Setting, resetting and general learning mechanisms: On the elements of syntactic variation in L2A*

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Since the Principles & Parameters approach, syntactic variation among languages has been dealt with through the notion of parameters, conceived of as binary options that can be differently set in different languages. In the field of L2A set parameters have been considered by some authors the source of syntactic transfer errors. In this work I argue that if parameters are not specified in principles but in the functional lexicon, and the triggers are vocabulary items, parametric values need not and cannot be transferred, as a by-product of UG availability. If UG is accessible in L2A, parameter values will not be transferred and then reset, but set again. The cause of transfer errors must be found somewhere else. I propose to characterize transfer neither as part of UG nor as a general learning mechanism but rather as a mental 'escape' mechanism alternative to acquisition.

0. Introduction

In the field of second language acquisition (henceforth L2A) one of the fundamental questions that researchers try to answer is what makes it different from first language acquisition (L1A), provided that everyone agrees that at least the ultimate attainment of the two processes is different. Various intersecting factors have been considered:

- UG availability
- Age
- Resort to general learning mechanisms
- Initial state

These factors intersect in the sense that UG availability is possibly a function of age (according to Lenneberg's (1967) Critical Period, and related notions, as the

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one of sensitive periods differentiated for different language modules), and resort to general learning mechanisms is possibly a function of UG availability (if UG is not available, the learner resorts to general learning strategies).
The Initial State factor is related to UG availability in different ways according to different models, but a common consideration is that in L2A the Initial State is different from L1A in the obvious sense that the L2 learner has already acquired a language.[1] This could have a number of consequences. It could make UG as a whole no more accessible (as maintained by Clahsen, 1988; Clahsen and Muysken, 1989, a.o.) leaving the L2 learner with only general learning mechanisms (or inductive learning strategies in Clahsen's (1988) terms) at disposal for L2A, or could be responsible for some peculiarities found in L2A.
In particular, transfer errors (or cross- linguistic influence) from the L1 have been observed since long in L2A (Sweet, 1899). In pre- generative frameworks (e.g. Bloomfield, 1945) they have been interpreted as the output of 'lifelong habits of muscular action, of naming, classification and combinatory patterns' peculiar to the native language.[2]
Restricting our attention to syntax, for some L2A researchers working in the Principles and Parameters framework, transfer errors are given a different interpretation. White (1989) for instance, maintains that UG principles are fully accessible in L2A, but the values for parameters, already set for the L1, are initially transferred to the L2 and then possibly reset to the L2 values as long as L2A proceeds. Then the problem is how is resetting achieved (is it a UG driven process?) and what evidence is needed in order to trigger it (is negative evidence needed?).
The idea that parameter values are transferred when the acquisition of an L2 starts, as a consequence of the availability of UG in this process, strongly relies on a conception of parameters as options specified in principles. But if parameters are not expressed in principles, and are rather featural specifications in the functional lexicon, as recently maintained by Rizzi (2011) following a tradition that goes back to Borer (1983), there is no principled reason to assume that parametric values are transferred as a by-product of UG availability. The L2 learner is faced with new vocabulary items (words, morphemes or their apparent absence) whose idiosyncratic properties have to be discovered, as the L1 learner is.
In what follows I will briefly review some studies of the late 80s – early 90s that propose and discuss the idea of parameter transfer and resetting (Section1) as well as Rizzi's (2011) characterization of parameters (Section 2). In Section 3 I'll provide some evidence that L2 learners do make UG driven hypotheses concerning L2 items they are exposed to, while in Section 4 I'll go back to transfer errors proposing for them a different explanation.

[1] In this work, as commonly held, we distinguish bilingualism (the simultaneous acquisition of two languages) from L2A, where a language starts to be acquired when another is already acquired.
[2] Bloomfield 1945/1970 p. 306.

