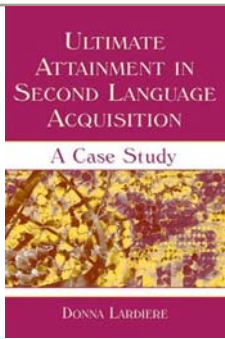


***Ultimate Attainment in Second Language Acquisition:  
A Case Study***

<b>Author:</b>	Donna Lardiere (2007)		
<b>Publisher:</b>	New York: Routledge		
<b>Pages</b>	<b>ISBN</b>	<b>Price</b>	
Pp. viii + 273	0-8058-3456-7 (cloth : alk. paper)	\$59.95 U.S.	

In 2003, in their influential synthesis on critical period in second language acquisition (SLA) research Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson outlined an agenda for future studies. Leading the list was the suggestion to pursue in-depth individual case studies of exceptional late-onset second language learners who may have achieved native level proficiency in their second language. The existence of individuals who have actually achieved overall native level proficiency in a second language in adulthood would constitute evidence against maturational constraints on language acquisition. The title of Donna Lardiere's recent book *Ultimate Attainment in Second Language Acquisition: A Case Study* immediately grabbed my attention for the very reason that it appeared to respond to Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson's call. I expected to finally read about the case of an exceptionally successful adult-onset foreign language learner who was nativelike in the target language in every observable way. Lardiere's treatment, however, delivers findings far more surprising.

*Ultimate Attainment in Second Language Acquisition: A Case Study* is a unique monograph, a longitudinal case study of just one adult immigrant learner of English. Patty, a Chinese American, has acquired English in adulthood successfully under relatively ideal conditions. She earned both a bachelor's and a master's degree at U.S. institutions and has risen to a managerial position at a U.S. company. She has assimilated to U.S. culture, married a native English speaker husband, and socializes with native English speaker friends. Her English skills serve her well, allowing her to perform in her new home country to the best of her abilities.

Nevertheless, despite her evident success as an adult-onset language learner,

Patty still does not utter native-speaker English. Apart from having an accent, Patty produces noticeably non-nativelike grammatical forms in her speech and unedited, informal writing. From a normative view, it may appear that Patty's grammar has fossilized in deficient forms. The extent to which Patty has failed to become 'nativelike' in her English usage after more than two decades of daily interaction with native speakers has important theoretical implications for linguistics, which Lardiere sets out to examine with the rigor of a forensic analyst. The result is a page-turner investigative report full of evidence and argument to contribute to the critical period debate.

Lardiere demonstrates to us that production errors are often not what they appear to be and that the relationship of production errors and underlying knowledge of abstract grammatical features is fantastically complicated to tease apart. Lardiere devotes entire chapters to the discussion of specific formal linguistic features, such as finiteness, past tense marking, word order and movement, and nominal phrases. She approaches her analysis by testing various current hypotheses relevant to the critical period debate on Patty's language data. We witness with amazement every analysis take its shape in Lardiere's insightful treatment and hold our breath till the very end to read her final conclusions. It is rare to find a study in formal linguistics this exciting. Although we are aware that Patty's is not the "deciding case" of the exceptional adult-onset second language learner who defies maturational constraints, we certainly learn to appreciate the extent to which Patty's language is target-like and successful.

Although it is difficult to convey the nuances and depth of Lardiere's argument in a brief example, I will attempt to abstract one discussion here. One non-nativelike element of Patty's utterances is that she tends to omit past tense markings or makes unnecessary shifts between the present and the past. She might say "I move out in '85 and then I live [ . . . ] by myself a year" or "I met him and go out [ . . . ]." A prevailing interpretation of this phenomenon is that individuals whose first language lacks the parameterized formal feature of [+/-past] cannot acquire it in adulthood (failed functional features hypothesis, Hawkins and Chan, 1997). Lardiere, however, argues that the past tense marking in English is not a parameterized formal feature, but rather an amalgamated feature of many functions mapped to one form, much more complicated to acquire than flipping a switch in universal grammar. A large portion of the phenomena associated with the past tense marking in English is beyond the scope of universal grammar. The variability of present and past forms in the Patty data and her rate of omission of past tense markings do not warrant the conclusion that Patty has failed to acquire the past tense in English. To the contrary, her having produced the correct past tense markings (when she supplied them) on average over 95% of the time and past tense markings (where needed) 78% of the time signal that her acquiring English has not failed despite the apparent non-nativelike features that tend to attract our attention.

We come to realize that focusing on production errors that may not validly represent underlying abstract grammatical knowledge could misdirect our investigations of the innate language faculty and consequently our theories on the nature of SLA. Lardiere successfully demonstrates the limit and scope of theorizing on the basis of production errors and thus makes a tremendously important methodological contribution to the critical-period debate.

Although the main argument is accessible to those new to the field of linguistics, the analyses presented presuppose more than an introductory level knowledge of formal linguistics, and in particular, some familiarity with the minimalist program (Chomsky, 1995) as well as SLA in the universal grammar framework (White, 2003). Graduate students contemplating linguistic case studies will find in this volume an exemplary model of rigorous methodology conveyed in crisp arguments and a captivating style.

## References

Chomsky, N. (1995). *The minimalist program*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Hawkins, R. & Chan, C. Y.-H. (1997). The partial availability of Universal Grammar in second language acquisition: The 'Failed Functional Features Hypothesis'. *Second Language Research*, 13, 187-226.

Hyltenstam, K. & Abrahamsson, N. (2003). Maturation constraints in SLA. In C. J. Doughty & M. H. Long (Eds.), *The handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 539-588). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

White, L. (2003). *Second language acquisition and Universal Grammar*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Andrea B. Hellman  
Boston University  
<andreabhellman@gmail.com>

© Copyright rests with authors. Please cite TESL-EJ appropriately.