THE PRO-DROP PARAMETER IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION*

INTRODUCTION

The parameterized model of Core Grammar that has been recently proposed by Chomsky (1981) has a two-fold function. As a part of the framework of linguistic theory, the model accounts for some systematic differences between languages, and accounts for a wide variety of constructions within an individual language. As part of the framework of Acquisition Theory, it can account for developmental stages in the acquisition process of a first language, including both stages of a single language and cross-linguistic comparisons (Otsu, 1981; Phinney, 1983). However, only a few researchers (White, 1983, 1985; Flynn, 1983, among them) have applied this model to the problem of second language acquisition.

The problem of how a second language is acquired by an adult is an interesting one. Ideally, one would like to assume that the acquisition device which operates during first language acquisition continues to operate during the acquisition of the second language, although perhaps less efficiently, since L2 competence rarely approaches that of the native speaker in an adult. If the LAD is still operational at some level past puberty, then the same constraints and conditions which operate in the acquisition of a first language should operate in the second. The setting of parameters (Chomsky, 1981, 1982) should thus be necessary in L2 acquisition as well as in L1 acquisition.

It has been assumed that the possible settings of the Core Grammar parameter can be ranked on a scale of markedness, and that the initial state of the acquisition device entails that all the parameters are set to the unmarked setting. To reset a parameter to a more marked setting requires certain input data which serve to confirm that the parameter in question is indeed marked in that language. If the language utilizes the unmarked setting, then the initial assumptions will be met by the input data, and the parameter will never be changed.

This model leads to predictions about the acquisition process which can be supported by empirical data. These predictions can include...
acquisition order and relative difficulty of certain constructions within a particular language, or relative order of acquisition across languages. A construction which is unmarked, or a parameter setting which is unmarked, should be relatively easy and acquired at an early stage, all things being equal. Constructions and parameters which are marked should cause more difficulty and be acquired later. There is some evidence to support these predictions from data on infinitives (Phinney, 1981) and White (1981) discusses several previously published studies from this point of view.

If we assume that Core Grammar and this model of the Acquisition Device are relevant to second language acquisition as well as to first, then these parameters and markedness considerations should be involved. Although the adult L2 learner is not in quite the same situation as the child, in that one language has already been learned and the parameters set for that language, the same process must hold to a certain extent in acquiring the L2. Parameters may have to be re-set according to the data available from the second language.

This paper will examine the role of the pro-drop parameter (Chomsky, 1981) and markedness in causing errors in the interlanguage, the intermediate stage between L1 monolinguism and the final L2 competence reached by the adult learner. Evidence from the L2 acquisition of English and Spanish will be presented to support the claim that parameter resetting must occur in L2 acquisition, and that a delay in resetting the parameter will induce systematic errors in the L2 learner's production. In addition, it is suggested that markedness considerations can account for directional differences in difficulty. The theory has the advantage over traditional L2 approaches to learner errors, Contrastive Analysis (CA) and Error Analysis (EA), in that it is more powerful and leads to further implications concerning the interaction of Core Grammar and the LAD.

1. PREVIOUS APPROACHES TO L2 ACQUISITION

Applied linguists have been concerned for many years with the problem of predicting and explaining difficulties which occur during the process of learning a second language. Two approaches which have waxed and waned in the past few years are Contrastive Analysis (CA) and Error Analysis (EA). Both approaches are in fact independent of linguistic theory; any framework may be used as the basis of analysis.