



SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING THEORIES

Rosamond Mitchell,
Florence Myles and
Emma Marsden

FOURTH EDITION

ROUTLEDGE



Second Language Learning Theories

Written by a team of leading experts working in different SLA specialisms, this fourth edition is a clear and concise introduction to the main theories of second language acquisition (SLA) from multiple perspectives, comprehensively updated to reflect the very latest developments in SLA research in recent years.

The book covers all the main theoretical perspectives currently active in SLA and sets each chapter within a broader framework. Each chapter examines the claims and scope of each theory and how each views language, the learner and the acquisition process, supplemented by summaries of key studies and data examples from a variety of languages. Chapters end with an evaluative summary of the theories discussed. Key features to this fourth edition include updated accounts of developments in cognitive approaches to second language (L2) learning, the implications of advances in generative linguistics and the “social turn” in L2 research, with re-worked chapters on functional, sociocultural and sociolinguistic perspectives, and an entirely new chapter on theory integration, in addition to updated examples using new studies.

Second Language Learning Theories continues to be an essential resource for graduate students in second language acquisition.

Rosamond Mitchell is Emeritus Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Southampton, UK.

Florence Myles is Professor of Second Language Acquisition at the University of Essex, UK.

Emma Marsden is Professor at the Centre for Research into Language Learning and Use at the University of York, UK.

“This book continues to be a comprehensive and up-to-date introduction to the ever-growing field of Second Language Learning research. With its systematic structure and its numerous illustrations from empirical work, the book will allow students and language teachers alike to compare and to contrast the aims, the claims and the scopes of the leading L2 theories in the field today. If you want to know something about the scientific study of Second Language Learning, there is no better place to start than right here.”

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“Having used the previous three editions in my SLA courses, I enthusiastically welcome the fourth edition of *Second Language Learning Theories*. Presenting new data from a range of languages, it clearly illustrates the major theoretical approaches of the discipline.”

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Fourth Edition

**Rosamond Mitchell, Florence Myles
and Emma Marsden**



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Preface

0.1 Aims of This Book

This book is the result of collaboration between researchers interested in second language (L2) learning from a range of perspectives: linguistic (Myles), cognitive (Marsden) and social/educational (Mitchell). As in previous editions, our general aim is to provide an up-to-date, introductory overview of the current state of L2 studies. Our intended audience is wide: undergraduates following first degrees in language/linguistics, graduate students embarking on courses in foreign language education/English as a foreign language/applied linguistics, and a broader audience of teachers and other professionals concerned with L2 education and development. Second language learning is a field of research with potential to make its own distinctive contribution to fundamental understandings of, for example, the workings of the human mind or the nature of language. It also has the potential to inform the improvement of social practice in a range of fields, most obviously in language education. We ourselves are interested in L2 learning from both perspectives, and are concerned to make it intelligible to the widest possible audience.

All commentators recognize that while the field of L2 research has been extremely active and productive in recent decades, we have not yet arrived at a unified or comprehensive view of how second languages are learned, although tentative models have regularly been proposed (see Chapter 10). We have therefore organized this book as a presentation and critical review of a number of different L2 theories, which can broadly be viewed as linguistic, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic. Indeed, the overall “map” of the field we proposed in the first edition largely survives today, reflecting the fact that key strands of research already active 20 years ago have continued to flourish and develop. No single theoretical position has achieved dominance, and new theoretical orientations continue to appear. Whether this is a desirable state of affairs or not has been an issue of some controversy (see discussion in Chapter 1). On the whole, while we fully accept the arguments for the need for cumulative programmes of research within the framework of a particular theory, we incline towards a pluralist view of L2 theorizing. In any case, it is

obvious that students entering the field today need a broad introduction to a range of theoretical positions, with the tools to evaluate their goals, strengths and limitations, and this is what we aim to offer.