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1. UG access and the transfer of parameters values

The question of whether UG is accessible in L2A has received different answers in the Principles and Parameters approach. While for some authors (Clahsen 1988; Clahsen and Muysken 1989 among many others) UG is no more accessible, for others it is accessible but not in the same way as in L1A. Crucial in this respect is the discussion on whether L2 grammars are UG compatible or not. Among the proponents of UG accessibility, some authors have argued that UG is not the same in L1A and L2A, since in L2A parameters have already been set. While for Bley – Vroman (1989) L1 settings constitute the L2 learner's only access to UG, White (1989) assumes that L2 learners use L1 settings of UG parameters as an interim theory about the L2. In some cases L2 learners are able to reset parameters to the L2 values, and sometimes negative evidence may play a role in this resetting.

White (1985) found for instance that Spanish speakers learning English incorrectly transfer the null subject property of their L1 to English in roughly the 40% of the cases.

White (1991) studied the L2A of adverb placement in English by native speakers of French aged 11-12. As it is well known, French and English exhibit some similarities as well as some differences in this respect, which White (1991), following Pollock (1989) attributes to the different setting of a parameter, the verb movement parameter.

In English, adverbs may not appear between the verb and its direct object, whereas they may in French:

(1) a. Marie regarde souvent la télévision
b.* Mary watches often television

In English, adverbs may appear between the subject and the verb, whereas they may not in French:

(2) a. *Marie souvent regarde la télévision
b. Mary often watches television

In French the verb raises past the adverb. In English verb raising is prohibited (for all verbs but *have* and *be*).

Two groups participated in White's study

1) Adverb group: they were taught adverb placement
2) Question group: they were taught question formation

In addition there was a control group (monolingual native speakers of English)

There were three testing sessions in the main study: pre-teaching test, immediate post teaching test, and five weeks later. A follow- up study was conducted one year later.

Three tasks were used: a grammaticality judgment task, a preference task and a manipulation task.

Results showed that there was no significant difference prior to instruction between the Adverb and the Question group, and both differed significantly from the Control

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group. The measure used by White (1991) is 'error score'. Restricting our attention to the grammaticality judgment task for ease of exposition,[3] considering a maximum error score of 16, she found a mean error score of 3.5 for the Adverb group and of 4 for the Question group. She notes however (p.144) that the error scores vary considerably between individuals, from 0 to 10.
There was no significant difference in the Question group's scores on the three test occasions, suggesting no improvement over time in the absence of appropriate teaching. For the Adverb group, the pre-teaching test differs significantly from both post teaching tests, and the two do not differ from each other, suggesting that they learned *SVAO in English and did not forget it.
This makes White (1991) assume that negative evidence (here in the form of explicit rule explanation) plays a crucial role in parameter resetting: the Question group should behave as the Adverb group if the value for the verb movement parameter were reset, but in fact does not.
White (1991) notes however some peculiarities of the learning process of the Adverb group learners: they learned * SVAO but they did not acquire the difference between VO and VPP structures or between manner and frequency adverbs in the VPP case. The underlying, conscious generalization the learners make seems to be:

(3) Adverbs may not appear between the verb and other categories [White 1991:152]

On the other hand, many of the subjects did acquire the distinction between SAV as the preferred position for frequency adverbs and SVOA as the preferred position for manner adverbs, without specific instruction on this point, and this is a distinction which cannot simply be attributed to the mother tongue, since SAV is not a possible adverb position in French.
The one year later follow – up test revealed however that children of the Adverb group had reverted to the state of knowledge that they revealed prior to instruction: the error score was not significantly different from the pre-instruction error score (pre-instruction mean error score for the different tasks was 3.2, in the follow- up 2.9). Nor was this score significantly different from the score of an uninstructed children group that participated in the follow- up study : explicit formal instruction does not give lasting results.
Schwartz and Gubala- Ryzak (1992) argue that there is no evidence that learners in White (1991) 's study have re-organized their grammar, i.e. that their rejection of SVAO in English is a consequence of Verb raising having been unlearned, since the result is not lasting and since subjects also reject SVAPP. To exclude SVAPP, they argue, the grammar must have 'unlearned' base- generating adverbs to the right of VP, but the fact that SVO/PP is still allowed is an inherent contradiction that a natural grammar cannot contain. They argue that primary linguistic data are the only input that UG can make use of, in L2A as in L1A: the language faculty cannot access the knowledge that gets learned as a result of exposure to negative evidence (information about the impossibility of a form or utterance) and explicit positive data (descriptive information about the language).

