# Language theory and/or language acquisition theory?

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## 1    De Saussure

I knew at high school that I wanted to study linguistics. But in the 1970s this was only possible after having obtained a bachelor degree (then called *kandidaats*) in a particular language. So I chose French and went to Groningen University, where I was immersed into De Saussure's structuralism and his distinction between *langue* and *parole*. Inspired by a pep-talk of almost one hour by professor Tervoort in his office at the Voetboogstraat, I decided in 1976 to continue my study in linguistics at the University of Amsterdam (UvA).

## 2    Chomsky

The Institute for General Linguistics turned out to be a Mecca for upcoming linguists who were initiated into the various components of linguistics during the famous introductory *Kurrikulum*. We started with a course on Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG) by Henk van Riemsdijk, where *langue* and *parole* were replaced by Chomsky's concepts of *competence* and *performance* (De Haan et al. 1975). However, soon we found out in the next course on psycholinguistics, by Catherine Snow, that these so-called transformational rules lacked psychological reality (Green 1972). My gut feeling that Chomsky's phrase structure rules were not much of a help for language learners was confirmed in later years when I taught Dutch as a second language to newcomers by means of *Levend Nederlands* (1975). This audio-visual course, based on behaviorist stimulus-response principles of imitation, contained lots of drill exercises where students had to provide answers to questions such as presented in example (1).

(1)    Question:    *Hebt  u    deze   tafel   gezien?*
                          have  you  this    table   seen
                          'Have you seen this table?

Answer :   *Ja,   dit   is   de   tafel   die   ik   gezien   heb.*
yes   this   is   the   table   that   I   seen   have
'Yes, this is the table that I have seen.'

In an attempt to help the students to memorize the structure of these sentences, tables had been added, like in example (2), with the idea that the students could benefit from the abstracted sentence structure while performing the exercise.

(2)   *Hebt # u # deze # [SUBST, de, sg] # [PART PERF] # ? →*
Have # you # this # [SUBST, the, sg] # [PAST PART] # →

*→ Ja, # dit # is # de # [SUBST, de, sg] # die # ik # [PART PERF] # heb.*
→ Yes, # this # is # the # [SUBST, the, sg] # that # I # [PAST PART] # have.

As can be noticed, these tables resemble Chomsky's phrase structure rules, although the authors strongly emphasized that their method was not based on TGG. That was an important point to mention, as Chomsky's TGG (1957, 1965) was a theory on language, in particular syntax, and not on language acquisition. It goes without saying that the students got more confused by these tables than that they learnt anything from it.

## 3   Dik

With respect to language acquisition I hoped to find more common ground in the theory of Functional Grammar (FG), to which I was introduced in 1977 in a course by Simon Dik. At that time Dik was developing his ideas on language and language use from a functional perspective. During the course we were handed parts of the text and discussed these, before they were structured and collected into *Functional Grammar* (Dik 1978), later followed by *The theory of Functional Grammar* (Dik 1989). I was especially attracted to his schematized presentation of Dutch word order, which is depicted below for main clauses in (3a) and for subordinate clauses in (3b). In these templates P1 indicates the clause-initial position (which can be used for various purposes), Vf = finite verb, S = subject, O = object, X = any other constituent, Vi = infinite verb.

(3)   Word order in Dutch (Dik 1989: 360)
a.  main:        P1  Vf  S  O  X  Vi
b.  subordinate: P1      S  O  X  Vf  Vi  Vf

In the year when *The theory of Functional Grammar* was published, I was working at the Free University Amsterdam on the successor of *Levend Nederlands*. This book, entitled *Code Nederlands* (1990), was – as its predecessor – intended for adult learners of Dutch as a second language. Inspired by Dik's templates for main and subordinate clauses, I included them in the teaching material, as illustrated in respectively (4a) and (4b).

(4)  a.  Word order in main clauses (*Code Nederlands* 1990:33)

| Eerste Plaats | Finiet werkwoord | Onderwerp | Rest | Infiniet werkwoord |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Kunnen | we | iets | bestellen? |
| Wat | willen | jullie | | drinken? |

  b.  Word order in subordinate clauses (*Code Nederlands* 1990:99)

| | Eerste plaats | Onderwerp | Rest | Werkwoord |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ik vind het leuk | dat | veel mensen | het filmvak | ontdekken |
| Ze kijken meer tv | terwijl | ze | minder | lezen |