In this fourth edition, our primary aim remains the same: to introduce the reader to those theoretical orientations on language learning which seem currently most productive and interesting for our intended audience. But we have revised our text throughout to reflect the substantial developments that have taken place in the field in the last few years, so that the work aims to be fully up to date. In particular, the new edition takes account of substantial recent developments in cognitive approaches to L2 learning, and we also review the implications of recent advances in generative linguistics (Chomsky's Minimalist Program); the strength of the ongoing "social turn" in L2 research has been acknowledged, with substantial revisions of later chapters dealing with functional, sociocultural and sociolinguistic perspectives; and in an entirely new chapter, we evaluate some contrasting recent proposals for a more integrative approach to L2 theorizing. Throughout the book, key theoretical and methodological advances are presented and explained, greater attention has been paid to research on internet-based language learning, and new studies (in a range of languages, and with recent methodological innovations) have been incorporated as examples. The evaluation sections in each chapter have been expanded, and the book is rebalanced in favour of newer material.

As one clear sign of the vigour and dynamism of L2 research, a very high number of surveys, reviews and meta-analyses are available. Reflecting the variety of the field, these vary in their focus and aims. Some are written from the perspective of a single theoretical position, construct or issue (e.g. Cook & Newson, 2007; Deters, Gao, Miller, & Vitanova, 2015; Duff & May, 2017; Gass, Spinner, & Behney, 2018; Hawkins, 2001; Hulstijn, 2015; Lantolf & Poehner, 2014; Lardiere, 2007; Leung, 2009; Li, 2015; Mackey, 2007; MacWhinney & O'Grady, 2015; Ortega & Han, 2017; Loewen & Sato, 2017; Paradis, 2009; Rebuschat, 2015; Slabakova, 2016; Taguchi & Roever, 2017; Thomas, 2004; Wen, Borges Mota, & McNeill, 2015); some are encyclopaedic in scope and ambition (e.g. Atkinson, 2011; R. Ellis, 2015; Gass & Mackey, 2012; Gass, Behney, & Plonsky, 2013; Herschensohn & Young-Scholten, 2013; Ortega, 2009; Ritchie & Bhatia, 2009; Robinson, 2013); some pay detailed attention to research design and methods and data analysis (e.g. Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014; Duff, 2008; Kasper & Wagner, 2014; Li Wei & Moyer, 2008; Mackey & Gass, 2015; Mackey & Marsden, 2016; Marsden, Morgan-Short, Thompson, & Abugaber, 2018; Norris, Ross, & Schoonen, 2015; Phakiti, De Costa, Plonsky, & Starfield, 2018; Plonsky, 2015).

This particular book is intended as a unified introduction to the field, for students without a substantial prior background in linguistics. We begin with an introduction to key concepts (Chapter 1) and a historical account of how the second language learning field has developed (Chapter 2). In later chapters (3–9) we have made a selection from across the range of L2 studies

of a range of theoretical positions which we believe are most active and significant. To represent linguistic theorizing, we have concentrated on the Universal Grammar approach (Chapter 3). In Chapters 4 and 5 we deal with a selection of cognitive theories: in Chapter 4 we examine the application to L2 learning of general and implicit learning mechanisms, concentrating on emergentist and processing perspectives, while in Chapter 5 we explore the place of memory, explicit knowledge and attention, and their contribution to L2 skill acquisition in particular. Chapter 6 explores the concept of L2 interaction, tracing earlier and later versions of the Interaction Hypothesis and related theories. Chapter 7 examines a range of theoretical positions which assume the centrality of meaning-making for second language learning (functionalism, “cognitive linguistics”, L2 pragmatics). Chapter 8 deals with sociocultural theory and some of its more recent extensions (activity theory, dynamic assessment, concept-based instruction). In Chapter 9 we turn to the emergence of socially patterned variation in L2, and examine L2 socialization theory, as well as theories of L2 identity, agency and investment as applied. Each of these theoretical positions is explained, and then illustrated by discussion of a small number of key empirical studies which have been inspired by that approach. We use these studies to illustrate the methodologies which are characteristic of the different research traditions (from controlled laboratory-based studies of people learning artificial languages to naturalistic observation of informal learning in the community); the scope and nature of the language “facts” which are felt to be important within that family of theories; and the kinds of generalizations which are drawn. Where appropriate, we refer our readers to parallels in first language acquisition research, and also to more comprehensive treatments of the research evidence relevant to different theoretical positions. Each chapter concludes with an evaluation section (see below). We have introduced an entirely new chapter (10) which discusses prospects for more integrative approaches to L2 theorizing. We review contemporary calls for building shared, transdisciplinary frameworks within which to locate the various research traditions, and we present two current integrative initiatives: the Modular Online Growth and Use of Language (MOGUL) project, and Complexity Theory/Dynamic Systems Theory (DST).

