

## Making sense of syntax – Innate or acquired? Contrasting Universal Grammar with other approaches to language acquisition

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### Abstract

Proponents of a Universal Grammar argue that humans are born with a dedicated language system that shapes and restricts the number of grammars found in human languages (Chomsky, 2005). It is essentially innate and has a genetic manifestation. Such an innate system is necessary because human grammars are too complex to be passed on through social interactions and probabilistic learning alone. However, this view is contested by a combination of emergentist approaches and a number of studies suggest that many of the core assumptions of Universal Grammar are either unnecessary or do not hold. Furthermore, this review will explore theoretical criticism of the Universal Grammar research programme.

**Keywords:** Universal Grammar, Language Acquisition, Language Evolution, Poverty of Stimulus, Nativism

### Introduction

Learning to understand a language is a task of seemingly incredible complexity, which appears to be almost infinitely complex from an infant's perspective. But the fact that children are indeed capable of acquiring a complex, arbitrary language that makes extensive use of grammar to convey meaning, requires an explanation with regard to the developmental and evolutionary origins of the human language capacity. Put rather bluntly, why is it that a typically developing human infant can acquire language, but her pet kitten cannot? (Yang, 2006, p. 451) Currently, there are a number of different approaches that try to explain the processes

used by infants to decipher language by acquiring new words and learning the grammar of their language. The predominant approach of the last 50 years has been that children have an innate sense for grammar and syntax, shared by all humans—a Universal Grammar (Chomsky, 2005). The Universal Grammar approach is part of Chomsky's generative view of language acquisition (cf. Y. Evans & Green, 2006). Universal Grammar's nativist position developed out of a rejection of blank-slateism, that resulted from Behaviourism. The Behaviourist perspective suggested that language could be learned through conditioning (Gould and Marler, 1986), yet formal linguists like Chomsky hold that linguistic structures are

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