

SOCIOCULTURAL AND ECOLOGICAL THEORIES OF SLA  
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## MAINSTREAM PSYCHOLINGUISTIC SLA THEORY

Four major concepts:

### 1. A computational model of SLA

- The goal of SLA research is to find out, describe and explain, the processes by which learners acquire linguistic systems different from their native tongue. It is less interested in how learners use their L2 in everyday life.
- Language acquisition takes place in the brain
- It is made possible in humans through an innate LAD that loses its plasticity with age (critical period hypothesis), but is compensated for in the adult by an inordinately more powerful cognitive capacity.
- Language acquisition is the cognitive, information-processing internalization of received input, as evidenced by the learner's output.
- The aim of SLA is to approximate as much as possible the NS target  
Input > intake > L2 knowledge > output

### 2. Interlanguage

- From observing learners' errors, Selinker (1972) came to the conclusion that these errors were not random but reflected a systematic transitional competence, that has its own structure and logic. He called this separate linguistic system, that results from a learner's attempt to produce a TL norm, 'interlanguage' (Corder 1967 "built-in syllabus").
- Interlanguage is a system of abstract linguistic rules

**Built-in syllabus in first language acquisition :** (Corder 1967)

Mother : Did Billy have his egg cut up for him at breakfast ?

Child: Yes, I showed him

Mother: You what?

Child: I showed him.

Mother: You showed him?

Child: I seed him

Mother: Ah, you saw him

Child: Yes I saw him.

- The learner's grammar is permeable and transitional. It varies both freely and systematically.
- Learners employ various learning strategies to develop their interlanguages (e.g., avoidance, transfer from L1, overgeneralization)
- The IL is likely to fossilize or at least to backslide or stabilize (only 5% of learners attain the mental grammar of native speakers).
- The IL develops according to a natural order of acquisition. If the learner is not ready to acquire, learning will take place, but not acquisition (Krashen 1982)

### Learning vs. Acquisition

Child: Want other one spoon, Daddy  
Father: you mean, you want THE OTHER SPOON  
Child: Yes, I want other one spoon, please, Daddy  
Father: Can you say 'the other spoon'?  
Child: Other...one...spoon  
Father: Say..'other;'  
Child: Other  
Father: 'spoon'  
Child: Spoon  
Father: 'Other...spoon'  
Child: Other...spoon. Now give me other one spoon?

### 3. Input

- It has been shown that 'comprehensible input' is necessary (and sufficient?) for acquisition (Krashen 1982).
- However, input has to be made comprehensible through input adjustments (foreigner talk, teacher talk) and interaction. People can't learn a language from TV.
- Input should be just above the current level of the learner:  $i + 1$
- The richer the input, the more opportunities there are for individual learners to learn according to their own learning style, at their own pace (cf. natural order of acquisition), for their own goals.

### 4. Interaction

- Interaction, i.e., the joint negotiation of meaning between two interlocutors (NNS-NS or NNS-NNS), is necessary for acquisition because it makes input comprehensible, focuses attention on syntax to produce accurate output, and promotes control and fluency (cf. Krashen's 1982 acquisition vs. learning distinction).

#### Interaction promotes acquisition

Ex.1 S1: .. and then I'll say ... *tu as souvenu notre anniversaire de mariage ..*  
or should I say *mon anniversaire*?  
S2. *Tu as...*  
S3 *Tu as...*  
S1 *Tu as souvenu...*"You remembered ?"  
S3 Yeah, but isn't that reflexive ? *Tu t'as ...*  
S1. Ah, *tu t'as souvenu*  
S2. Oh, it's *tu es*  
S1 *Tu es*  
S3 *Tu es, tu es, tu..*  
S1 *T'es, tu t'es*  
S3 *Tu t'es*  
S1 *Tu t'es souvenu* (Donato 1994)

- Ex.2 B : My uncle is going to sell his boat this weekend  
 A: Oh, has he a sailboat?  
 B: yes  
 A: Are you going with him this weekend?  
 B: Uh – no, he’s going to sell the boat  
 A: Yeah, I understand. Are you going sailing with him?  
 B: no, I’m sorry. Sell, not sell. Someone is going to buy his boat  
 A: Oh, he’s *selling* the boat! I got it!

