
Cognitive and Sociocultural Perspectives: Two Parallel SLA Worlds?

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Looking back at the past 15 years in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), the authors select and discuss several important developments. One is the impact of various sociocultural perspectives such as Vygotskian sociocultural theory, language socialization, learning as changing participation in situated practices, Bakhtin and the dialogic perspective, and critical theory. Related to the arrival of these perspectives, the SLA field has also witnessed debates concerning understandings of learning and the construction of theory. The debate discussed in this article involves conflicting ontologies. We argue that the traditional positivist paradigm is no longer the only prominent paradigm in the field: Relativism has become an alternative paradigm. Tensions, debates, and a growing diversity of theories are healthy and stimulating for a field like SLA.

In this article, we characterize the several most important developments in the SLA field over the past 15 years. Although research and findings in the early decades of SLA were major accomplishments, we believe that the developments of the past 15 years are better characterized as ontological,¹ manifested in part as debates and issues. More specifically, we address the arrival of sociocultural perspectives in SLA and then discuss two debates, one whose tensions involve cognitive versus sociocultural understandings of learning and a second, related

¹ *Ontology* asks “basic questions about the nature of reality” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 185). We focus on ontological debates, which we consider a development particularly prominent within the past 15 years. These ontological debates have emerged with the arrival of sociocultural perspectives in SLA. In contrast, since the beginning of the field of SLA, there have been debates and discussion regarding *epistemology* (or how we come to know the world, Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Some recent discussions can be found in Jordan (2004), Lazaraton (2003), Ortega (2005), and Thorne (2005).

debate involving disagreements between positivists and relativists over how to construct SLA theory.

THE CONTINUATION OF COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVES AS TRADITIONAL SLA

In one of two special issues of *TESOL Quarterly* published in 1991 to celebrate its twenty-fifth anniversary, Diane Larsen-Freeman contributed an article that discussed the important topics that had emerged during SLA's first 20 years, from 1970 to 1990. Perhaps the most important SLA topic, as Larsen-Freeman (1991) saw it, was research attempting to describe and then explain the process of second language learning. Though the research varied somewhat regarding the particular theory invoked (e.g., universal grammar [UG], interactionism, connectionism), the phenomena that were researched (input, transfer, output, etc.) were conceptualized as psycholinguistic entities. That is, the SLA process was considered, almost unanimously, to be an internalized, cognitive process. (Though Larsen-Freeman did not mention this in her 1991 survey, the theories and research she surveyed were cognitively based.)

Writing as we are, 15 years later, the cognitive continues to dominate SLA. (However, it is not without critique nor is it the only paradigm; we discuss this in more detail later.) For many, the metaphor that Michael Sharwood Smith used in his plenary at the 1991 Second Language Research Forum in Los Angeles remains apt. Defining SLA for the audience, Sharwood Smith (1991) said the "cake" of SLA is cognitive, while its "icing" is the social. A perusal of four of the major refereed journals publishing SLA research in the 15 years since Sharwood Smith's remark bears testimony to the continuing domination of cognitively oriented SLA research. *Language Learning*, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *Applied Linguistics*, and *TESOL Quarterly* each continue to publish SLA articles that are cognitively based and, in the case of the first two journals listed, are devoted almost entirely to work within a cognitive paradigm. New volumes and articles providing surveys of SLA research either offer cognitively based research as virtually the only orientation (e.g., Doughty & Long, 2003; McGroarty, 2005; Pica, 2005) or at least give it a major role (though cf. Sealey & Carter, 2004). After all, as DeKeyser and Juffs (2005) write: "Nobody would doubt that language, whether first or second, is an aspect of human cognition" (p. 437).

Moreover, if one considers predictions made by some prominent SLA researchers, one might envision a future SLA field in which the cognitive has an even more expanded position than it currently has. Writing on the occasion of his stepping down as editor of *Language Learning*, Alexander Guiora (2005) addresses the future in what he referred to as

“the language sciences.” Though he points to what he sees as a “new and exciting chapter” in the field, with more developed technology and greater “multidisciplinarity of research” (pp. 185–186), Guiora envisions these developments through a cognitive lens. The greater disciplinarity of research involves, for him, the greater inclusion of cognitive science and neuroscience; the new technologies that will bring a more complex understanding of language will offer the “real possibility of establishing direct relationships between observed behaviors and their neurobiological substrates without *mediating constructs*, that is, a set of words, thus allowing for first-order explanations of these phenomena” (p. 186).

