misunderstandings as potential sources of information about the language. Available evidence (e.g., Karmiloff-Smith 1986) suggests that metalinguistic awareness occurs at a relatively late stage of acquisition. The ESF data suggest, however, that some adults have the means to become 'better' learners. Simonot et al. (Part II:2) identify individual factors that may facilitate ALA: 'The fast learners among the informant group use specific clarifying, through metalinguistic comment and reprise, and hypothesis forming earlier and more frequently than learners whose development remains limited'. They go on to list 'behaviours leading to greater understanding' as well as avoidance behaviours that lead to 'a downward spiral of poor communication.' Becker et al. (1988:313-15) contrast 'communication-oriented' and 'norm-oriented' learners, with different consequences for early and late phases of acquisition. Interestingly, such dimensions have not figured in most studies of FLA, where it is assumed that all normal children succeed at the task. (But see Bates et al. 1988; Lieven 1993; Peters 1993.) In ALA, however, individual differences in personality and cognitive style may play a heavy role in determining the ultimate level of achievement.

1.7 The learning task

As mentioned above, children seem naturally prone to apply grammatical rules in obligatory and automatic fashion. Overregularisation of inflexional morphology, for example, is one of the most well-established phenomena in FLA, whereas it is a relatively late phenomenon in ALA, and not observed in all learners. In the creolisation of Tok Pisin (Sankoff and Brown 1976; Sankoff and Laberge 1973) it is apparently the child learners who take the optional grammatical markers of the language and make them obligatory. Child learners obsessively fine-tune their language, whereas adult learners appear reluctant to deal with detailed phonological, morphological, and syntactic distinctions. Here we seem to have a critical difference between FLA and ALA: what little children do unthinkingly, adults can only achieve with some degree of care and attention.

Two caveats must be raised, however:
(1) Studies of a la have not followed learners long enough to determine if some of them do acquire 'near-native' competence – in some domains of acquisition at least. (Perdue has suggested, in personal communication, that this is indeed possible for those learners whose personal lives have led them to become assimilated members of the host society.)

(2) The achievements of children are not limited to language acquisition. In every way, they take on cultural identity – from manner of speaking and gesturing and walking to the tastes, values, and habits of their parents and peers. Our focus on language can lead us to overlook all of the other achievements of childhood and characterise the mind as either a collection of isolated 'modules' or a 'language module' awash in a sea of 'general learning abilities'.

The study of child language acquisition has led us to deeply respect our innate powers of mind. In conclusion, I would stress that these studies of adult language acquisition should lead us to deeply respect the human capacity to learn and adapt.

References


Humboldt, W. von 1836. Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluß auf die geistige Entwicklung des Men-


1993. From 'thought and language' to 'thinking for speaking.' In J. J. Gumperz and S. C. Levinson (eds.) Rethinking linguistic relativity.
