"A" Stands for Acquisition: A Response to Firth and Wagner

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FIRTH AND WAGNER'S (F&W) PAPER RAISES important issues about second language (L2) studies. Its call for a more critical examination of taken-for-granted concepts in L2 research is well taken, and so is the admonition to tighten up our transcription practices when we work with conversational data. In my comments, I will focus on some positions advanced by the authors that I find problematic.¹

First, I shall ruthlessly exploit my privileged knowledge of the first transcript that F&W reanalyzed. The continuation of this transcript was published in Faerch, Haastrup, and Phillipson (1984, p. 31). It reads as presented in Table 1:

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**TABLE 1**
Transcript of *historie* Conversation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NS but you like reading books about</th>
<th>aha -</th>
<th>not about histori this history - you</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

**NS**

L. know - er er young histories - er not not with this old thing you know

**NS**

aha (laugh) in er in er for example - what

**L.**

kings or - all that - but er (laugh)

**NS** - 1930- or so - do you mean - recent - in more recent years like that

**L.**

yes er maybe

**NS**

- er I mean in years which aren't so far away - from us now -

**L.**

er - a

**NS**

book - a - a history is - maybe on a boy - girl and - er this er young

**NS**

oh you mean a story - maybe - just a story - about

**L.**

people life and yer - yer

**NS**

people - yes not not necessarily not - in the past no - I see yes

**L.**

yer - no

**NS**

- no now I understand you (laugh)

**L.**

(laugh)

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*Note. NS = Native Speaker; L = Learner*

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I am unable to detect any evidence in this data that the Danish learner changed her mind about what she wanted to talk about—reading stories or reading about history. From the videotape, which is available from the English Department of the University of Copenhagen and has been shown in Denmark and throughout Scandinavia on many occasions, there is every evidence in the first part of the conversation that the Danish student used the Danish word _historie_, knowing that this was not a good solution for what she wanted to express: She spoke more slowly, more softly, and looked at her interlocutor for confirmation. Granted, this information is not included in the transcript and hence it is not publicly available. The transcript is all the reader can go by.

This small point of contention raises a number of bigger issues more important than quibbling about multiple interpretations of this particular transcript. First of all, there is a lot of conversational data around in L2 research, but not all conversational data require equal treatment. As has been said repeatedly, all transcription is necessarily selective. How data is transcribed, analyzed, and presented depends on the research objective, the researcher's theoretical commitment, and not least, the context of presentation. For instance, adjacency pairs were identified by Sacks as a conversational unit on the basis of very carefully transcribed conversations, following a particular method of transcription suited for the project of Conversation Analysis (CA), that is, demonstrating how social order is constructed at the microlevel of conversational interaction. Any textbook on discourse analysis examines adjacency pairs, but usually the exchanges presented for illustration are either plausible inventions or, when extracted from authentic conversation, presented in an extremely reductive fashion, as in the standard examples for greeting-greeting (A: Hello.—B: Hi.) and question-answer pairs (A: How are you?—B: Fine.) (e.g., Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 230). I do not think there is anything wrong with this. A more data-loyal presentation could obscure the purpose at hand, which is to demonstrate a structural relationship between utterances in adjacent turns. The _historie_ example is placed at the beginning of a theoretical article on communication strategies, which is a chapter in a book on communication strategies. Its purpose is to illustrate different categories of communication strategies, and it so happened that the phenomena we categorized as communication strategies, according to the adopted model of speech production, conveniently occurred in a continuous stretch of interactional talk. We could just as well have used data from a picture description task or other noninteractional data, but then we would not have contributed to this enjoyable controversy.