In addition to these revisions, we have updated our timeline of important milestones in the development of L2 research, as well as our glossary explaining key terms used in the book.

0.2 Comparing Second Language Learning Perspectives

We want to encourage our readers to compare and contrast the various theoretical perspectives we discuss in the book, so that they can get a better sense of the kinds of issues which different theories are trying to explain, and the extent to which they are supported to date with empirical evidence.

In reviewing our chosen perspectives, therefore, we evaluate each systematically, considering the nature and extent of empirical support and paying attention to the following factors:

- The claims and scope of the theory;
- The view of language involved in the theory;
- The view of the language learning process;
- The view of the learner.

In Chapter 1 we discuss each of these factors briefly, introducing key terminology and critical issues which have proved important in distinguishing one theory from another.

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1 Second Language Learning

Key Concepts and Issues

1.1 Introduction

This preparatory chapter provides an overview of key concepts and issues which will recur throughout the book. We offer introductory definitions of a range of terms, and try to equip the reader with the means to compare the goals and claims of particular theories with one another. We also summarize key issues, and indicate where they will be explored in more detail later in the book.

The main themes to be dealt with in following sections are:

- 1.2 What makes for a “good” explanation or theory
- 1.3 Views on the nature of language
- 1.4 Views of the language learning process
- 1.5 Views of the language learner
- 1.6 Links between language learning theory and social practice.

First, however, we must offer a preliminary definition of our most central concept, “second language learning” (SLL). We define this broadly, to include the learning of any language, to any level, provided only that the learning of the “second” language takes place sometime later than the learning by infants and very young children of their first language(s) (i.e. from around the age of 4).

Simultaneous infant bilingualism from birth is of course a common phenomenon, but this is a specialist topic, with its own literature, which we do not try to address in this book; for overviews see, for example, Serratrice (2013) and Nicoladis (2018). We do, however, take account of the thriving research interest in interactions and mutual influences between “first” languages (L1s) and later-acquired languages, surveyed, for example, in Cook and Li Wei (2016) and Pavlenko (2011); aspects of this work are discussed in later chapters.

For us, therefore, “second languages” are any languages learned later than in earliest childhood. They may indeed be the second language (the L2) the learner is working with, in a literal sense, or they may be his/her third, fourth

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or fifth language. They encompass both languages of wider communication encountered within the local region or community (e.g. in educational institutions, at the workplace or in the media) and truly foreign languages, which have no substantial local uses or numbers of speakers. We include “foreign” languages under our more general term of “second” languages because we believe that many (if not all) of the underlying learning processes are broadly similar for more local and more remote target languages, despite differing learning purposes, circumstances and, often, the quantity and nature of experiences with the language. (And, of course, languages are increasingly accessible via the internet, a means of communication which cuts across any simple “local”/“foreign” distinction.)

We are also interested in all kinds of learning, whether formal, planned and systematic (as in classroom-based learning) or informal and incidental to communication (as when a new language is “picked up” in the community or via the internet). Following the proposals of Stephen Krashen (1981), some L2 researchers have made a principled terminological distinction between formal, conscious learning and informal, unconscious acquisition. Krashen’s “Acquisition–Learning” hypothesis is discussed further in Chapter 2; however, many researchers in the field do not distinguish between the two terms, and unless specially indicated, we ourselves will be using both terms interchangeably. (Note, in Chapters 4 and 5, where the distinction between conscious and unconscious learning is central, we will use the terms “implicit” and “explicit” learning, which often broadly align with the distinction between “acquisition” and “learning”.)

