



HAL
open science

Book review of, Child language acquisition: Contrasting theoretical approaches. Ben Ambridge and Elena V. M. Lieven

Aliyah Morgenstern

► **To cite this version:**

Aliyah Morgenstern. Book review of, Child language acquisition: Contrasting theoretical approaches. Ben Ambridge and Elena V. M. Lieven. *First Language*, 2013, 33 (3), pp.321-325. 10.1177/0142723712454953 . halshs-01350589

HAL Id: halshs-01350589

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01350589>

Submitted on 3 Aug 2016

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

B. Ambridge & E.V.M. Lieven

Child Language Acquisition. Contrasting Theoretical Approaches, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2011; 466 pp.: 9780521768047, £65.00 (hbk), 9780521745239, £27.99 (pbk)

Reviewed by: Aliyah Morgenstern, Sorbonne Nouvelle University

The authors of this impressive book have taken up the challenge of opening a fruitful dialogue between generative and constructivist approaches to child language. Their work makes careful analyses of opposing theories and the results of a great body of research papers in a range of fields (phonology, including both perception and production; word meaning and word learning; grammar acquisition; inflection; simple and complex syntax; binding). The volume presents a remarkable state of the art review and is an outstanding contribution to the field; it will be useful to teachers and students, as well as members of the scientific community. Indeed, whether readers are newcomers to the field of language acquisition, versed in only one theoretical approach, knowledgeable in only one of the domains explored in the book, or seeking to put different theoretical approaches into perspective, they will find enough here to fulfil their needs.

Each chapter is constructed to be independent, but I highly recommend reading at least chapters 1, 4 and 9 along with the target chapter to those who can't manage to read it from cover to cover.

Chapter 1 very clearly contrasts the assumptions of the two approaches to child language acquisition under consideration (generative and constructivist); it presents the book's contents and outlines the methods used by the researchers who represent each theoretical framework.

Chapter 2 is about speech perception, segmentation and production, with the focus mostly on perception: how children benefit from specific phonological cues and how they segment the speech stream they hear into words, phrases and clauses. Though the literature on production is less extensive, interestingly enough, the book presents optimality theory and contrasts it with a constructivist alternative grounded in a template-based approach to phonological acquisition (Vihman & Croft, 2007).

Chapter 3 synthesizes three approaches that could explain how children learn the meaning of words: a constraint-based approach, a social-pragmatic approach and a frequentist-associative approach. The discussion focuses on which strategies facilitate learning and how children actually use these strategies. The debate in this chapter could be of interest to and enriched by students or clinicians applying it to clinical practice.

Chapter 4 provides much detail about the generative and constructivist approaches in the context of grammar and syntax. Complementary to chapter 1, it also serves as a very dense introduction to chapters 5 to 8.

Chapters 5 and 6 constitute the heart of the book and may best reflect the authors' own experience and research. Chapter 5 focuses on inflectional morphology and introduces three debates in that field: root infinitive errors, productivity and rules versus analogy. Chapter 6 centres on how children acquire basic categories and word order and how they avoid using verbs incorrectly. This chapter is presented very dynamically, with the best arguments for each approach being discussed after the presentation of research from the opposing viewpoints.

Chapter 7 is about movement and complex syntax. It discusses how children may use simple constructions they have already mastered to acquire passives, questions, and relative clauses, examining whether children can generalize, since their behaviour does not appear to be consistent, and concluding that in the case of questions containing relative clauses, they do generalize, but in the case of full passives, they do not.

Chapter 8 focuses on the topics of binding, quantification and control. Most of the research discussed here has been conducted by researchers in the generative tradition. The authors introduce constructivist approaches based on construction learning and socio-pragmatic understanding. Taking a more personal stand on specific issues, they contradict the claim that the constraints on pronoun coreference, quantification and control must be innate because they are too abstract to be acquired from input.

Chapter 9 addresses a variety of other debates such as those related to atypical populations and critical periods. The reader may experience some frustration with the brevity of this treatment, which is likely due to reasons of space: each of these issues deserves a whole chapter (or even a book) to cover a large range of research with more nuanced descriptions of opposing views. The second part of chapter 9 is particularly well designed and engaging. The authors draw together the key points of the book. They emphasize that research programs need to be developed by each side of the debate if

progress is to be made, for example, generativists might need to explain the role of performance limitations, context and lexical frequency when they analyze their results, whilst constructivists are asked to explain how children go from rote-learned phrases to fully abstract productive constructions.

The book ends with the question: “What is the default hypothesis?” Of course, both sides are candidates: The argument for the generativist hypothesis remains the poverty of the stimulus (Chomsky, 1988), though this requires that the wealth of research on the scaffolding influence of input on the blossoming of children’s language (Clark, 2009) not be taken into account. The argument for the constructivist approach (Tomasello, 2003) is that the default hypothesis should posit NO exclusively linguistic assumptions and only try to understand the data alone. The authors conclude by not favouring any one position, but instead encouraging all researchers to further develop their proposals through further data analysis and experimentation.