A more interesting and important point is the theory-dependency of transcription. Ochs (1979) discussed this issue in a well-known paper, demonstrating, among other things, that transcript arrangements may privilege certain interlocutors over others. Ehlich and Rehbein's HIAT system (halb-interpretative Arbeitstranskriptionen, "semi-interpretive work transcription," e.g., Ehlich, 1993), adopts as its organizational principle that of a musical score, which represents each interlocutor's speech activity on continuous horizontal lines; thus preconceived categorizations of verbal production as turns are avoided. A simplified version of the HIAT system is illustrated in the _historie_ transcript above. Of course, any turn-based transcript makes assumptions about the definition and identification of turns; whether these turn assignments are consonant with interlocutors' perceptions, that is, whether they reflect emic categorization, is not at all clear. In the CHAT system, the transcription system of the CHILDES database (MacWhinney, 1995), the unit per line is the utterance, reflecting a consensus among many first language (L1) acquisition researchers that the utterance is an appropriate unit of analysis for studying the development of children's linguistic knowledge. For L2 data, a similar point has been made by Crookes (1990). An attempt to adapt CHAT to written speech act data proved unsuccessful because the utterance is _not_ an adequate unit of analysis for speech act data. The point is that there is no transcription system that is privileged over others in and of itself. Transcription adequacy is always relative to the adopted theory and research goals. This point has also been emphasized in Edward and Lampert's (1993) book _Talking data_, which discusses a number of the most frequently used transcription systems, including the HIAT system.

There is thus a three-way dependency—theory shapes transcripts, transcripts shape results, the results shape theory. I fully join F&W's complaint that, in L2 research, this circle of dependencies has not always received the attention it deserves. But this complaint is not new, and it may be helpful to remind ourselves that more careful transcription was advocated in the past by L2 researchers representing very different traditions. In continental European second and foreign language classroom research, researchers like Wagner (1983), Rehbein (1984), Bolte and Herrlitz...
 Without predetermining fundamental categories that constitute real people. Of course, intrinsically interactional discourse activities such as repair, elicitations, and feedback require a transcript that clearly represents the flow of participants’ speech activity relative to each other, without predetermining fundamental categories such as turns. The other example of a research tradition that has paid even closer attention to the finer details of speech activity than the transcription conventions in CA or HIAT comes from the quarters that are among the targets of F&W’s critique, namely psycholinguistic research on L2 speech production. Especially in the Kassel project, scholars like Dechert, Möhle, and Raupach (1984) used very fine-grained transcription that is capable of capturing temporal characteristics of speech, such as different kinds of pauses, false starts, draws, changes in the rate of articulation, and so on. The theoretical assumption underlying such detailed notation is that temporal variables provide a window to both the representation of linguistic knowledge and the processes of speech production. In communication strategy (CS) research, for example, these features of speech production, together with retrospective reports, have been interpreted as indicators of planning decisions and lexical search (e.g., Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Poullisse, Bongaerts, & Kellerman, 1987). In L2 acquisition research, it would indeed be helpful to pay closer attention to the temporal characteristics of speech because they may be one indicator of interlanguage development. So, with regard to transcription, we should transcribe adequately to the research purpose at hand. CA conventions have no inherent superiority over other notation systems.

Moving onwards and upwards to the conceptual level, F&W critique three fundamental concepts of L2 (acquisition) research: those of non-native speaker, learner, and interlanguage (IL). Again, I share their viewpoint to some extent, as I have written in several places (e.g., Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Poullisse, Bongaerts, & Kellerman, 1987). In L2 acquisition research, it would indeed be helpful to pay closer attention to the temporal characteristics of speech because they may be one indicator of interlanguage development. So, with regard to transcription, we should transcribe adequately to the research purpose at hand. CA conventions have no inherent superiority over other notation systems.

