

Language Acquisition as the Locus of Grammatical Change

Modern linguistics makes a fundamental distinction between linguistic *utterances* and *grammar*. The utterances are observable manifestations of language – spoken, written, or signed. The grammar is the system underlying the linguistic utterances, a set of rules and principles which *generate* the language. The grammatical system is the real object of theoretical linguistics. We are interested in the system underlying the observable linguistic utterances, not the utterances *per se*. They are our *data*, not our object of study. Our project here at the CAS is concerned with change in language through history. Not changes in the inventories of linguistic utterances, but changes in the grammatical system underlying the utterances.



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Our most important historical data are of course written documents, which can be of many different kinds, depending on the age, the type of culture, the writing system, etc. It is the task of philologists to interpret the documents and establish what is actually written in them. But there is

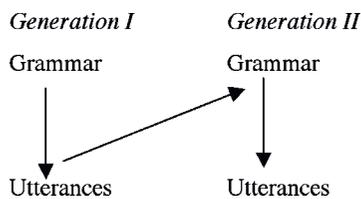
further challenge facing historical linguists, in fact all linguists to varying degrees, and that is to try to establish the relationship between the observable linguistic utterances and the underlying grammatical system.

A grammar is a kind of *knowledge* about the system which generates language, and which enables us to produce and understand utterances in our own language (Chomsky 1986, Anderson & Lightfoot 2002). Knowledge is a state of mind, a mental object, and it is thus a property of the *individual*. Linguistics is the science studying a particular kind of human knowledge. This creates a paradox for historical linguistics: if language belongs to the individual, it dies with the individual, and has thus no history beyond the life span of the individual. Although no one will deny the individual mental existence of language, historical linguistics also sees language in another perspective, as a property of the community. This mode of existence is of course what makes it possible to use language as a means of communication, and this *communal* language certainly has a history.

Language has its historical communal existence because it is acquired by the children of each new generation. The acquisition of the mother tongue by infants is perhaps the most perplexing mystery of linguistics. Perhaps the greatest challenge facing theoretical linguistics is to try to understand how this is possible. Children start the process of learning their first language as soon as they are born, perhaps even before, and by the age of four at an average, they master the grammar of their first language perfectly. This is a spectacular achievement, given the enormous

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complexity of human language. All normal children who grow up under regular circumstances automatically learn to speak. It is not something they decide to do or are forced to do, and they do it on the basis of rather poor and inadequate stimulus. Children are exposed to lots of incomplete and ‘incorrect’ utterances, and all sorts of sounds that are not language at all. Learning a language seems to be a kind of instinct (Pinker 1994), and what makes the acquisition possible is an innate language faculty, also called *Universal Grammar* (UG). The two necessary conditions for acquiring a mother tongue in infancy are then the innate language faculty and the linguistic input from the environment. UG gives you what is common to all languages and determines what is a possible language, and the utterances in the environment determine which language you are learning, and which of the alternatives that are offered by UG becomes your language. Here is a model of language acquisition:



Historical linguistics is interested in how and why grammars change from one generation of speakers to the next, but as you can see from this model, grammars are not transmitted directly between generations. Generation II acquires its grammar, not from the grammar of Generation I, to which they have no direct access, but by abduction from the concrete utterances of the previous generation (Andersen 1973, Faarlund forthcoming). On the basis of this input, they construct their own grammar.

If there is a universal grammar and a shared human capacity to learn language, the question is of course why there are different languages in the world. The reason is that languages do change. If groups of users of the same language for some external reason are separated and cease to communicate with each other, their respective languages may change in different directions up to the point where they become so different that they no longer understand each other. At this point we have two different languages.

The question is, however, why languages and grammars change at all. Why don't new generations always acquire the same grammar as that of previous generations? UG contains a set of *parameters*, which can be understood as a choice between two values for a certain grammatical feature. When the infant analyzes the linguistic utterances of the environment in order to establish its own grammar, it has to set the value for each of those parameters. One way that languages may differ, is in the order of elements within the sentence. There is thus a parameter which determines the order of verb and object in the sentence. In many languages the rule is that the verb precedes its object, as in English: *He has read the letter*. We find the same order in today's Scandinavian languages. In other languages the order is the opposite, as in German: *Er hat den Brief gelesen* (lit. 'he has the letter read'). Those languages then have different values for this parameter. On the basis of the linguistic input from the environment, the infant sets the value for this parameter. Now it turns out that in many languages, including many Germanic languages, there has been a change from

object-verb order to verb-object order. In the oldest Scandinavian texts we find the object-verb order. Here is an example from a text written in the runic alphabet on a golden horn from the 5th century AD, found in Jutland in Denmark:

ek hlewagastiz holtjaz horna tawido

I, Hlewagasti of-Holt, horn made

The two final words show the object-verb order, so there has been a change taking place in Scandinavian, as in English, and several other languages. This means that at some point in history, children learning a Scandinavian language have changed the value of this parameter from object-verb to verb-object. This can only have happened on the basis of the linguistic input from the environment. We do not know precisely what happened at that time, but at some point new learners of the language must have been exposed to utterances with the object after the verb. This may have happened because some speakers began to place the object at the end in certain contexts, perhaps in order to obtain a certain stylistic effect or in order to emphasize a word, or it may have been due to influence from speakers of a foreign language.

In many cases the actual external causes are hidden in the darkness of prehistory, but we believe that we are gradually uncovering enough of the nature of human language at least to understand the general principles underlying language change.

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