Second Language Acquisition

❖ *Is L2 Acquisition the Same as L1 Acquisition?*

Adults do not simply pick up a second language. It usually requires conscious attention, if not intense study and memorization, to become proficient in a second language. They generally have an accent, and they may make syntactic or morphological errors that are unlike the errors of children acquiring their first language.

Many people, including many linguists who study L2 acquisition, believe that adult second language acquisition is something different from first language acquisition. This hypothesis is referred to as the *fundamental difference hypothesis* of L2 acquisition. Like L1ers, L2ers do not acquire their second language overnight; they go through stages. L2ers construct grammars and these grammars reflect their competence in the L2 at each stage. The intermediate grammars that L2ers create on their way to the target have been called *interlanguage grammars.*

❖ *Native Language Influence in L2 Acquisition*

One respect in which L1 acquisition and L2 acquisition are clearly different is that adult L2ers already have a fully developed grammar of their first language. Linguistic competence is unconscious knowledge, we cannot suppress our ability to use the rules of our language or decide not to understand English. Similarly, at the beginning stages of acquiring their L2, L2ers seem to rely on their L1 grammar to some extent.

We can find native language influence in the syntax and morphology. Sometimes this shows up as a wholesale transfer of a particular piece of grammar or speakers may begin with the word order of their native language.

❖ *The Creative Component of L2 Acquisition*

There is a strong creative component to L2 acquisition. Many language-specific parts of the L1 grammar do not transfer. Items that a speaker considers irregular, infrequent, or semantically difficult are not likely to transfer to the L2. For example, speakers will not typically transfer L1 idioms such as *He hit the roof* meaning 'He got angry.' They are more likely to transfer structures in which the semantic relations are transparent.

❖ *Heritage Language Learners*

A heritage language learner is someone who was raised with a strong cultural connection to a language through family interaction and who decides at some point to study that language more formally. Often heritage language learners are exposed to the heritage language in childhood and then switch to another dominant language later in life. At this point they may begin to lose the heritage language—a process known as ***language attrition.***

❖ *Is There a Critical Period for L2 Acquisition?*

Age is a significant factor in L2 acquisition. The younger a person is when exposed to a second language, the more likely she is to achieve native-like competence. Although age is an important factor in achieving native-like L2 competence, it is certainly possible to acquire a second language as an adult. Many teenage and adult L2 learners become proficient, and a few highly talented ones even manage to pass for native speakers.

It is more appropriate to say that L2 acquisition abilities gradually decline with age and that there are "sensitive periods" for the native-like mastery of certain aspects of the L2. The sensitive period for phonology is the shortest. To achieve native-like pronunciation of an L2 generally requires exposure during childhood. Early exposure may leave an imprint that facilitates the later acquisition of certain aspects of language.