Overall, this is an extremely valuable book that I can strongly recommend. There are some very useful tables, which ideally could have been produced in landscape format, synthesizing the main differences between the theoretical approaches and methodologies.

The main title of the book, *Child Language Acquisition*, could be misleading in that the authors have explicitly chosen to focus on monolingual typical language acquisition. This is a pity since there is now much multilingual language acquisition research and parallel studies of typical and atypical acquisition can also help us to understand the underlying processes; however, perhaps a single volume could not do justice to all these issues. Another limitation is that the book does not cover all aspects of language acquisition but instead focuses on those that have been tackled by generative specialists (phonology, lexical acquisition, morphology, syntax). This choice can of course facilitate fruitful debates between the two contrasting theoretical approaches presented. But many important issues are not dealt with in this book because they are not often included in generative research; these include the role of multimodality and especially gesture and gaze (Clark, 1978; Guidetti & Nicoladis, 2008), interaction (Clark, 2003), adult scaffolding (Bruner, 1975, 1978), pragmatic development and children as “conversationalists” (Ninio & Snow, 1996; Veneziano, 2010), individual differences (Nelson, 1981; Bates et al., 1985), and crosslinguistic difference and relativity (Slobin, 1985; Bowerman & Choi, 2001). Most of the examples are in English and most of the

research discussed is about the acquisition of English. The examples might have been more engaging and vivid if they had all been taken from actual children's and adults' data for which the community now has an impressive database through CHILDES (MacWhinney, 2000). The authors are of course well aware of these issues and databases to which they themselves have contributed. However, in this book they have chosen to present the topics for which clearly opposing views could be contrasted, as such it might have been worth making that even more explicit in the introduction and in the choice of the main title.

The lengthy explanations of the debates and clear presentations of a large body of research were particularly helpful elements of the book. However, there is an undercurrent of bias in the book toward the constructivist view, and despite the extremely well documented presentations of the generative view, it is difficult to evaluate whether the generative work is faithfully represented and defended. It might have been more exciting, but more of a challenge, if the two authors instead of being well-known constructivists, had been known representatives of the two competing theories; this would have enabled us to imagine their own debates in the process of writing this book. Nonetheless, the authors present constructive criticisms of both approaches.

I therefore strongly recommend the book not only to students but also to colleagues who believe that doing research on language acquisition is the best way to seize the very essence of language and of children's "cognitive socialization" (Brown 1958). Children appropriate and internalize symbolic forms and become "grammatical beings" (Karmiloff & Karmiloff-Smith, 2002) through processes that are transitory and can only be understood by confronting opposing views and inspiring new research. Ben Ambridge and Elena Lieven have made a very successful contribution to this end.

References:

- Bates, E., Dale, P. E., & Thal, D. (1995). Individual differences and their implications for theories of language development. In P. Fletcher & B. MacWhinney (Eds.), *The handbook of child language* (pp. 96-151). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd.
- Bowerman, M., & Choi, S. (2001). Shaping meanings for language: Universal and language-specific in the acquisition of spatial semantic categories. In M. Bowerman &

- S. C. Levinson (Eds.), *Language acquisition and conceptual development* (pp. 475-511). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bruner, J. S. (1975). The ontogenesis of speech acts. *Journal of Child Language*, 2, 1-40.
- Bruner, J. (1978). The role of dialogue in language acquisition. In A. Sinclair, R. J. Jarvella, and W. J. M. Levelt (Eds.), *The child's concept of language* (pp. 241-56). New York, NY: Springer-Verlag.
- Chomsky, N. (1988). *Language and problems of knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Clark, E. V. (1978) From gesture to word: On the natural history of deixis in language acquisition. In J. S. Bruner & A. Garton (Eds.), *Human growth and development: Wolfson College lectures 1976* (pp. 85-120). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Clark, E. V. (2009). What shapes children's language? Child-directed speech, conventionality, and the process of acquisition. In V. C. Mueller Gathercole (Ed.), *Routes to language: Studies in honour of Melissa Bowerman* (pp. 233-254). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Guidetti, M., & Nicoladis, E. (2008). Introduction to Special Issue: Gestures and communicative development. *First Language*, 28, 107-155.
- Karmiloff, K., & Karmiloff-Smith, A. (2002). *Pathways to language. From fetus to adolescent*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- MacWhinney, B. (2000). *The CHILDES project: Tools for analyzing talk*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Nelson, K. (1981). Individual differences in language development: Implications for development and language. *Developmental Psychology*, 17(2), 170-187.
- Ninio, A., & Snow, C. E. (1996). *Pragmatic development*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Slobin, D. I. (1985). Introduction: Why study language crosslinguistically? In D. I. Slobin (Ed.), *The cross-linguistic study of language acquisition: Vol. 1. The data* (pp. 3-24). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Tomasello, M. (2003). *Constructing a language: A usage-based theory of language acquisition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Veneziano, E. (2010). Conversation in language development and use: An introduction. *First Language*, 30, 241-249.
- Vihman, M. M., & Croft, W. (2007). Phonological development: Toward a 'radical' templatic phonology. *Linguistics*, 45, 683-725.