To start with learner and nonnative speaker, these are constructs invented by practitioners of L2 studies in order to talk about the kinds of agents that are the object of their inquiry. As such, these notions are highly reductionist in that they abstract from the complex multiple identities that constitute real people. Of course, all social sciences, even disciplines such as anthropology that favor holistic and socially situated approaches to research, such as ethnography, construct their idealized agents by reducing away what seems trivial in terms of the adopted theory. Surely academic disciplines, and approaches within them, differ according to the degree to which they operate in a holistic and contextualized manner versus a particularizing and isolating fashion, but I think it is debatable whether the conversation analyst’s “conversationalist” is any less reductionist than the cognitive psychologist’s “limited capacity information processor.” The constructs “nonnative speaker” and “learner” focus upon the aspect that is common to the studied agents, and relevant in the global research context (or discourse universe) of L2 study generally and L2 acquisition (SLA) specifically. As F&W note, the generic notions “learner” or “nonnative speaker” are more or less specified in studies, mostly in terms of L1, L2 proficiency level, length of residence in the target community, age, gender, and sometimes but not often, social class; if the focus is on individual differences, we find all sorts of cognitive and affective variables specified as well. These learner variables are not included in studies because they are relevant to the interlocutors in the ongoing interaction (to the extent that the data is interactional), but because the researcher has theoretically or empirically motivated reason to believe that such variables may influence L2 use and learning in some way. Of course, interlocutors may attend to these or any other categories, for instance, culture-specific notions of self and face. Identifying such emic categories has been one of the traditional goals of ethnography. In SLA, we have recently seen an increase in ethnographic or ethnographically inspired studies that situate L2 learners in the sociocultural context where L2 acquisition takes place. These studies are quite different though from what, I think, F&W have in mind. I will come back to them shortly.

I am not too concerned that generic terms such as “learner” and “nonnative speaker” suggest to anybody that all learners or all nonnative speakers are the same. What they do suggest is a researcher’s focus on human agents. Perhaps such terms should be seen more as indexical than as referential in function: When we open an article and notice that people are referred to as learners or nonnative speakers, we have good reason to believe that the article is about L2 research. If the article were talking about consumers, patients, or passengers, we would contextualize it differently.

Now about interlanguage (IL). When the con-
struct was first introduced with a different term—for instance, as “transitional competence” by Corder (1967)—, it was conceptualized as a construct parallel to children’s developing language. Corder argued that just as it was pointless to assess child language in terms of adult language and talk about “errors” when child forms were different from adults’, it was also pointless to set off learners’ “errors” against native speakers’ “correct” forms because such a view ran counter to the idea that learners creatively construct their IL. Therefore, what Corder advocated was actually a very emic view, a view that informs many longitudinal studies modeled on child language acquisition research. The comparative focus was introduced through Selinker’s (1972) recipe for research designs in IL study: performance data in the learners’ IL, their L1, and L2, that is, one set of nonnative speaker data paralleled with two different sets of native speaker data. This design was inherited from Contrastive Analysis (note that the acronym CA has shifted its meaning since). Bley-Vroman (1983) warned against the “comparative fallacy” in IL research; I cautioned against the same problem in the context of interlanguage pragmatics (e.g., Kasper, 1992), but no one has listened much to either of us (including myself). Perhaps F&W will be able to make their case more effectively, but I am not too hopeful. SLA researchers have legitimate and important interests in assessing learners’ IL knowledge and actions not just as achievements in their own right but measured against some kind of standard. The solution to the comparative fallacy that I envision does not renounce on comparison but selects more appropriate baselines. For instance, when you study the phonological development and ultimate attainment of Anglo-Canadians learning French, do not choose as a baseline monolingual speakers of Canadian French; choose highly competent French-English bilinguals. Careful choices of baselines are not just crucial for obtaining valid research results but also highly consequential in applied contexts, such as L2 teaching and assessment and speech pathology.