In the concluding chapter to their *Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*, Long and Doughty (2003) view the SLA future quite similarly. While discussing how the fields of cognitive science and SLA are related, Long and Doughty end their extensive volume with this vote of confidence for cognition:

For SLA to achieve the stability, stimulation, and research funding to survive as a viable field of inquiry, it needs an intellectual and institutional home that is to some degree autonomous and separate from the disciplines and departments that currently offer shelter. Cognitive science is the logical choice. (p. 869)

We wish to make clear, before going further, that we see nothing problematic or aberrant in continuing a certain perspective or theory in a given field. In showing evidence that the cognitive orientation continues to dominate SLA, we intend to clarify the context within which our discussion occurs. In other words, to understand the new kids on the block and, later, some tensions and arguments in the neighborhood, it is necessary to understand what the neighborhood has been and who has dominated it. We turn now to the newer arrivals.

THE ARRIVAL OF SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON SLA

These more recent arrivals to the field of SLA—*sociocultural perspectives*² on language and learning—view language use in real-world situations as fundamental, not ancillary, to learning. These researchers focus not on language as input, but as a resource for participation in the kinds

² We use the term *sociocultural perspectives* to refer to varied approaches to learning that foreground the social and cultural contexts of learning (as discussed in Zuengler & Cole, 2004; see also Thorne, 2005). One such approach to learning is what we call *Vygotskian sociocultural theory*. However, we recognize that for some, the term *sociocultural theory* is equivalent to Vygotskian theory.

of activities our everyday lives comprise. Participation in these activities is both the product and the process of learning.

We provide brief summaries of the sociocultural perspectives we find typically invoked in recent SLA research, mentioning relevant studies. We do not, however, refer to all studies that draw on these perspectives. Readers are urged to see Lantolf (2000) for an overview of Vygotskian SLA studies and Zuengler and Cole (2005) for a review of language socialization research in second language learning. The order we have chosen is somewhat arbitrary. We begin, however, with Vygotskian sociocultural theory and language socialization because one or the other is often positioned as the primary theoretical framework. These two also seem to be invoked more frequently than situated learning theory, Bakhtinian approaches to language, or critical theories of discourse and social relations—the remaining perspectives we discuss. Segregating these sociocultural perspectives into their own sections allows us to address their unique disciplinary roots and contributions to SLA. Though we believe researchers must take care in how they bring together these varying approaches, given their distinctiveness, we suggest that the “hybrid interdisciplinarity” that many SLA scholars practice (Rampton, Roberts, Leung, & Harris, 2002, p. 373) has been productive and mirrors the increasing interdisciplinarity found in much of the current social science research.

Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory

SLA research using Vygotskian sociocultural theory first began to appear in the mid-1980s (Frawley & Lantolf, 1984, 1985) but quickly gained momentum in the mid-1990s with a special issue of the *Modern Language Journal* (Lantolf, 1994), devoted to sociocultural theory and second language learning. That same year, an edited volume appeared (Lantolf & Appel, 1994), and the first of a series of annual meetings dedicated to sociocultural research in SLA convened in Pittsburgh. Since then, conference presentations and publications taking this approach to SLA have only increased.

Like traditional cognitive approaches to learning, Vygotskian sociocultural theory is fundamentally concerned with understanding the development of cognitive processes. However, its distinctiveness from traditional cognitive approaches can best be highlighted by citing Vygotsky: “The social dimension of consciousness [i.e., all mental processes] is primary in time and fact. The individual dimension of consciousness is derivative and secondary” (1979, p. 30). Lantolf and Pavlenko (1995) clarify that even though Vygotskian sociocultural theory does not deny a role for biological constraints, “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” (p. 109). These means are the socioculturally meaningful artifacts and symbolic systems of a society, the most important of which is language. Of significance for SLA research is the understanding that when learners appropriate mediational means, such as language, made available as they interact in socioculturally meaningful activities, these learners gain control over their own mental activity and can begin to function independently. And as Lantolf (2000) notes, “according to Vygotsky, this is what development is about” (p. 80).

SLA researchers have focused on learners’ linguistic development in the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD), Vygotsky’s conception of what an individual can accomplish when working in collaboration with others (more) versus what he or she could have accomplished without collaboration with others (less). The ZPD points to that individual’s learning potential, that is, what he or she may be able to do independently in the future (Adair-Hauck & Donato, 1994; Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Anton, 1999, 2000; DiCamilla & Anton, 1997; Nassaji & Cumming, 2000; Ohta, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Others have focused on the use of *private speech* or speech directed to oneself that mediates mental behavior. Private speech manifests the process in which external, social forms of interaction come to be appropriated for *inner speech* or mental development (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; McCafferty, 1994, 2004b; see also McCafferty, 2004a). Still others have focused on activity theory and task-based approaches to second language teaching and learning (Coughlan & Duff, 1994; McCafferty, Roebuck, & Wayland, 2001; Parks, 2000; Storch, 2004; Thorne, 2003).

