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Two textbook representations of second language acquisition and Universal Grammar:

“access” and “constraint”

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Abstract

Two textbooks written by Lydia White, one published in 1989 and the other in 2003, introduce generative research on second language acquisition and evaluate existing proposals about the role of Universal Grammar. Comparison of the two texts provides an opportunity to examine some of the conventions the field uses in representing itself to a novice readership. It also brings to light certain aspects of the field’s development during a 14-year interval. A point of particular interest is that this interval spans a shift in the language commonly used to pose questions about the relationship of Universal Grammar to second language acquisition, from the metaphor of “access” to the metaphor of “constraint.”
Every textbook, even if single-authored, is necessarily a communal project. Of course, no writer really writes alone: the editor of a collection of papers relies on contributing authors to realize his or her plan for the text, and authors of monographs—no matter how original—are indebted to many more people than ever get listed in the Acknowledgements. But the social orientation of a textbook constitutes a special case, on at least two grounds. First, textbooks are fundamentally communal enterprises because they survey and synthesize the work of a
community of scholars, albeit often a divided or discordant community. Second, a textbook’s self-conscious goal is to sustain that community, by passing on to a new generation the tools and the results of scholarship to date. Moreover, in organizing, summarizing, and evaluating competing claims within the sub-domains of a discipline for the purpose of transmitting that information to neophytes, a textbook defines a discipline’s boundaries and models its rhetoric and key metaphors. For these reasons, textbooks typically communicate far more than their authors’ individual opinions and perceptions. They are often unusually revealing of a discipline’s shared intellectual self-concept, and can be mined on several levels for insight into it.

All this renders irresistible the opportunity to compare two textbooks published 14 years apart, written by the same author, on the same subject, from essentially the same perspective, addressed to the same readership. As exemplars of a genre separated by what counts in this context as a substantial interval, Lydia White’s pair of textbooks invites reflection on the representation of research into the two topics that flip-flop across each other in the books’ titles, namely second language acquisition and Universal Grammar (UG), and on the recent history of that research.

White’s career to date has focused on the nexus of second language acquisition and UG. Prominent as a scholar and teacher, she is active both as an advocate for the field to the outside and as an arbiter within it (reviewing conference abstracts and manuscripts, evaluating tenure cases, serving on editorial boards). It is worth noting that White has received a series of grants constituting uninterrupted financial support since 1987 from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, a major source of funding for academic research in Canada. Continuity of support for her work from the SSHRC, among other agencies, affects more than her own career. It has engaged half a generation of her McGill University graduate students, and, by accustoming
White to explaining the purport and value of the field to an external audience, it has raised the public profile of generative study of second language acquisition. All these experiences sanction White’s authority to speak on the behalf of the scholarly commonwealth, and position her to adopt the global, “transcendental” (Olson, 1989) voice of the textbook author. White’s own opinions and judgments are certainly apparent in her writing, and impose a particular shape upon it. Those opinions and judgments are by no means uncontroversial. But what is of greatest interest here is less what makes White (1989) and (2003) recognizably her work, than the books’ characters as products of a community that, in a sense, might be said to have produced these books about and for itself through her agency. That is, what is of greatest interest is the books’ tacit conceptualization of research on second language acquisition and Universal Grammar, the language they employ to represent that research, and how both of these matters developed between 1989 and 2003.

I White (1989)

