**Feature Reassembly is concerned with syntax, but its main goal is
to account for the (second) language acquisition process**

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Lohndal and Putnam (2024) (L&P henceforth) argue that Feature Reassembly (FR; Lardiere 2008, 2009) can—and hence should—be replaced by an exoskeletal approach to syntax. Evidently, FR and exoskeletal syntax are not theoretical approaches that stand in direct competition: FR is an approach to understanding the *process* of second language acquisition (SLA) and the morphosyntactic mechanisms that underpin it, whereas exoskeletal models provide a framework for understanding how syntactic categories interact with morphology and the lexicon (in the exoskeletal framework structures are separate from the lexicon). Although FR was indeed built on generative views on the interaction between syntax and morphology (i.e., formal features bundle onto specific morphological outfits and lexical items), its importance and application in the field of SLA transcend issues related to the syntax-morphology interface, an important point not really discussed by L&P. FR is a framework that exploits grammatical mechanisms that are required by *any* language acquisition process (at least, under the assumptions of the prevailing Minimalist model of the time) concerning the positing of morphosyntactic features on syntactic heads and models the specific process of second language acquisition, incorporating elements which are essential and specific to this process, such as L1 transfer/cross-linguistic influence and the fact that learners move along a learning/acquisition continuum, from the early stages of language acquisition to acquiring an end-state grammar (see White, 2003; Slabakova, 2016).

We fully agree with L&P that approaches to SLA/Multilingualism must be adequately informed by formal linguistic theory and that acquisition theories that aim to integrate second language acquisition/multilingualism within a unified model of the grammar/language faculty are desirable, as we have argued ourselves in some of our previous work on native grammatical attrition (Hicks & Domínguez, 2019). Incorporating updated theoretical approaches to morphosyntax within SLA research is critical to understanding the nature of SLA, and indeed has continually shaped the research field during the generative era. As such, we welcome discussions on new approaches/frameworks/theories which reflect developments in linguistic theory and recognise that in principle there must be scope for:

* FR to adapt to incorporate new developments in linguistic theory, retaining its essential predictions for acquisition;
* FR to be superseded as a result of developments in linguistic theory and be replaced by something that retains its essential predictions for acquisition;
* FR to be superseded as a result of developments in linguistic theory and be replaced by something that makes novel predictions for acquisition.

However, our main concern with the specific proposal that L&P put forward is that in its present form it does not, in fact, bear out any of these possibilities. The significance of FR as an approach to understanding the second language acquisition process means that it can only be replaced or subsumed by another theory or approach that generates predictions for the processes of SLA. As far as we can see, exoskeletal approaches to syntax do not.

In this respect we disagree with L&P when they claim that FR does not fall out from “first order constraints” if these are meant to be properties related to the grammatical architecture as such. In any case, that is not where one should put the focus on when reviewing FR, or any other SLA theory for that matter, as the major (generative) theories proposed in the last few decades (e.g. Feature Reassembly (Lardiere, 2009), Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (Prévost & White, 2000), the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace, 2011) or the Failed Functional Feature Hypothesis (Hawkins & Chan, 1997) have incorporated theoretical assumptions concerning how syntax (formal features and syntactic categories) feeds into other areas of the grammar, although this was not the main concern of those theories in the first place.

In the case of FR, Lardiere’s proposal was for an updated model to SLA which dispensed with the classic view of principles and parameters as rigid markers or switches, in favour of an analysis of cross-linguistic differences based on the selection and assembly of formal features onto lexical items, more attuned to Minimalist views of the Language Faculty’s syntactic component and its interfaces. Furthermore, the origin and basis of FR is to account for the well-known observation that even highly proficient L2 speakers find functional morphology problematic, whereas syntactic structures can be fully acquired; the reason for this being that the L2 learner starts the acquisition processing assuming that the L2 grammar is like their native grammar (a phenomenon known as Full Transfer). Since this necessarily leads to inaccuracies and mistakes—especially during the early stages of acquisition—the acquisition process, or reassembly, entails a process for correcting these false assumptions. We quote a definition of FR by Hwang and Lardiere (2013:58) which summarises what is important about this approach:

“*We adopt a feature reassembly perspective: a comparative linguistic feature-based approach in which the ultimate attainment of nativelike L2 morphosyntactic knowledge depends on the extent to which learners are able to reconfigure the feature values in functional cat­egories and lexical items, and the conditions under which these are realized, from those of the first language (L1) to the L2 in cases where these differ.”*

We see that although one of the pillars of FR is a particular view of the syntax-morphology interface (as noted by L&P), the other pillar is that language acquisition is a process in which an initial false assumption because of L1 transfer is corrected (not noted by L&P). The key point is that, as clearly shown by previous research which has employed this framework, FR can be used to generate testable predictions for SLA, yet it is difficult to see how the exoskeletal approaches mentioned by L&P generates predictions that account for the second language acquisition process specifically along the same lines.

On this point, let’s imagine we want to examine how English definite articles are acquired by Russian adult speakers, a language which does not have overt definite articles. We know that Russian speakers of English make mistakes when using English articles and that this difficulty is tied up to the fact that the L1 (Russian) and L2 (English) express the same semantic features ([definite], [specific], [familiar], etc.) differently (see Ionin et al., 2004; Ko et al., 2008; Cho & Slabakova, 2017; Snape et al., 2013; Tuniyan, 2018). The real issue is not whether the semantic features exist in the L1 and the L2 (they do) but whether the L2 learners know how to express them correctly. A framework such as FR allows researchers to approach this question taking into consideration important assumptions which are relevant to the acquisition process itself, i.e., considering cross-linguistic differences which are specific to the L1 and the L2 and for the grammatical features in question. Crucially, one of the clear benefits of FR is that it can be used to generate specific hypotheses regarding what would be difficult to acquire (features which exist in both languages but are bundled and expressed differently). These are partially based on what Full Transfer would mean for that structure and for that pair of languages.

For SLA theory, this remains an advantage of FR over the exoskeletal approach. Even if it does “capture the mechanism” of FR as L&P suggest, it does not explain the predictions for SLA: there is no clear indication yet of how an exoskeletal approach might replace FR to provide specific and testable hypotheses for SLA, so at present it is hard to see what an exoskeletal model does for SLA that feature reassembly did not. This could conceivably be resolved by referring to the comparative grammatical differences between an L1 and L2 as formalised by an exoskeletal model, and to the nature of the acquisitional change that characterises the development in bilingual speakers’ grammars over time. If this can be achieved without reference to the “second order mechanisms” that L&P object to for FR, then their optimism for applying the exoskeletal model to SLA theory would be warranted; at present, the authors’ promise to “illustrate the importance of linguistic representations in capturing larger-scale generalizable trends in bilingual grammars” through the exoskeletal model is not quite fulfilled. A welcome update to L&P’s proposal, then, would be to articulate the benefits of adopting an exoskeletal approach for SLA research in more detail, including how it can be used in the design of a second language acquisition study, in the manner briefly illustrated above.

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