

On languages, multilingual grammars and the status of mental representations

Laura Domínguez
University of Southampton

Understanding language acquisition has been key for the generative enterprise. For decades, generative second language acquisition research has played a crucial role in advancing our knowledge of the language faculty and its processes by postulating theories about the nature of learners' grammatical representations. This has been achieved by analysing formal distinctions between the grammars of languages and examining the acquisitional processes that construct grammatical representations. A key to its success as a scientific enterprise has been its explanatory power thanks to the fact that it is deeply embedded in a rich and articulated theory of language.

In this talk I will review recent arguments that highlight that generative SLA is at a critical point as the generative agenda continues to be applied to a variety of learning contexts (e.g., heritage language acquisition or acquisition in multilingual contexts), and expands/relates to other subfields (e.g., psycholinguistics or education). These are contexts in which the focus often shifts from the original goal of explaining the possible mental representations (not languages) entertained by learners to describing the experience of bilingual speakers or language users. I will show how being grounded in (generative) linguistic theory appears to be problematic as some basic notions (e.g. mental grammar, native speaker or error) are often misinterpreted.

I will review the ways in which generative SLA is adapting to current challenges (e.g. embracing a model of language acquisition which sees multilingualism as the norm, rather than the exception) within the constraints of the generative view of language. I will conclude by highlighting that, as we adapt and change, the focus must remain on explaining, rather than describing, grammar acquisition in its multiple contexts.

About the speaker:

Laura Domínguez is a Professor of Linguistics at the University of Southampton, UK. Her scholarly interests include syntactic theory and second language acquisition within a generative framework. The overarching research question guiding her research agenda aims to investigate the nature of morphosyntactic representations entertained by second language learners during the process of acquiring a second language. In recent years, she has also led a UKRI-funded project examining grammatical native attrition. She is interested in exploring whether Minimalist theoretical models can explain the selective vulnerability of a speaker's L1 grammar in (full immersion) bilingual contexts. She is a member of the editorial board of *Second Language Research* and was a board member of *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*. She has recently co-authored a monograph on research methods in generative second language acquisition (Slabakova, Leal & Domínguez 2025) and she is a co-author of the 5th edition of *Second Language Learning Theories* (Mitchell, Myles, Marsden & Domínguez, forthcoming).