### **Critique of mainstream SLA.**

Computational models of SLA, unlike their behaviorist predecessors, validate the biological autonomy of human learners (cf. Chomsky), the rationality of the human brain to acquire new knowledge, and the value of communication and interaction to apply this knowledge to new circumstances in context. But they do not take into account what is going on outside the learner’s head: interlocutor’s lack of familiarity with foreign accents or prejudiced listening (Lippi-Green 1997); the nature of the target (NS); the nature of the activity; self- and other-perception. It doesn’t explain how the individual learner and the social context interact in IL development

### **SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY OF SLA**

Inspired by Soviet psychology (Vygotsky) and later interpretations of Vygotsky within activity theory (Leontiev, Lantolf). Three major concepts.

#### **1. Mediation**

- SCT erases the boundary between language learning and language use.
- All knowledge is **mediated** through symbols, signs and other psychological tools.
- Psychological **tools** are internally directed at organizing and controlling our mental activity in ways that would not be possible in their absence (Vygotsky 1978).
- Development does not proceed as the unfolding of inborn capacities, but as the transformation of innate capacities once they intertwine with socioculturally constructed mediational means.
  - o “Any function in the child’s cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category. This is equally true with regard to voluntary attention, logical memory, the formation of concepts, and the development of volition...It goes without saying that internalization transforms the process itself and changes its structure and functions. Social relations or relations among people genetically underlie all higher functions and their relationships.” (Vygotsky 1981:163)

Social processes allow the language to become a cognitive tool for the individual.

**Language mediates social interaction on the interpsychological plane, and mediates thought on the intrapsychological plane.** The ontogenetic or general language development of children, for example, entails the integration of symbolically constituted mediational means into biologically specified patterns of behavior. Microgenesis is cognitive development that occurs moment by moment in social interaction.

SCT posits that adult L2 acquisition proceeds in the same manner.

**2. Zone of proximal development.** The internalization of social interactive processes happens in the 'zone of proximal development, i.e., the interactional space within which a learner is enabled to perform a task beyond his or her own current level of competence, through assisted performance. Thus learning is ahead of development. Internal mental activity has its origins in external dialogic activity

**From external speech (= social speech) to egocentric speech (= private speech) to inner speech (= verbal thought).**

Two ESL students discussing "Who gets the money?"

G. let's speak about this exercise. Did you read it?

S: yes

G. Okay. What are we suppose to do?

S. We have to speak about these people and ummm justify our position...you know our decision...our decisions about actions in ummm the past

G. No. I think not just the past. We have to imagine our situation now. We have to give our opinions now.

S. So for example, I choose Smit because he need it. No...it's a conditional. I would give Smit ...I would choose Smit because he need the money. Right. I WOULD give...

G. Needs it.

S. Yes, because he need it.

G. Yes, but no. He needs. 's', you forgot 's'. He needs.

S. Did I? Let me listen the tape (Listens to the tape). Yes...yes. He needs. I have problem with 's'. I paying so much attention to conditionals I can't remember 's'. Can you control...your talking?

G. It's a big problem. I still must remember 'had had'. But we try.

S. Yes, we try. But I don't know.

G. We don't try ... you know we don't get better. We don't improve. We must practice to change old ways.

S. Okay. Maybe good idea to listen to tape after we each talk.

(cited in Swain 2000)

Verbalization of metacognitive strategies was initiated through social interaction. Dialogue mediated the students' co-construction of strategic processes and of linguistic knowledge. Through such collaborative dialogue, the students engaged in knowledge building.

**3. Activity theory**

Human behavior results from the integration of socially and culturally constructed forms of mediation into **human activity, defined as goal-directed, motivated action.**

Activities are differentiated from each other by their objects and motives, not necessarily by their concrete realization as actions. Thus two activities might look alike but be in fact very different activities because of the motives, goals etc. of the participants. Major advance in children: joint attention (intersubjectivity) and perspective taking. Similarly in

adults: Activity focuses the attention of interlocutors on a 3d object, a problem to be solved or a task to achieve..

