

Universal Grammar, Principles and Parameters, Language Acquisition, and the Chomskyan view

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Universal Grammar

The basic postulate of Universal Grammar is that structural rules innate to humans independent of sensory experience. We can think of Universal Grammar as the set of principles common to *all* languages. It's the initial state of language faculty all humans have. Principles in this may represent parameters that may vary from one language to another.

Universal Grammar, the Chomskyan View

As Chomsky puts it, Universal Grammar does not encode the actual rules of each language individually. Instead, it contains **principles and parameters**, from which the rules of the language are derived. Thus, invariants across human languages can be represented by principles, and parameters vary freely, encoding cross-linguistic variations.

Principles and Parameters

The idea behind principles and parameters is that a person's syntactic knowledge can be modelled with two formal mechanisms:

1. A **finite set of fundamental principles** common to all languages; e.g., a sentence must always have a subject, even if it is not overtly pronounced.
2. A **finite set of parameters** that determine syntactic variability amongst languages; e.g., SOV vs SVO syntax.

Language Acquisition: Role of Universal Grammar

Children acquiring a language, under this framework, do not have to start from scratch - as universal principles are inbuilt, 'free' so to speak. However, parameters still need to be inferred from surrounding available data as they see others using the language while growing up. For instance, children learning English infer from available data that English has a largely head-initial parameter setting. In the framework then, children need only learn the variables for the parameters, and not all the rules in their entirety.