

SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION OF LINGUISTICS TO SLA RESEARCH*

María Adelaida Jurado Spuch
Universidad de La Laguna

This latest work by Cook is concerned with the stimulating and novel discipline of second language acquisition (SLA) research that started in the early 1970s. He presents a linguistics-based introduction to this field of research, which serves to emphasize the importance of this work in this particular area of study. At the same time he critically appraises the methodology and goals that have underpinned it. Throughout the ten chapters of the book, three dimensions intertwine and provide its wide-ranging scope, and within them (a) the historical progression of the field, (b) the variety of SLA research methods and techniques employed, and (c) the decisive problems that are raised when SLA is related to linguistics are addressed.

Thus, in the historical strand, an overview of the field is given, from early SLA research –Chapter One– that laid the foundations for later work, that is, the earlier work of Weinreich (1953) and Lado (1957), and the paradigm shift in the concept of first language acquisition (FLA) itself that occurred in the 1960s due to Chomsky’s accounts of the nature of language and the *creative* aspect of language use (Chomsky, 1959), to the contrasting theories of the Universal Grammar (UG) Model of SLA –Chapter Nine– and the different cognitive approaches to SLA research –Chapter Ten– around which current work is revolving. The strand concerning research methods and techniques focuses on (i) observational data –Chapter Two– which are the result of the research carried out to establish the sequence in which people learn second languages (L2s): i.e. much of the negation research and grammatical morpheme research; (ii) experimental research –Chapter Seven– which takes on more revealing syntax so as to inform outstanding issues of L2 learning –i.e. sequence and psychological processing– and investigates data coming from comprehension techniques, acceptability, sentence combining, guided production, and filling in the blanks; and (iii) grammaticality judgements –Chapter Nine– which provide helpful confirmation evidence to UG-related research, although “any individual’s notions about an L2 sentence will be temporary and idiosyncratic;” (p. 237) their value, nevertheless, rests on their difference from single sentence evidence, the starting point of the poverty-of-the-stimulus argument, central to the UG model, and on their being a controlled experimental measure established from several subjects; single sentence evidence does

not necessarily consult any speakers. Finally, the dimension which tackles the relationship between linguistic theory and SLA research looks at (i) the problem of syntactic models –Chapter Two–, that is, the two areas of grammatical morphemes and negation research prominent during the late 1970s and early 1980s that relied on earlier models of syntax closely linked to structuralist linguistics; (ii) the sociolinguistic perspective on SLA –Chapter Four– which relates it to neighbouring disciplines such as pidgins, creoles and variation and gives prevalence to use and variation over knowledge and competence; (iii) and the issues involved when UG theory is used –Chapter Nine–, that is, “some of the potential and some of the dangers involved in the adoption of a complex and specialised learning model” (p. 200) such as the current Chomskyan model of linguistics, the principles and parameters theory or Government/Binding theory (Chomsky, 1981; 1986b). The last chapter –Chapter Ten– concentrates on psychological research that has produced the main alternatives to the linguistics approach to SLA, namely Anderson’s Adaptive Control of Thought (ACT*) Model, McLaughlin’s information-processing model, MacWhinney’s Competition Model, and Dechert’s Competing Plans Hypothesis. An assessment is made of the methodology used in these cognitive approaches which are closer to the mainstream psychological tradition than to the linguistic tradition. The insights into the mechanics of speech production they can provide are pointed out, since they are, above all, performance models, not competence models. It seems worth mentioning that the study ends with a set of activities fully consonant with the thoroughness with which the representative areas and pieces of research discussed in the different chapters have been covered. Each chapter gives a detailed account of the area of SLA research selected, with critical appraisal of the key elements of research depicted both in terms of the general framework of SLA research and in relation to their relationship to the general aims of L2 research. The intent of this set of activities is to familiarize the reader to the research tackled in the different chapters so that, once he is given some data, he should be able to relate these to the line of research in question.

