

## Third Language Acquisition and Universal Grammar

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# **Third Language Acquisition and Universal Grammar**

Edited by

Yan-kit Ingrid Leung

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Yan-kit Ingrid Leung  
June 2008





## Contributors

**Patricia Bayona** is a Canadian researcher interested in the acquisition of Spanish as a third or additional language, and in the sociolinguistics of Spanish as a native language. Her initial theoretical training was in second language acquisition from a generative perspective, but her doctoral specialization has recently evolved toward quantitative research on trilingualism. As an active member of the International Association of Multilingualism and of the International Research Network on Multilingualism, her exploration of the Spanish language learner has focused on the effect of the integration of sociocultural and linguistic aspects.

**Diana Hsien-jen Chin** is Assistant Professor of Spanish at Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages, Taiwan. She received her PhD in Spanish from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2006. Being a language lover, she speaks Mandarin Chinese, English, Spanish, Japanese and French. Her research interests include multilingualism, second language acquisition theories, learners' motivation and learning strategies.

**Vivian Cook** worked at Ealing Technical College, North East London Polytechnic and the University of Essex, teaching EFL, first and second language acquisition and language teaching methodology. Since 2004 he has been Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. He is chiefly known through his books on second language learning, Chomsky and spelling. His current interests include the English writing system and the multi-competence view of L2 acquisition. He was the founder and first president of the European Second Language Association, and is a founding co-editor of *Writing Systems Research* (OUP), to appear in 2009.

**Suzanne Flynn** received her PhD from Cornell University in 1983 and is Professor of Linguistics and Language Acquisition at MIT. Her research focuses on the acquisition of various aspects of syntax by both children and adults in bilingual, second and third language acquisition contexts. More recently, her work has also focused on the neural representation of the multilingual brain as well as on the phonological and acoustic underpinnings of accent. She is the author/editor of several books as well as the author of many articles published in journals and edited volumes. She is also the co-editor of the journal *Syntax* with T. Stowell.

**Rebecca Foote** is Assistant Professor of Second Language Studies in the Department of Linguistics and Germanic, Slavic, Asian and African Languages at Michigan State University. She received her PhD in Spanish Linguistics from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2006. Her research centers on psycholinguistic aspects of second language acquisition, including bilingual and multilingual language processing and production. Ongoing and future projects examine the processing and production of gender agreement in early and late language learners, the role of working memory capacity in agreement processing and production, and multilingual sentence processing strategies.

**Carol Jaensch**'s research to date has focused on the L3 acquisition of German by native speakers of Japanese who acquired English as an L2. The particular focus has been on the role that the L2 might play in the acquisition of properties of the German Determiner Phrase. She has recently completed her PhD thesis (entitled 'The role of the L1 and the L2 in the L3 acquisition of German DP features') at the University of Essex, UK. She has presented work related to this topic at a variety of international conferences over the past four years, which has resulted in a number of publications.

**Fufen Jin** is currently a researcher at the Department of Scandinavian Studies and Comparative Literature, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). She read English Language and Literature for her BA, and General Linguistics for her MA. She had subsequently worked as a lecturer at the Department of Foreign Languages, Tsinghua University (Beijing, China) for three years before she joined NTNU, pursuing her PhD in linguistics (specialized in a Generative Approach to Second Language Acquisition). She received her PhD from NTNU in 2007. Her research interests are in second / third language acquisition, mainly involving Norwegian, Chinese and English.

**Yan-kit Ingrid Leung** received her PhD in linguistics from McGill University in Canada. She has taught at the linguistic departments at the University of Southern California, USA and the University of Essex, UK. She is interested in second and especially third language acquisition, as well as bilingualism/multilingualism. Her research has focused on East Asian and Southeast Asian learners. She is currently affiliated with the University of Hong Kong.

**Sirirat Na Ranong** is currently a PhD student at the Department of Language and Linguistics of the University of Essex, UK. Before coming to Essex, she worked as a lecturer for the English Department at Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand. She has developed her interest in the area of third language acquisition, focusing on the case of Thai learners of Chinese. Her PhD thesis is entitled 'Investigating the lexical and syntactic transfer in L3 acquisition of Chinese: The case of L1 Thai–L2 English–L3 Chinese'.

**Wai lan Tsang** is Assistant Professor at the University of Hong Kong. She received her MPhil and PhD from the University of Cambridge, UK, and the focus of her doctoral research was the acquisition of English finiteness by Cantonese learners. Her research interests include syntax and morphology, contrastive analysis of Chinese/Cantonese and English, and second/third language acquisition. Her recent projects focus on teachers' language awareness, the use of implicit/explicit feedback in second language acquisition, and the acquisition of Mandarin as a third language by Japanese learners.



# 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 the 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 logicity 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.