Syntactic Problems of the UG Approach to SLA of French Verb Movement in Finite Clauses by L1 English Speakers

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1. Introduction

This article is mainly concerned with the syntactic structure of finite clauses in French and English focusing on how L1 (first language) English learners acquire L2 (second language) French verb movement and placement of not/pas, often/souvent and all/tous on the basis of UG (Universal Grammar) principle.

The article will proceed in the following way. In section 2, I will briefly show some motivations of the UG analysis on SLA (Second Language Acquisition) comparing its approach to FLA (First Language Acquisition). Section 3 will present two methods of parametric approaches in SLA. Section 4 describes verb movement and placement of pas/not, souvent/often and tous/all argued by Pollock (1989), Rizzi (1990), and Hawkins, Towell & Bazergui (1993). In section 5, I will point out some syntactic problems of the above theories. Section 6 will suggest an alternative of syntactic interpretation about the verb movement in finite clauses in French and English. Section 7 will conclude our general arguments.

2. The UG perspective on SLA

UG is a theory of linguistic knowledge, not of speech acts. Its main concern is to construct the internal structure of the human mind. Chomsky elaborates the principles and parameters approach to UG in his work (1981): Lectures on Government and Binding. Although human languages are superficially diverse, they are considerably alike in formal properties, and they vary in narrowly
limited ways. Principles are invariant universal features. By contrast, parameters are variant within the UG principles. The following will show how UG principles and parameters can be applied to FLA and SLA.

2.1 The UG Approach to FLA

According to Chomsky's UG principle, acquiring a language means learning how UG principles apply to a particular language and which value is relevant for each parameter. Language acquisition is conceptualized by Chomsky in terms of initial and final 'state' of the mind. Children have the LAD (Language Acquisition Device) like a black box with which they proceed from a genetically determined initial state, or S₀ (zero state) to fully developed grammatical competence, or Sₘ (steady state). If children do not have physiological impairment and are given normal exposure to language, they acquire their first languages rapidly, effortlessly, uniformly, and successfully. The major difference of their first language acquisition from the adult acquisition of L2 is that they acquire their native language on the basis of positive evidence only.

McNeill (1966) and Schiff (1979) support Chomsky's UG principle in language acquisition. That is, language acquisition can be illustrated by innate competence, not simply by repeated learning or stimulus conditioned reinforcement,¹ etc. McNeill (cited in Towell & Hawkins, 1994: 59) showed that children appeared not to be sensitive to repeated instruction or correction of their patents. Schiff (cited in Hymes, 1991, recited in Towell & Hawkins, 1994) reported a very striking case of hearing children of deaf parents who received less than 20 hours a week of oral language input. By several standard measures of linguistic development these children showed no delay in oral language development when compared to children from homes with hearing parents.

From the above examples we can draw the conclusion that children's first language acquisition is due to the innate biological endowment as Chomsky argues.

¹ Behaviorists view language acquisition as learning by positive reinforcement of "good grammar" and constant corrections of "bad grammar." See Brown (1973) for further details.