Language Socialization

Language socialization researchers, including those in SLA, closely identify with Vygotskian sociocultural approaches to learning (see Ochs, 1988; Schiefflin & Ochs, 1986; Watson-Gegeo, 2004; Watson-Gegeo & Nielson, 2003). But in contrast to a disciplinary history in psychology and a focus on cognitive development, this theory emerged from anthropology with an interest in understanding the development of socially and culturally competent members of society. In her introduction to an edited volume comprising language socialization studies among children in a variety of cultures, Ochs comments that she and her co-editor, Schieffelin (1986), “take for granted . . . that the development of intelligence and knowledge is facilitated (to an extent) by children’s communication with others,” and instead emphasize the “sociocultural information [that] is generally encoded in the organization of conversational

discourse” (pp. 2–3). As such, language socialization research has investigated the interconnected processes of linguistic and cultural learning in discourse practices, interactional routines, and participation structures and roles.³

Although language socialization research in the 1980s largely investigated ways in which children are socialized into the social practices of a community, by the mid-1990s the language socialization approach was being applied to adult second language learners (see, e.g., Duff, 1995; Harklau, 1994; Poole, 1992). Whether at home, in the classroom, at work, or in any number of other environments, language learners are embedded in and learn to become competent participants in culturally, socially, and politically shaped communicative contexts. The linguistic forms used in these contexts and their social significance affect how learners come to understand and use language.

In a recent review of language socialization research in SLA, Zuengler and Cole (2005) observed that even though some studies portray socialization as a smooth and successful process (e.g., Kanagy, 1999; Ohta, 1999), many other studies, mostly classroom based, demonstrate “language socialization as potentially problematic, tension producing, and unsuccessful” (p. 306). For example, some researchers have found that school socialization processes can have negative effects on second language learning (Atkinson, 2003; Duff & Early, 1999; Rymes, 1997; Willet, 1995) and others have observed contradictory home and school socialization processes, which often result in students’ relatively unsuccessful socialization to school norms (Crago, 1992; Moore, 1999; Watson-Gegeo, 1992). These findings, among others, point to the shifting emphasis in language socialization research to the sociopolitical dimensions of discourse and social organization and their implications for language learning (Watson-Gegeo, 2004). Like language socialization, *situated learning theory*, to which we now turn, underscores the role of social identity and relationships as well as the historical and practical conditions of language use in learning.

LEARNING AS CHANGING PARTICIPATION IN SITUATED PRACTICES

Typically, situated learning—most notably represented by Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notion of *community of practice*—has not been positioned as the primary learning theory in SLA research in the same way that

³ See, however, Watson-Gegeo (2004) and Watson-Gegeo and Nielsen (2003), who insist that investigating and understanding cognitive development should not be abandoned in language socialization research.

Vygotskian or language socialization theories have been. For example, though Toohey's ethnographic research (2000) and the related work by Day (2002) both draw heavily on Lave and Wenger's community of practice, they also invoke Vygotskian sociocultural theory and Bakhtin's dialogic perspective (see next section). Lave and Wenger note that they could have adopted a socialization model, but they found that the apprenticeship model helped them conceptualize "learning in situated ways—in the transformative possibilities of being and becoming complex, full cultural-historical participants in the world" (p. 32). As suggested in this comment, *situated learning* foregrounds learners' participation in particular social practices, understood as habitual ways people (re)produce material and symbolic resources, often attached to particular times and places, and comprising communities of practice in complex, often overlapping ways.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) conception of *legitimate peripheral participation* is meant to describe the changes of engagement in particular social practices that entail learning. Thus, we can consider second language learners who demonstrate a change from limited to fuller participation in social practices involving their second (or additional) language as giving evidence of language development (much as language socialization views children or novices being socialized into more appropriate participation in the social practices of their communities). Elsewhere, Wenger (1998) maintains that learning is "not a separate activity. . . . [but] is something we can assume—whether we see it or not. . . . Even failing to learn what is expected in a given situation usually involves learning something else instead" (p. 8). Toohey (1999) agrees, suggesting that this approach can help us avoid consigning poor success in second language learning merely to an individual's failure to learn. Legitimate peripheral participation allows us to see instead that some members learn to take a less empowered position in a community of practice because of the kinds of participation made available to them by "processes of exclusion and subordination [that] operate locally" (p. 135). Toohey adds that it might be less helpful to see learners as marginalized than to view them as "very much integrated" into schools or other communities of practice but in positions that maintain their peripheral participation (p. 135). This shift in focus away from language and learning as an individual achievement aligns with Bakhtin's view of language as constituted in particular sociohistorical contexts.

