

## 397LH: L1 and L2 topics

Week 2:  
Differences between L1 and L2

## Second Language Acquisition

- A person's native language (L1 or NL) is the language s/he learned first, as a child growing up.
- A person's second language (L2) is a language learned after L1 (includes third, fifth, ...) usually non-natively.

## Second Language Acquisition

- Second Language Acquisition (SLA or L2A) is concerned with studying how people learn an L2.
- Target Language (TL) refers to the language being learned.

## What is L2A?

- Consider:
  - What is the goal state of L2A?
  - What actually happens?
- Does a second language learner wind up with the same knowledge that a native speaker has?
- Do they get there? Do they learn something else? What do they learn (in either case)? How? In what order? What helps, what doesn't help?

## What needs to be learned?

- If we're studying how L2A proceeds, we should have some idea what needs to be learned.
- Simply speaking, one needs to learn "grammar" and the "lexicon", but what *is* the grammar?
- How do we characterize the knowledge that speakers have of language?

## Why this is potentially difficult

- The knowledge we have of language (at *least* our native language) is largely unconscious.
- Very young children can form complex constructions; e.g., *I want the toy that that boy is playing with* or, *j'ai vu le garçon avec lequel Marie a joué*
- We can only study this knowledge from the *outside*.

## Knowledge of language

- What differentiates L1A from L2A?

...and yet it turns out that people know all of this...

- 5) What did Mary say John bought?
- 6) What did Mary say that John bought?

☞ **Ok, *that* is optional.**

- 7) Who did Mary say bought coffee?
- 8) \*Who did Mary say **that** bought coffee?

## Prescriptive vs. descriptive

- This is a different kind of knowledge from the sort of rule that we learned in school, like:
  - **Prepositions are things you don't end a sentence with.**
  - **Try to not split your infinitives.**

Language is (surprisingly?) complicated...

- 1) Tony threw out the couch.
- 2) Tony threw the couch out.

☞ **Prepositions can go on either side of the object.**

- 3) Tony stormed out the door.
- 4) \* Tony stormed the door out.

## Speakers of English know...

- 9) Bill thinks Mary is a genius.
- 10) Her mother thinks Mary is a genius.
- 11) She thinks Mary is a genius.
- 12) I asked Mary to buy coffee.
- 13) What did you ask Mary to buy?
- 14) I saw the book about aliens on the table.
- 15) \*What did you see the book about on the table?

## Prescriptive vs. descriptive

- In general, *prescriptive* rules are pretty much just a "secret handshake" to allow educated people to identify each other. They tell you how to modify what you would have said in order to conform to the convention.

## Prescriptive vs. descriptive

- *Descriptive* rules are not rules that you were taught, not rules that you would generally know how to articulate (until you study Linguistics), but they are rules which people nevertheless seem to follow (and therefore *know*).
- Descriptive rules are scientific hypotheses

## Prescriptive vs. descriptive

- If our goal is to determine what a person's subconscious knowledge of language is, we will not learn anything by studying prescriptive rules (what the person was taught).
- Among the most important linguistic behaviors we aim to capture in our description are *linguistic intuitions*—knowing whether a sentence or a word is “part of the language” or not.

## How do people know these things?

- Every native speaker of English knows these things; they have the same intuitions about the possibility vs. impossibility of these sentences.
- No native speaker of English was taught (growing up) “You can't question a subject in a complement embedded with *that*” or “You can't use a proper name as an object if the subject is co-referential.”
- But they know it anyway...

## Grammar is a system

- What people eventually end up with is a *system* with which they can produce (and rate) sentences. A *grammar*. Even if you've never heard these before, you know which one is “English” and which one isn't:

16) Eight very lazy elephants drank brandy.

17) Eight elephants very lazy brandy drank.

## Do kids learn the grammar by listening to their parents?

- \*What did you see the book about on the table?
- \*Who did Mary say that bought coffee?
- Eight very lazy elephants drank brandy.
- Linguists' theories: built by considering both grammatical *and ungrammatical* sentences.
- Kids: Don't hear ungrammatical sentences, nor even all of the grammatical sentences.

## Some hypotheses:

- A linguistic capacity is part of being human.
- The language faculty (tightly) constrains what kinds of languages a child can learn.
- =“Universal Grammar” (UG).

## Supporting evidence...

- Children go through stages during acquisition of their first language.
- These stages are quite consistent across children learning the same language.

## Supporting evidence...

- Moreover, children *across* languages go through similar stages, fairly well tied to age (although rate does vary).

## Supporting evidence...

- There seems to be a correlation between age of language learning and eventual success — kids learn languages pretty much automatically, adults learn languages only with difficulty
- This all points to a *biological* component to language.

## Supporting evidence...

- Language ability does not seem to be correlated with intelligence.
- Perhaps the most striking evidence of this comes from children suffering from Williams syndrome.

