

Rita Calabrese

Insights into the
Lexicon–Syntax Interface
in Italian Learners’ English

*A Generative Framework
for a Corpus-Based Analysis*



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ARACNE editrice S.r.l.

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00173 Roma
(06) 93781065

ISBN 978-88-548-1919-1

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1st edition: July 2008

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Abbreviations

AP	Adjective Phrase
DP	Determiner Phrase
INT	interviews
LA	Language Acquisition
Num	Number
NP	Noun Phrase
PP	Prepositional Phrase
SUBC1	subcorpus 1
SUBC2	subcorpus 2
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
T	tense
TL	target language
UG	Universal Grammar
VP	Verb Phrase

Acknowledgements

This book is based on my PhD thesis entitled *The Lexicon–Syntax Interface in the Acquisition of English as a Foreign Language. A corpus–based analysis* which was defended at the University of Salerno in May 2006. I am therefore especially indebted to Maria Teresa Chialant who expertly coordinated the doctoral courses in her uniquely learned way and to Bruna Di Sabato to whom I would like to express my deepest gratitude for her helpful support and continuous encouragement throughout this work.

I am very grateful to those critical and discerning academics who have read, revised and enriched the original manuscript with their comments. In particular, I would like to thank Grazia Basile for her constructive criticism and enlightening suggestions and Miriam Voghera whose challenging comments and intriguing questions have given new impetus to my research.

I feel one person deserves special mention. My supervisor Elda Morlicchio has constantly accompanied the writing process of my thesis by reading every chapter and providing, as usual, pages of detailed comments in her very personal and authoritative fashion. My sincere thanks go to her especially for introducing me to the study of language and for arousing my interest in language matters since I was a student.

Thanks are also due to Rachele De Felice for generously sharing her study resources and academic experience. My thanks also to Richard Ashdowne who has provided meticulous proofreading of the final draft of the manuscript.

Readers should not blame any of the above for any shortcomings and mistakes contained within these pages: full credit for these is mine.

This book is dedicated to my beloved husband Pietro and to my lively children Biagio and Beatrice.

Rita Calabrese

University of Salerno
May 2008

Preface

Much of the interest in language, in psychology and cognitive science comes from what the study of the cognitive mechanisms underlying language use and acquisition can reveal about the human mind.

(R.D. Van Valin, *An Introduction to Syntax*, 2001: 1)

In most current descriptions of linguistic (sub-)systems, there is a growing interest in the lexicon as well as in its close interrelationship with the syntactic component. The hypotheses made with regard to the lexicon–syntax interface as reflected in individual linguistic models have recently been empirically tested in the field of second language acquisition research.

In order to assess the validity and applicability of such descriptive models to the study of foreign language acquisition processes, the research presented here adopts a performance/usage perspective based on the observation of language data elicited from a group of Italian EFL learners as an attempt to analyse the lexicon–syntax interface in the process of foreign language acquisition. In order to account for the implications for second language acquisition, corpus-based information has been incorporated in a generative grammar framework to achieve a general description based on a quantitatively meaningful ‘usage-based’ model. This procedure is not in itself new, since there is in fact a general tendency on the part of linguists to analyse language acquisition data within the Principles and Parameters framework. In this respect, the contribution of Universal Grammar theory is essential since it offers a predictive model of acquisition that is empirically testable, which can be usefully employed as a valid reference point for a wide range of phenomena, including second language ac-

quisition. At any rate, it must be said that past analyses had essentially showed two characteristics:

1. restricted number of informants (ranging from 5 to between 10 and 15)¹
2. data elicited through task-oriented tests specifically designed to get information about a particular language phenomenon in a highly contrived situation.

Recent approaches to language and interlanguage analyses based on the methodology of corpus linguistics have instead stressed the importance of varying the individual queries which can be analysed in a comprehensive view as well. The underlying move towards an approach based on language process phenomena makes electronic corpora powerful tools to discover, through ‘repetition’, occurrences of repeated patterns which are common to any learner.

From the point of view of language acquisition, the observation of relatively large amounts of data through specific queries can help to isolate recurrent patterns of language use which may reflect the presence of underlying universal principles of syntactic constituency in both L1 and L2. In particular, the two fundamental components of UG, namely the invariant *principles* which are characteristic of all human languages and the varying *parameters* which are specific to particular languages have been investigated by adopting a computer-based approach. Therefore, the main research issues of the present study are grounded in two productive strands in the fields of formal linguistics and L2 acquisition: the role of Universal Grammar (UG) in interlanguage and the role of computer methodologies in empirical studies based on the analysis of language data. Thus the need for ‘relevant empirical evidence’ for the selection process from either different or common/same knowledge sources in interlanguage grammars is the starting point (and the main focus in the second part) of the present study.

