Conceptualizing ultimate attainment in bilingualism and second language acquisition

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Over several decades, researchers have used behavioral and brain-based evidence for ultimate attainment as the basis of characterizations of bilingualism and second language acquisition. While the findings of ultimate attainment research have advanced our knowledge in many ways, they have in some cases been misunderstood and misinterpreted, and are often associated with distorted views of language acquisition and processing. Against the backdrop of such concerns, this presentation briefly revisits native - nonnative comparisons; age and plasticity; exceptional language learners; and attrition, dominance and reciprocal influence of speakers’ languages in bilingualism. This critical examination culminates in modest guidance for collecting, analyzing, interpreting and theorizing ultimate attainment evidence. In the course of the talk I bring to light underexplored questions of variability and learnability. I conclude with a forward-looking reframing of both ultimate and attainment in the context of second language acquisition and bilingualism.