It should be noted that White (1989) is nowhere explicitly identified as a textbook, and that neither author nor publisher (p.c.) report conceiving it as such. However, it contains textbook-like properties such as chapter-by-chapter suggestions for “Further Reading” and an organizational superstructure that labels individual subsections in a manner that would facilitate classroom use. Above all, White (1989) guides readers step-by-step through the facets of her research question, meticulously presenting empirical studies pro and con with the even-handed consistency that makes a good textbook so reassuring, especially to students working to get their bearings in a discipline. Therefore it is not surprising that whatever the author’s or publisher’s
intentions, reviewers like MacLaughlin (1991: 254) and Eubank (1991: 95–96; 1992: 499) spontaneously portray White (1989) as a textbook, and tailor their evaluations of it to that purpose. The book inaugurated John Benjamins’ series *Language Acquisition and Language Disorders*, eventually setting a high-water mark for sales in the series through several reprints. Two hundred seventy-five public and academic libraries worldwide are on record as owning copies. That is enough to indicate an established presence in the relevant market of ideas, if not a saturation of it, even without taking into account a Japanese translation available as White (1992). Searches of the *Social Science Research Index* and the online *ISI Web of Science* database indicate that citations of White (1989) held steady for an impressive interval, the decade between 1991 and 2000. The actual numbers of citations are less revealing than their distribution across time, because neither database happens to cover journals where reliance on White (1989) would likely have been high (e.g. *Second Language Research, Studies in Second Language Acquisition*). But it is salient that among publications included in the databases, citations of the book have appeared in such diverse venues as the *Annual Review of Anthropology, Education Policy, and Transactions of the Philological Society*. Thus it is fair to characterize the overall influence of *Universal grammar and second language acquisition* within language studies as having been relatively broad and durable. Within the sub-specialty of generative study of second language acquisition, the book became a classic.

It is a testimony to the classic status of White (1989) that its contents and organization now seem inevitable: at first one can hardly imagine how it could have been other than what it is. White’s question is whether the principles and parameters of Chomsky’s 1980s generative grammar remain available in adult second language acquisition. The book comprises seven chapters, methodically analyzing research up to the late 1980s on “the potential relationship
between linguistic universals and second language acquisition” (p. xi). White adopts generative grammar’s principles and parameters model without presupposing familiarity with it, in that she (somewhat brusquely) tutors readers in the major sub-theories of the model in Chapter 1.

Fourteen years post-publication, the structure of her argument is a well-trodden path. White first establishes that child first language (L1) learners face a poverty of the stimulus problem in acquiring their native language, and provides readers with a vocabulary for analyzing phenomena like wanna-contraction and parasitic gaps. In Chapter 2, she asks whether adult learners likewise exhibit knowledge of a second language (L2) derivable neither from observation of L2 use in the environment, nor instruction, nor knowledge of the mother tongue. She reasons that if that knowledge could be demonstrated, it would implicate learners’ access to Universal Grammar. White articulates three hypotheses (pp. 49–50): the “pure UG hypothesis,” which anticipates that L2 acquisition exactly recapitulates UG-driven L1 acquisition without impediment or support from the L1; the proposal that “UG is dead” and cannot be recruited to overcome any logical problem of L2 acquisition; and several sub-varieties of the notion that “UG is partially available” to L2 learners wherein, in instances where L1 and L2 differ, access to UG is blocked either permanently, or only temporarily due to an initial controlling influence of the L1, or where access to UG is mitigated in other ways and by other factors yet to be defined.

White then devotes chapters to L2 research relevant to (a) principles of UG (structure dependence, subjacency); (b) parameters (pro-drop, Principal Branching Direction, German word order, the ECP, subjacency revisited); (c) markedness (order of acquisition, questions of L1 transfer); and (d) learnability and the Subset Principle (Case assignment; binding). White concludes in Chapter 7 that existing research most fully supports partial availability, that is, that L2 learners have “partial access to UG,” and that “a major future research goal . . . should be to
try to specify precisely the conditions under which UG is accessible, and what factors inhibit the operation of UG in L2 acquisition” (p. 174).

The pieces of this argument, assembled in the same order, often giving rise to the same guarded conclusion, have been iterated many times both before and since 1989. Memory traces of those iterations induce a certain fatigue on re-reading White’s book. But if one can get beyond that fatigue to view the text as an artifact communicating on more levels than its face value, several striking features emerge.

One such feature is that White initiates discussion of second language acquisition, and motivates its interest, through reference to the study of L1 acquisition. Chapter 1 asserts that UG is certainly involved in L1 acquisition. That assertion defines the terms in which Chapter 2 asks whether L2 learners have access to UG, and sets up a standard against which the availability or non-availability of UG in L2 acquisition is judged. A subsection entitled “Some differences between L1 and L2 acquisition” (pp. 41–5) concedes that L2 and L1 acquisition diverge, while holding out that those differences “do not force us to abandon the possibility that UG mediates L2 acquisition” (p. 45). After Chapters 1 and 2, explicit comparison of L2 to L1 acquisition recedes from the surface of the text, but reappears in a subsection of Chapter 7, “L1 and L2 acquisition differences revisited” (p. 175). Here again White uses L1 acquisition as a kind of touchstone for probing the nature of L2 acquisition, as if taking for granted that what we know about child language learning is the natural place to both start and conclude inquiry into L2 learning.

