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Different speakers but same Language Acquisition Device?

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In her paper ‘Different speakers; different grammars’, Dąbrowska raises a number of intriguing questions, equally relevant to theories of first language (L1) acquisition and theories of second language (L2) acquisition. I welcome the decision of LAB’s editors to devote a special issue to the discussion of these issues. In my commentary, I have chosen to restrict myself to three main points.

What are the implications for LAD?

Dąbrowska challenges the widely held belief that all (monolingual) first language learners (L1ers) converge on the same grammar. She provides data from various studies, suggesting that not all native speakers acquire the same grammatical knowledge. Dąbrowska argues that these differences should be interpreted as difference in competence (knowledge of the language’s grammar) rather than differences in performance (processing). Dąbrowska admits, however, that this “does not necessarily mean that Universal Grammar does not exist” (p.246).

In appraising Dąbrowska’s line of argumentation, I suggest that the appraisal be conducted in the context of the fundamental questions we want to answer. Theories of L1 acquisition should at least be able to account for the acquisition of the linguistic knowledge acquired (and thus shared) by *all* native speakers. This is what I have called ‘basic language cognition’ (BLC) (Hulstijn, 2011, 230–231):

“*Basic language cognition* (BLC) pertains to (1) the largely implicit, unconscious knowledge in the domains of phonetics, prosody, phonology, morphology and syntax, (2) the largely explicit, conscious knowledge in the lexical domain (form-meaning mappings), *in combination with* (3) the automaticity with which these types of knowledge can be processed. BLC is restricted to frequent lexical items and frequent grammatical structures, that is, to lexical items and morphosyntactic

structures that may occur in any communicative situation, common to all adult L1-ers, regardless of age, literacy, or educational level (...) BLC is restricted to speech reception and speech production; it does not comprise reading and writing.”

How small or large of how simple or complex BLC is, is a matter of empirical inquiry, to be conducted, preferably, on the basis of a theory of language acquisition or a theory of language competence. By testing a wide variety of native speakers (not affected by language-related disorders), one could establish which types of utterances can be understood and produced by all native speakers. The ‘smaller’ or ‘simpler’ BLC turns out to be, the fewer demands we have to pose — at least potentially — on the language acquisition device (LAD) in terms of (i) initial knowledge (domain specific, as in UG, or domain general, as in usage-based and emergentist theories) or (ii) its learning mechanisms. In other words, even though substantial differences in the language knowledge acquired by L1ers do exist, the question remains how we explain L1 acquisition of the L1ers with the ‘smallest’ or ‘simplest’ grammar. An additional question is how we explain the fact that not all L1ers end up acquiring the same grammatical knowledge.

Level of education effects

Dąbrowska provides empirical evidence of the effect of level of education (LoE) on L1ers’ knowledge of their language. This is indeed what my associates and I have found too — and others before us (see the literature review in Mulder & Hulstijn, 2011). In one study, involving 98 adult native speakers of Dutch, differing in age (18–35, 36–50, and 51–76 years old) and LoE (low versus high), Mulder and Hulstijn (2011) observed large individual differences in lexical knowledge (vocabulary size and word associations), lexical fluency (auditory and visual lexical decision) and lexical memory (auditory and visual word span). Hulstijn, Andringa, Olsthoorn, Van Beuningen and Schoonen (submitted) conducted a study involving 245 native speakers of Dutch, divided into four groups of equal size along the dimensions of age (19–40 vs 56–82) and LoE (low versus high). Participants in the LoE-low group had attended elementary school and had received several years of vocational education. Participants in the LoE-high group were minimally at college level. Participants performed six language tasks plus various nonlinguistic or partially linguistic tasks, assessing nonverbal intelligence, working-memory capacity and reaction time to nonverbal stimuli. In one of the linguistic tasks, participants had to judge the semantic/pragmatic appropriateness of responses to propositions, that differed in length (7–12 words versus 13–23 words), frequency of the content words in them, and syntactic complexity (absence or presence of one subordinate clause). Average correct scores (max = 56) was high in all four Age x LoE groups,

ranging from 54.6 to 55.3. Senior and LoE-low participants performed slightly but significantly lower than, respectively, younger and LoE-high participants but the sizes of the Age and LoE effects were small. We take these results to mean that Dutch NSs can easily process not only utterances such as (the Dutch equivalence of) ‘Will the next bus to Amsterdam really be in service?’ (short and simple) but also utterances such as ‘Because I also have to go to the doctor tomorrow, I won’t have enough time to visit grandma’ (long, complex). However, a significant and substantial effect of Age and LoE on response speed was obtained. It took senior and LoE-low participants 750 and 1600 ms longer than, respectively, the young and LoE-high participants to respond in this computer-administered task. These findings underscore the causal roles of literacy (LoE) and language experience (indexed in our studies by age and LoE) in the emergence of individual differences. As I said above, however, findings of individual differences do not necessarily speak to the nature of LAD.

Comparison of L2-performance with L1-performance

Dąbrowska also points to the problem of comparing performance of L2ers to performance of L1ers. This is problematic, she argues, because native speakers do not all converge on the same grammar. I quite agree. With respect to the comparison of L2ers with L1ers, one should not underestimate the effect of the linguistic norms of the standard language, in most societies, conveyed to L1ers in education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Thus, to compare performance of L2ers on a given language task to performance of L1 college students runs the risk of comparing to an L1 norm not representative of the population of L1ers at large. In a paper on the study of bilingualism from a cognitive perspective, I have recommended, in the spirit of Grosjean (1998), to always include a comparison group of L1ers. For such a comparison group L1ers should be selected of roughly the same age and educational, occupational or leisure-time profiles as the L2ers involved in the study (Hulstijn, 2012). In general, and depending on the research question, for any task administered to L2ers, it is good to administer that task also to L1ers, differing in level of education and age, and report the variance in L1ers’ performance.

In conclusion, I welcome Dąbrowska’s findings as a falsification of the claim that all children acquire the same grammar. In my own words (Hulstijn, 2011: 232): “Since Chomsky (1965) claimed that all adult native speakers share the same grammatical competence (“the ideal speaker-hearer’s intrinsic competence”; p. 4), most researchers, except sociolinguists and speech therapists, have simply taken the proposition for granted, neglecting the obligation of finding out to what extent it can be empirically upheld.” But the more difficult challenge of specifying

LAD in terms of pre-knowledge (if any) and learning mechanisms (evolutionary given or acquired after birth) remains on the table.

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