

PREFACE

The aim of this textbook is to provide an introduction to language acquisition from a strictly linguistic perspective. The theoretical framework I have chosen is that of generative linguistics for at least two reasons. Firstly, because one cannot present facts in a theoretical vacuum nor can one switch from one perspective to another with the excuse of being eclectic. Such an approach seems impracticable to me and, in many cases, misleading. Secondly, generative linguistics is the first model which clearly states that linguistic theory must meet two requirements: that of descriptive adequacy and that of explanatory adequacy. And also for the first time, it provides strong arguments that human language is part of our biological endowment. I do not know of any other linguistic theory that takes the problem of language learnability that seriously and which, by so doing, turns the study of language, seen as a mirror of the human mind, into one really worth pursuing. It follows then that the present textbook is aimed at students who have some prior knowledge of generative grammar. However, I have tried to provide definitions whenever I thought that might be helpful to someone with no previous training in generative linguistics.

The textbook contains five interrelated but clearly distinct units. Unit I outlines the general framework. It focuses on what makes language knowledge so different from other cognitive skills and it provides a tentative definition of language acquisition.

Unit II is a more theory-oriented version of the first one: it presents the concept of language acquisition and its implications for language learnability theories in the history of generative linguistics, from Noam Chomsky's *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* to his *Minimalist Program*. The main goal of this unit is to offer the student an insight into generativism from the perspective of acquisition, with a view to showing how "old" the new Minimalist Program actually is.

Unit III deals with morphological development, with a focus on how the dual-mechanism model can explain the overregularization or irregularization of morphological forms in early speech. It also briefly looks into issues related to the acquisition of derivational morphology and the way in which derivational and inflectional morphology intermingle in the child's linguistic development.

Unit IV offers an introduction to the acquisition of syntax. It is actually organized in three parts. In the first part, I summarize the three main views on syntactic development available in the literature. The second and the third part represent illustrations of how one empirical phenomenon can be viewed from the perspective of each of the three models. Each part reviews a selection of studies addressing two specific topics: the optional infinitive stage and early subjects. I have decided on these two topics for several reasons. One of them is that both have been the subject of a huge number of studies in recent years. This is because the analysis of optional infinitives or early subjects inevitably requires tackling other issues as well, such as the acquisition of functional categories, of movement or of control. This is also the second reason for which I opted for optional infinitives and early subjects.

Unit V addresses the problem of the syntax/semantics interface. It is organized in two parts. The first part deals with lexical development, explaining in what way the

acquisition of vocabulary, just like the acquisition of syntax, is guided by some possibly innate constraints. The second part offers an overview of the various hypotheses about the acquisition of tense and aspect. It revisits, from a semantic perspective, the syntactic analysis of the early optional infinitives.

I hope that this textbook will help open up some of the fascinating world of language acquisition and that students will enjoy exploring it.