[3] Results in the three tasks reveal parallel trends (White 1991:150).

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White (1992) replies that a number of acquisition researchers recognize the possibility that L1 acquisition may involve a period of 'trying out' more than one setting at a time, and if L1A and L2A are alike, this possibility cannot be dismissed for L2 acquisition. White (1992) accepts the arguments of the rejection of both SVAO and SVAPP, and the one based on the follow- up study which revealed that after one year subjects had reverted to the state of knowledge they had in the pre-teaching test, and agrees on the fact that negative evidence does not seem to have led to parameter reset in this particular case (but not in principle). She gives then further data, based on Trahey (1992) and Trahey and White (1992) which show that L2 learners might not use primary linguistic data to reset the verb movement parameter. 54 francophone subjects of the same age of the subjects in White (1991) were given an input 'flood' of positive evidence inconsistent with finite verb raising, and received no negative evidence or explicit positive evidence on adverb placement. The results show that exposure to the flood of positive input led to a significant increase in subjects' acceptance and use of adverbs in the SAV position. However, subjects' SVAO errors did not decrease after the input flood: optional raising seems thus a feature of their grammar too, even though they did not receive explicit positive evidence or negative evidence.

I fundamentally agree with Schwartz and Gubala - Ryzak (1992) on the fact that if negative evidence and explicit positive evidence are used by an L2 acquirer, UG is not engaged, but general learning mechanisms are involved, and I agree (with both Schwartz and Gubala – Rizak 1992 and White 1992) that the results of White's (1991) study (rejection of both SVAO and SVAPP, but also acceptance of both, loss of *SVAO after one year) strongly indicate that UG was not involved.

I think however that the fact that both SVA and SAV are accepted in the 'flood' study (Trahey 1992; Trahey and White 1992), which reveals that even in the absence of negative evidence subjects showed optionality of verb raising, must be interpreted as indicating that UG is not involved in transfer, either.[4]

One important fact that I would like to stress in this respect is that the amount of syntactic transfer errors found by White is far below the amount one could expect if they were the result of a deterministic, UG driven, process: in White (1985) they were nearly the 40%. White (1991) in the pre-teaching test found not only a mean error score of 3.5-4 /16 (which means 25%) but also, as we have seen, that the error scores varied considerably between individuals, from 0 to 10. Both data are inconsistent with a UG driven process: a UG driven process is not supposed to take place in the 25% (or 40%) of the cases and with great variability between individuals.

This does by no means entail, however, that UG is not involved in L2A, but simply that it is not involved in the transfer of parameter values. We will come back to transfer errors in Section 4.

For the moment I would just like to argue that there is a principled reason to justify my claim. The idea that parameter values are transferred in L2A as a

[4] The fact that optionality is also attested, to a certain extent, in L1A, must not be thought of as indicating that the two kinds of optionality are alike. In L1A optionality is a transitory feature, while in L2A it may 'fossilize'. We do not (and cannot) know whether optionality of verb movement was a transitory feature of the grammar of White's subjects.

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consequence of the availability of UG is based on the idea that parameters are options specified on UG principles or, in Rizzi's words, on the 'Parameters expressed in Principles' view:

(4) Parameters expressed in Principles: each UG principle specifies one (or a small number of) parameter(s), a choice point to be fixed on a certain value for the principle to become operative. [Rizzi, 2011: 146 (6)]

One consequence of this view is that since the L1 is already acquired, parameters values have been fixed, and, in re-accessing UG, the L2 learner can do nothing else but start L2A with those values. But if parameters are specified in the lexicon the availability of UG principles and the values for parameters are two independent objects, and having access to UG principles does not necessarily entail assuming the L1 parameters values. In the next section I will briefly summarize Rizzi (2011)'s characterization of parameters.