Cook acknowledges the complexity inherent in L2 learning, since it can take place both naturally or under circumstances parallel to FLA, as well as in a tutored fashion like instructor or classroom SLA, and contends that linguistics is relevant to SLA research. In this way he contrasts his position to those approaches to L2 research which view the acquisition of linguistic knowledge to be the same as the acquisition of other types of knowledge and not in need of any linguistic explanation. Although he agrees it is highly probable that both perspectives will be needed in order to comprehend the diversity of L2 learners and L2 learning, a view he emphasizes throughout the book. Nevertheless he displays a modular view of language acquisition and argues that “the knowledge of a second language is an aspect of language knowledge rather than of some other type of knowledge” (p. 3).

Since he relates SLA to linguistics, he looks at the nature of both linguistics and SLA research. Following Chomsky (1986b: 3), he defines linguistics according to the three well-known questions about (i) what constitutes knowledge of language –i.e. the language contents of the human mind or the internal reality of language in the individual mind, not the external reality of language in society, (ii) how knowledge of language is acquired –i.e. the built-in capabilities of the human mind that allow, and constrain, the acquisition of linguistic competence–, and (iii) how knowledge of language is put to use –i.e. how this knowledge relates to thinking, comprehension, and communication (Chomsky, 1980: 90ff.; 101ff.), what some have called communica-

tive competence (Hymes, 1972) and others pragmatic competence (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969 (1975); Grice, 1975). Cook rephrases these questions as multilingual rather than monolingual goals for SLA research, taking into account knowledge of more than one language. Thus, in relation to the first question, he asserts that one goal of SLA research is to describe grammars of more than one language existing simultaneously in the same person. Here he sees the importance of SLA research in accounting for the L2 present and acquired in a mind that already knows a L1, not of its account of the knowledge and acquisition of the L2 in isolation. He (1991b; 1993) has called the state of knowledge of two languages 'multi-competence'. Dealing with the second question, he considers that SLA research must explain the means whereby more than one grammar can be acquired by the mind. In his view, this research should explain how this complex state of knowledge of two languages originates. Concerning the third question, he understands that SLA research should describe the language use of people who know two languages by showing how knowledge of two or more languages is used by the same speaker psychologically and sociologically. Cook keeps referring to these three questions throughout the book as the knowledge question, the acquisition question, and the use question.

In agreement with Chomsky (1986b: 19ff.), Cook distinguishes within linguistics *E-language* approaches, which regard language as an externalized object, i.e. behaviour and social conventions, and *I-language* approaches, which address language as a system of knowledge internally represented in the mind/brain. He accepts linguistics as the study of I-language and states that the issues of SLA dealt with in the book will reflect this perspective. This view will also mark the limits of the scope of the book, since within SLA research only the work related to I-language linguistics has been described, the wide variety of differing approaches currently being applied in this research area are not considered. As far as the competence/performance distinction goes, he recalls that in an I-language theory the speaker's knowledge of language is called 'linguistic competence' whereas his use of this knowledge is 'performance'. Turning to the first question for linguistics above –i.e. the knowledge question–, its answer would be in terms of knowledge rather than use. Therefore, he continues, a competence model based on knowledge rather than a performance model based on process is embraced. And the other two questions of acquisition and use depend on the answer given to the first question. For L2 research the first question comes down to specifying what it means to know a L2, i.e. what is the knowledge of language of a person who knows more than one language.

Among the merits of this book which aims to relate some of the most outstanding features of SLA research to linguistics is the way in which Cook analyses critically the evidence obtained through the different methods and techniques of SLA research. As he demonstrates when he discusses the observational data –i.e. the negation research and the grammatical morpheme research– in SLA research, these data do not constitute direct evidence of L2 learners' competence since they both need to be related to L2 models of speech processing and memory, on the one hand, and qualified with the common limitations of performance, on the other, due to their reliance on either transcripts of learners' elicited speech or on observations on learners' sentences. Their direct relationship is to development, not competence. Even though, it must be born in mind that as far as the L2 goes, development and performance are not the same thing due to factors such as the differing ages of the learners, L2 cognitive deficit, etc. In relation to the value of experimental research which goes beyond phrase