Bakhtin and the Dialogic Perspective

Given Mikhail Bakhtin's view of the fundamentally social nature of language and his metaphor of appropriation to conceptualize how

people take others' utterances in coming to own a language—within a specific social space and historical moment, Bakhtinian theory overlaps in important ways with situated learning. Though Hall (1995, 2002) and Johnson (2004) have extensively discussed Bakhtin's ideas and their applicability for understanding second language learning, most second language researchers have drawn on select concepts from Bakhtin's philosophical writings and, as with situated learning, have folded them in with other sociocultural frameworks.

Like the sociocultural theories already described, we find that Bakhtin (1981) stresses the sociality of intellectual processes in claiming that "language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the border between oneself and the other" (p. 293). One of the key concepts in Bakhtin's writings frequently invoked in SLA research is *dialogism*: the mutual participation of speakers and hearers in the construction of utterances and the connectedness of all utterances to past and future expressions. Thus, the linguistic resources we use and learn can never be seen as merely part of a "neutral and impersonal language"; rather, Bakhtin viewed our use of language as an appropriation of words that at one time "exist[ed] in other people's mouths" before we make them our own (pp. 293–294). Hall (2002) explains that, in this view, an utterance "can only be understood fully by considering its history of use by other people, in other places, for other reasons" (p. 13). Within this framework, Toohy (2000) describes language learning as a process in which learners "try on other people's utterances; they take words from other people's mouths; they appropriate these utterances and gradually (but not without conflict) these utterances come to serve their needs and relay their meanings" (p. 13).

Packaged with dialogism is Bakhtin's understanding of the inherently ideological nature of language. In agreeing that "all language is political," Hall (1995) asserts that the "authority and privilege residing in certain interactive resources result from sociopolitical and historical forces surrounding their use" (p. 214). Every utterance we produce reveals our stance toward the interlocutors involved, signaling our social positioning within the local interaction and in response to larger sociopolitical forces. This ideological nature of language is foregrounded by critical theorists, who see the role of power relations as primary for understanding the social world, both in broader social worlds as well as in our very local social practices.

Critical Theory

From the point of view of critical theory, being socialized into the practices of a community includes learning one's place in the sociopolitical

organization of those practices. Researchers who incorporate critical theory into their exploration of second language learning argue that one must account for relations of power in order to gain a fuller understanding of the practices and interactions in which learners participate—and thus of their learning processes. But what is more important, these researchers contend that this understanding should then lead to social and educational change such that more equitable social relations can be effected, particularly in the interests of disenfranchised groups and individuals. It is interesting that, in contrast to the theory of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in which learners are viewed as learning their marginalized participation, critical theorists tend to view marginalized members of a community as having their access to learning blocked because they may be prevented from participating meaningfully in target-language social practices. The critical focus in second language learning has been strongly influenced by the work of Pennycook (1990, 1999, 2001) as well as Norton (1995, 1997b, 2000) and Canagarajah (1993, 1999, 2005).

Though the range of critical research is outside the scope of this discussion, we highlight one area of interest, language and identity, that has gained footing in the field and become a research area in its own right. It has been addressed in a special issue of *TESOL Quarterly* (Norton, 1997a) as well as in numerous other publications. From a sociocultural perspective, our identities are shaped by and through our language use (Norton, 1995, 1997b, 2000; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2003). Although issues of identity and learning have been treated in all of the sociocultural approaches to learning that we have discussed so far, we think it is appropriate to mention them here because they often explore and critique the ways in which the patterning of power relationships can legitimate some identities and forms of participation but devalue others. As such, language learners have much more at stake than merely developing competence in an additional linguistic code. As Morgan (1998) notes, “language ‘conditions’ our expectations and desires and communicates what might be possible in terms of ourselves—our identity—and the ‘realities’ we might develop” (p. 12).

COGNITIVE AND SOCIOCULTURAL: TENSIONS AND DEBATES

As we have seen, the SLA field in the past 15 years has expanded from a largely cognitive orientation to include sociocultural approaches such as those just documented. This expansion, we believe, is one of the main reasons the SLA field has during the past 15 years witnessed debates and tensions that, in their cross-paradigm criticisms and

ontological disagreements, are more fundamental than the (largely) intraparadigm issues surrounding, for example, the relative validity of options for eliciting speech that received attention in the earlier decades of SLA. This said, we would not, however, go as far as Larsen-Freeman (2002) in describing the current SLA field as being “in a state of turmoil” (p. 33). We prefer Lantolf’s (1996) more positive, accepting portrayal of the SLA field as “incredibly, and happily, diverse, creative, often contentious, and always full of controversy” (p. 738).