2. Parameters and principles as independent entities

Following a tradition that goes back to Borer (1983) and Kayne (2000), Rizzi (2011) assumes that parameters are not options expressed directly in UG principles but rather featural specifications in the (functional) lexicon:

(5) A parameter is an instruction for a certain syntactic action expressed as a feature on an item of the functional lexicon, and made operative when the item enters syntax as a head [Rizzi, 2011:150 (13)]

Or, more precisely,

(6) H has F {yes, no} [*ibidem*:150 (14)]

where

(7) H is an item of the functional lexicon entering syntax as a head, and F is a relevant feature [*ibidem*:150]

In the set of possible linguistic features, parametric features will be restricted to a small and well-defined subset of morpho-syntactic features which have the property of triggering the basic syntactic actions, i.e. merge, move and spell-out. The typology of parameters is thus derived:

(8) A typology of parameters [*ibidem*: 150 (15)]

1. Merge parameters:
- H c-selects XP (where XP departs from the canonical structural realisation of the s-selected entity)

2. Move parameters:
- H attracts X [+ F]

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- H attracts XP [+ F]

3. Spell- out parameters
- H is null
- H licenses a null Spec

(9) "each item of the functional lexicon has a small number of switches, corresponding to the typology in (15); acquiring the lexical item amounts to setting its switches on the basis of the linguistic data the learner is confronted with. So a given head may c-select a particular category (departing from the canonical structural realisation of its s-selectional properties), attract another head or a specifier, be spelled-out or not and govern the spell-out properties of its Spec." [*ibidem*:151][5]

The lexicon is traditionally considered the component of grammar for which there is strong evidence for learning (Borer 1983), and acquiring a new word is an open possibility throughout life.
And if acquiring a lexical item means setting its switches (i.e. discovering its merge, move and spell-out properties) on the basis of the data a learner is confronted with, we can assume this possibility to be open as long as UG is operative.

There is no principled reason to assume that this possibility is not at disposal when an L2 is acquired, provided that UG is still accessible. But if it is so, principles can be operative independently of the setting of parameters, so the values of parameters need not be transferred in order to access principles. They need not but they also cannot, since they must be established for each new lexical item the learner encounters

A different view is expressed by Tsimpli and Russou (1991). They also assume (following Borer1983) that parameters are not associated with UG principles but with lexical items and, in particular, functional categories. They adopt the idea that functional categories form an independent component of UG, the UG lexicon.

With respect to L1A, it is this module of UG that is subject to maturation. With respect to L2 acquisition, on the other hand, the prediction is that this module is inaccessible to the adult L2 learner, on the assumption that language learning at stages other than those included in the Critical Period cannot make use of the same mechanisms. Thus parameter resetting in L2 is excluded.UG principles, however,

[5] According to Cinque and Rizzi (2010), the inventory of functional elements (heads or specifiers of functional projections) is much larger than is generally thought. Besides determiners and complementizers, there are conjunctions, functional and spatial adpositions, mood, modal, tense, aspect, polarity and voice morphemes (whether bound or free), auxiliaries, copulas, and other verbs lacking a clear argument structure, pronouns (strong, weak, clitics), demonstratives, quantifiers, numerals, classifiers, number morphemes, gender or class morphemes, diminutive/augmentative morphemes, degree words, indefinite/ wh- words, Case morphemes, focusing adverbs, comparative and superlative morphemes, and many more: at least four hundred or so. According to the authors, it is in fact quicker to consider which elements are lexical, i.e. belong to an open class. Nouns in all languages appear to belong to an open class. It is less clear as far as adjectives, verbs and adverbs are concerned.

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are assumed to be operative in any language acquisition process. The availability of UG principles allows the L2 learner to make use of grammatical options which are not the ones adopted by the L1 grammar nor by the L2 target grammar. This theory also predicts that where L2 differs from L1 in terms of parametric values there will be transfer errors at the early stages, given that the functional module is not accessible to the language learner. At the more advanced stages, where the L2 learner seems to adopt the correct parametric choice, the authors assume that this is the result of general learning mechanisms correctly analyzing the input data.

