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**CHILDREN'S ACQUISITION OF FUNCTIONAL CATEGORIES IN L1
ROMANIAN
Doctoral Thesis
ABSTRACT**

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E- CORPUS

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Key-words: language acquisition (LA), first language acquisition (L1A), stages of language acquisition, faculty of language (FL), innateness, Universal Grammar (UG), positive evidence (PE), negative evidence (NE), indirect negative evidence (INE), poverty of stimulus (PoS), critical period hypothesis (CPH), syntactic models, functional category (FC), phi-features, interpretable feature (*iF*), uninterpretable feature (*uF*), Tense feature, Case feature, Minimalist Program (MP), optional infinitive (OI), Case theory, asymmetries, Case hierarchy.

The purpose of the present research paper was to present some of the challenges and the key-research questions associated with the acquisition of FCs in L1, by summarizing the main empirical findings registered in past and present researches in the domain of L1A, in monolingual Romanian children, in order to support the empirical results and propose future aspects and phenomena to be investigated longitudinally and cross-sectionally. In addition, the proposed corpora support the analysis, offer linguistic insight, and propel future research topics in the domain of LA. In our inquiry, we have outlined the strongest arguments in support of a continuity approach to L1A and we addressed some of the limitations we were able to identify, although without affecting the investigative process, the registration, and the validation of the empirical data.

The study addresses some issues regarding the way children who speak Romanian as L1 acquire FCs during *Stage 1* and *Stage 2* of L1A. In the theoretical and empirical quest, we adopted an analytical methodological framework, based on existing qualitative and quantitative studies, in order to support the theoretical arguments posited in the first section of the research paper. The selection of qualitative data from the corpora was meant to provide a unifying account, with focus on the acquisition of Tense and Case features, insisting upon the relationship between syntax, semantics, and discourse. We were able to support with valuable examples previously made claims, and we refer here, specifically, to the *optional infinitive* (OI) stage. The aim of the present research paper was clearly stated, and methodologically, the analytical approach shed light onto particular early multi-word stage (EMWS) features in L1A.

The approach was, on one side, analytical and gradual in presenting key-models from the empiricist and nativist spectrum, in order to get into a deeper analysis of the nativist models and their evolution and development under different generative accounts, all the way to the latest approaches proposed by the *Minimalist Program*, and, on the other, synthetic in concentrating the main arguments in favour of adopting the latest theoretical framework and arguing for economy, simplicity, and elegance in explaining syntactic mechanisms during these

stages of LA. The reasoning behind the approach stemmed from the need to compare and contrast models, focus on strengths and weaknesses, and distinguish approaches in terms of validity and feasibility in L1A.

The paper contains six chapters, a section allotted for annexes and a section for the corpus. In **Section I**, *Theoretical approaches to L1 acquisition. A descriptive framework*, we started off with a general assessment of the main directions in linguistics during the 50s insisting upon the implications to the domain of L1A. Some key syntactic models corresponding to data-driven structuralist and behaviourist directions of research were presented, so as to highlight the shortcomings and the insufficiency of such models in explaining and describing the input-output relations. A contrastive approach, as showcased in **Chapter 1**, *Theoretical perspectives on language acquisition (LA) and language learning (LL)*, makes the direction adopted and the justification of the generativist theoretical framework objective and unbiased, with strong arguments in favour of nativism. In light of this view, the most relevant perspectives were outlined starting with behaviourism, social-interactionism, and continuing with the cognitivist theoretical approaches, in order to conclude with some of the main concepts associated with the nativist approach to LA, as the theoretical framework adopted in the present research paper is aligned to a minimalist inquiry and a generative approach to L1A. In each of the presented models, the input-output relation was described, the position adopted with respect to *competence* and *performance*, the learning mechanisms associated with the models, the position in relation with innateness of FL, and the definition of modules, among many other aspects. From the preliminary remarks, the differences between rationalist-empiricist, social-interactionist, and nativist accounts were delimited.

The new vision is supported throughout the paper by arguments in favour of a generativist approach to L1A. The purpose of the research was reinforced, namely to support with evidence a *continuity* approach to L1A, validated by the empirical data set against studies that adopt nativist assumptions. As such, from an evolutionary perspective, FL is defined as a property of the brain. In **Chapter 2**, *On the nature of language*, the focus was on the theoretical implications and the empirical results in reflecting the innate characteristic of FL, under a UG framework, stating, once more, that children do not acquire language via imitation, and that the structures are generated beyond such assumptions, the *PoS* argument being the strongest so far. Moreover, adjacent arguments such as the evolution in the study of brain functions and the specific areas associated with memory, syntax, and morphology support such claims in tandem with the role played by critical periods in acquisition processes, FL being a system in its own right, equipped with universal operators. The biological features associated with FL, from a minimalist point