In this section, we discuss two debates that originated within the past 15 years and still continue. These debates are arguably the most important given their ontological differences, the great amount of attention the SLA field has paid them at conferences in the literature, and, on a more cynical note, the wrestling for academic territory that some have seen in them. Each debate shakes out as the cognitivists and socioculturalists arguing with each other for reasons we hope to make clear. However, we feel that such labels (*cognitivists*, *socioculturalists*), if used as the primary characterizations of the debates, would obscure the more basic ontological differences that underlie the arguments. Though the two debates are related, each originated in and focused on different conceptions, conceptions that we feel are more important means of framing and understanding each of the debates. Framing by conception, then, we first discuss the debate around understandings of learning⁴ and after that, the debate about theory construction in SLA.

The Debate Around the Understanding of Learning in SLA

At the 1996 annual conference of the International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA) in Jyväskylä, Finland, Alan Firth and Johannes Wagner (1996) organized a symposium in which they delivered a paper arguing that SLA had long been dominated by cognitive views of the learner and learning as individualistic, mentalistic, and as functioning independent of the context and use of the language. Following their paper, several presenters took a variety of positions vis-à-vis Firth and Wagner’s critique. (One of the authors attended that symposium and remembers that the atmosphere was quite electric.) Although Firth and Wagner were not necessarily the first to raise such criticism of the field (see, e.g., Bremer, Roberts, Vasseur, Simonot, & Broeder, 1996; Hall, 1995; Rampton, 1987), attention to Firth and Wagner’s criticism in particular, with prominent respondents (e.g., Joan Kelly Hall, Gabriele

⁴ Though earlier SLA work sometimes differentiated *learning* from *acquisition*, following the distinction made by Krashen (e.g., 1982, 1985), we understand the two terms as synonymous. Our understanding reflects the field’s current position, given that Krashen’s theory has fallen out of favor.

Kasper, Nanda Poulisse, Michael Long) from varying orientations offering support or declaring opposition, was guaranteed when, in 1997, their symposium papers were published along with additional response papers in the *Modern Language Journal* (see Firth & Wagner, 1997). The debate intensified further after the *Modern Language Journal* published Susan Gass's (1998) response to Firth and Wagner, and Firth and Wagner's (1998) response to Gass.⁵

Firth and Wagner (1997) criticize the field of SLA for its overwhelmingly cognitive orientation in defining and researching the learner and learning. Such an approach too strongly emphasizes the individual, the internalization of mental processes, and "the development of grammatical competence" (p. 288). Meaning does not occur, they argue, in "private thoughts executed and then transferred from brain to brain, but [as] a social and negotiable product of interaction, transcending individual intentions and behaviours" (p. 290). Like other humans, a language learner should be considered a "participant-as-language-'user' in social interaction" (p. 286). It is time, they say, to question the field's division of language use (as consigned to the social) from language learning (as the individualized, decontextualized domain of the cognitive). An SLA field reformulated according to Firth and Wagner's argument would help us gain more comprehension of "how language is used *as it is being acquired through interaction*, and used resourcefully, contingently, and contextually" (p. 296). Reiterating their view of learning in their response to Gass (1998), they invoke Vygotsky in asserting that "cognitive structures are influenced and, indeed, developed through engagement in social activity. . . . From this perspective, it can be said that language use forms cognition" (Firth & Wagner, 1998, p. 92).

Firth and Wagner's argument that learning (or acquisition) occurs through use would find support not just in Vygotsky but also in the other sociocultural perspectives discussed in this article. In fact, Kramsch (2002) points out that the unifying thread running through her edited collection "is a common dissatisfaction with the traditional separation between language acquisition and language socialization" (p. 4), language socialization being one of the sociocultural perspectives prominent in current SLA. Some go further. In her contribution to the Kramsch collection, Larsen-Freeman (2002) appears to be beyond "dissatisfaction" in declaring that "the failure to consider language use" is one of the "most trenchant criticisms of mainstream SLA research" (p. 34), the other being the lack of balance between the social and the cognitive.

⁵ For reprints of some of the papers as well as commentary, see Seidlhofer (2003). Larsen-Freeman (2002) provides a very concise summary of the debate.

Although some of the respondents (namely, Hall, 1997, and Liddicoat, 1997) support Firth and Wagner's argument, it is the opposing respondents whose position we summarize, particularly those—Long (1997), Kasper (1997), and Gass (1998)—who assert strong opposition to Firth and Wagner's claim that we should not separate acquisition and use because use is actually how learning takes place. Perhaps because they share a cognitive orientation, all three give basically the same response, maintaining a strong split between acquisition and use. To Kasper (1997), the "most nagging problem" with Firth and Wagner's paper is that it "has in fact very little to say about L2 *acquisition*" (p. 310) because, as she sees it, although social context can influence SLA, the SLA process itself is essentially cognitive. Long (1997) completely agrees, ending his response by offering his "skepticism as to whether greater insights into SL *use* will *necessarily* have much to say about SL *acquisition*" (p. 322). And though Gass (1998) concedes that perhaps "some parts of language are constructed socially," that in itself does not imply that "we cannot investigate language as an abstract entity that resides in the individual" (p. 88), maintaining, in so doing, her view of learning as largely an individualized mental process. Drawing a figure characterizing the field, Gass (1998) presents "SLA" and "SL Use" as together making up research on "Second Language Studies," but it is important that she draws "SLA" and "SL Use" as branches that are separate and unconnected (p. 88).