1.2 What Makes for a Good Theory?

Second language (L2) learning is an immensely complex phenomenon. Millions of human beings experience L2 learning and may have a good practical understanding of activities that helped them to learn. But this experience and common-sense understanding are clearly not enough to help us explain the learning process fully. We know, for a start, that people cannot reliably describe the language system that they have internalized, nor the mechanisms that process, store and retrieve many aspects of that new language. We need to understand L2 learning better than we do, for two basic reasons:

1. Because improved knowledge in this domain is interesting in itself and can contribute to a more general understanding about the nature of language, human learning and intercultural communication, and thus about the human mind itself, as well as how all these affect each other;
2. Because the knowledge will be useful. If we become better able to account for both success and failure in L2 learning, there will be a payoff for many teachers and their learners.

We can only pursue a better understanding of L2 learning in an organized and productive way if our efforts are guided by some form of theory

(Hulstijn, 2014; Jordan, 2013; VanPatten & J. Williams, 2015). For our purposes, a theory is a (more or less) abstract set of claims about significant entities within the phenomenon under study, the relationships between them, and the processes that bring about change. Thus, a theory aims not just at description, but at explanation. Theories may be embryonic and restricted in scope, or more elaborate, explicit and comprehensive. They may deal with different areas of interest; thus, a property theory will be primarily concerned with modelling the nature of the language system to be acquired, while a transition theory will be primarily concerned with modelling the developmental processes of acquisition (Gregg, 2003; Jordan, 2004, Chapter 5; Sharwood Smith, Truscott, & Hawkins, 2013). One particular property theory may deal only with one domain of language (such as morphosyntax, phonology or the lexicon). Likewise, one particular transition theory itself may deal only with a particular stage of L2 learning or with the learning of some particular subcomponent of language; or it may propose learning mechanisms that are much more general in scope. Worthwhile theories are collaboratively produced and evolve through a process of systematic enquiry in which the claims of the theory are assessed against some kind of evidence or data. This may take place through hypothesis-testing through formal experiment, or through more ecological procedures, where naturally occurring data are analysed. In addition, bottom-up theory development can happen, usually through reflections on data (whether naturally or experimentally elicited), from which theories can emerge and become articulated. (There is now a considerable number of manuals offering guidance on research methods in both traditions, such as Mackey & Gass, 2012; Phakiti, De Costa, Plonsky, & Starfield, 2018. We will provide basic introductions to a range of research procedures as needed, throughout the book and also in the Glossary.) Finally, the process of theory building is a reflexive one; new developments in the theory lead to the need to collect new information and explore different phenomena and different patterns in the potentially infinite world of “facts” and data. Puzzling “facts” and patterns that fail to fit with expectations in turn lead to new, more powerful theoretical insights.

To make these ideas more concrete, an early “model” of L2 learning is shown in Figure 1.1, taken from Spolsky (1989). This model represents a “general theory of second language learning”, as the proposer described it (p. 14). The model encapsulates this researcher’s theoretical views on the overall relationship between contextual factors, individual learner differences, learning opportunities and learning outcomes. It is thus an ambitious model, in the breadth of phenomena it is trying to explain. The rectangular boxes show the factors (or variables) which the researcher believes are most significant for learning, that is, where variation can lead to differences in success or failure. The arrows connecting the various boxes show directions of influence. The contents of the various boxes are defined at great length, as consisting of clusters of interacting “Conditions” (74 in all: 1989, pp. 16–25), which make language learning success more or less likely. These summarize the results of a great variety of empirical language learning research, as Spolsky interprets them.