structure syntax –i.e. relative clauses and the Accessibility Hierarchy (Keenan and Comrie, 1977; Eckman *et al.*, 1988)–, Cook sees a merit in that it does not depend only on speech performance. Comprehension and other levels of language provide evidence for this research, extending, thus, the range of perspectives on knowledge of language. Amongst its limitations are the problems which arise when comparability is established between research and the artificiality of experiments, which are different from natural language use. Finally, as far as the usefulness of grammaticality judgements, he acknowledges that it is limited because the very nature of the UG model entails important methodological problems with empirical L2 research related to it. However, provided their status is far from clear (Chomsky, 1986b:37), he believes they offer interesting data whose research value should be strengthened by checking the knowledge of native speakers through grammaticality judgement tests as well as from single-sentence evidence, keeping always, in the comparisons between natives and non-natives, similar sources of evidence for both. Another factor that should be taken into account when pursuing this research is the demands of the task. Also, within the different approaches currently undertaken to carry out research on SLA, but turning now to the Multidimensional Model of Meisel, Clahsen, and Pienemann (1981), which claims that SLA entails (a) developmental sequences for certain aspects of language independent of the learner or the environment, and (b) variational sequences for other aspects of language dependent on learner differences or the situation. Cook argues that the solid foundation based on actual data, this research paradigm possesses is nevertheless limited by the same shortcomings of the observational data discussed above. That is, the data which provide the basis of this research are only relevant to production, not to comprehension or to competence. (White, 1991) Furthermore, Cook states that when the neighbouring discipline of psychology is related to SLA research, it should be recognized that psychological processes are not the concern of a competence-based model of linguistics, since they form part of performance, which concerns the use question, not the knowledge question. A detailed account of how performance data relate to competence and to acquisition should be provided by a process-based model. For all this, it seems worth to highlight the contribution of Cook's criticisms to the evidence provided by the different research paradigms. The utility of this book is amply demonstrated for those who feel inclined to undertake empirical research in SLA themselves, and also for those who want to keep abreast of the research published in journals and other publications. Cook's critical appraisal of the shortcomings of the different techniques and methods used in all these kinds of research, as well as those of the data thus obtained, should be apparent when empirical support is provided to theorizing in SLA.

Another point worth stressing is the book's attempt to put forward the relevance that the current Chomskyan model of linguistics has for SLA research. Two chapters, Chapters Eight and Nine, serve this purpose. The former focuses on the syntactic aspects of the theory, particularly principles and parameters theory (Chomsky, 1981; 1986a) and how they relate to L2 learning. The latter centres on Universal Grammar as a specific model of language acquisition. Cook posits that in recent SLA research, principles and parameters theory has become a mainstay, since major alternatives –i.e. functionalism (Halliday, 1985) or Generalized Phrase Structure Grammar (Gazdar *et al.*)– in his view have not proved relevant as yet. Principles that are common to all languages and parameters whose values vary from one language to another, constitute the speaker's knowledge of language. As all languages are encom-

