

Language acquisition and emergent variation in the Three Factors era

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Abstract

The idea that language acquisition shapes grammatical variation (possible I-languages, typology) and change (diachrony) is strongly associated with the generative approach to language. During the classic principles & parameters era, the interaction of two factors – a rich Universal Grammar (UG) and the so-called *primary linguistic data* (PLD) – was central to driving generative understanding of acquisition, variation and change. In the minimalist era, these two factors become three, with UG being reconceptualised in sparser terms alongside the introduction of principles not specific to language, notably also including ‘principles of data analysis that might be used in language acquisition and other domains’ (Chomsky 2005:6). In this course, we revisit and critically evaluate the classic generative perspective on acquisition and its outputs before introducing some Three Factors-era generative approaches to acquisition and then considering one of these – the so-called *Maximise Minimal Means* (MMM) model (Biberauer 2019) – and its predictions in-depth. Topics we will discuss include the emergence of grammatical structure (e.g. features, categories, structural domains and their ‘edges’), recurring patterns in crosslinguistic variation (e.g. ‘recycling’ effects, convexity effects, and ‘grain’ effects), and the predictions that the model makes for diachronic change, contact-induced and otherwise.

Knowledge of introductory generative syntax will be assumed.