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## Attainment and acquirability in second language acquisition

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When the editors of *Second Language Research* first inquired about the possibility of my guest-editing the special thematic issue of this volume, the topic they had in mind was ‘fossilization’. This theme, however, with its underlying focus on ultimate failure in second language acquisition (SLA), eventually came to feel too limiting. It is undeniable that many (if not most) adult second language (L2) acquirers ‘fail’ if ‘success’ is loosely defined as acquiring native-like competence and performance in the target language in all respects. Nor is it the case that such ‘failures’ are uninteresting: arriving at an adequate explanation for the differences we observe between native and non-native language acquisition has long been a goal of SLA research and can also be expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of human cognition in general.

However, the research construct that can better exploit such a comparison between different kinds of end-states is ‘ultimate attainment’. Not only is the term itself more neutral in its avoidance of notions of dubious theoretical value such as ‘success’ and ‘failure’, but it is also more accurate. The study of ultimate attainment is potentially more illuminating in regard to a central goal of modern linguistic inquiry (following Chomsky, 1986): determining what properties must be attributable to the human mind/brain that could account for the nature of the complex system of knowledge that has actually been attained. In other words, we can only hope to understand the nature of the system by first examining what has actually been acquired (or not), given a particular linguistic environment and – for SLA – prior knowledge of another I-language, and then ‘working backwards’ to figure out how such a system could have possibly been acquired.

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The articles in this issue make it clear that such complex L2 systems have indeed been attained, even if they are not completely identical to those of native speakers. All five research articles collected here make theoretically interesting and testable claims about what is predicted to be acquirable or not in adult L2 acquisition.

The first two papers, by Goad and White and by Hawkins and Hattori, explore the role of the first language (L1) in delimiting what is ultimately attainable in the L2. Both papers argue – one from a phonological and the other from a syntactic perspective – that under certain specific conditions it will be impossible for native-like L2 representations to be acquired. Goad and White investigate the L2 acquisition of English past tense morphology by native speakers (NSs) of Mandarin Chinese, arguing against an approach that had previously tied (relatively) low rates of English past tense marking by Chinese native speakers to an inability to represent a morphosyntactic feature ([+past]) that was unselected in the learners' L1 (Hawkins and Liszka, 2003). Goad and White propose instead that it is reliance on L1 prosodic structures that constrains L2 production of functional morphology, which is affected by the phonological shape of the particular stem type. In cases where available L1 structures cannot be adapted, the authors predict that native-like prosodic representations will be ultimately unacquirable.

Hawkins and Hattori, meanwhile, following along the lines of the Hawkins and Liszka study cited above as well as recent research by Tsimpli (2003) and Tsimpli and Dimitrakopoulou (to appear), further refine the syntactic featural-deficit approach by restricting the type of feature they claim cannot be acquired by adult learners to 'uninterpretable' features that have never been selected in the learner's L1. They report that highly proficient Japanese learners of English are significantly less sensitive than native English controls to superiority or sub-jacency effects associated with constraints on *wh*-movement in multiple-*wh*-questions. This difference is attributed to the presence in English but not in Japanese of an uninterpretable *wh*- (or EPP-) feature that forces *wh*-movement. The authors further explore the possibility that what appears to be target-like *wh*-movement in English by native Japanese speakers may actually be *wh*-scrambling instead, an option that is licensed by the L1.

The next article, by Slabakova, provides a thorough review of recent research on the L2 acquisition of semantic knowledge, encompassing results from both linguistic theory-based and neurolinguistic studies in order to determine if semantic acquisition is subject to age-related effects. Slabakova carefully teases apart distinct lexical, grammatical and pragmatic components of the language faculty that are sometimes indiscriminately lumped together under ‘meaning’, and argues that all available evidence points to the conclusion that knowledge of phrasal semantics in the L2 is ultimately acquirable.

The final two research articles, by Sorace and Filiaci and by Hopp, investigate and compare the processing strategies used by near-native and native speakers in resolving potentially ambiguous syntactic dependencies. Sorace and Filiaci tested native English speakers of Italian and monolingual Italian controls on their interpretation of null and overt pronouns in forward and backward anaphora contexts in Italian. Their results indicate that the near-native speakers have acquired the necessary syntactic licensing features as well as target-like processing strategies for null subjects in Italian; however, they differ from native speakers in their choice of antecedent for overt pronouns in the backward anaphora condition. The authors conclude that this difference is the likely result of indeterminacy at the syntax–pragmatics interface, since preferences for antecedents of overt pronouns among Italian native speakers reflect sensitivity to pragmatic factors (such as avoiding potential miscommunication).

Next, Hopp compares advanced and near-native (L1 Dutch or English) L2 acquirers of German with German native-speaker controls on their processing strategies for repairing or reanalysing potential garden path effects of scrambled (OS) word order in German, based on sensitivity to morphosyntactic cues. Hopp finds a clear effect for proficiency: the near-native but not the advanced speakers in both L1 conditions exhibited reaction times and judgement accuracy scores implicating the use of processing patterns that were ‘qualitatively identical’ to those of the German native speaker controls.

Finally, true to the *Second Language Research* editors’ original topical suggestion, I have included a short book review article on two recent books about fossilization: one authored by Z.-H. Han and the other a collection of papers co-edited by Han and T. Odlin. The review

by Fidler highlights some of the problems associated with defining and characterizing fossilization that are dealt with in these works.

In sum, the articles collected here offer wide-ranging and complementary perspectives on the nature of what adult L2 learners are ultimately able to achieve, from phonology to pragmatics, in both competence and performance. In some cases the L2 end-states under consideration in these studies are native-like in certain ways and, in other ways, not; regardless of the 'native-likeness' of the outcome, however, we expect that these and further studies of L2 ultimate attainment will contribute to an emerging overall picture of the human language faculty.

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