of view, characterize language in optimal terms in satisfying the necessary conditions and define it as an association of sound and meaning. Such conditions are found at interface level in association with phonetic and semantic properties of the sensory-motor (SM) system and the conceptual-intentional system (C-I). In distinguishing between the broad and narrow approach to FL, key-elements were selected, namely the recursive ability to discretely generate to infinity, the autonomy of language in relation with other systems, the universal role of the operators activated in derivation, and the *I-language* properties, to name a few. One of the closing arguments of this chapter is that, whether UG is assumed partially or fully, with interpretations of principles and constraints and their maturation, what is generally acknowledged is that children mark specific milestones before reaching full competence in L1, reflecting that the acquisition process is intensional, autonomous, and biologically predetermined.

In **Chapter 3**, *Generativist hypotheses to language acquisition (LA)*, are presented the main syntactic models, and in **Chapter 4**, *Functional categories (FCs) and first language acquisition (L1A)*, offers a critical and inquisitive account on the evolution of generativist models from the first models associated with principles and parameters to the latest minimalist proposals. Thus, a continuity approach to *L1* is adopted, although the chapter outlines the main generative syntactic models designed to explain the acquisition of FCs at different stages of development, in the attempt to bridge the gap between the lexicon, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and discourse. The relationship established between syntax and semantics, is critically approached, and the alleged tension is gradually reduced from one model proposal to another. As such, FCs have received different interpretations, from complete lack of FCs during *Stage 1*, and gradual emergence during *Stage 2* under weak continuity accounts, to full availability from onset under strong continuity accounts, to absence of FCs and violation of UG principles under discontinuity hypotheses to L1A.

In order to give a proper definition of FCs in a generative context, the core theoretical functions and instruments of the syntactic apparatus were described. In the inquiry, the main assumption was that there are lexical and functional classes. With a minimalist proposal of an economy-based framework, the alleged syntactic-semantic tension was reduced. As illustrated in **Chapter 4**, the problem encountered with this specific UG framework revolved around the availability of the triggers during the early stages. Following in the line of the theoretical aspects presented in **Chapter 4**, we see how minimalist principles, such as economy, simplicity, and elegance impact the processes of L1A in describing specific stages based on the productions of monolingual Romanian children. As such, the proposal of limited computation with cost-

efficient free of charge operations obeying economy conditions, interpretation at interface level should be satisfactory. If we assume that children operate only under necessary conditions with the instruments available at specific stages of development, many problems associated with interface level vulnerabilities could be solved.

Section II, entitled *The Analysis of the empirical data*, proposes an analytical and critical approach in disseminating the main results provided by the qualitative empirical data, with focus on the acquisition of Tense features, in **Chapter 5**, *The acquisition of Tense features in L1 child Romanian*, and the acquisition of Case features and their interpretability, in **Chapter 6**, *Case asymmetries. Evidence from the empirical data*. The case studies presented in these chapters were concentrated on key-empirical data analysed in a minimalist key, but with a critical approach in interpretation. We started with a briefing on the main research questions regarding the emergence and the specificity of L1A in child Romanian paired with some of the key-research findings, so as to delineate a satisfactory theoretical and empirical account. The research findings recorded attest milestones children mark and specific sequences registered in the participants after the emergence of specific formal features. The most revelatory examples are associated with feature interpretability and the complexity of computation in mapping μF such as phi-features, Tense and Case features at interface level, as well as a possible order in the acquisition of formal features.

In the last chapter of this section, hierarchies and asymmetries were signalled by the empirical data, with uniformity in terms of manifestation in participants and following the proposals coming from the domain of nanosyntax. The universality of Cases in languages was explained functionally, in a binary asymmetric ordering, with the underlying features triggering hierarchic assumptions and receiving explanation and optimal description at morphological level, we refer here to paradigm specificity and Case syncretism. As a result, the outcomes of this investigative process were critical and revelatory at the same time, as they shed light on the predictions made, offered material for future research endeavours, and supported previous claims made in literature.

Section III contains the corpus which served the needs of the empirical analysis, the recorded files being coded in line with CHILDES requirements for CA transcription conventions. The corpus is authentic and corresponds to the conditions and the premises associated with the theoretical framework. Moreover, it becomes a resource to be explored in future research proposals. Many of the assumptions made found empirical support, and the assumptions launched for future research endeavours found partial or limited support and would need to be further investigated.

The section intended for *Conclusions* summarizes the main results of the research and synthesized the most relevant hypotheses. The main theoretical accounts were readdressed, and as an outcome of empirical data processing, the most compelling and relevant results were selected and presented, focusing on the role played by Time and Case features in interpreting in minimalist key the process of L1 acquisition in child Romanian. As such, the research proved to be valuable and relevant, qualitatively contributing and offering future research themes in the domain of LA.