This kind of implied prioritization of L1 over L2 acquisition runs deep in linguistics at large. It is reinforced by such phenomena as the ubiquitous, apparently innocuous, convention of listing L1 acquisition before L2 acquisition in inventories of topics within the purview of a
conference, or checklists of one’s research interests; by more self-conscious order-of-presentation decisions like the one White (1989) makes to develop a context for L2 acquisition out of analysis of L1 acquisition; and even by formal, institutional, customs like the location of instruction in L1 acquisition within a mainstream School of Arts and Sciences, while instruction in L2 acquisition is located within a smaller, often conspicuously underfunded, School of Education. These phenomena are likely driven by an assumption that child L1 learning is a normative or default case, to which the special or limited status of adult L2 learning can best be compared. But although that notion is commonplace, it is not inevitably given by nature. There are reasons why one might turn the tables around to treat the chronologically prior experience of L1 acquisition as a marked, once-in-a-lifetime case distinguished from the standard circumstance of (L2) acquisition by the child learner’s cognitive immaturity. For example, one wonders whether the “monolingualist” bias that Cook (2002: 22) depicts lies behind an assumption that L2 learning is rare or incidental relative to the pandemic phenomenon of L1 learning; or whether prioritization of L1 over L2 acquisition, and of their products, signals incomplete commitment to the core insight of the interlanguage hypothesis, namely that L2 grammars are systematic in their own right independent of any resemblance to native speaker grammars. These issues are too complex to be treated here. My point is simply that by blithely extracting the question of L2 access to UG out of the presumption of L1 access, then returning to compare the two again at the end of the book, White (1989) participates in this convention without drawing attention to it, thus implicitly normalizing it for her readers. Lawson (2001: 12) remarks that one of the most powerful communicative devices textbooks use is the absence of discussion, since absence seemingly excludes material from legitimacy. Thus readers of White (1989) aren’t poised to wonder whether the accessibility of UG in L2 acquisition might appear different if L2 research
were disengaged from comparing L2s to L1-defined standards. Rather, they are trained to leave the issue unrecognized.

A second striking feature of White (1989) is that it is organized according to the categories of linguistic theory. That is to say, White asks: given that there are principles of UG, what evidence is there that those principles are available to L2 learners? She subsequently poses the same question about parameters of UG, and then with respect to theoretical constructs like markedness and the Subset Principle. Consistently, her approach is to start from linguistic theory, then to assess the extent to which L2 data is tractable within specific predictions the theory makes. In this sense, the book’s title accurately represents it as concerned first with Universal Grammar and then with second language acquisition, not vice versa. At first this seems unremarkable: after all, one has to start a book somewhere. And this starting point makes sense in that in the 1980s generative theory was relatively more developed than generative study of L2 acquisition, which had by then produced suggestive but often problematic and rather unshaped research results whose relationships to each other were still quite moot.

However, there remains an interesting gap between White’s actual use of linguistic theory and the role she explicitly assigns to it. In the textbook’s concluding paragraph, she characterizes linguistic theory as providing “a general frame of reference” and “a highly sophisticated tool for describing and investigating the language of L2 learners” (p. 183). In practice, White constructs her narrative out of the components of linguistic theory, then arrays L2 research around those components. By doing so, she invests much more in theory than would be warranted if it were to her merely a strategic “frame of reference” or “tool” for analysis. Readers are thus implicitly socialized to foreground linguistic theory, while acknowledging for it only a subordinate, instrumental, role. This incongruity might have been an exigency of the
time, as researchers in the 1980s looked forward to the emergence of a more robust, elaborated, discipline of L2 acquisition than actually existed at that point—a discipline that they anticipated would gain the substance and independence to draw on generative theory as a resource, rather than being plastically molded by it. If so, White’s language at the end of the book which seems to instrumentalize generative theory may have prepared readers for the future more than it described the status quo in 1989.

