Third Language Acquisition and Universal Grammar
SECON D LANGUAG E ACQUISITION
Series Editor: Professor David Singleton, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland

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Acknowledgements

I thank David Singleton for inviting me to do this L3 project for his Multilingual Matters SLA series while I was working at the University of Essex, UK. I thank all the authors who have generously contributed their papers to the present volume. I thank the following colleagues (in alphabetical order) who acted as external reviewers for the papers: Mónica Cabrera, Jasone Cenoz, Joyce Bruhn de Garavito, Roger Hawkins, Britta Hufeisen, Johanne Paradis, Virginia Yip and Boping Yuan. I also thank an anonymous reviewer arranged by Multilingual Matters for reviewing the entire manuscript. Finally, I thank all the staff members at Multilingual Matters particularly Marjukka Grover and Anna Roderick for their kind editorial help and advice.

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June 2008
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Introduction

Third Language Acquisition and Universal Grammar is a volume that has collected a total of nine conceptual and/or empirical chapters that look at adult third language (L3) or multilingual acquisition from the Universal Grammar (UG)/generative linguistic perspective. A variety of languages other than English are involved in the studies reported in the chapters, including Cantonese Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Kazakh, Mandarin Chinese, Norwegian, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog and Thai, with acquisition cases taking place in a number of different geographical locations, such as Canada, Germany, Hong Kong, Norway, Taiwan, Thailand, the UK, and the USA. Compared to its mother field of second language acquisition (SLA), which has flourished over the last 30 years, L3 acquisition is only a young field that is still very much in its infancy. Irrespective of theoretical framework, the number of studies on L3 is scant. This volume brings together some up-to-date research on adult L3 acquisition that borrows insights from previous descriptive studies on multilingualism particularly concerning the role of prior linguistic knowledge (Cenoz et al., 2000, 2001; see also Cook, 1996 on multicompetence), and follows the important field of generative SLA (White, 1989, 2003) to seek explanatory adequacy in (adult) non-native language acquisition research by adopting the UG framework (Flynn et al., 2004; Klein, 1995; Leung, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007b, 2008). For a more detailed proposal on combining multilingualism, descriptive L3 and generative SLA, see Leung (2007a). It is hoped that this volume will generate more interest in the study of L3 or multilingual acquisition from both the generative linguistic perspective and other theoretical perspectives. It is also hoped that this same volume will induce more dialogue and scholarly exchange between the fields of bi/multilingualism and SLA within academia. Undeniably the world is becoming more and more multilingual. We thus believe that this work is timely and of social relevance. The following section presents an overview of the chapters collected in this volume.

Chapters in this Volume

The chapters in this volume are presented in an alphabetical order based on the last names of the contributors. A synopsis of each chapter is provided below. Chapter 1 by Bayona looks at the acquisition of the Spanish middle construction by anglophones in Canada from two perspectives:
generative SLA and generative L3. Two experimental tasks were employed in the SLA part of the study, namely a grammaticality judgment task and a truth value judgment task. The SLA analysis centers on the issue of UG access. Intermediate and advanced Spanish learners’ performance on the grammaticality judgment task testing the surface structure of *se* seems to support Full Access to UG, but the results of the truth value judgment task indicate that these same learners still have problems with the abstract semantic properties related to the Spanish middle construction, as against reflexives or perfectivity. Thus overall it is unclear as to whether UG is fully available to post-critical period SLA so far as the syntax–semantics interface is concerned. A replication experiment based on the grammaticality judgment task used in the SLA study was administered on a new group of subjects who are trilinguals (L1 English–L2 French–L3 Spanish). This L3 analysis focuses on the issues of typological proximity, L2 proficiency effect, and recency. Findings suggest that higher L2 French proficiency indeed helps those Spanish learners to perform significantly better than the low L2 French proficiency group, thus providing some support for the role of typology and L2 proficiency in L3 acquisition. Recency as defined by exposure to classroom Spanish before testing has a neutral effect. Overall Bayona rejects the Full Transfer Full Access model as she observes no absolute L1 transfer in her case.

