

Project Description

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1 Problem Description

The problem to be inquired into as the subject of this final paper (VA) is that the acquisition of language is still a poorly-understood process. The main problem is also that I am unaware of the true extent of this field. Through this VA, I intend to expand my knowledge on the subject and conduct a small, informal experiment of my own, to document the process of language acquisition through immersion in comprehensible input.

2 Current State of Research

At the moment, the most commonly accepted — but still highly controversial — theory, is that humans have an innate biological framework for language that allows us to acquire it through immersion when we are extremely young. This implies the existence of some structure that must be common to all of the world's languages — what's known as Chomsky's universal grammar. This has prompted the research and documentation of many languages and their base structures to find the common thread.

So far, that common feature seems to be recursion — the ability to build on top of previous ideas to create successively complex concepts. This is most obviously seen in languages where multiple sentences can be nested. For example: “The man, who's car had been rusting, because it had rained a lot, liked to eat fish.”

There has been some evidence that might debunk this claim, but more samples of languages are needed and much more time is required to process it in order to conclusively prove any theory of universal grammar.

3 Questions to be Answered

There are two questions to be answered by myself (Samuel Pearce) by this VA. They are as follows:

1. What, if any, linguistic features are universal to all natural human languages, and what are the known facts about Chomsky's universal grammar, as of the time of this VA?
2. How does language acquisition work in adults and how effectively can an adult learn a language through immersion and comprehensible input alone?

The goal of the final document to be handed in, is to provide answers to these questions to the best of my ability and knowledge. The final document must also cite all utilised sources for the claims made therein.

4 Method

The method I have chosen to answer these questions is twofold:

For the first part — the UG Summary — I will research universal grammar by reading one (or two, if time permits) linguistic textbooks on the subject and

write a summary of their contents while citing the sources of my claims. The aim of the summary is to show my understanding of the topic and prove my ability to use academic sources in a paper. The summary will be written as a surface-level introduction aimed towards readers who are familiar with the fundamentals of linguistics.

The second part — the experiment — will be used to gain information on the acquisition of language through pure immersion for adults. I will spend time with volunteers speaking toki pona¹ This language has been chosen for its simple grammar and lexicon size, in order to keep the time-frame of the experiment minimal. Once the volunteers have reached a minimum of semi-fluency (the point where the most basic conversations can be had), I will record an interview with them in toki pona to show their ability. The interview will be transcribed and translated into a report for the final document. This report will also include details of the acquisition process and my method of teaching.

Once both halves of the project have been completed, the UG Summary, the Experiment report, and a journal of the steps taken throughout the whole project (the Work Log) will be compiled with introduction and review sections into the final report.

5 Required Materials

For required materials, I have listed some books which should serve as a good introduction as well as solid literary source for the UG Summary. They are:

- Chomsky’s Universal Grammar: An Introduction
(ISBN-13: 978-1-4051-1186-7)
- Universal Grammar in Second-Language Acquisition: A History
(ISBN-13: 978-0-5217-9647-7)

For the Experiment, I will use “Tokl Pona: The Language of Good (ISBN-13: 978-0-9782-9230-0)” as the reference grammar for toki pona. For the interview with the volunteers, I will use audio recording software such as Audacity, or the audio recording capabilities of my phone. All documentation will either be performed using Microsoft Word or PDFLaTeX and Kile editor.

6 Task Division

The tasks can, for the most part, be run in parallel; the UG Summary can be researched and written during the time provided from TBZ, and the experiment can be run in my free time, so that I can conform to the schedules of the volunteers. This way, both parts of the project can be completed at the same time before compiling the results into the final document.

The task division for the UG summary would only really consist of first reading through the selected literature to look for the most important points to compile in the sumamry, which would be followed by writing the summary

¹toki pona is a minimal language constructed by Sonja Lang in 2001. It is designed to have as small of a lexicon as possible, while still being able to express complex concepts. It was created in order to simplify the speaker’s thoughts, according to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis

while citing the sources. Finally, the written summary would be redrafted and tweaked according to feedback.

For the experiment, the first part would consist of teaching the volunteers toki pona until time runs out, or they reach a desired level of fluency for an interview. After which, the interview would be performed and documented.

7 Time Plan

I propose to divide the allotted four weeks as follows:

- **Week 1:**
 - Read selected UG literature
 - Provide volunteers with comprehensible input
- **Week 2:**
 - Write first draft of UG Summary with sources
 - Provide volunteers with comprehensible input
- **Week 3:**
 - Second, Third, etc. drafts of UG Summary with suggested changes
 - Provide volunteers with comprehensible input
- **Week 4:**
 - Finalise UG Summary
 - Interview volunteers and transcribe/translate interview
 - Compile results in final document

8 Signatures

Student

Date

Teacher

Date