

Review of Usage in Second Language Acquisition: Critical Reflections and Future Directions



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INTRODUCTION

During the last several decades, usage-based linguistics has emerged as a major theoretical perspective in second language acquisition (SLA) studies. This broad framework assumes that language learning is primarily based on general learning mechanisms that unconsciously extract patterns from language use as it occurs within rich communicative contexts. The growing popularity of the usage-based perspective among researchers using a wide range of methodological approaches makes this edited collection particularly relevant to the ongoing task of comparing and synthesizing SLA research findings.

SUMMARY

The collection contains seven chapters along with introductory and concluding chapters written by the editor, Kevin McManus. One strength of the book is that the authors of each chapter were asked to focus on

the same set of key questions concerning the nature of usage, the nature of the L2 learning task, and the connection between usage and learning. The seven internal chapters provide excellent overviews of the usage-based perspective as understood by researchers employing various approaches, including a corpus-based approach (Chapter 2 by Stefanie Wulff), a conversation-analytic approach (Chapter 3 by Søren Eskildsen), a variationist approach (Chapter 4 by Aarnes Gudmestad), a dynamic usage-based approach (Chapter 5 by Marjolijn Verspoor and Hans-Jörg Schmid), a cognitive linguistic approach (Chapter 6 by Han Luo), a processing-based perspective (Chapter 7 by Ronald Leow), and skill acquisition theory (Chapter 8 by Yuichi Suzuki).

CONTENTS

In Chapter 2, Wulff points out how corpus-based research is especially well-suited to usage-based approaches as it is able to elucidate the role of frequency in acquisition. A number of studies have noted that token frequencies (the number of occurrences of a particular word or construction) and type frequencies (the number of unique realizations of a particular construction) both drive language learning, with high token frequency leading to the conservation of specific variants of a construction (Bybee, 2006; Ellis, 2006). Moreover, research on first language acquisition has demonstrated that verbs that occur with the highest frequency within a construction (e.g., the verb *give* in the double-object construction) often serve as “pathbreakers” as they tend to draw attention to a construction’s general meaning.

In Chapter 3, Eskildsen argues that ethnomethodological conversation analysis (EMCA) has much to offer SLA research. He views talk-in-interaction as the primordial scene of human social life, drawing attention to the relationship between materiality, embodiment, the usage environment, social action, and multimodal communication, as these features of use have been revealed in longitudinal research on L2 learners.

In Chapter 4, Gudmestad divides variationist research into studies that focus on “vertical” variation (which occurs along the developmental trajectory as learners produce forms that are more or less target-like) and “horizontal” variation (which is found within target language community usage). Focusing on horizontal variation, Gudmestad summarizes research

that has examined the linguistic and social factors that drive variation. One interesting finding concerns ways in which learners who have studied abroad produce certain target form variants that are not produced by their peers who did not go abroad.

In Chapter 5, Verspoor and Schmid discuss the entrenchment-and-conventionalization model. The model combines both cognitive and social processes and shows how these interact under the influence of usage events and a range of forces. A key feature of the model is that speakers can, through usage events, extract a wide range of features beyond the core formal features of grammatical and semantic elements. For example, a learner of Korean could presumably, over time, unconsciously extract features of a speech situation (formality of the situation, interlocutor's status, difference in age, etc.) that are relevant to the use of Korean honorifics.

In Chapter 6, Luo discusses the cognitive linguistic (CL) approach, which she explains largely through the lens of Langacker's (2000) theoretical work. She emphasizes the fact that interlanguage grammars are thought to contain a great deal of redundancy. For example, learners may memorize a collocation (e.g., I wanna ...) while at the same time acquiring the words and constructions that make up the collocation. She argues that a key advantage of CL approaches is that they show how features of an L2 formerly thought to be arbitrary are actually motivated (see also Mueller, 2022; Tyler et al., 2010). She gives the example of particle placement with phrasal verbs like *pick up*. In contrast with many textbook explanations that treat the choice (e.g., *He picked up the pen* and *He picked the pen up*) as arbitrary, she notes that the continuous order in the former sentence evokes a holistic construal, whereas the discontinuous placement in the latter evokes a sequential construal. Based on such considerations, Luo advocates instruction that draws learners' attention to the motivation behind the systematicity of target language constructions.

In Chapter 7, Leow discusses the usage-based perspective in relationship to instructed second language learning, focusing in particular on the cognitive processes that occur within working memory as input is processed. He claims that deeper processing of linguistic data (especially awareness at the level of understanding) allows language data to be "explicitly learned or restructured if necessary and stored in the grammatical component within the L2 developing system" (p. 140). Noting that the usage-based perspective regards L1 and L2 acquisition

as having a great deal of overlap, he questions whether this assumed overlap has received empirical support and is applicable to learners in non-immersion settings. Leow's chapter thus stands out as questioning many of the key assumptions of the usage-based perspective as presented in other chapters.

Suzuki, in Chapter 8, discusses skill acquisition theory in relationship to language use. He reports research showing that declarative knowledge (i.e., knowledge about things, which is verbalizable) and procedural knowledge (i.e., knowledge of how some skill is performed, which is consolidated slowly but less susceptible to forgetting) rely on distinct brain areas. He puts forth a view of language learning in which most L2 expressions and grammar are initially learned as declarative knowledge but are then proceduralized and automatized through practice. He claims that automatization (the development of the ability to access and use knowledge rapidly, as during a conversation) requires systematic practice.

EVALUATION

I would highly recommend this book to SLA researchers and language teachers who are interested in how scholars working in different areas of SLA and applied linguistics understand and apply the usage-based perspective. Two admirable features of the book are its tightly integrated focus and its inclusion in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 of perspectives that both challenge and diverge from typical usage-based perspectives.

One weakness of the book is that the editor's two chapters do not, in my opinion, go far enough in problematizing the definition of the usage-based perspective and the tensions between Eskildsen, Leow, and Suzuki's chapters and the other chapters in the volume. For example, Eskildsen views cognition as "a socially shared, publicly visible phenomenon" that can be studied through "visible behavior" (p. 57), whereas much of the focus in usage-based approaches has been on implicit stochastic learning and the accumulated effect of language processing over multiple instances of use. Inclusion of Eskildsen's work as an example of the usage-based perspective seems to water down the term to the point that it becomes a mere slogan. All theories of language learning, after all, have something to say about learners' use of the target

language.

Other chapters diverge even more sharply from the fairly consistent perspective presented in most of the earlier chapters (i.e., chapters 2, 4, 5, and 6). Leow, in particular, echoes Schmidt's (2001) contention that conscious awareness of form–meaning mappings is the key driver of L2 acquisition, a position opposed to that of most usage-based scholars, who see implicit learning as central. This is no trivial academic debate. If usage-based scholars are correct, second language instructors need to prioritize learners' exposure to realistic input within context and the use of language for authentic communicative purposes.

THE REVIEWER

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