

The Comparative Fallacy in UG Studies

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In his well-known paper, Bley-Vroman (1983) discusses the potentially harmful effect of the *comparative fallacy*, in which “the linguistic description of learners’ language may be seriously hindered or sidetracked by a concern with the target language” (p. 2). In order to avoid the problem, he urges researchers to focus on linguistic descriptions of learners’ languages with respect to their own logic, rather than comparing them with those of native speakers (NSs). Similarly, Cook (1999) cautions that many second language acquisition (SLA) research methods, such as grammaticality judgments, obligatory occurrences, and error analysis, involve comparing the second language (L2) speaker’s language with that of a native speaker. He also argues against measuring the success or failure of an L2 learner’s language use against native norms. Such arguments on the comparative fallacy (CF) are well-grounded, especially with regard to studies which employ direct comparison of a learner’s performance with NS norms. However, it may also be the case that the use of NS criterion could be useful in some studies, especially in Universal Grammar (UG)-related studies which focus on the nature of learners’ *mental representations* or *interlanguage grammar* (ILG), rather than their performance. In what follows, two studies will be reviewed in order to illustrate that using NS competence as a point of reference may be useful, efficient, and sometimes inevitable, especially in studies pertaining to UG and ultimate attainment, which aim to uncover the source or nature of the learner’s interlanguage grammar.

UG is a system of innate principles and parameters, which places limitations on an individual’s grammar(s), constraining their form as well as how they operate (White, 1998). It thus serves as a constraint on the kinds of grammar that can be created, thereby limiting the hypothesis-testing space that learners use in creating language knowledge (Gass, 1997). The postulation of UG was motivated by the logical problem of language acquisition, which essentially refers to the phenomenon wherein an individual’s knowledge of language, or competence, is underdetermined by the input he or she is exposed to. Earlier L2 studies under this framework often sought to investigate the availability of UG in the learners’ ILG by looking at whether a particular principle constrains the ILG. A classic example is Schachter’s (1989) oft-cited study on subjacency, which investigates the operation (or non-operation) of UG in adult L2 learners. She hypothesized that a strong case for the operation of UG in SLA could be made if evidence showed that certain L2 properties could *not* have been learned from the input alone. She looked for evidence of the subjacency principle in the grammaticality judgments of proficient English-speaking adults with different first languages (L1) – Dutch, Chinese, Indonesian, and Korean – compared to those of native English speakers. The subjacency principle was chosen because it is said to be a universal and innate principle of UG. The underlying assumption was that if learners, whose L1 lacks the subjacency principle (and therefore is not incorporated into their ILG), behave as NSs of the L2 do, it would imply that they must have access to UG, since this is not the kind of knowledge that could be extracted from the input alone. The results from the grammaticality judgments revealed that Korean learners (whose L1 lacks this principle) behaved differently from the NSs, which led Schachter

to conclude that these learners could not have had access to UG because their grammars are not constrained by this principle.

How does this study fare in relation to the comparative fallacy? This study, along with many other UG-related studies (e.g., Schachter, 1990; Sorace, 1993; White, 1991) have used grammaticality judgment or acceptability tasks in order to gauge the learners' IL representation of the L2. The use of this technique, however, has been accused of violating the CF on the grounds that learners' ILGs are being measured against native intuitions of grammaticality (Bley-Vroman, 1983; Cook, 1999). While the argument that learners' IL productions should not be measured against the NS productions is valid and well-intended, asserting that any study which has incorporated the use of grammaticality judgment tasks has automatically violated the CF seems to be a bit of an overstatement. Cook (1999) is quite right in pointing out that the use of grammaticality judgments implies that the learners' ILG is in some sense being compared with NS intuitions, which is in violation of the CF. However, it should be kept in mind that in Schachter's (1989) study, this kind of comparison was incorporated solely for describing the ILG as it exhibited itself in relation to the native grammar, and not to evaluate or measure the learner's performance against NS norms. Furthermore, the overarching objective of Schachter's study was to see the (non)operation of UG on different L1 groups compared to the NS group. Any putative comparison that may have taken place in the process was done in an attempt to *understand* the source or nature of IL competence, not to portray it as a "degenerate form of the target system" (Bley-Vroman, 1983, p. 4). In this respect, the use of grammaticality judgment tasks seems quite appropriate, especially given the purpose of the study. Arguing that this type of task involves indirect comparison with native intuitions, and is therefore guilty of committing the CF, seems to be stretching the notion of the comparative fallacy a little too far.