As Larsen-Freeman (2002) points out, this debate is irresolvable because it involves two different ontological positions that reflect "fundamental differences in the way they frame their understanding of learning" (p. 37). What one might hope for, though, is that "we agree to disagree," as the expression goes, and accept that contrasting views of learning can stimulate rather than befuddle the field.

The Debate on Theory Construction in SLA: Positivism Versus Relativism

During the past 15 years, the SLA field has devoted more attention to metatheoretical and metamethodological concerns than it had in earlier decades. The most prominent debate has concerned theory construction in SLA. Though others have written (and continue to write) on theory construction,⁶ we have selected a set of authors and articles, ranging from 1991 to 2000, that comprise a coherent debate for discussion. The discussion we profile of theory construction—in fact, any discussion of theory construction—addresses a complex subject that raises a number

⁶ See, for example, Atkinson (2002), McGroarty (1998), and van Lier (1991, 1994).

of questions. We have distilled from the discussion the authors' debate on positivism versus relativism in theory construction. The tensions and differences it raises reflect a new dynamic entering the field, one that continues and that results from, we believe, the arrival on the SLA scene of the sociocultural perspectives we discussed earlier.⁷

Beretta (1991) framed a discussion of theory construction by addressing issues such as whether or not (what he saw as) a diversity of theories and criteria in SLA represents a problem; that is, should this diversity be reduced to one or a few theories? Considering different approaches to theory building, Beretta arrives at a clear conclusion in favor of few, rather than many, theories, viewing the former as the result of "rationality" and the latter, the outcome of "relativism" (p. 495). Comparing SLA to the "already-successful sciences" (p. 497; i.e., the so-called hard sciences), Beretta says that because these fields do not, unlike SLA, have "multiple rival theories" (p. 497), it is not beneficial for SLA to have many theories, either. He goes on to state that the "most anarchic criterion of all" is that of "no criterion" (p. 501). Referring to what he calls "extreme relativism," Beretta's nightmare scenario is one in which phenomena are not independent of but "always relative to the values of individuals and communities" (p. 501). This "whatever" position (to use a current slang term) implies that "poetry, voodoo, religion, and nonsense are no less valid bases for belief than 'science'" (p. 501). Clearly, then, Beretta supports theory building only from a rationalist/positivist⁸ paradigm, and certainly not from a relativist one. He is not alone. Although Crookes (1992) does not address relativism, his agreement with Beretta is implicit in his adherence to a positivistic notion of science as the gold standard in considering theory construction.⁹

The debate continued with the publication of a special issue of *Applied Linguistics* in 1993 titled "Theory Construction in SLA," which contains papers from a 1991 conference at Michigan State University titled "Theory Construction and Methodology in Second Language Research." Almost all of the contributors (i.e., Beretta, Long, Crookes, Gregg)¹⁰ take

⁷ To follow the debate, the reader should consult, in this order, Beretta (1991); Crookes (1992); Beretta (1993); Block (1996); Gregg, Long, Jordan, & Beretta (1997); Lantolf (1996); and Gregg (2000).

⁸ Though Beretta states that positivism is not a viable paradigm any longer, he appears to be keeping to positivism nevertheless, taking perhaps a postpositivistic stance instead. For information on the two positions (which are within the same paradigm), see, for example, Guba and Lincoln (1998). Because we see positivism and postpositivism as matters of degree rather than substance, and because *positivism* is the better known term in the field, we will use *positivism* to describe Beretta's and others' positions.

⁹ Such a characterization of science (as equivalent to positivism) may be simplistic. We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing this out.

¹⁰ The exception is Schumann (1993), who argues, to oversimplify it, that art and science are not that different. Because Schumann's position is similar to that of the other relativists that we discuss, we will not focus on him here.

a similar position that although it does not necessarily mention relativism explicitly, nevertheless implicitly opposes it by supporting positivism as the (sole) paradigm for cognitive research on SLA. Beretta and Crookes (1993) dismiss the argument that the social can cause the content of theories; they argue that social conditions are not only not sufficient but are not necessary “for scientific discovery” (p. 253). Gregg (1993), like Beretta and Crookes (1993), does not attack relativism directly. Nevertheless, it is clear that Gregg (1993) opposes relativism: “In SLA . . . the overall explanandum is the acquisition (or non-acquisition) of L2 competence, in the Chomskyan sense of the term” (p. 278). And the criteria that Gregg chooses for discussing theory construction, transition theories and property theories, come from psychology (i.e., Cummins, 1983). Thus, in what becomes an ongoing metaphor in the debate, Gregg’s “Let a Couple of Flowers Bloom” does not advocate a relativist’s acceptance of a multiplicity of theories, but advocates “a couple” as opposed to many and within a cognitive and positivistic framework.