Thus the precedence that White grants to L1 over L2 acquisition, and her use of linguistic theory to organize her material, signal something about the working conditions of the time and reveal assumptions about the discipline that the textbook communicated to readers. But perhaps even more telling is White’s (1989) sustaining metaphor, variously expressed by references to the question of L2 learners’ “access” to UG or the “availability” of UG to learners. To appreciate the weight of this expression, however, one needs to contrast White (1989) with White (2003), and then to contrast the metaphor of “access” with what replaced it.

II White (2003)

White (2003) not only displays a textbook’s orientation and apparatus (discussion questions; reading suggestions; glossary), but is also repeatedly identified as such by its author and publishers. As White insists (p. xii), the new book is not a revision of the older one, but their extensive similarities of purpose, content, and authorial voice strengthen the sense that both belong to the same genre.

The two books pose the same question and pursue it by the same means, although the new text answers that question less equivocally than its predecessor. The question is still
“whether or not interlanguage grammars can be characterized in terms of the principles and parameters of UG” (p. xi); the answer in 2003 is that “There is now a considerable body of research whose results are consistent with the claim that [L2 grammars] are systematic and UG-constrained” (p. 269). As in 1989, White addresses her research question by reviewing generative studies of L2 acquisition, summarizing and assessing masses of empirical research.

In both books White presents hypotheses about the role of UG in L2 acquisition, labels those not already named, points out where hypotheses are in competition with each other, and adjudicates their capacity to explain L2 data. The hypotheses White presents in 2003 are far more articulated but still recognizable as descendents of those from 1989. Replacing a crude notion that “UG is dead” we have the more circumscribed Global and Local Impairment Hypotheses; instead of the pure UG hypothesis there is what White dubs Full Access Without Transfer (e.g. Epstein, Flynn, and Martohardjono, 1996); and taking up some of the different niches vacated by partial access are the quite distinct proposals of No Parameter Resetting and Full Transfer Full Access. White reviews all of these (and more: Minimal Trees and Valueless Features also appear), giving each hypothesis its due, although Full Transfer Full Access is generally what ends face-up on the table when hypotheses compete against each other.

Among the outstanding differences between the two books is, of course, the massive expansion and refinement of inquiry into UG and L2 acquisition that has taken place since 1989. In the almost 500-item bibliography of the new book, fewer than 30 empirical studies of L2 acquisition are retained from the bibliography of the older book. The research White reviews in 2003 is more abundant, more conceptually and methodologically sophisticated, and designed so that there can be real conversation from study to study. The influx of new data allows more intricate answers to White’s question to be proposed, and (for the most part) it better justifies
those answers relative to what counted as adequate empirical support in 1989. Thus White (2003) moves toward satisfying the hope she expressed in 1989, that future research would “specify precisely the conditions under which UG is accessible, and what factors inhibit the operation of UG in L2 acquisition” (p. 174).

In addition, White’s organization of the new book suggests change since 1989. As in the earlier text, Chapter 1 introduces the logical problem of L1 acquisition, then Chapter 2 returns to the issue with reference to L2 acquisition. Although in both chapters White uses new data and updated analyses to make her points, the familiar habit endures of deriving a context for the study of L2 acquisition from the study of L1 acquisition. However, White organizes the material of the remaining six chapters according to its relevance to the course of acquisition of a second language. Chapter 3 inquires into evidence for UG in L2 acquisition in “The initial state,” citing work by (among others) Haznedar, Slabakova, Vainikka and Young-Scholten, Eubank, Yuan, and Epstein, Flynn and Martohardjono. Chapter 4 addresses “Grammars beyond the initial state: parameters and functional categories (featuring research by Clahsen and Hong, Neeleman and Weerman, Beck, Hawkins and Chan, White). Chapters 5, 6, and 7 continue with research on issues pertinent to post-initial-state acquisition, namely, triggering and input (work by Brown, White, Bruhn-Garavito), morphological variability (Haznedar and Schwartz, Lardiere, Prévost and White, Müller), and argument structure (Bley-Vroman and Yoshinaga, Inagaki, Juffs, White et al. (on psych verbs), Zobl, Hirakawa, Montrul). Chapter 8 concludes with “Ultimate attainment: The nature of the steady state” (Johnson and Newport, White and Genesee, Coppieters, Birdsong, Montrul and Slabakova, Sorace).

