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# Reply to commentaries – Kenneth F. Drozd

Three important themes emerge from the commentaries offered in response to 'Learnability and linguistic performance'. In this reply, I would like to critically but briefly review these themes.

One theme, which I fully endorse, is that Crain & Thornton (C&T) have made positive, substantial contributions to developmental linguistics. Putting learnability, innateness, and modularity aside, Crain & Thornton's research has been particularly instrumental in revealing the sophistication of young children's grammatical knowledge (Goodluck, Lust). It has also led to a greater awareness in developmental linguistics of how experimental task design and administration affects children's language performance (Allen, Guasti) and, more recently, of how assumptions about language processing can be integrated into a model of language acquisition (Guasti, McKee & McDaniel, O'Grady).

Guasti, in particular, sees more value in C&T's programme. Guasti finds C&T's Full Processing assumption reasonable on the grounds that 'it forces researchers to posit differences only when it is necessary and after having excluded other possible sources of variation.' Furthermore, Guasti suggests that C&T sufficiently address the processing issue by describing the processing of garden paths, ambiguity and embedding. Finally, Guasti suggests that C&T's quest to eliminate extraneous factors from experimental designs should result in the absence of significant variability in performance, the dream of every researcher including C&T. I don't find these points very compelling. Guasti ignores the fact that, whether Full Processing is correct or not, it is never treated as an experimental hypothesis in *Investigations in Universal Grammar* (IUG). Nor do learnability considerations render it necessary. Similarly, she ignores the fact that although C&T describe language processing in some detail, they never designed experiments to investigate children's processing capacities. This is unacceptable in a guide to experiments. Lastly, researchers may well view the absence of dispersion in data as a 'dream' result. But a dream is all it is. C&T, on the other hand, fully expect no variability in performance and have few, if any, cogent explanations for the variability in performance they do find.

A second theme, which I also fully endorse, is that nativist and emergentist research in language acquisition are not incommensurable (McKee & McDaniel) and need not proceed independently despite their differences (Akhtar). Developmental research in UG, as represented by Crain & Thornton's IUG, needs to move beyond standard learnability rhetoric and be receptive (1) to what children can and do learn about language from the rich cultural and communicative environments in which language



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acquisition takes place (Brooks, Allen) and (2) to the interaction between language development, cognitive development, and social development (Brooks). Importantly, such moves are likely to lead to important developments and refinements in UG as a viable theory of language acquisition. Only one commentator (Akhtar) commented briefly that emergentist, constructivist, and/or functionalist developmental researchers also need to be receptive to nativist concerns (Akhtar). This is an important issue. Jackendoff (2000: 78–87) has recently stated that any interesting theory of language acquisition needs something like UG to explain what it is about natural languages that 'enables children to ''guess the rules of syntax'' so well,' (Jackendoff, 2000: 81–2) and researchers who do not adopt UG need to explain how language is learnable, how children come to know the complexity of linguistic structure, and how grammatical development relates to general cognitive development. Explanations of language acquisition on general cognitive principles should be welcomed to the extent that they lead to such explanations.

Of all the commentators, Akhtar expressed the greatest pessimism that nativist and constructivist researchers can learn anything from one another on the grounds that they are committed to entirely different assumptions and engaged in entirely different tasks and have different world views. This precludes nativists from being 'converted' to constructivism and *vice versa*. One problem with Akhtar's account is that she takes Crain & Thornton's position as representative of nativist developmental linguistics. As the commentaries suggest, this isn't the case. Second, a nativist or constructivist need not be converted to the 'other side' in order to integrate and capitalize on the benefits of an alternative theoretical perspective – one just needs to have an open mind.

A third theme is that Crain & Thornton's IUG, and their research programme more generally, do little to promote progress and integration in developmental linguistics and cognition. It promotes the independence of theoretical perspectives (Akhtar) and rejects the value of experimental methodological variety (Kidd). It promotes standard learnability arguments as the primary, if not the only, criterion for measuring the value of language acquisition theories and experimental methodologies (Akhtar). Its focus on investigating certain theoretically interesting aspects of children's grammatical knowledge misses interesting and important questions about language development (Allen, Roeper, Sobin, Theakston) and discourages the search for comprehensive cognitive explanations of children's language performance (Philip). Together with my review, these comments suggest that there is little to be gained from adopting the research programme described in IUG as a working research programme, especially given the number of interesting alternative approaches to language acquisition on the market which strive to go beyond logical arguments and link language development with cognitive development more generally.



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