Adapting Gregg’s metaphor, Lantolf’s (1996) article, subtitled “Letting All the Flowers Bloom!,” not surprisingly supports relativism and opposes positivism. Though Block’s (1996) article is more wide-ranging, he, too, argues for relativism: “Reality is a social, and, therefore, multiple, construction. . . . there is no tangible, fragmentable reality on to which science can converge” (p. 69, citing Lincoln, 1990). However, that does not mean that everything is acceptable, Block asserts. Though he acknowledges that relativism and positivism are two fundamentally different ontologies, he argues, again citing Lincoln (1990), that rather than throwing their hands up at the situation, relativists attempt to find patterns, “working hypotheses, or temporary, time-and-place-bound knowledge” (Block, 1996, p. 69). Coming from a similar position, Lantolf (1996) provides a “postmodernist critical analysis” of the theory-building literature of Gregg, Long, Crookes, and others, pointing out that they are all clearly dedicated to the rationalist/positivist paradigm in the SLA field and adding ironically that they “share . . . a common fear of the dreaded ‘relativism’” (p. 715). In fact, Lantolf coins a term for this condition: *relativaphobia* (p. 731). In a detailed set of points, Lantolf argues against what he sees as the hegemony of the positivistic, echoing Block’s (1996) accusation of “science envy” (p. 64) in accusing Gregg and the others of having “physics envy” (p. 717). Where Gregg and the others consider the existence within SLA of multiple and incommensurable theories an obstacle to the development and maturation of the field, Lantolf (1996) encourages “Letting All the Flowers Bloom,” warning that otherwise, “once theoretical hegemony is achieved, alternative metaphors are cut off or suffocated by the single official metaphor;

subsequently, those who espouse different world views . . . cease to have a voice” (p. 739).

Both Block (1996) and Lantolf (1996) generated response articles; Gregg, Long, Jordan, and Beretta (1997) critiqued the Block article, while Gregg (2000) responded to Lantolf (1996) by presenting a negative summary of postmodernism. Writing from within their positivist paradigm, Gregg, Long, Jordan, and Beretta (1997) accept Block’s criticism that they have “science envy”:

Let us grant that many or even all of us in the field have the occasional twinge of envy for the accomplishments of other sciences; given the fairly feeble progress made so far in SLA, and the magnificent intellectual achievements of the more successful sciences, such envy would certainly be unsurprising. (p. 543)

Unfortunately, their stance becomes both smug and naïve. For example, Gregg and his colleagues (1997) declare a state of “disbelief” in Block’s point that controlling for extraneous variables in SLA research is “probably not even desirable” (p. 544, quoting Block, 1996, p. 74). Continuing, they declare: “Do we actually need to point out the disastrous consequences of Block’s ‘stance’ for SLA, or indeed for any intellectual inquiry?” (p. 544). No one invoking a positivist paradigm would disagree with their critique because one of the paradigm’s principles is indeed the manipulation of variables, which includes controlling wherever possible for extraneous variables. However, what Gregg and colleagues (1997) fail to recognize is that Block’s statement comes from a different (relativist) paradigm, rendering their response irrelevant.

In his critique of Lantolf (1996), Gregg (2000) does not directly reiterate the anti-relativist, pro-positivist argument that he and his colleagues had already published elsewhere. Instead, he begins by summarizing (negatively) postmodernism, the approach that Lantolf (1996) takes in his article. Describing postmodernism, Gregg discusses its stance that, among other things, instead of written texts having objective meaning—that of the text’s author—meaning is generated as the reader interacts with the text. Gregg’s response to this stance reveals his reluctance (or inability?) to think outside of his paradigm: “Such a perspective strikes me as nonsense” (p. 386). On the other hand, he takes “the common-sense position . . . that the meaning of sentences can usually be agreed upon, and that there generally are correct and incorrect interpretations of (meaningful) sentences” (pp. 386–387).