*Code Nederlands* was designed from a communicative perspective, corresponding to the standard of pragmatic adequacy in FG, which attributes a central place to verbal interaction. Another common principle is the standard of psychological adequacy, or as phrased in the opening sentence of *The theory of Functional Grammar*: 'How does the natural language user (NLU) "work"?' (Dik 1989: 1). Seemingly less relevant with respect to language acquisition seems to be FG's third standard of typological adequacy. Being an applied linguist who specialized in second language acquisition, I would have appreciated a fourth standard of language acquisition. Dik does not avoid the topic, but does not elaborate on it either. He defines (first) language acquisition as 'communicative interaction between the maturing child and its environment, and to attribute to genetic factors only those underlying principles which cannot be explained as acquired in this interaction' (Dik 1989: 6). This single paragraph summarizes all Dik has to say about language acquisition.

## 4    Hengeveld & Mackenzie

This brings us to the crucial question whether language theory and language acquisition theory can meet, and if so where and how. Jordan (2004) wrote a book on theory construction in second language acquisition (SLA) and came up with criteria these theories should meet. According to him a good (SLA) theory should be coherent, cohesive, clear, consistent, have empirical content, be

fruitful, broad in scope and simple. FG ticks the boxes for several of these criteria and so does its successor entitled Functional Discourse Grammar (FDG) (Hengeveld & Mackenzie 2004). As the subtitle of the latter suggests (*A typologically-based theory of language structure*), the focus in FDG is on Dik's third standard of typological adequacy, meaning that FDG should be equally applicable to languages of all types. That is great and in the last two decades much work has been done in this area. But what about the use of FDG in language acquisition research? To my knowledge until now only two studies have combined the theory of F(D)G with acquisition data, one regarding second language acquisition (Lalleman 1986) and the other first language acquisition (Boland 2006).

Lalleman (1986) compared the Dutch language proficiency of twenty Turkish children born in the Netherlands (age range 5;11-7;2 years) with that of twenty Dutch children (age range 5;10-7;8 years). She focused on three types of proficiency: morphological (development of the verbal predicate), syntactic (complexity and correctness of utterances) and semantic proficiency (communication of perceptual experiences). Data were analyzed in terms of FG, based on Dik (1978). Not unexpectedly she found that on all three types of proficiency the children with Turkish parents performed less well than those with Dutch parents. The (large) differences within the Turkish group could –at least partly– be explained by social and socio-psychological factors, like cultural and social distance from Dutch society, values and norms. She concluded that FG formed an adequate theoretical framework for the description of morphological, syntactic and semantic features of Dutch by both native and non-native speakers. It was also possible to describe certain developmental stages within FG and –to a certain degree– to explain these.

Despite these promising results it took twenty years before Boland (2006) analyzed her acquisition data within the framework of functional grammar, this time in terms of FDG within the semantic domain of time, modality and aspect (TMA). One of the main issues in this thesis was whether implicational hierarchies have predictive power with respect to first language acquisition. On the basis of an implicational hierarchy, the possible variation in grammatical TMA systems in adult languages and in stages of child language were studied in order to determine whether the limits on variation are identical. Child data consisted of longitudinally collected data of eight American-English speaking children between 1;6 and 7;6 years of age, who were recorded every three (until 2;6) or six months (from 2;6). Their spontaneous speech was examined with regard to the production of TMA expressions. By using precise productivity criteria, the acquisition order was established. Boland concluded that the limits on variation in adult languages and in stages of first language acquisition are indeed identical within the domain of TMA.

## 5   Language theory ánd language acquisition theory

Both Lalleman and Boland confirmed that fruitful use could be made in their acquisition studies of the framework of functional grammar. The FDG framework allowed Boland to make predictions regarding the features of TMA-systems in the languages of the world and in stages of first language acquisition. She therefore claims that language typology and language acquisition should be studied in combination, as there seem to be relations between the two fields: "Acquisitional processes could be constraining factors on the possible variation in adult language systems. The field of typology might thus benefit from insights from psycholinguistics. On the other hand, the study on typology might provide helpful insights to psycholinguistics. Linguistic universals presumably also hold for stages of language acquisition. Phenomena in child language should, therefore, not be studied in isolation, but be compared to adult systems and to the systems in the input to children" (Boland 2006: 509).

Given these stimulating words and the successful use of FDG in acquisition research one may wonder why after Boland's (2006) inspiring study almost another twenty years have passed without new acquisition studies that have been designed within the framework of FDG. Perhaps the focus was mainly on typology issues? Perhaps now the time has come for a shift and to pay more attention to the use of FDG in language acquisition research in the coming years? And perhaps even to include a supplementary standard of language acquisition?

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