This model thus predicts the availability of UG principles but also transfer errors for parameters values, and no resetting.

More than two decades of studies on the structure of functional projections (see Cinque and Rizzi, 2010 for a review), however, allow us now to clearly distinguish a universal hierarchy of functional projections from language specific functional properties. The latter, under Rizzi's (2011) proposal, are established by the learner endowed with the discovery procedure outlined above, which is as well a universal endowment. No transfer of language specific functional properties is thus predicted, and I think we should dispense with the notion of a UG lexicon no more accessible to the L2 learner. If UG is accessible to the L2 learner (modulo Critical (or Sensitive) Period/s) no language specific properties need to transferred.

One final point concerns the maturation of functional categories (now understood as a universal hierarchy). There is ample evidence in the L1A literature that in the early stages of language acquisition the complete functional structure is not available to the child (Wexler 1994, Friedemann and Rizzi 2000, Hyams 2001 a.o.), while it seems that in L2A the functional structure is at disposal since the early stages (Lardiere 1998; Prévost and White 2000; Schlyter 2003 a.o.). Is the functional structure, fully available once L1 is acquired, part of the Initial State in L2A ?

In the next section I'll provide some evidence consistent with the idea that L2 learners in fact try to establish the syntactic properties of L2 lexical items, and do so with operative UG principles on one hand and a matured functional structure on the other.

3. Discovering the properties of lexical items in L2A

How do L2 learners behave when they are faced with a new lexical item (word or morpheme)? In a pilot study (Di Domenico 2012) I made inquiries concerning the English *–s* morpheme proposing a written grammatical decision task to 50 native speakers of Italian aged 10-12, beginners or near-beginners of L2 English.

Given the written nature of the test, I chose two uses of the *–s* morpheme which are homographic and homophonic: the case in which *'s* is a (contracted) form of BE and the case in which it is a genitive.

Subjects were presented five sentences, corresponding to different structures: in two of them *'s* is a form of BE, in three of them it is a genitive. The sentences contained no violations and were not ambiguous. Subjects had to decide whether the value of *'s* in each sentence was BE or genitive and indicate it to the right of the item.

Two testing sessions were realized: one soon after students were taught BE simple present and *'s* genitive and one five months later. The main results reveal that (in

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both experimental sessions) there is a statistically significant difference between sentences of the type in (8) (the lowest number of target answers: 28/ 50 in the first session, 29/50 in the second session) and sentences of the type in (9) (the highest number of target answers: 39/50 in the first session, 42/50 in the second session):

(8) Jake's at the skatepark.

(9) Is this Jack's tracksuit?

Why is (8) a significantly more difficult structure than (9) ($\chi 2$=5. 4726 p=.05, with Yates correction $\chi 2$= 4.5228 p=.05 in the first session; $\chi 2$= 8.2079 p=.05 ,significant also at p=.01 and at p=.001, with Yates correction $\chi 2$= 6.9937 p=.05, significant also at p=.01 in the second session) to decide what is *'s* ?
And why is it difficult to decide what is *'s* even after 5 months of exposure, and despite what the kids have been taught?
We interpreted the results as follows. First of all, subjects really find *'s* ambiguous, but this ambiguity is structure dependent. They also make the hypothesis in (10):

(10) *Is* and *'s* are allomorphs of a general agreement morpheme[6]

where 'general' means that it can be merged both clause internally and DP internally. In (8), the most difficult sentence type, *'s* is placed at a 'choice point' (Fodor 1998b), i.e. a point at which it can be attached into the currently parsed DP (and in this case it is interpreted as a genitive) or in the clausal structure (and in this case it is interpreted as a form of BE). The two interpretations are coherent with two different parsing principles: Late Closure in the first case and Minimal Attachment in the second case.[7]
In (9), the easiest sentence type, on the contrary, *'s* is not ambiguous because the sentence parsing has started with *is* in C, which is coherently interpreted as a verb, and thus the subsequent occurrence of *'s* is not ambiguous.[8]

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[6] (10) is confirmed by some elicited productions collected by Bennati and Di Domenico (unpublished work) such as:
(i) a. What does Jane want?
b. Bag is Mary
(ii) a. Where are the belts?
b. The belt is Brom is on the table. The belt is Katrina is on the bed.