In this way, White (2003) organizes Chapters 3 through 8 around an analysis of L2 acquisition, rather than around the components of linguistic theory. Linguistic theory is by no
means absent from the new textbook. But its role has shifted. It is instructive to compare, for example, White’s presentation of research on the Null Subject Parameter in 1989 versus 2003. In White (1989) it emerges in one of three subsections which take up most of Chapter 4, each addressing a proposed parameter of UG. White initiates discussion within the context of generative grammar: “One of the first parameters to be proposed in linguistic theory was the Pro-drop or Null Subject Parameter . . . ” (p. 84). In contrast, the relevant chapter in White (2003) moves not from parameter to parameter, but from one hypothesis about L2 acquisition to another. Pro-drop first enters into the narrative in that White identifies Clahsen and Hong’s “weak UG” proposal as a version of Global Impairment, then continues “In order to investigate this hypothesis, Clahsen and Hong look at adult L2 acquisition of German by speakers of Korean, in the context of the Null Subject Parameter” (p. 103). The shift from 1989 to 2003 underscores the appropriateness of the new book’s title, which foregrounds second language acquisition relative to UG. It also gives White (2003) a chance to model how to employ generative theory as a bona fide “tool” or “frame of reference” in the way White (1989) anticipated but did not realize. What is more, White (2003) insists on holding the “tool” of generative theory rather loosely in hand. In an interesting turn of phrase, appearing first on p. xi and echoed on pp. 9 and 15, she adds a disclaimer to the effect that the book will “consider L2 the issues without being tied down to a particular version of generative theory” (emphasis added). Ostensibly, the point is to try to preserve L2 research results from being prematurely discarded in the wake of fast-moving linguistic theory, and, plausibly, to ward off critique that some of the work White (2003) surveys is outdated. In actual fact, it is not clear that White’s disclaimer has much effect other than to allow her to move freely across theoretically heterogeneous research without further apology, since every product of research is necessarily
“tied down” to its authors’ theoretical assumptions. But the fact that White (2003) asserts independence from any “particular version of generative theory” (p. 15), and from “the precise details of how UG principles have been formulated and reformulated” (p. 9) is a measure of the different role that theory holds relative to L2 acquisition in Second language acquisition and Universal Grammar (2003) compared to its role in Universal Grammar and second language acquisition (1989).

Another feature of White (2003) constitutes not so much a change from White (1989) as the amplification of a property present in both books. It is a property characteristic of White’s work in general, namely, a singular talent for judiciously simplifying and clarifying complex material. White’s talent faces a steep test in working with the more ambitious, more articulated, research of the 1990s. For the most part she succeeds admirably, moving easily among intricate arguments and sometimes labyrinthine data to produce a textbook that is a model of perspicuity and artful restraint. In general, this is a great virtue. It enhances the value of White (2003) in that scholars in related fields can rely on it as a reference manual, as can specialists in L2 acquisition who need a quick précis of a topic outside their area of expertise.

The core readership who approaches White (2003) as a textbook will likewise profit from her capacity to extract the essence of an issue away from peripheral detail. But for this group, White’s gift may sometimes prove too much of a good thing. A textbook certainly needs clarity, but it also needs to acknowledge the ambiguity, incoherence, and messiness that haunt most research projects at some point in their development, and often leave an intractable residue in the final product. Clarity doesn’t necessarily entail suppression of disorder, but White (2003) achieves both by inserting 33 eye-catching “boxes” into the text, each of which records, in capsule, the attributes of a particularly important study. White imposes a uniform content on
these boxes. She supplies each with a title drawing attention to the role the study plays in her exposition; identifies the relevant L1(s) and L2(s); names the task or methodology employed; (often) illustrates the stimuli; and distills the core results into one or two simplified tables, typically represented by subject group in 3 x 4 rows and columns as percentages or means. White’s boxes are very effective. They allow her prose analysis of these studies to flow uncluttered by parenthetical reports about, say, the numbers of Chinese- versus English-speaking L2 learners, or the mean age of arrival of Group A relative to Group B. They also succeed in making these 33 studies memorable. But White’s boxes may deceive newcomers to the discipline into believing that real research always comes out looking this pristine and docile. If I were to use White (2003) as a textbook, I would want to counteract what may be a side effect of the book’s overweening clarity by making sure that students had lots of first-hand experience struggling to make sense of primary sources. Otherwise, they may be poorly prepared for the adventure of designing and interpreting the results of their own empirical research, and might well come to grief in attempting to reduce their unruly data into something like one of White’s boxes.

