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David Birdsong

# Metalinguistic Performance and Interlinguistic Competence

Springer-Verlag  
Berlin Heidelberg New York  
London Paris Tokyo

Dr. DAVID BIRDSONG  
Department of Romance Languages and Program in Linguistics  
University of Florida  
Dauer Hall 212  
Gainesville, FL 32611, USA

*Series Editor*

Professor Dr. WILLEM J. M. LEVELT  
Max-Planck-Institut für Psycholinguistik  
Wundtlaan 1  
6525 XD Nijmegen, The Netherlands

**With 1 Figure**

ISBN-13: 978-3-642-74126-5      e-ISBN-13: 978-3-642-74124-1  
DOI: 10.1007/978-3-642-74124-1

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1989

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2126/3130-543210 – Printed on acid-free paper

## Preface

The roots of this book may be traced to a series of conference papers where I expressed concern over what I considered to be empirical obstacles to advances in second-language acquisition theory. I argued then that one of the principal sources of data--metalinguistic performance in the form of grammaticality judgments--was often naïvely assumed to reflect straightforwardly interlinguistic competence, and was in some cases misinterpreted to favor theoretical positions. These conclusions were based not only on examination of other researchers' work, but on an honest appraisal of my own, equally flawed, efforts as well.

As my interest in the topic grew, it became clear that a deeper understanding of the nature of metalinguistic behavior was called for. What are the various types of metalinguistic performance? How do metalinguistic abilities develop in the individual, and what is the relationship between metalinguistic ability and language acquisition? Under what circumstances can metalinguistic data be used to inform linguistic theory and first- and second-language acquisition theory?

My research led me to consider a crucial type of metalinguistic behavior, wherein language learners use metalinguistic input in the form of negative evidence (suggestions or direct information that their linguistic structures are faulty) in order to disconfirm interlinguistic hypotheses. Among language acquisition theorists, there is considerable debate concerning the role of negative evidence in first- and second-language acquisition. Is negative evidence available to and processed by all learners? Does negative evidence occur in optimally usable forms? What, if any, are its short- and long-term benefits?

Such questions are representative of those asked in this book. To begin to do them justice, the insights of cognitive and developmental psychology, linguistic theory, and language acquisition theory are required. *Metalinguistic Performance and Interlinguistic Competence* represents an attempt to integrate these perspectives in a description of the complex epistemological and psychological features of metalinguistic performance, and an attempt to shed light on the nature of the relationship of metalinguistic ability to ultimate success or failure in language acquisition.

This volume has benefitted immeasurably from the comments and suggestions of numerous individuals. I offer my sincere thanks to Robert Bley-Vroman, Craig Chaudron, Lynn Eubank, Jeff Farrar, Bob Gard, Kevin Gregg, W. J. M. Levelt, Barry McLaughlin, Terry Odlin, and Jackie Schachter for having carefully read and critically responded to various parts and versions of the manuscript. My appreciation extends to Denis Bouchard, Sue Gass, Eric Kellerman, and Steve Pinker for stimulating discussion of theoretical issues. In acknowledging the efforts of these friends and colleagues, I do not mean to suggest that they endorse the contents of the book, in part or whole, nor should they be considered accountable for infelicities of style or errors of fact or argumentation.

I have received valuable bibliographic assistance from Judith Cook Birdsong, John Bro, Lalitha Henderson, Tom Sawallis, Krista Thoren, and Carol Wilkerson. Special thanks go out to Ron Koss, who expertly and patiently guided me through the preparation of the final manuscript copy. Finally, the staff of Springer-Verlag, and Dr. Susan Kentner in particular, must be commended for their thoroughness, efficiency, and overall professionalism in producing this volume.

This book is dedicated to my late father, Jackson Holt Birdsong, to my mother, Rachel Persons Birdsong, and to my wife, Judith Cook Birdsong.

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