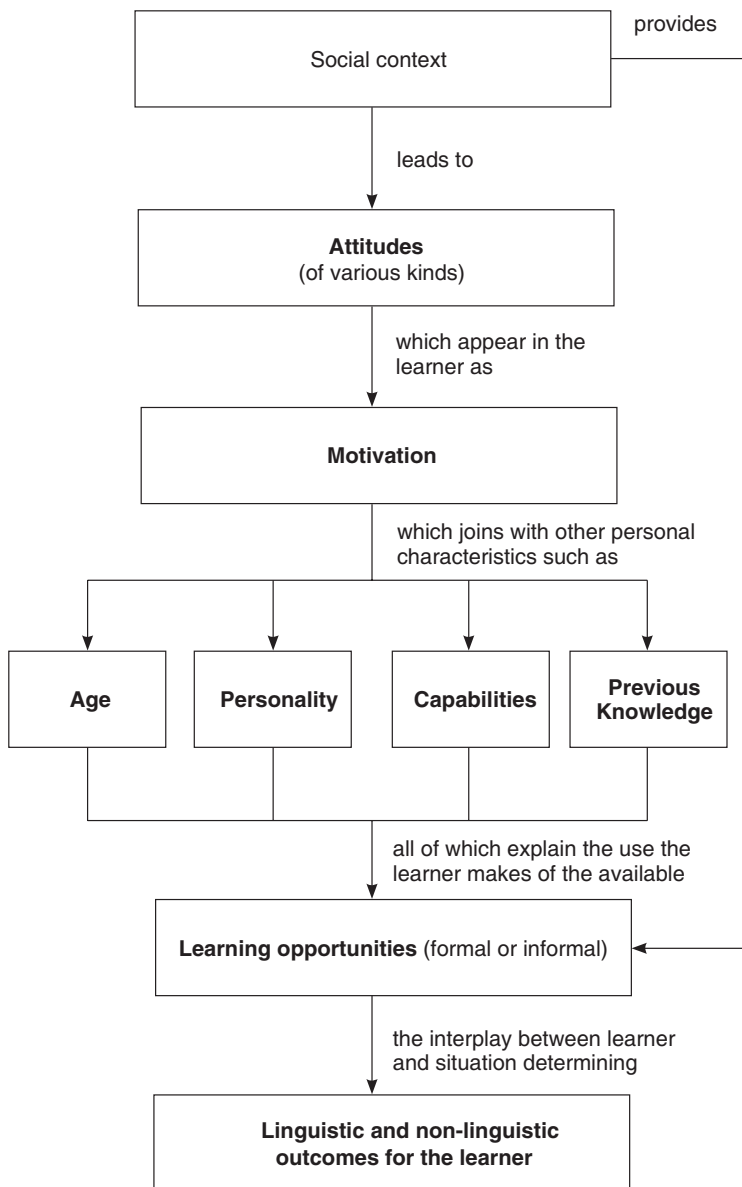


Figure 1.1 Spolsky's General Model of Second Language Learning

Source: Spolsky, 1989, p. 28

How would we begin to evaluate this or any other model, or, even more modestly, to decide that this was a view of the language learning process we could work with? This would depend partly on the extent to which the author has taken account of evidence and provided a systematic account of it. It would also depend on rather broader philosophical positions: for example, are we satisfied with an account of human learning which sees individual differences as both relatively fixed and also highly influential for learning? Finally, it would also depend on the particular focus of our own interests, within L2 learning; this particular model seems well adapted for the study of the individual learner, for example, but has relatively little to say about the social relationships in which they engage, the way they process new language, nor the kinds of language system they construct.

Since at least the mid 1990s, there has been debate about the adequacy of the theoretical frameworks used to underpin research on L2 learning. One main line of criticism has been that L2 research (as exemplified by Spolsky, 1989) has historically been too preoccupied with the cognition of the individual learner, and sociocultural dimensions of learning have been neglected. From this perspective language is an essentially social phenomenon, and L2 learning itself is a “social accomplishment”, which is “situated in social interaction” (Firth & Wagner, 2007, p. 807) and discoverable through scrutiny of L2 use, using techniques such as conversation analysis (Pekarek Doehler, 2010; Kasper & Wagner, 2011). A second—though not unrelated—debate has concerned the extent to which L2 theorizing has become too broad. Long (1993) and others argued that “normal science” advanced through competition between a limited number of theories, and that the L2 field was weakened by theory proliferation. This received a vigorous riposte from Lantolf (1996) among others, advancing the postmodern view that knowledge claims are a matter of discourses. From this point of view, all scientific theories are viewed as “metaphors that have achieved the status of acceptance by a group of people we refer to as scientists” (p. 721), and scientific theory building is all about “taking metaphors seriously” (p. 723). For Lantolf, any reduction in the number of “official metaphors” debated could “suffocate” those espousing different world views.