Focus is on meaning creation in **goal-directed activities**. The choice of form is dependent on the purpose and the goal of the activity. The LAD is not in the heads of individuals but in their dialogic interaction with one another. It is not a question of comprehensible input or acquisition-rich environment, but of motives, i.e., culturally constructed and validated discourse that organize our world according to certain meanings and not others.

Errors are efforts by the learners to regain **control of their mental activity**, to go from other-regulation to self-regulation.

Fossilization occurs when learners lack **a motive** to extend their language use to new functions.

### **Critique of SCT: Theorizing the creative space in language learning**

SCT provides a theoretical framework to understand the interaction of the individual and the social, mind and society. But it remains mostly grounded in the here-and-now of present activities. In adult L2 learning, acquisition takes place on multiple timescales of memory and projection, in multiple dimensions of self and identity, affective states and social face, and in multiple layers of reality, fiction and simulation. An example

For Vygotsky (as for Bakhtin) the ZPD is a zone of imagination, transformation, simulation, and creativity, not just internalization of external speech, i.e., socialization.

A good deal of authentic or natural language is playful, in the sense of being focused upon form and fiction *rather than* on meaning and reality. . . What is needed. . . is a recognition of the complexity of language learning: that it is sometimes play and sometimes for real, sometimes form-focused and sometimes meaning-focused, sometimes fiction and sometimes fact. (Cook 2000 my emphasis).

One day two sisters, aged five and seven, said to each other: "Let's play sisters". Here [...] was a case where two sisters were playing at being sisters, i.e., playing at reality. In the game of sisters playing at "sisters", they are both concerned with displaying their sisterhood (Vygotsky 1966:9).

Why a child plays must always be interpreted as the imaginary, illusory realization of unrealizable desires. . . Play is essentially wish fulfillment (8) Play continually creates demands on the child to act against immediate impulse, i.e., [it creates demands] to act on the line of greatest resistance (Vygotsky 1966:14) A child who plays that he is fighting, delays the motion of his arm ready to strike . . . We are dealing, both in play and aesthetic activity, or response, with a *delay*, but not with an inhibition of the response (Vygotsky 1971:210-11 emphasis in the original)

Ex.1

*Intermediate level college French students*

1. Gilles says, « vous n'etes pas des students mais des stupidents »
  2. Corinne says, « tu es mechant »
  3. Gilles [to Corinne]: « je blague voyons !! »
  4. Emily says, « oui il blague » (Kern & McGrath 2002)
- [1. Gilles says, “you are not students but stupidents”  
2. Corinne says, “ you are mean”  
3. Gilles says, “hey I am kidding”  
4. Emily says, “yes, he’s kidding”]

Ex.2

*Intermediate college level French students enter the chatroom*

1. Marina says, “salut tous=)”
2. Doug says, ”On chat.”
3. Doug says, “☺”
4. Dina says, “eh bien..”
5. Doug says, “Ou ‘chatte’...”
6. Marina says, “chatte veut dire qqch de vulgare Doug!”
7. Doug says, “Eh... je pensais que ce pourrait etre le cas...”
8. Doug says, « alors, c’est quoi le mot correct pour dire ‘chat’ ? »
9. Dina says, « mais non ! c’est une petite chatte mignonne !☺ »
10. Tony says, “on dit tchat”
11. Marina says, « je crois qu’on peut bien dire chat...euh...peut-etre... »
12. Doug says, “Ah oui, c’est ca“
13. Tony says, on va ‘tchater’ je crois »
14. Marina says, « merci Tony »
15. Doug says, « tchatcher... » (Kern & McGrath 2002)

- [1. Marina says, “hi to all =)”  
2. Doug says, “we chat/cat”  
3. Doug says, “☺”  
4. Dina says, “well..”  
5. Doug says, “or ‘female pussy cat’...”  
6. Marina says, “pussy means something vulgar Doug!”  
7. Doug says, “eh... I thought it might be the case...”  
8. Doug says, “so, what is the correct word to say ‘chat’?  
9. Dina says, “no! it is a nice little female cat! ☺”  
10. Tony says, “they say tchat”  
11. Marina says, “I think we can say chat...eh.. maybe...”  
12. Doug says, “ah yes, that’s right”  
14. Marina says, “thanks Tony”  
15. Doug says, “tchatcher...”]

