

The Power of the Grammar in Between
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The learning problem in first and second/bilingual acquisition is the same: all learners must build a grammatical representation of the target language based on input. Yang's variational model (2012, 2016) holds that learners come equipped with UG and powerful computational processes that allow them to perform statistical analyses of the input. Children entertain other possible grammars in the process but they eventually converge on the target. This outcome stands in stark contrast with what happens in bilingualism and L2 acquisition, where learners may entertain other grammars but do not often move beyond them.

I consider the acquisition of Differential Object Marking (DOM), the overt morphological marking of direct objects that are more prominent than others on semantic and referentiality scales (Aissen 2003). Findings on the acquisition of DOM in several languages indicate that DOM is mastered with about 90% accuracy by age 3;00 in oral production, with minimal omission or overgeneralization errors. However, DOM is highly vulnerable to morphological variability, incomplete acquisition and fossilization in bilinguals, younger and older. Why is DOM apparently so easy for young monolingual children exposed to DOM languages by comparison? While a weak UG and statistical mechanisms may very well guide child learners exposed to sufficient input to build a grammar (bottom-up), the cognitive representation of the L1 guides input processing in bilinguals (top-down), especially in situations of insufficient input. The stronger grammar takes over, sometimes even independently of the input evidence.