These debates about the nature of knowledge, theory and explanation have persisted up to the present. It is probably fair to say that the majority of L2 researchers today adopt some version of a “rationalist” or “realist” position (Jordan, 2004; Long, 2007; Sealey & Carter, 2004, 2014). This position is grounded in the philosophical view that an objective and knowable world exists (i.e. not only discourses), and that it is possible to build and test successively more powerful explanations of how that world works, through systematic programmes of enquiry and of problem-solving. Indeed, this is the position we take in this book. However, like numerous others (Jordan, 2004; Ortega, 2011; Rothman & VanPatten, 2013; Zuengler & Miller, 2006), we acknowledge that a proliferation of theories is necessary to make better sense of the varied phenomena of SLL, the agency of language learners, and

the contexts and communities of practice in which they operate. We believe that our understanding advances best where theories are freely debated and challenged. As later chapters show, we accommodate a range of linguistic, cognitive, sociocultural and poststructuralist perspectives. But in all cases, we would expect to find the following:

1. Clear and explicit statements about the ground the theory aims to cover and the claims it is making;
2. Systematic procedures for confirming/disconfirming the theory, through data gathering and interpretation: the claims of a good theory must be testable/falsifiable in some way;
3. Not only descriptions of L2 phenomena, but attempts to explain why they are so, and to propose mechanisms for change, i.e. some form of transition theory;
4. Last but not least, engagement with other theories in the field, and serious attempts to account for at least some of the phenomena which are “common ground” in ongoing public discussion (VanPatten & J. Williams, 2015). Remaining sections of this chapter offer a preliminary overview of numbers of these.

(For fuller discussion of rationalist evaluation criteria, see Gregg, 2003; Hulstijn, 2014; Jordan, 2004, pp. 87–122; Sealey & Carter, 2004, pp. 85–106; and for a poststructuralist perspective on theory in second language acquisition and applied linguistics, see McNamara, 2012; S. Talmy, 2014.)

1.3 Views on the Nature of Language

1.3.1 Levels of Language

Linguists have traditionally viewed language as a complex communication system, which must be analysed on a number of levels (or subcomponents), such as phonology, morphology, lexis, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, discourse. (Readers unsure about this basic descriptive terminology will find help from the Glossary, and in more depth from an introductory linguistics text, such as Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2017.) They have differed about the extent of interconnections between these levels; for example, while, e.g., Chomsky argued at one time that “grammar is autonomous and independent of meaning” (1957, p. 17), another tradition initiated by the British linguist Firth claims that “there is no boundary between lexis and grammar: lexis and grammar are interdependent” (Stubbs, 1996, p. 36). (See also our discussion of O’Grady’s work in Chapter 4.)

In examining different perspectives on SLL, we will first of all be looking at the levels of language which they attempt to take into account. (Does language learning start with words or with pragmatics?) We will also examine the degree of integration or separation that the theories assume, across

various levels of language. We will find that the control of syntax and morphology is commonly seen as central to language learning, and that most general L2 theories try to account for development in this area. Other levels of language receive much more variable attention, and some areas are commonly treated in a semi-autonomous way, as specialist fields. This is often true for L2 pragmatics, lexical development and phonology, for example: see Kasper and Rose (2002), Bardovi-Harlig (2012, 2017) or Taguchi and Roever (2017) on pragmatics; Daller, Milton, and Treffers-Daller (2007), Kroll and Ma (2017), Meara (2009), Schmitt (2008) or Webb and Nation (2017) on vocabulary; Colantoni, Steele, and Escudero (2015), Derwing and Munro (2015), Eckman (2012) and Moyer (2013) on phonology and L2 pronunciation.