[7] Late Closure (Frazier and Fodor 1978)
When possible attach incoming material into the constituent currently being parsed
Minimal Attachment (Frazier and Fodor 1978)
Attach incoming material into the phrase marker being constructed using the fewest nodes consistent with the well- formedness rules of the language under analysis
On the universality of these parsing principles see in particular Fodor 1998a.

[8] The idea that (8) is difficult because 's is at a choice point is confirmed by the fact that the second most difficult sentence type is:
(i) Rosie's dog is very friendly

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The results of this study are an instance of how second language learners behave when they are exposed to a new vocabulary item: they make UG driven hypotheses trying to establish its syntactic properties, in this case the merge properties of *'s,* using universal parsing principles grounded on a fully developed clausal architecture, and, despite what they are taught about *'s* , their hypotheses are more in line with proposals made by linguists in this respect.[9]

4. Back to cross- linguistic influence

It might be argued that the study just reported refers to a domain where no transfer is expected since there is no equivalent of the *–s* morpheme in the L1 of the subjects.[10] This is in fact true, but notice by the way that the notion of 'equivalence' is not a linguistic one, but rather a mental one.

If we go back to very early studies of L2A, after the immediate post-Bloomfieldian period in which transfer was emphasized (as in work by Lado 1957, for instance), researchers tried to quantify transfer errors, with respect to other kinds of L2A errors (or 'goofs', Dulay and Burt 1974), at the same time individuating other sources for the peculiarities of interlanguage grammars (Selinker 1972). Dulay and Burt (1974) report a series of studies of the late 60s and early 70s concerning both adult and child productions which all found an amount of transfer errors around the 30%. A study of Doca (1979), similarly found that the amount of transfer errors in the spontaneous production of the adult subjects under investigation was 28%.

Interestingly, these percentages are not dissimilar from those found by White (1985; 1991). Note however that the two amounts are not directly comparable, in that White's data express the amount of transfer errors with respect to target answers, while the studies just reported express the amount of transfer errors with respect to errors of different sources.

Nevertheless, both kinds of data reveal that transfer errors (and hence the process of transfer), can only in part characterize L2A. The study we have reported in Section 3 surely refers to the other part.

A lot of evidence concerning transfer errors has been gathered up to now. More recent research (see White 2009 for a review) has individuated that different sub-modules are differently interested by transfer. In particular, in various domains at the syntax discourse interface, at more advanced levels of L2 proficiency, a disjunction can be observed between the L2ers syntactic knowledge, which is target like in the relevant respects, and knowledge of interface conditions which is subject to protracted L1 effects, and higher percentages of transfer- driven responses (Belletti and Leonini 2004; Sorace and Filiaci 2006 a. o.). An even greater role of transfer seems to influence the PF interface, where the L1 feature inventory, according to Brown (2000) constrains L2 speech perception.[11] It seems thus, as

[9] The hypothesis that possessive 's is the singular form of the copula has been advanced by den Dikken (1998; 1999) while Bernstein and Tortora (2005) maintain that it is a (singular) number marking akin to that found in the verbal domain. Our data seem to support den Dikken's analysis.

[10] See footnote 11 below on morphological transfer

[11] As far as morphology is concerned, transfer can be observed in a more indirect way. Montrul (2000) proposes that morphological items in the L1 which lack equivalents in the L2 have a blocking effect on L2 acquisition of related syntactic structures

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Ionin and Zubizarreta (2010) suggest, that purely syntactic phenomena are less vulnerable to transfer.
It is beyond the scope of the present article to find an explanation for these observed differences which surely deserve further consideration.