passed within the same principles and parameters, and the grammar of any language describes how that language uses the resources available to all languages, SLA research can make use of a common descriptive framework for L1 and L2. Hence, research carried out with different L2s or L1s will be easy to compare. As Cook says (p. 156), this is why at the syntactic level principles and parameters theory is highly seductive for SLA research. The three areas of the theory described are the pro-drop parameter, Binding Theory, and the head-direction parameter. In relation to the Universal Grammar Model of SLA, the main themes of UG-related SLA research currently being developed are introduced. Much of early SLA research rejected the view of language acquisition that established learning as stimulus-response associations. Weinreich and Lado believed in the importance of the L1:L2 relationship, sharing also a same concept of language structure which allowed this relationship to occur. It was in fact the American structuralist tradition (Bloomfield, 1933) that was the bedrock for this stance. After Chomsky's review of Skinner's *Verbal Behaviour* (Chomsky, 1959), a new concept of FLA emerged in the 1960s. The creative aspect of language use became to be accepted as the core of human language. The mind grew in importance over the environment in the process of language acquisition. It was Chomsky (1964:26f.) who specified the device necessary for learning language, i.e. a device that constructs a theory –a generative grammar– as its output on the basis of primary linguistic data as input. This device which has been termed the Language Acquisition Device or LAD and which consists of “innate specifications of certain heuristic procedures and certain built-in constraints on the character of the task to be performed.” (1964:26) As Cook states, the UG theory develops this model “by establishing the crucial features of the input, the contents of the black box, and the properties of the resultant grammar.” (p. 200) Now grammars are described not in terms of rules but as principles and parameters, which are purpose-designed and account for FLA. Cook discusses in a minute way the complex array of controversial issues related to the UG model of language acquisition and how this model can be applied to L2 learning. Thus he provides, what in his view is, the most plausible linguistics-based approach to Second Language Acquisition. We would like to highly commend this book to all those interested in the relationship between SLA and linguistic theory, that is, to those who care for both the state of the art of SLA research and for what linguistics can offer to this evolving research field.

Notes

*Cook, V. (1993) *Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition*. London: MacMillan, pp. x + 313.

References

- Austin, J. (1962) (Second Edition 1975) *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Edited by J. Urmson and M. Sbisà.
 Bloomfield, L. (1933) *Language*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Chomsky, N. (1959) "A Review of B. F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*." In J. Fodor and J. Katz (Eds.) (1964) *The Structure of Language: Readings in the Philosophy of Language*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall: 547-578.
- Chomsky, N. (1964) *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Chomsky, N. (1980) *Rules and Representations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Chomsky, N. (1981) (Third revised edition 1984) *Lectures on Government and Binding*. Foris: Dordrecht.
- Chomsky, N. (1986a) *Barriers*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Chomsky, N. (1986b) *Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origin, and Use*. New York: Praeger.
- Cook, V. (1991a) *Second Language Learning and Language Teaching*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Cook, V. (1991b) "The Poverty-of-the-Stimulus Argument and Multi-Competence," *Second Language Research*, 7:2, pp. 103-117.
- Cook, V. (1993) "Universal Grammar and Second Language Acquisition," *Second Language Acquisition: Performance and Competence*. Second Summer Institute in English and Applied Linguistics. University of Cambridge, UK, July 1993.
- Eckman, F., Bell L., and Nelson D. (1988) "On the Generalisation of Relative Clause Instruction in the Acquisition of English as a Second Language," *Applied Linguistics*, 9:1, pp. 1-20.
- Gazdar, G., Klein E., Pullum G., and Sag I. (1985) *Generalized Phrase Structure Grammar*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Grice, H. (1975) "Logic and Conversation." In P. Cole and J. Morgan (Eds.) *Syntax and Semantics*, Vol. 3: *Speech Acts*. New York: Academic Press, pp. 41-58.
- Halliday, M. (1985) *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Hymes, D. (1972) "Competence and Performance in Linguistic Theory." In R. Huxley and E. Ingram (Eds.) *Language Acquisition: Models and Methods*. New York: Academic Press, pp. 3-23.
- Keenan, E. and Comrie B. (1977) "Noun Phrase Accessibility and Universal Grammar," *Linguistic Inquiry*, 8, pp. 63-99.
- Lado, R. (1957) *Linguistics Across Cultures*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press.
- Meisel J., Clahsen H., and Pienemann M. (1981) "On Determining Developmental Stages in Natural Second Language Acquisition," *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 3:2, pp. 109-135.
- Searle, J. (1969) *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Weinreich, U. (1953) *Languages in Contact*. The Hague: Mouton.
- White, L. (1991) "Second Language Competence versus Second Language Performance: UG or Processing Strategies?" In L. Eubank (Ed.) *Point Counterpoint*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin, pp. 167-189.