However one might balance the two sides to the coin of White’s talent for simplicity and clarity, it is an idiosyncratic gift rather than the product of a scholarly community. What may be more significant here is that, as in White (1989), a distinctive metaphor runs through White (2003) that is the communal property of the discipline out of which, and about which, White writes. The new metaphor suffuses the text, appearing, for example, three times in the single-paragraph advertisement for White (2003) posted on the publisher’s website (http://uk.cambridge.org/). Replacing the older metaphor of “access” or “availability,” the new metaphor formulates White’s research question as whether L2 acquisition is “constrained” by
UG. White does not call attention to the substitution of one metaphor for the other, and in fact, both expressions occur in both textbooks. However, there is an unmistakable transition from the dominance of “access” in 1989 to the dominance of “constraint” in 2003.

III “Access” and “constraint”

White’s positioning of the two books vis-à-vis each other provides a starting point for analysis of the metaphors of “access” and “constraint.” The Preface (2003: xii) comments that compared with White (1989), “The current work takes a somewhat different perspective . . . representative of research conducted in the 1990s.” But beyond noting an “enormous increase in research” since 1989, White does not specify the scope of that different perspective or indicate how it diverges from that of White (1989).

Chapter 1 returns to the issue under another rubric, in a subsection entitled “UG access: earlier approaches to UG and SLA” (pp. 15–17). But even here White isn’t very forthcoming. She begins by asserting that generative approaches both present and past “have considered UG as a system of principles and parameters which provide constraints on [L1] grammars,” from which has arisen “the question of whether UG also mediates L2 acquisition.” This is, of course, the thrust of Chapters 1 and 2 in both textbooks, except that in 1989 the language of “access” dominated over that of “constraint.” White then presents an uncharacteristically obscure exposition of what she had called in 1989 the pure UG hypothesis, the claim that “UG is dead,” and the partial access hypothesis. Instead of employing these (admittedly, somewhat quaint) names, she associates each hypothesis with a new name, and in some cases a sequence of new names. For example, what White (1989) had identified as that sub-variety of partial access that accepted the temporary influence of the L1 grammar on the L2, she labels in 2003 as “indirect
access.” She goes on to indicate that the expression “indirect access” was superceded by (actually, reverted to?) “partial access,” before being replaced in the usage of Schwartz and Sprouse (1996) by “Full Transfer Full Access.” White remarks that “All of these terms have turned out to be somewhat problematic” (p. 15), but her dissatisfaction seems to derive more from the unstable distribution of the modifiers “partial,” “full,” “direct,” and “indirect,” than from the term “access.”

White comes closest to spelling out what separates “access-” versus “constraint”-oriented approaches in the concluding paragraph of the subsection (p. 17).

As hypotheses about UG access developed, interest began to shift from overarching questions like ‘Is UG available?’ or ‘What kind of UG access is there in L2?’ to a closer examination of the nature of the interlanguage grammar, with particular focus on whether interlanguage grammars exhibit properties characteristic of natural language . . .

Notice that, disregarding the outmoded terms “available” and “access,” the two questions White attributes in this passage to 1989-style research are essentially the same ones she asks in 2003, only now framed in the different language of “constraint.” Moreover, “a closer examination of the nature of the interlanguage grammar” which probes the linguistic status of interlanguages has surely always been a desideratum, rather than a defining feature of recent research. Thus White asserts a gap between the old and the new, and participates in the conventional labeling of that difference with the terms “access” versus “constraint.” But she offers little analysis of the content of that gap.
Therefore the question remains: what does the shift of metaphor between 1989 and 2003 signal about inquiry into the relationship between UG and L2 acquisition? “Access” means “availability, capacity to reach or achieve something, ingress, opening up” whereas “constraint” means “inhibition, confinement, hindrance, closure, holding back.” With their adoption as technical terms within the discipline, “access” and “constraint” become attenuated from their fundamental referential properties; still, it is significant that these specific expressions have flourished, in sequence, and not others. The classic 1989 question (“Do L2 learners have access to UG?”) is directed at learners and what they know: it asks “Do learners have open to them mentally-represented linguistic principles and options in constructing an L2 grammar?” The classic 2003 question (“Does UG constrain L2 learners’ grammars?” or, in passive, “Are L2 learners’ grammars constrained by UG?”) inquires about the function of UG. It asks “Do mentally-represented linguistic principles and options hold back learners in their construction of an L2 grammar?”