As a consequence of the focus on morphosyntax of many L2 theorists, both those concerned with property theories and those concerned with transition theories, our own attention in much of what follows reflects this. Indeed, in our view, some of the most controversial and theoretically stimulating challenges have been thrown up in the area of learning morphosyntax. However, as noted earlier, an increasing number of theories are more explicitly integrating the lexicon with morphosyntax (on this, see Chapters 3 and 4 in particular, and also the MOGUL framework discussed in Chapter 10).

1.3.2 Competence and Performance

Throughout the 20th century, theorists changed their minds about their approach to language data. Should this be the collection and analysis of actual attested samples of language in use, for example by recording and analyzing people's speech? The structuralist linguistics tradition of the early 20th century leaned towards this view. Or should it be to theorize underlying principles and rules which govern language behaviour, in its potentially infinite variety? The linguist Noam Chomsky famously argued that it is the business of theoretical linguistics to study and model underlying language competence, rather than the performance data of actual utterances which people have produced (Chomsky, 1965). By competence, Chomsky was referring to an abstract representation of language knowledge hidden inside our minds, with the potential to create and understand original utterances in a given language (rather than sets of stored formulae or patterns). Much of the Chomsky-inspired research discussed in Chapter 3 indeed concerns itself with exploring L2 competence in this sense.

However, even if the competence/performance distinction is accepted, there are clearly difficulties in studying competence. Performance data is seen as only an imperfect reflection of competence; for Chomsky himself, the infinite creativity of an underlying system can never adequately be reflected in a finite sample of speech or writing (1965, p. 18). Researchers interested in exploring underlying competence have not generally taken much interest in the analysis of linguistic corpora, for example (see below). Instead,

they are likely to believe that competence is best accessed indirectly and under controlled conditions, through experimental tasks such as sentence-completion, eye-tracking or grammaticality judgement tests (roughly, tests in which people are offered sample sentences, which are in (dis)agreement with the rules proposed for the underlying competence, and invited to say whether they judge them to be acceptable or not: Ionin, 2012). What exactly is being measured in such tasks is regularly debated (Gutiérrez, 2013; Plonsky, Marsden, Crowther, Gass, & Spinner, in press).

This split between competence and performance has never been universally accepted, however, with, e.g., linguists in the British tradition of Firth and Halliday arguing for radically different models. Firth himself described such dualisms as “a quite unnecessary nuisance” (Firth, 1957, p. 2n, quoted in Stubbs, 1996, p. 44). In the Firthian view, the only option for linguists is to study language in use, and there is no opposition between language as system and observed instances of language behaviour; the only difference is one of perspective.

Of course, the abstract language system cannot be “read” directly off small samples of actual text, any more than the underlying climate of some geographical region of the world can be modelled from today’s weather (a metaphor of Michael Halliday, quoted in Stubbs, 1996, pp. 44–45). The development of corpus linguistics has challenged the competence-performance distinction and has revitalized the writing of observation-based, “probabilistic” grammars (Conrad, 2010; Hunston & Francis, 2000). In this form of linguistics, very large corpora (databases) comprising millions of words of running text are collected, stored electronically and analysed with a growing range of software tools. New descriptions of English grounded in corpus analysis have provided greatly enhanced performance-based accounts of the grammar and vocabulary of spoken language and of variation among spoken and written genres (Biber & Reppen, 2015; Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Dang, Coxhead, & Webb, 2017; O’Keefe & McCarthy, 2010). In L1 acquisition research, the CHILDES project has made extensive child language corpora available in an increasing number of languages, and is a central tool in contemporary research (MacWhinney, 2000, 2007). Within the field of L2 learning, large new learner corpora are also becoming available, which can be analysed both from a bottom-up perspective (to find patterns in the data) and from a top-down perspective (to test specific hypotheses) (Myles, 2008, 2015; Granger, Gilquin, & Meunier, 2015). More recently, emphasis is shifting towards the integration of experimental and corpus-based approaches in computational linguistics (Rebuschat, Meurers, & McEnery, 2017).

