READING COMPREHENSION EXERCISE
Read the text below and answer the questions. Once you have
done it, write a 50-word summary.

Language acquisition and grammar change

The general framework for the study of syntax adopted here is Principles and Parameters theory. This is not one single set of ideas or theoretical notions, but rather an approach to the study of language. Its nature is perhaps best captured in the following quote from Chomsky:

> The study of generative grammar has been guided by several fundamental problems, each with a traditional flavor. The basic concern is to determine and characterize the linguistic capacities of particular individuals. We are concerned, then, with states of the language faculty, which we understand to be some array of cognitive traits and capacities, a particular component of the human mind/brain. The language faculty has an initial state, genetically determined; in the normal course of development it passes through a series of states in early childhood, reaching a relatively stable steady state that undergoes little subsequent change, apart from the lexicon. To a good first approximation, the initial state appears to be uniform for the species. Adapting traditional terms to a special usage, we call the theory of the state attained its *grammar* and the theory of the initial state *Universal Grammar* (UG). (Chomsky 1995: 14)

It follows from this characterization that in this perspective on the study of language, the object of study is the grammar of the native speaker, to be understood as one language learner's choices for her native language with respect to the abstract parameters that are part of Universal Grammar (UG).[2] One of the core aims of generative grammar, then, is to solve what has come to be called 'the logical problem of language acquisition', i.e. the question how it is that the language learner is capable of constructing a mature grammar of her native language in a surprisingly short time, and on the basis of impoverished evidence. The evidence available to the language learner consists of the speech output of her language environment, which contains many performance errors, and little to no evidence about ungrammaticality. It seems that the role of correction by parents in the language acquisition process is very limited indeed, as illustrated in e.g. McNeill (1966). The starting point for the answer to the logical problem of language acquisition is that the human language capacity, the 'initial state' or 'UG' as Chomsky and Lasnik call it, is a highly structured system of abstract principles and parameters, the values of which are filled in by the language learner on the basis of exposure to the language environment. This system is called Universal Grammar and is assumed to be part of the genetic endowment of the human species.

If we consider historical change from this perspective, it follows that the focus of investigation is on grammar change rather than on language change. This distinction is crucial and has important ramifications for how we approach historical change. The distinction between grammar change and language change correlates with the distinction usually made in generative approaches between a speaker's *competence* (knowledge and understanding) and *performance* (what the speaker does with that knowledge and understanding). The competence of the speaker, grammatical or otherwise, is reflected by what she knows about her native language. An important method for obtaining information about this grammatical knowledge is by eliciting a native speaker's wellformedness judgements. There may be a considerable

discrepancy between competence and performance. Whereas competence is supposed to constitute the steady state referred to by Chomsky, performance very often reflects that steady state imperfectly, and is influenced by factors such as slips of the tongue, tiredness, boredom, external distractions and, as the case may be when working with historical data, factors that are beyond our reach, such as the possibility of a piece of written performance like a manuscript being a late copy of a copy of a translation from Latin, written in winter when the scribe's fingers were cramped by frost, with a quill that was badly in need of sharpening, while the candle was running low. What we aim at when we study historical change from this perspective is to isolate from the set of historical data, which comprises historical written performance material, those data that reflect changes in the competence of speakers, changes in grammars.

An implication of this view of grammar change is the notion that the process of acquisition of the grammar of the native language is the main locus of change. Data from language change are of particular interest to this approach because, as Paul Kiparsky first put it, they provide a window on the form of linguistic competence (Kiparsky 1982). Instances of change can show something about the grammars of languages, because we can get a clearer view of a partially hidden abstract system when it changes from one state to another. This in turn may throw light on the precise way the theory of grammar should be formulated.

The idea that we should look primarily to language acquisition for explanations of syntactic change has evolved with increasing emphasis since it was first formulated explicitly in this context in David Lightfoot's *Principles of Diachronic Syntax* (1979). In that work, Lightfoot reacts strongly against ideas about language change in terms of drift and teleology, and the notion of diachronic grammar, which were popular in the 1970s. Such notions presuppose that language change follows, even across many generations, a pre-destined direction. This, according to Lightfoot, cannot be right. Each speaker constructs her own grammar afresh. The language learner does not know anything about the history of her language, and hence cannot follow any pre-destined process. Lightfoot argues that the language learner is endowed genetically with the ability to construct a grammar of her native language on the basis only of the speech in her language environment. Example (1) (dating back to Andersen (1973)) illustrates this:

(1)   Grammar 1 ----------Grammar 2   I-language

       Output 1 ---------- Output 2   E-language
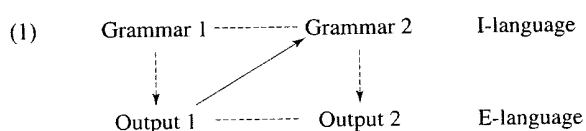
If we see output 1 as the speech of the parent grammar (their E-language, or external language), what this diagram shows is that the language learner constructs her grammar (grammar 2) on the basis of output 1. Crucially, this happens without reference to the grammar of the parent language, since the learner has no access to that. The relationship is between output 1 and grammar 2; there is in principle no relation between grammar 1 and grammar 2. On such a view, there is no (direct) relation between the grammars of speakers, often called their I(internal)-languages, whether they belong to the same or to different generations. There is therefore no ontological basis for such notions as drift, teleology or diachronic grammar, since they presuppose that the language learner recognizes a change in progress as part of a master plan spanning many generations, to which she conforms. There is indeed no theory of change, since change is by definition synchronic, and takes place as each new language learner constructs her grammar.

I. Answer the following questions in your own words (in no more than three sentences for each of them).

1. What does Chomsky understand as *the language faculty*?
2. Accordingly, what should the object of study be?
3. What kind of evidence does the learner have?
4. What's the speaker's *competence*?
5. How would you define the term *performance*?
6. Do historical written texts tell us something about the speaker's *competence* and *performance*? Explain the relation between historical data and the grammar of speakers of previous stages of the language.
7. What kind of genetic endowment does the language learner have according to Lightfoot?
8. Why does the author say that there is no theory of change?

II. Summarize the text in no more than 50 words.