I can think of two ways in which this difference may be meaningful, the first less obvious and perhaps less substantive than the second. The first difference has to do with the roles attributed to L2 learners in the language of “access” versus “constraint.” These two near-antonyms can be employed to frame parallel questions about L2 acquisition and UG because of their different argument structures. “(Have) access” assigns the role of actor or agent to L2 learners in subject position, whereas “constraint” typically demotes learners to the status of possessor (cf. the anomaly of posing the question as “Do L2 learners constrain their grammars according to UG?”). Displacement of the active, engaged, L2 learner of 1989 by a learner in the static role of possessor by 2003 is consistent with an overall trend in generative grammar’s representation of L1 acquisition, as observed in Thomas (2002: 65). In the 1970s, the notion of
the child learner as a busy, inquisitive, hypothesis-testing, “little linguist” prevailed. This was replaced in the 1980s by the attribution of a passive role to learners as engaged in setting parameters, and then supplanted in the 1990s by the relatively more inert depiction of learners as deducing a grammar from input. An expression used by Crain (2001) may culminate the trend, in that it reduces the agency of the learner to nil: Crain described language acquisition as a process in which “data drives children through linguistic space.” viii Thus L2 theorists’ abandonment of the metaphor of “access” in favor of “constraint” may mirror a trend within generative research on L1 acquisition. What is less obvious is how to assess the significance of that trend. Perhaps a gradual reduction in the attribution of agency to language learners is integrated into some larger theoretical shift. Or, it may simply be a curiosity within the sociology of the discipline, since generative grammar is not immune to the usual sociolinguistic pressures to constantly coin new terms for its own use.

A second possible interpretation of the shift from “access” to “constraint” may be more consequential. Study of L2 acquisition and UG under the metaphor of “constraint” focuses attention on what L2 learners’ grammars hold back, or disallow, rather than what they “[have] access” to. Information about what a target grammar excludes is, famously, unavailable in the input to L2 learners. Therefore constraint-based research should be especially attuned to instances where the poverty of the stimulus fails to inform learners about the exclusion of a particular linguistic feature from the L2 grammar. Although the notion of the poverty of the stimulus animates both White (1989) and (2003), comparison of the relevant index entry in the two books (under “logical problem [of language acquisition]”) reveals that its distribution is much broader in the 2003 text. White (2003: 57) notes Schwartz and Sprouse’s (2000) insistence that under-determination be made central to the design of L2 research. Later, she points out the
vulnerability of research on acquisition of word order in Romance DPs to the charge that learners face no obvious poverty of the stimulus in generating N+Adj (pp. 133–5). Other work White treats might be similarly criticized: acquisition of wh-movement (pp. 120–7); of English questions, negatives, and adverb placement (pp. 128–32); of gender (pp. 135–9). But in fact, much of the new research that White (2003) analyzes exhibits a keen awareness of the poverty of the stimulus, for example that by Dekydtspotter, Sprouse, and Anderson (pp. 30–5) and by Montrul and Slabakova (pp. 254–8). A study by Bruhn-Garavito (pp. 171–5) is particularly intriguing. Bruhn-Garavito finds that L2 learners can acquire a subtle UG-derived contrast in the interpretation of null subjects that bears on only certain subclasses of Spanish subjunctive clauses. Learners succeeded in deducing the appropriate grammar without explicit relevant input. Moreover, they did so even though what classroom instruction they did receive about subjunctives happened to be erroneous, revealing that they can surmount not only a poverty of the stimulus, but in this case also a kind of perversity of the stimulus.