What is worth noting with respect to the assumptions made here, is that transfer on one side can only in part explain L2 syntax, and on the other seems to affect other language sub-modules more than syntax.[12]

Recent research on transfer, furthermore, seems to attest transfer not only in L2 learners but also in adult heritage speakers and bilingual children (see Ionin and Zubizarreta, 2010 and the references quoted there). In both cases, and differently from L2A, L1 and L2 are acquired simultaneously.

Research on L3 (Ln) acquisition has revealed that at the early stages of Ln acquisition transfer seems to occur more from the learner's L2 than from her L1 (Falk and Bardel 2010 and the references quoted there).

Finally, transfer errors are more likely to be observed in certain experimental tasks then in other: translation tasks significantly give rise to more transfer errors with respect to productions elicited without L1 material (Bennati and Di Domenico, 2008).

All these facts in my opinion lead to the conclusion that transfer does not have the features of a UG driven process, but is rather to be conceived of as a mental process. I would like to suggest that it has to do with the 'tricks' we are able to make with language: solve (or even invent) a cross-word or a rebus, produce rhymes and alliterations, create and understand a pun, translate, transfer, and so on and so forth.

In transfer we first establish an equivalence between an item of our L2 and an item of our L1 (or of our Ln and our L(n-x)), keep the morpho-phonological make-up of the item in the L2 (or Ln) but the feature values (and hence the syntactic actions that they trigger) of the 'equivalent' item in the L1 (or L(n-x)).[13]

Transferrable features are of many kinds (from discourse- related features to phonological features) and they are transferred at different degrees, possibly in relation to their different sensitive periods of acquisition.

Among the things we can do with language, we can also re-organize a language grammar (or parts of it).[14] While re-organizing a language grammar is indeed a general learning mechanism (which may profit of negative evidence and descriptive information about the L2) transfer is not a learning mechanism at all, but rather an anti- acquisition procedure, an escape mechanism the learner may resort to when and if linguistic competence in the target language is lacking or hardly accessible. Perhaps in some cases transfer is an escape mechanism the learner must resort to, if the UG driven procedure of acquisition is not accessible for critical period related reasons: phonological features might be such a case. As far as syntax proper is concerned, it seems that L2ers resort to transfer in less than a half of the cases.

[12] But see Belletti and Leonini (2004) a.o. for an interpretation of problems at the C-I interface as syntactic problems.
[13] In code-switching we do not keep the morpho-phonological make- up of the item in the L2.
[14] Resetting is thus a misleading term for this operation.

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5. Conclusions

In this work I have argued that transfer of parameters settings is not a UG driven operation. It needn't be so under the assumption that parameters and principles are independent entities, as in the approach to parameters proposed by Rizzi (2011) which follows Borer's (1983) proposal that the locus for parameters is the (functional) lexicon. It cannot be so under the assumption that parametric values are triggered by and established for each new element of the (functional) lexicon the learner is faced with.

Even some external peculiarities of transfer errors lead to the same conclusion: their amount and individual variability, the fact that they can occur at different degrees in different domains, that they preferably (at least in the early stages of an L3 acquisition) occur from the L2 than from the L1, and that they may be favored by certain metalinguistic tasks such as translation.

I have proposed that transfer is to be conceived of not as learning mechanism but as an escape-from-acquisition mental mechanism that L2ers (or Ln-ers) may resort to: in L2A, features can be acquired or transferred.

In Section 3 I have given some evidence of how a UG driven acquisitional procedure can work in L2A.

Assuming a Universal Grammar consisting in principles (possibly reduced to recursive merge and interface conditions), a hierarchy of functional projections (if not determined by interface conditions, see Cinque and Rizzi (2010) for a brief discussion), a functional lexicon containing the list of possible functors (Cinque and Rizzi 2010) and a procedure/ instruction to set language specific properties of lexical items, as the one proposed by Rizzi (2011), nothing differentiates the L1 and the L2 learner's endowment in this respect, modulo Critical Period.

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