In making sense of contemporary perspectives on SLL, then, we will also need to be aware of the extent to which a competence/performance distinction is assumed. This will have significant consequences for the research methodologies associated with various positions, for example the extent to which these pay attention to naturalistic samples and databases of learner language, spoken and written, or rely on more controlled and focused—but

more indirect—testing of learners’ underlying knowledge. (For further discussion of the relationship between language use and language learning, see Section 1.4.8.)

1.3.3 Models of Language: Formalist, Functionalist and Emergentist

A further debate in contemporary linguistics which is relevant to SLL theorizing has to do with whether language is viewed primarily as a formal or a functional system. From a formal linguistics perspective such as that adopted in structuralist or Chomskyan theory, language comprises a set of abstract elements (parts of speech, morphosyntactic features, phonemes and so on) which are combined together by a series of rules or procedures. Semantics forms part of this formal system, but does not drive it (for discussion see, for example, Rispoli, 1999).

From a functionalist perspective, on the other hand, research and theorizing must start with the communicative functions of language, and functionalists seek to explain the structure of language as a reflection of meaning-making. For example, a speaker’s intention to treat a particular piece of information as already known to their interlocutor, or alternatively as new for them, is seen by theories such as Halliday’s systemic functional grammar as motivating particular grammar phenomena such as clefting (fronting a piece of information within a sentence: *It was my mother who liked jazz*). Theoretical linguists who have adopted this perspective in varying ways, and whose work has been important for both L1 and L2 research, include Givón (e.g. 1979, 1985), Halliday (e.g. Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), Lakoff (1987), Langacker (1987) and L. Talmy (2000) (and see Chapter 7 for discussion of this perspective in L2 research).

A third theoretical perspective which is important in L2 research is that of emergentism. From this viewpoint, language does not have fixed abstract, underlying representations. Rather, language is conceived of as emerging in a dynamic fashion from language use, and its form is strongly and continuously influenced by statistical patterns detected by the learner in the surrounding input. Emergentist perspectives are explored in Chapters 4 and 10.

1.3.4 Models of Language: Communicative Competence and CAF

Sociolinguists and many language educators have long been interested in models of language proficiency which are somewhat broader than those discussed so far, and which take full account of the ability to use language appropriately in its social context. The most famous of these proposals is of course the “communicative competence” concept proposed by Dell Hymes (1972), and adapted for discussions of L2 learning by Canale and Swain (1980). The ongoing influence of these ideas can be traced in L2 learning research, in work on L2 pragmatics and on interactional competence, discussed here in Chapters 7 and 9.

"This book continues to be a comprehensive and up-to-date introduction to the ever-growing field of Second Language Learning research. With its systematic structure and its numerous illustrations from empirical work, the book will allow students and language teachers alike to compare and to contrast the aims, the claims and the scopes of the leading L2 theories in the field today. If you want to know something about the scientific study of Second Language Learning, there is no better place to start than right here."

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Written by a team of leading experts working in different SLA specialisms, this fourth edition is a clear and concise introduction to the main theories of second language acquisition (SLA) from multiple perspectives, comprehensively updated to reflect the very latest developments in SLA research in recent years.

The book covers all the main theoretical perspectives currently active in SLA and sets each chapter within a broader framework. Each chapter examines the claims and scope of each theory and how each views language, the learner and the acquisition process, supplemented by summaries of key studies and data examples from a variety of languages. Chapters end with an evaluative summary of the theories discussed. Key features to this fourth edition include updated accounts of developments in cognitive approaches to second language (L2) learning, the implications of advances in generative linguistics and the "social turn" in L2 research, with re-worked chapters on functional, sociocultural and sociolinguistic perspectives, and an entirely new chapter on theory integration, in addition to updated examples using new studies.

Second Language Learning Theories continues to be an essential resource for graduate students in second language acquisition.

Rosamond Mitchell is Emeritus Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Southampton, UK.

Florence Myles is Professor of Second Language Acquisition at the University of Essex, UK.

Emma Marsden is Professor at the Centre for Research into Language Learning and Use at the University of York, UK.

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