Recent theories regarding ‘pattern grammar’ (Hunston & Francis, 2000) reinterpret some aspects of traditional grammar by focusing on

¹ See Clahsen et al. (1986); Parodi et al. (2004); White (2003).

linguistic behaviour of single lexical items. A *pattern* is a sequence of functional words, word types or clause types frequently co-occurring with a given lexical item. Such frequent patterns can be observed through lists of ‘concordances’ displayed by a concordancer. One of the most valuable characteristics of such computer-generated lists is to make the lexis-grammar relation more evident than in previous approaches to the description of grammar and to reveal the clearly phraseological/idiomatic nature of the selection rules of the lexical items. Actual frequencies of linguistic forms as well as principles and factors of language usage in a given context can easily be obtained from corpus data. The incorporation of corpus-based information in a generative grammar framework can therefore increase the usage-based quality of generative models.

To reach a better understanding of the most recent implications of corpus linguistics methodology combined with generative theory and their influence on second language acquisition research, the first part of the present study deals with the main concepts of those theories concerning second language learning which have paid particular attention to the acquisition of syntax and lexicon and to the fundamentals of syntactic theory necessary to explain the different syntactic structures that occur in most natural languages (and interlanguages as well) and their implications for lexis.

In the second part of the book I examine a sample of data from the *University of Salerno Learner Corpus (UNISALC)*, paying particular attention to the structure of the Noun Phrase (NP) and the Prepositional Phrase (PP) recurring in learners’ interlanguage. The decision to analyse these two types of phrasal construction reflects the claim that at this level the functioning of the lexicon-syntax interface in interlanguage becomes particularly evident and the arguments supporting either transfer or universal-typological effects become clearly definable. In particular, PPs form a ‘fuzzy’ category with both lexical and functional features; at the same time they are strictly related to NPs and contribute to the construction of their whole meaning.

The last chapter gives an account of the application of the linguistic principles which have been discussed in the first part of the thesis to the current teaching methodologies that have been developing since 1990s.

PART I

Theoretical Perspectives

Chapter 1

Second Language Learning Theories

1.0. Introduction

The general aim of the present research is an understanding of phenomena underlying the *process* of foreign language acquisition, to explain them in relation to the different theoretical constructs that have been developed regarding the relationships between syntax and lexicon and the ways in which they are acquired in both L1 and L2.

The process of second language learning implies the assimilation of three systems that continuously interact: the acquisition of *syntax* occurs through a process of implementing a particular set of universal structures; *lexis* is learnt by establishing a set of arbitrary associations; the activation of *cognitive mechanisms* is necessary for the use of linguistic forms in *comprehension* and *production* (Van Hout & al. 2003:1). The linguistic knowledge which emerges from the interaction of the first two systems can find expression through the cognitive mechanisms associated with language comprehension and production, e.g. language processing.

In the field of research into second language learning many theories have been developed and each of them has been characterized by a different degree of attention paid to either grammar knowledge or language processing. It is therefore possible to group the existing language learning theories according to the emphasis they have laid on the explanation of the acquired language system (the generative and functional models) or on the cognitive mechanisms triggering language acquisition (the cognitive model).

In the following pages I will give a general survey of the approaches mentioned above that have been developed in the domain of both second language acquisition research and mainstream linguistics.

1.1. Cognitive models of language processing

Cognitive theorists try to explain language knowledge and processing through general cognitive principles such that ‘the learner is seen as operating a complex processing system that deals with linguistic information in similar ways to other kinds of information’ (Mitchell & Myles 2004:97). The term ‘processing’ is to be interpreted as both language *comprehension* and *production* in any common communicative setting. Since the publication of Levelt’s important work on language processing (1989), other researchers (Handke 1995; Dijkstra & de Smedt 1996; Kintsch 1997) have reformulated (in a slightly different manner) his tripartite model of language production into *conceptualization / formulation / articulation*.

Handke’s model (1995:35) indeed contains more detailed information about the interaction between the individual parts of each component as shown in the figure below (adapted from Schönefeld 2001:18) (Fig. 1).

The most obvious difference between Levelt’s and Handke’s models is to be found in the modular view in Levelt’s language processing theory, stating the autonomous position of the language component with respect to other more general conceptual structures as shown in Fig. 2.

As a matter of fact, the opposite position to this modular conception of human mind has been provided by the theorists who hold a holistic view of the functioning of the mind which gradually creates a propositional network with nodes representing linguistic components such as sound features, words and connections between them. The nodes of such associative networks consist of predicate–argument units, which seem to be the best format available for representing mental structures in a general theory of cognition.

The same attempt to apply cognitive theories to the study of second language learning emerges from the studies carried out by Pienemann (1998) culminating in the so-called *Processability Theory*. His aim was to clarify how learners acquire the computational mechanisms that operate during the formal construction of a grammar as well as the organizing principles which allow sentences to communicate grammatical information. This process, also known as *feature unifica-*