SLA studies that have resorted to the use of grammaticality judgment tasks are not limited to UG-related studies. In fact, many empirical investigations pertaining to the learners' ILG or ultimate attainment have also resorted to some type of grammaticality judgment or acceptability task (e.g., Johnson & Newport, 1990; Schachter, 1990; Sorace, 1993; White, 1991). One study chosen for discussion here is Sorace's (1993) study on near-native competence, which investigates the mental representations of L1 French and L1 English near-native speakers of Italian. Sorace used acceptability judgments to gauge the learners' IL grammar, as well as the NS grammar, targeting various syntactic and semantic properties related to unaccusativity. Results revealed that the French-speaking learners of Italian seemed to have determinate intuitions in certain constructions, whereas the English subjects showed indeterminate intuitions, suggesting that they were unsure about auxiliary selection in various syntactic contexts. Once again, as was the case in Schachter's (1989) study, Sorace describes the near-NS mental representations with respect to the NS norms. She reports, "while the subjects could often pass for native speakers of Italian, the results show that the state of their knowledge *differs measurably from that of the native speakers*" (Sorace, 1993, p. 24, italics added).

Given the strong cautions against the comparative fallacy furnished by Bley-Vroman (1983) and Cook (1999), the above observation would seem incriminating in that the ILs of L2 learners are essentially being compared to the grammar of native speakers, rather than being considered on their own terms. However, it should be noted that in this study, it *was* important to know the nature of NS competence, in order to characterize the type of knowledge which is

derived from UG.¹ As White (1996) aptly points out, there are cases in which “one needs to know whether competent bilinguals can ever attain the kind of knowledge that is usually assumed to stem from UG” (p. 105). Accordingly, the validity of the use of NS intuitions really depends on the underlying objective of the study – whether the objective lies in measuring learners’ IL performance with respect to the NS performance, or in exploring the nature of learners’ mental grammar. And in the case of the latter, the most accessible and logical resource would be the NS grammar, which many UG-related studies (including the two studies discussed here) have quite legitimately incorporated, in the form of grammaticality judgment tasks.

Given that SLA is the study of how people acquire a second language, any SLA study implicitly has a built-in notion of interlanguage with the target language lurking in the background. While the current view of interlanguage reflects the notion of it being an independent system in its own right, one can also view it as a process on a continuum. Moreover, if IL were viewed as a continuum, it would implicitly portray a continuum hypothetically leading *towards NS competence*.² Therefore, while it is certainly not desirable to evaluate learners’ language performance against native norms, it should be recognized that some studies may actually call for the use of NS norms depending on the overarching goal of the study. This is particularly true for UG-related studies which seek to tackle the nature of learners’ interlanguage grammar. Consequently, strong arguments against the use of grammaticality judgments on the grounds of committing the comparative fallacy should be made cautiously, since not all studies that have opted to use this tool are guilty of committing the comparative fallacy.

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¹ Of course, there may be ways in which one could arguably devise an alternative way to gauge this type of knowledge without having to resort to NS intuitions (see White, 1998).

² The author acknowledges the irony of this assumption (which may well be perceived as yet another manifestation of the CF), for this view may indirectly imply that NS-like competence is the ideal end-state. It should be noted that while the IL continuum would hypothetically lead towards NS competence, it may also head in the *other* direction – as in the case of L2 attrition, fossilization, the U-shaped model of learning, and so forth.

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