Chapter 2 by Chin also examines L3 acquisition of Spanish. She aims to pin down the source of transfer in the acquisition of aspectual contrast amongst L1 Chinese–L2 English–L3 Spanish learners in Taiwan. An experiment that comprises a proficiency test, a morphology test and an acceptability task in two language versions was devised to test learners’ knowledge and interpretation of semantic contrast of perfective and imperfect aspect in English and Spanish. With respect to the acceptability task, for L2 English, group results show that learners were sensitive to the semantic contrast between perfective and imperfective aspectual marking on state, accomplishment and achievement verbs in English; on the other hand, individual results reveal that L1 Chinese influence in some of the learners’ L2 English interlanguage systems cannot be ignored. For L3 Spanish, learners only recognized the perfective and imperfective contrast on accomplishment verbs despite possible positive transfer from L1 Chinese as far as state verbs are concerned and from L2 English with respect to both accomplishment and achievement verbs. Chin argues that her overall findings point to both L1 and L2 transfer in L3 acquisition, with L2 posing the dominant influence.

Building on the idea that ‘language’ does not refer to a single language in the Chomskyan sense and that UG is not only concerned with a single language in the mind but allows for the possibility of multiple languages, Cook claims in Chapter 3 that (post-critical period) second, third or any subsequent language learners should not be considered as ‘abnormal’
compared to monolingual speakers. Quite the contrary, bilingualism or multilingualism should be considered as the norm, and monolinguals should instead be regarded as individuals who have been deprived of input in order to trigger more than one languages in their minds. In his chapter, Cook presents various arguments to support his claim and discusses the consequences of such a multilingual view on the theory of UG.

Flynn also explores the relationship between the study of L3/multilingual acquisition and the theory of UG in Chapter 4. Based on the empirical findings of her experiment on relative clauses in the case of L1 Kazakh–L2 Russian–L3 English, Flynn investigates three research questions: (1) whether the properties of the L1 grammar alone determine language learning in L3 development; (2) whether grammatical properties of all prior languages known can potentially determine subsequent patterns; and (3) how the L3 results inform us concerning the nature of the initial state for language learning. The first two questions relate to the cumulative enhancement model advanced by Flynn and her colleagues in their earlier work. With regard to the third question, Flynn situates her discussion in the light of two possible models of language acquisition, namely the ‘at birth’ model (i.e. UG matures and changes in the course of language acquisition, and ultimately evolves into the target language) and the ‘constant’ model (i.e. UG remains unchanged during the language acquisition process, and remains separate from the target language (or any other previously acquired language)). Flynn concludes that her L3 findings support both cumulative enhancement and the ‘constant’ model.

To continue with the rest of empirical studies, in Chapter 5 Foote investigates L3 acquisition of aspect in Romance languages, focusing on the role of typology in transfer. She compares learners of three language combinations: L1 English–L2 Romance–L3 Romance, L1 Romance–L2 English–L3 Romance, and L1 English–L2 Romance. Similar to Chin, perfective vs. imperfective interpretative contrast forms the focus of Foote’s study. Foote assumes that the Romance languages in her case, Spanish, Italian and French, are broadly similar to each other as far as aspectual marking and semantic contrast of perfective and imperfective are concerned. The main experimental task conducted was a sentence conjunction judgment task in which learners had to judge the logicality of sentences made up of two clauses conjoined by the target equivalent of but, the verb of the first clause supplied in either of the two past tense forms and only the imperfective form would make the sentences logical. Results of the task on both group and individual levels suggest that the two L3 groups consistently outperformed the L2 group; they seem to have transferred knowledge of aspect from the previously known Romance language to have gained this advantage. Foote thus contends that typology plays a crucial role in determining the major source of transfer in L3 acquisition on the morpho-syntactic (and semantic) levels.