Concluding his discussion of postmodernism, Gregg (2000) asserts, again from within his paradigm:

It is no accident that postmodernism originated as a movement among literary critics and cultural philosophers. . . . It flourishes, that is, precisely in those areas of intellectual activity where decisive evidence is extremely hard to find. . . . Faced with a range of disciplines that are actually making progress . . . the postmodernists tried to turn the tables on the sciences. . . . Rather than claiming that the grapes of science are sour, the postmodernist assures us that there are no grapes. . . . To put it a bit differently, one can see postmodernism as a sophisticated way for academics in the humanities to overcome their own “physics envy.” (pp. 389–390)

With that memorable point of view, we will end our discussion of the theory construction debate. On the positive side, we agree that debates like this stimulate a field. And debates being debates, it is not necessary or relevant to try to come to agreement. After all (as we indicated in discussing the debate about learning), the debate on theory construction is occurring across very different paradigms with contradictory views of reality. Although the debate can be framed as occurring between cognitivists and socioculturalists, we have emphasized a more fundamental difference. Like Lantolf (1996), we view as positive a field in which possibly incommensurable theories proliferate and are debated rather than allowing one theory to dominate without being problematized. We are only sorry that so much energy has gone into some participants’ refusal to admit (or understand?) that these positions on theory are incommensurable because they stem from contradictory ontologies. And the smug tone that some of the debate takes is therefore not only naïve but unfair.

Though we have discussed a debate whose outcome is incommensurability, some argue for cognitive-sociocultural integration. Authors take varying approaches in making their argument. For example, Larsen-Freeman (2002) proposes chaos/complexity theory as a means of accommodating both sociocultural and cognitive perspectives within SLA. Block (2003) cites several pieces of research that argue for the complementarity of cognitive and sociocultural views, namely, Ellis (2000), Swain and Lapkin (1998), Tarone and Liu (1995), and Teutsch-Dwyer (2001). However, Block himself does not take a clear position supporting integration. Instead, he advocates a “more multidisciplinary and socially informed future” for those following the input-interaction tradition (p. 139). Making a somewhat different argument, Watson-Gegeo (2004) sees a possible new “synthesis” of the cognitive with the sociocultural because of developments in the field that view cognition as a phenomenon which “originates in social interaction and is shaped by cultural and sociopolitical processes” (p. 331). Thorne (2005) and Lantolf (2000) envision Vygotskian theory in particular as providing a lens for viewing social context as central to the development of cognition (see also Johnson, 2004).

IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES FOR CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Hall (2002) observes that traditional SLA approaches seek to identify good pedagogical interventions that will most effectively “facilitate learners’ assimilation of new systemic knowledge into known knowledge structures” (p. 48). However, given their different understandings of language learning, socioculturally informed studies offer much different recommendations for improving classroom practice. For example, in seeing learning as participation, as relational and interactive, and as constrained by unequal power relations, Lave and Wenger’s perspective asks educators to consider how the practices of school relate to those outside of school, how schools and classrooms themselves are organized into communities of practice, and what kinds of participation are made accessible to students.

Other studies taking sociocultural perspectives have examined classroom interactions or discourse patterns with an eye toward identifying those that best facilitate student participation (Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larsen, 1995; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Nystrand, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991). Still others have examined such topics as the kinds of guided or scaffolded assistance from teachers (or other experts) that can move students along within their ZPD (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Anton, 1999; McCormick & Donato, 2000; Nassaji & Cumming, 2000), the effectiveness of goal-oriented dialogue between peers to mediate learning (Donato, 1994; Ohta, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 1998), and the need for dialogic and contextually sensitive approaches to language assessment (Johnson, 2001, 2004). These studies are only a few among many, but they share the sociocultural awareness that highly situated classroom participation promotes language learning.

We acknowledge that we do not specify general recommendations for transforming classroom practices, primarily because we are aware of the limits of what can be generalized across classroom contexts. Hall (2000) speaks to the situatedness of learning processes in saying that “effecting change in our classrooms will not result from imposing solutions from outside but from nurturing effectual practices that are indigenous to our particular contexts” (p. 295). Clearly, this is no easy task for educators. It requires ongoing and intense work with every group of students and reflective awareness of how the affective and political dimensions of classroom life affect individual students’ participation. However, with the increased awareness and sensitivity to local contexts that sociocultural perspectives bring us, we have reason to hope that we are closer to understanding and creating the kinds of classroom communities that learners need.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Although it is difficult to make predictions about the next 15 years in such a dynamic field, we end our article by looking forward to some developments we consider exciting and worth watching. Among them is work in conversation analysis investigating language learning as it occurs in the turn-by-turn development of conversational processes (see, e.g., Markee, 2004); developments in discursive psychology (not yet emergent in SLA but relevant for researchers interested in learner positioning within social practices; see, e.g., Davies & Harré, 1990); a growth in work focusing on postcolonial, transnational, and World Englishes (e.g., Canagarajah, 2000; Jenkins, 2003, also this issue; Kachru, 2001; Pennycook, 1998; Rampton, 1995); and explorations in the new kinds of discursive practices that language learners engage when using new technologies (see especially Gee, 2003; Kern, this issue; Lam, 2000; Thorne, 2003; and Warschauer, 1997). We are eager to see what unfolds.

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