It seems plausible, therefore, that the metaphor of “constraint” acknowledges an enhanced role for the poverty of the stimulus in generative studies of L2 acquisition, relative to its role when the “access” metaphor dominated. Hawkins (2001) provides indirect support for this speculation. Hawkins depicts the older research tradition into “access to UG” as attentive to developmental differences in L1 versus L2 acquisition, and to the effects of L1 on L2. In his opinion the “access” tradition faces premature displacement, to the detriment of the discipline, by poverty-of-the-stimulus-oriented research. He criticizes the latter as capable of contributing only narrowly to the question of whether UG is involved in L2 acquisition, a question he views has as having little potential for wider impact in linguistics. Hawkins does not associate poverty-of-the-stimulus-oriented research with the metaphor of “constraint,” and he re-names the “access
to UG” tradition “difference-oriented research” (p. 348) because of its focus on L1 versus L2 acquisition. But his sense that a deeper investment in the poverty of the stimulus is registered in recent work is consistent with the waning of the metaphor of “access” and waxing of the metaphor of “constraint” attested in White (1989) versus (2003). Furthermore, Hawkins’ attribution of greater breadth to the “access” approach coheres with White’s (2003: 17) characterization of it as preoccupied with “overarching” questions, in the quotation from her text given above. The “closer examination of the nature of the interlanguage grammar” attributed in the same passage to more recent research communicates a sense that to White it entails retrenchment into a kind of “undergirding” question of whether L2 learners can overcome the poverty of the stimulus.

On the other hand, White would probably not share Hawkins’ reservations about post-“access” research, nor does she position research into overarching questions in opposition to undergirding ones. Rather, White accepts that the architecture of the discipline requires both kinds of inquiry, and so assumes the applicability of the more refined conceptual and methodological instruments of 2003 to issues that Hawkins subsumes under “difference-” or “access-” orientation. Moreover, the 1989-style overarching questions that White (2003: 17) cites—“Is UG available?” and “What kind of UG access is there in L2?”—seem to be re-formulated in the metaphor of “constraint” in the new textbook, more than they seem to be abandoned, replaced, or in some definitive way, answered.

In this matter, White probably speaks for a consensus. The new textbook does a fine job of representing the commonwealth of scholarship into second language acquisition and Universal Grammar. It should have at least as long and useful a life as that of its predecessor.
Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Patricia Balcom for her excellent advice on improving this review article, both in form and substance.
Footnotes

i  Source: http://newfirstsearch.oclc.org/. The publishers report that precise sales figures for the book are unavailable to the public.


iii  One of those 30 is Phinney (1987), which is omitted from the References. Otherwise, White (2003) has few proofreading or typographical lapses, and displays Cambridge University Press’ usual elegant, easy-to-read, visual style.

iv  On the other hand, the initial-to-final-state layout introduces certain problems, since not all research can be assigned a discrete spot on that continuum. For example, assessment of the Minimal Trees and Valueless Features Hypotheses is at home in Chapter 3 (“The initial state”), but less so for the bulk of discussion of Full Access without Transfer; and Chapters 4, 5, and 6 interrupt the developmental vector for rather too long in their survey of various, unordered, aspects of L2 grammars keyed neither to the initial or final states.

v  Byrne (1991: 187–8) criticized White (1989) on these grounds. White (2003), like its predecessor, does not bring readers up to the absolute cutting edge of research. There is not much effort to integrate the Minimalist Program or to re-interpret existing work in those terms, nor is there reference to Optimality theory. But a textbook’s burden is less to be excruciatingly up-to-date than to accurately position ideas in their contexts (cf. Meara, 2002: 396).

White seems not unaware of this issue. In identical words in 1989 (p. xi) and 2003 (p. xii), she urges readers to consult her original sources, “especially if [readers] are themselves intending to pursue experimental research.”

Patricia Balcom pointed out to me the relevance here of Pollock’s (1998: 13) statement that “l’apprentissage de leur langue maternelle n’est pas quelque chose que font les enfants mais qui leur arrive” (in Balcom’s translation, “learning their first language is not something children do; rather it happens to them”). Chomsky’s preference for the expression “language growth” over “language learning / acquisition” (documented by Marshall 1987 back to the 1970s) is related as well.
IV References


White, L. 1992: Fuhen-bunpoo to daini-gengo-kakutoku: genri to parametaa no aproochi