

Universal Grammar, Principles and Parameters, Languages Acquisition and the Chomskyan View

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Universal grammar is defined as the set of principles that are common to all languages – the initial state of language knowledge for human beings. Principles may include parameters, which represent settings that may vary from language to language.

According to Chomsky – the universal grammar does not contain the actual rules of each language instead it contains principles and parameters – and the rules ~~principles~~ of each language are derived from the principles and parameters. Hence, the invariants of human language are represented by principles and the parameters are basically – cross-linguistic variations. The central idea of principles and parameters is that a person's syntactic knowledge can be modelled with two formal mechanisms –

1. Principles – A finite set of fundamental principles that are common to all language. For example: nouns, verbs, etc.

2. Parameters: A finite set of parameters that determine syntactic variability amongst languages. For example: Head-first or head-last

Role of universal grammar, principles and parameters in language acquisition:

Children acquiring language get the universal principles for free (innate) - it is part of the universal grammar but they have to figure out the 'parameters' from what they hear in the world around them as they grow up. For example: children who are learning English (as L1) receive input that lets them know that English has (generally) a head-initial parameter setting. So, children simply need to learn the ~~to~~ values of relevant parameters to acquire the grammar of their native language. Principles and parameters explain not just language acquisition but also language universals and linguistic variation.