Ex.3

*Assignment: write about your plans for the Christmas break*

Justin dit, « Janice, est ce que Molly est dans un autre classe de francais maintenant ?

Janice dit, « justin, oui je vois son nom dans la liste... »

Cameron : « moi je ne l'ai jamais vue »

Marcus dit : « Je n'y arrive pas bien. Je ne parviens a revoir que son visage assez flou, lisse et rose...lumineux.. »

Franz dit, « cameron, ma femme etude d'etre une coutouriere et new york est le meilleure ville en etats unis »

Marcus dit : c'est mon émerveillement qui surtout me revient ... tout en elle etait beau. C'etait cela etre belle »

Marcus dit : « O; est doffoco;e de retrpiver ce que cette [pi]ee de cpoffeir avaut de so fascomam » [CK :Some characters are typed one space off to the right of the keyboard. It should read: il est difficile de retrouver ce que cette poupee de coiffeur avait de si fascinant]

Sabine dit, « Mark, tu es vraiment bizarre »

Eve dit, « Marcus, de qui parles-tu ? »

Marcus dit, « c'est de Nathalie Sarraute, *Enfance*. J'en lis maintenant »

Marcus dit, « Elle avait du m'amener..sans jamais l'exiger..elle m'avait surement incite, sans que je sache comment, a la trouver tres belle »

Cameron [to Marcus], « a quoi est-ce que tu parles !? »

Cameron [to Marcus] « je veux dire de quoi »

Marcus dit, « ...d'une incomparable beaute...C'est de la que cela m'etait venu, ce malaise, cette gene « (Kern & McGrath 2002)

[Justin says, "Janice, is Molly in another French class now?"

Janice says, "Justin, yes, I see her name on the list..."

Cameron says, "I have never seen her"

Marcus says, "I can't manage to see her. I can only recover the rather vague contours of her face, smooth and pink ...a shining face"

Franz says, "Cameron, my wife is studying to become a seamstress and New York is the best city in the United States"

Marcus says, "it is my amazement that I mostly remember.. everything in her was beautiful. This is what it meant, to be beautiful"

Marcus says (CK. Some letters are typed one space off to the right of the keyboard) it is difficult to recover what was so fascinating about this Barbie doll "

Sabine says, "Mark, you are really bizarre"

Eve says, "Marcus, who are you talking about?"

Marcus says, "it is by Nathalie Sarraute *Childhood*. I am reading it now.

Marcus says, "She had probably led me... without ever demanding it ...she had surely incited me, without my knowing how, to find her very beautiful"

Cameron (to Marcus), "what are you talking to?"

Cameron (to Marcus), "I mean...what are you talking about?"

Marcus says, "... about an incomparable beauty... This is where this unease, this embarrassment had come from"]

*Intermediate learners of German are assigned to role-play a restaurant script*

1. Freak says : « Wo bist du, Kellner »
2. Freak says, „Shnellllllll!“
3. Schmu says, “Bestellen Sie jetzt etwas zu essen?”
4. Freak says, „ja?“
5. Schmu says, “oder, moechten Sie eine Speisekarte?”
6. Freak says, „ich habe ein Spieskarte.”
7. Schmu says, „na gut. Was moechten Sie zu essen?“
8. Schmu says, „SCHNELL!“
9. Freak says : « I’m not really trying to be an ass. It’s a game, right?”  
(Warner 2002)

- [1. Freak says, “Where are you, waiter”
2. Freak says, “Quick!!!!!!”
3. Schmu says, “Are you ordering something to eat?”
4. Freak says, “yes?”
5. Schmu says, “or do you want a menu?”
6. Freak says, “I have a menu”
7. Schmu says, “OK. What do you want to eat?”
8. Schmu says, “QUICK!”
9. Freak says, “I’m not really trying to be an ass. It’s a game, right?”]