## Supporting evidence...

- The dissociation goes the other way too; some kids who are otherwise cognitively normal suffer from Specific Language Impairment, which manifests itself in slower language development, often resulting in long-term language impairment.

## But L2 acquisition...

- Adults seem to have a harder time learning language than kids do learning their first language (is there a *critical period*?).
- Adult second language learners rarely reach a native-speaker-like level of competence.
- Adult second language learners already know a language.
- Adult second language learners are often given negative evidence (“you don’t say it that way”) when taught in a classroom.

### L2A seems very different from L1A

- Is L2A like learning to play chess? Like learning calculus? Do we just learn the rules of the language and apply them (sometimes forgetting some of the rules, never quite learning all of them, etc.)?
- It's very tempting to think that's true. (It feels intuitively plausible to anyone who has attempted to *learn* a second language).

### L2 competence

- Learners of a second language have some kind of linguistic knowledge. They have retained their L1 knowledge, and they have knowledge of a sort which approximates (perhaps poorly) the knowledge held by a native speaker of the learner's L2.
- This knowledge is often referred to as an *interlanguage grammar*—not (solely) L1, not (strictly) L2, but something different.

### UG or not UG?

- How does L2A relate to UG?
- Properties of the IL
  - Like any natural language?
- Process of acquiring knowledge
  - Any part of L1A still operative in L2A?

### Methodology

- Grammaticality judgments task
  - Rate sentences in their second language.
  - But biases are common
  - No extreme position, based on sense not syntax...
- Production task
  - cannot distinguish between “dispreferred” and “ungrammatical” in production data

### Methodology

- (1) Who did you say that bought John dinner?  
(1–bad 2–weird 3–natural)
- (2) I wonder what will John wear tomorrow.  
(1–bad 2–weird 3–natural)

### Many questions to address...

- To what extent is knowledge of a second language like a native speaker's knowledge of their native language?
- What are the mechanisms of second language learning?

## Theories of L2A

- We'll consider some theories of second language acquisition, and so it is worth touching on what makes an adequate theory.
- A good theory:
  - Clearly defines its scope.
  - Makes testable predictions.
  - Provides an explanation (rather than simply a description) of the phenomena.
  - Interacts with other theories, where feasible.

## Some properties of L2A

- Systematicity. Although the result of (partial) L2A is often full of "errors", the *knowledge* (IL) of the learner is still systematic, as is the *process* of learning.
- Variability. At the same time, there is also a great deal of variability both in the productions of second language learners and between second language learners (rate, errors)—significantly more than found in L1A.

## Some properties of L2A

- Routines/chunks. It is common for second language learners to initially use memorized "chunks" (*keskesay "chien"?*) which appear grammatical but are unanalyzed (*qu'est-ce que c'est "chien"?*).

## Some properties of L2A

- Incomplete success. The norm in second language learning is for a learner to achieve only a partial knowledge of the target language. Almost no second language speakers reach a point where they are indistinguishable from native speakers of the target language.

## Some properties of L2A

- Fossilization. It is often observed that second language learners will reach a certain "plateau", this is usually referred to as "fossilization."

## Some properties of L2A

- L1 influence. It is commonsense knowledge that a person's first language has an effect on their learning of a second language. You can often guess fairly accurately if a non-native speaker's first language is.

### Some properties of L2A

- L1 influence—language **transfer**. An effect that L1 has on a learner's IL is often called “transfer”—something has been transferred from the knowledge of the first language and imposed on the learner's view of the target language.

### Some properties of L2A

- Negative evidence? Often, providing corrections to second language learners seems surprisingly ineffective.

### Some properties of L2A

- Individual learners are different. *Perhaps* more than in the process of L1A, there are differences between people learning a second language.
- Exposure: They may or may not use it in everyday life (e.g., to communicate with a community). They may be learning it in a classroom setting or “picking it up” from their environment.

### Some properties of L2A

- Intelligence. Learners may differ in their overall cognitive abilities, which *may* have an effect on their language learning abilities (but note this does *not* seem to carry over to L1A).
- Language aptitude? There *may* be a difference between individuals in their skill with learning languages (again note that this does *not* seem to carry over to L1A).

### Some properties of L2A

- Strategies. Different learners may employ different strategies in trying to learn a language; this *may* make a difference in the outcome/rate of acquisition.
- Motivation. Different learners have different levels of motivation for success; someone taking a language course casually to fulfill a language requirement will be in general less motivated than someone plunked in the middle of Macedonia with no community that shares the learner's native language.

### Some properties of L2A

- Language anxiety/confidence. Different learners will vary in their self-confidence in their ability to learn/speak the second language, which seems to affect success.

### Coming up

- The 'critical period hypothesis'
- Read Ortega