On Language Acquisition

Neil SMITH & Ianthi-Maria TSIMPLI. The mind of a savant: language learning and modularity. *Blackwell: Oxford, 1998, xviii + 243 pages.*

The mind of a savant: language learning and modularity is aimed at providing evidence concerning the modularity of mind, invariant principles of language and their role in first and second language acquisition, and the interaction of pragmatic and conceptual factors in language use. Smith and Tsimpli undergo this task through a careful study of an individual with remarkable linguistic abilities but otherwise limited capacities. This book not only provides insight into the mind of one unique individual, but simultaneously it casts light on the nature of language and thought in general. By exploiting recent developments in both linguistics and psychology, the authors have made an essential contribution to the field of cognitive science and secondary language acquisition (SLA).

The way in which the book is structured –five independent although interrelated chapters– facilitates the reader's understanding of the reasoning followed by the authors. In the first chapter, and after introducing Christopher –personally, medically, psychologically and linguistically– a range of the theoretical assumptions that Smith and Tsimpli presuppose is outlined. In chapter 2, they provide a detailed account of Christopher's performance in English, concluding that his competence in his native language is flawless, and that apparent exceptions to this generalisation can be accounted for by reference to extra-grammatical considerations. The third chapter documents the results of a battery of tests on a sub-set of Christopher's 'second' languages, paying particular attention to Modern Greek and the Romance languages: French, Spanish and Italian. The next chapter discusses the authors' attempts to teach Christopher languages with which he was previously unfamiliar, so that they could study his learning process while they controlled the input to him. The languages chosen were Berber, spoken in North Africa, and Epun, a language they invented in order to test Christopher's reaction to structures which, by hypothesis, could not occur in the world's real languages. The final chapter takes a closer look at Christopher's translational expertise –the talent that first brought him to attention, and then attempts to provide a general account of the full range of his mental abilities. By blending insights from cognitive psychology, the philosophy of mind and theoretical linguistics, Smith and Tsimpli produce a revised model of the mind in terms of which they can describe, and in part explain, both Christopher's exceptional, albeit flawed, talent, and by implication the abilities of normal people. As further evidence, they provide documentation of the standard psychological and linguistic tests they used throughout the project as

well as of supplementary data included in the appendices.

To make possible an understanding of Christopher's case from both a psychological and a linguistic perspective, Smith and Tsimpli introduce certain fundamental notions of current linguistic theory, and embed them within a more general framework of a theory of cognition. They outline the *innateness hypothesis* as it relates to language. The theoretical background on which their claims are based is that of the *principles and parameters* model. The authors maintain that the set of functional categories constitutes a submodule of Universal Grammar, namely the UG lexicon. Each functional category is associated with an entry specified for relevant functional features. Parameterisation is then defined in terms of a set of alternative values with which a functional category can be associated. Cross-linguistic variation is thus restricted to differences in the parametric values of functional categories. These assumptions, in conjunction with a maturational approach to language acquisition, have certain implications: first, the inaccessibility of the functional module at the early stage of acquisition; and second, the lack of cross-linguistic differences in early grammars. They also claim that if the *critical period hypothesis* is correct, maturational constraints on the functional module can be interpreted as entailing its complete inaccessibility after the end of this period. The importance of this suggestion is that it has clear implications for adult second language learning: UG may still be available but parameter-resetting can not be.

Furthermore, they refer to Fodor's (1983) *modularity hypothesis* (according to this hypothesis, the human mind is not an unstructured entity but consists of components or modules which can be distinguished by their functional properties), as reformulated in the light of Anderson's (1992) *cognitive theory of intelligence* (this theory is an attempt to formalize properties of central systems within a modular theory of mind. Anderson's model is explicitly designed to be compatible with the Fodorian distinction between modular input systems and putatively non-modular central systems) and Sperber and Wilson's *(1986) theory of relevance*. Relevance in a technical sense is defined as a joint function of the achievement of contextual effects and the amount of effort needed to achieve them. The 'principle of relevance' states that communicated information creates an expectation of relevance: engaging someone's attention by speaking to them guarantees that you think what you are saying is worth their attention.

With this book, Smith and Tsimpli have made a splendid contribution to the whole field of cognitive science. It casts light not only on the nature of language but also on that of thought in general. Furthermore, as far as second language acquisition is concerned, the combined results from the experiment to teach Christopher new languages under conditions of controlled input are more than suggestive. It seems clear that, while there is no evidence for complete mastery, there is support for the directing role of transfer from the first language and for the importance of UG; there is clear indication that the learning of the morphology and the lexicon is different in kind from the learning of syntax; there is evidence that, at least in this natural context, second language learning exploits inductive strategies as well as modular capabilities; and of course there is yet another demonstration of Christopher's remarkable talent in mastering (parts of) the structure of new languages. Although the bulk of the book was intended to be accessible to the general reader, the need to provide technical analyses and explanations to justify their conclusions has prevented the

authors from achieving their original intention. Only those who have some familiarity with current linguistic theory and psychology are able to follow and evaluate the reasoning put forward. Other readers can either skim the technicalities or run to the nearest university to take an accelerated course in Linguistics. Both options are quite inappropriate, but the thing is that this book deserves more than just being read: it must be understood and, hence, enjoyed as a whole.

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Alessandro DURANTI, *Linguistic anthropology.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xxi + 398 pages.

Linguistic anthropology is a welcome textbook that focuses on the cultural importance of language and speaking, that is, it studies language as part and parcel of our lives. The insightful ethnographic approach to linguistic fieldwork provided by the book is really appealing and extremely useful to anyone interested in carrying out research in first and second language acquisition. Divided into ten chapters, the first three are devoted to theoretical issues, whereas chapters four and five focus on how to carry out effective fieldwork. Chapters six, seven, and eight present different trends within the field of Linguistic Anthropology in the last decades. Finally, in chapter nine, Duranti develops his interest in the role of participants in speech events, which is followed by his conclusions summarized in chapter ten.

On the whole, the book is well written, clear and neatly organized. Perhaps the only exception is the discussion of certain theoretical concepts which are complex due to their multiple meanings. For example, the terms 'culture', 'linguistic relativity' and 'speech community' have been differently defined by various authors and, therefore, the reader may find problems when trying to figure out which specific definition the author is referring to.

In the first chapter, Duranti points out that Linguistic Anthropology is mainly concerned with language use and three theoretical notions, namely performance, indexicality, and participation. Performance has to do with the power of words because words do things as Austin's notion of performative verbs shows. For instance, when a person says (i) "*I promise I'll be good*", the uttering of these words is the act of promising itself. This notion displays a 'creative' and 'dynamic' view of language, which is the one assumed throughout the book. In relation to indexicality, the author mentions Gumperz's concept of 'contextualization cues' which are features of talk (not only linguistic) that contribute to the interpretation of sentences and situations. For instance, intonation of an utterance gives the hearer clues about the meaning that the speaker wants to convey. Thus, the utterance (ii) '*You don't know him*' would be interpreted as a question if spoken with a rising intonation. However, the same utterance pronounced with a falling intonation is an assertion meaning 'you do not know what he is capable of'. Participation takes into account that the participants in linguistic interaction are crucial for its development as a social activity. Therefore, these three concepts are important, but a notion that has been left out is that of context. Context both in the fixed and dynamic sense is also essential for inter-