Ex.5

- Parlez allemand, s’il vous plait!  
- „Oh, ich spreche Deutsch , auch auf franzoesisch!” (. . .) avec toi je prefere cette langue a la mienne, car pour moi, parler francais, c’est parler sans parler, en quelque maniere – sans responsabilite, ou comme nous parlons en reve. Tu comprends ? (Mann 1924:308-9)

[- Speak German, please !  
- Oh, I speak German, even when I speak French (...) with you I prefer this language to mine, because for me, to speak French means to speak without speaking, so to speak – without responsibility, or like we speak in our dreams. Do you understand?]

## **ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SLA**

In an ecological perspective, language learning is a nonlinear, relational human activity, co-constructed between humans and their environment (as they remember, perceive and imagine it), contingent upon their position in space and history, and a site of struggle for the control of social power and cultural memory. Three major notions:

### **1. Emergence**

An ecological approach to SLA sees language as emergent, not rule-governed, nor even modeled, but the result of social alignments, rekeyings of past events (Goffman), and the construction of scenarios of possibilities for future events. As learners learn the forms of the language, their words not only index directly the objects in the world but they index indirectly who they present themselves to be, who they align themselves with or against, they define the teacher as much as the teacher defines them. (cf. for example, interaction between A and B above).

Linguistic and sociocultural knowledge of both novice and member is vulnerable and can be transformed through social activity (Ochs 1990)

Grammar is not a pre-requisite to communication, but a byproduct of communication (Hopper 1998) (cf. need for ellipses, false starts, given-new information structure). If, in instructional settings, we must put the cart before the horse, we might want to remember what the real horse looks like and not pretend that the cart is the horse.

**2. Affordance** (Gibson 1979). Language learning is a relational process between actor and object.

“The linguistic world to which the learner has access, and in which she becomes actively engaged, is ‘full of demands and requirements, opportunities and limitations, rejections and invitations, enablements and constraints – in short, affordances’” (Van Lier 2000). An affordance refers to the fit between an animal’s capabilities and the environmental supports and opportunities (both good and bad) that make possible a given activity (Gibson & Pick 2000)

Language is only one of many semiotic systems (not only gesture, visual, musical, tactile, taste, but also different registers, idiolects and language varieties). An ecological perspective contextualizes language into other semiotic systems.

In an ecological perspective, language mediates learning, but leaves paradoxes and conflicts intact.

### **3. Dynamics or multiple time scales**

Learning new linguistic habits replicates patterns associated with prior learning of other languages and with the thoughts and experiences (good or bad) associated with those languages. Similarly the mind projects its future capabilities onto its capabilities of the present (teacher teaches to the adult in the child, to the expert in the novice). In ecological terms, fractal patterns replicate phenomena and events at various levels of scale. In the following example, a childhood upbringing prevents a student from behaving like a native speaker in the target country. A young Australian student returning from his year abroad in France, recounts to his professor how he couldn’t get himself to ‘barge into’ the secretary’s office like the French did, even though the door was open, without at least a glance from the secretary allowing him to do so. This is how he describes the scene.

This was a very hard thing to do. I hated it. It felt like I was *violating someone else’s space*, that I was *an invader*. I know that’s not the way they see it, but that doesn’t matter. It still feels the same. This is just not something I can do. I mean I really feel that there’s this really important barrier there and I just can’t get through that without permission. *That’s an invasion*. I can’t *go into another person’s space*, well I know it’s not really their space, it’s an open space, but I can’t – it’s just not – *it really is their space* for me. I

can't change that and I can't be an invader like that. *It's too traumatic*. It doesn't even matter that no-one seems to mind. I mind. (Liddicoat 2003 my emphases).

The taboo comes from the parental and social English injunctions that mediated John's primary socialization. Clash between Australian childhood time and French adult time, clash between polite young man's internalized identity and expected role in France, clash between John's rational knowledge and gut feelings. In addition, there is a clash between French memory and the English discourse in which the story is told, clash between the 2 identities of the Australian French professor, and the suspicion that John is laying it on for greater dramatic effect. This rather hyped up account establishes a distance between the telling and the experienced event and then again, between the experienced event and the sacred primary socialization.

### **Conclusion**

Ecological perspectives build on SCT, but bring in a much needed historical dimension and a power dimension. Also it leaves paradoxes intact.

How does an ecological perspective on language look like from the pt of view of bi- and multilingual individuals who learn, speak and write a language that is not their own?

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