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SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

WOLFGANG KLEIN

MAX-PLANCK-INSTITUT FÜR PSYCHOLINGUISTIK
# CONTENTS

*Preface* viii

**PART I The process of language acquisition** 1

1 Some forms of language acquisition, some fundamental facts, some focal issues, some well-known theories 3

1.1 First language acquisition 4
1.1.1 Cognitive, social, and linguistic development 4
1.1.2 The language acquisition device 6
1.1.3 The ‘critical period’ 8
1.1.4 Compound and coordinate bilingualism 11
1.1.5 Relative dominance 13
1.1.6 Side effects on development 14
1.2 From first to second language acquisition 15
1.3 Second language acquisition 15
1.3.1 Spontaneous learning 16
1.3.2 Guided language learning 19
1.4 Re-acquisition 22
1.5 Theories of second language acquisition 23
1.5.1 Identity hypothesis 23
1.5.2 Contrastive hypothesis 25
1.5.3 Krashen’s monitor theory 28
1.5.4 Theories of learner varieties 29
1.5.5 Pidginization theory 30
1.5.6 Conclusion 32

2 Six dimensions of language acquisition 33

2.1 A global view 33
2.2 Propensity 35
2.3 Language faculty 39
Contents

2.4 Access 43
2.5 The structure of the process 47
2.6 Tempo of acquisition 50
2.7 End state 50
2.8 Summary 52

3 Some consequences for foreign language instruction 53

PART II From the learner’s point of view 57

4 The learner’s four tasks 59
4.1 The problem of analysis 59
4.2 The problem of synthesis 60
4.3 The embedding problem 61
4.4 The matching problem 62

5 The problem of analysis 63
5.1 The available knowledge 63
5.2 Structural properties of the input 66
5.3 Example 1: Repetition test for personal pronouns 71
5.4 Example 2: Translation test for modal verbs 74
5.5 Example 3: Prefabricated patterns 77

6 The problem of synthesis 79
6.1 The syntax of basic learner varieties 80
6.2 Further advances in synthesis 89
6.2.1 Acquisition of finite elements 90
6.2.2 Acquisition of negation 95
6.3 Conclusions 108

7 The embedding problem 111
7.1 Some devices of context-dependency 113
7.1.1 Deixis 117
7.1.2 Anaphora 118
7.1.3 Ellipsis 119
7.1.4 Word order and intonation 122
7.2 How learners express temporality 123
7.2.1 Temporality 124
7.2.2 Temporality in a basic learner variety 129
7.3 Conclusion 137
## Contents

8 **The matching problem** 138  
8.1 General issues 139  
8.1.1 Objective and subjective discrepancy 139  
8.1.2 Variations in the target language 139  
8.1.3 Conscious and subconscious perception of discrepancy 140  
8.1.4 Metalinguistic reflection 141  
8.2 Types of (self-)control 142  
8.2.1 Monitoring 143  
8.2.2 Feedback 144  
8.2.3 Reflection 145  
8.3 Critical rules or: What is being matched against what? 145  
8.3.1 Communication task vs. learning task 146  
8.3.2 Degrees of communication and 'test rules' 147  
8.3.3 Criticalness 149  
8.3.4 Some implications 150  
8.3.5 An example 153  
8.4 Self-corrections 163  

**Conclusion** 167  
**Notes** 168  
**References** 174  
**Index of names** 187  
**Index of subjects** 190
The acquisition of a second language, be it by everyday communication or by instruction, follows certain principles, which stem from various properties of human language processing, from the learner’s specific motivation and, finally, from the way in which samples of, or information about, the language to be learned are made accessible to the learner. The objective of second language acquisition studies is to uncover these principles.

Above and beyond the genuine interest which any human activity as common as learning and using a second language excites, there are two reasons why the study of second language acquisition is an important and sometimes rewarding enterprise. First, for foreign language teaching to be maximally effective, it must be tuned to the principles outlined above. To the extent to which we do not explicitly know them, successful language teaching can only be a matter of practical experience, of individual pedagogical gifts, or of luck. Second, the study of how the human mind builds up fragmentary linguistic systems from limited input, how it re-organizes them if new input becomes available, and how it uses them for communicative purposes for which they may still be inadequate, can tell us something about how human language processing functions in general. The study of second language acquisition opens a window on the nature and function of human language to an even greater extent, perhaps, than have aphasia studies, with their many methodological problems, and studies of first language acquisition, where linguistic and cognitive development are so difficult to tease apart. The present introduction is not so much a comprehensive survey of all of the research done in the field over the years; rather, it attempts to give the reader an idea of what the relevant problems are, of how they were and are approached, and of what the results so far obtained can contribute to the practical and theoretical issues mentioned above.

The present version is a revised and extended translation of the German original; some of the changes were suggested by Suzanne Romaine and...
Preface

John Trim. Bohuslaw Jankowski undertook the tedious task of rendering my sometimes very idiosyncratic German into readable English; Clive Perdue and Julia Harding worked through the English translation and suggested many changes both of style and presentation. The manuscript was typed and retyped by Marlene Arns. Many friends and colleagues helped me with critical comments and advice: Rainer Dietrich, Willem Levelt, Clive Perdue, Christiane von Stutterheim and Jürgen Weissenborn commented on the original manuscript; Michael Clyne, Norbert Dittmar, Jane Edwards and Bohuslaw Jankowski pointed out some shortcomings in the printed German version and suggested improvements.

The basic content of the book was presented in seminars at Brighton, Heidelberg, Frankfurt and Salzburg where I profited a great deal from the discussions. To all the people I have mentioned I am very grateful.

A final note: There are female and male learners and researchers. For simplicity’s sake, I have chosen to use the pronoun he when referring to them generally.