Finally, I shall address what in my view is the most nagging problem with the F&W paper. The paper purports to redirect the field of SLA, but has in fact very little to say about L2 acquisition. Any theory of language acquisition has to make explicit what the conditions and mechanisms of learning are. In other words, it has to address the question of how learners’ interlanguage knowledge progresses from stage A to stage B, and what events promote or hinder such progress. F&W do not address these questions. What they seem to call for are socially situated studies of second language use. Yet as they also note, there are already a number of such studies, which adopt approaches such as interactional sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis, and—especially in the work of Firth and Wagner themselves—Conversation Analysis (CA). But none of these approaches has anything to say about L2 learning. It would be fruitful to explore how discourse analysis in its different incarnations could be combined with (some) theories of L2 acquisition; however, F&W do not offer any suggestions to that effect—perhaps because CA, their discourse approach of choice, is strictly anti-cognitive? On the other hand, Gregg’s (1993) view of the project of SLA succinctly identifies “the acquisition (or non-acquisition) of L2 competence” as “the overall explanandum” in SLA (Gregg, p. 278, cited in F&W, p. 287). One does not have to subscribe to Gregg’s theoretical commitment to Universal Grammar as the only compelling approach to SLA, nor to the narrow definition of L2 knowledge as competence in the Chomskyan sense, in order to accept the (rather obvious) proposition that SLA is about what its name suggests. If the “A” of “SLA” is dropped, we are looking at the much wider field of second language studies, which spans as diverse endeavors as intercultural and cross-cultural communication, second language pedagogy, micro- and macrosociolinguistics with reference to second languages and dialects, societal and individual multilingualism, and SLA.

Notwithstanding my interest in pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis, I am comfortable with an essentially cognitivist definition of SLA. This is because in the final analysis, learning or acquiring anything is about establishing new knowledge structures and making that knowledge available for effective and efficient use. Issues of knowledge representation, processing, and recall have to be central to any discipline that is concerned with learning. A noncognitivist discipline that has learning as its central research object is a contradiction in terms. But this being said, there is a whole range of issues about SLA that cognitive theory does not tell us anything about, nor does any formal (as opposed to functional, not informal) theory of language, for that matter. Because SLA, just as L1 acquisition, always takes place in a social context, one can suspect that the social context in some way influences SLA. Furthermore, because language learners are not passive recipients of input but actively participate in different kinds of in-
teraction, they also construct their own identities and those of their respective others; these experiences are likely to be reflected in different parts of learners' developing L2 competence. Among the "at least forty" theories of SLA counted by Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991, p. 227), there are many that address these aspects of SLA, and from different theoretical vantage points. Vygotsky's (1934/1964) theory of cognitive development has been applied to L2 development (Lantolf & Appel, 1994); specifically, Vygotsky's construct of a Zone of Proximal Development has been connected to the input and practice opportunities afforded by different participation structures (Shea, 1994). As a social-psychological approach, Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991) has the potential to explain interlocutors' convergence and divergence in terms of interactional dynamics and attitudinal factors, and to relate the conversational practices of learners and their interlocutors to the learning opportunities provided in different kinds of encounters. Different ethnographic approaches to L2 classroom research have been adopted in recent work by Atkinson and Ramathan (1995), Duff (1995), and to sojourners' (Siegal, 1996) and immigrants' development of communicative competence in the target community (Peirce, 1995a); theoretical discussion of ethnography in L2 research has been offered by Watson-Gegeo (1988), Davis (1995), Lazaraton (1995), and Peirce (1995b). Language socialization theory (e.g., Schiefflin & Ochs, 1986) examines the dialectic relationship between linguistic and cultural practices in the interaction between experts (caretakers, teachers, native speakers) and novices (child or adult learners) from a developmental perspective. Studies applying language socialization theory to L2 acquisition have shown how linguistic and pragmatic competence, sociocultural knowledge, and learner identity are shaped by novice-expert interaction in various contexts (e.g., Poole, 1992; Duff, 1995; Willett, 1995; Pallotti, 1996; Siegal, 1996; He, 1997). Although compatible with the previously mentioned approaches, language socialization theory has a particularly rich potential for SLA because it is inherently developmental and requires (rather than just allows) establishing links between culture, cognition, and language, between the macrolevels of sociocultural and institutional contexts, and the microlevel of discourse. A good example is Poole's (1992) reinterpretation of interactional modification and feedback in ESL classroom discourse.

To conclude on a heretic note, if the excellent microanalytic tools of CA were incorporated into a language socialization approach to SLA, we might be able to reconstruct links between L2 discourse and the acquisition of different aspects of communicative competence that have been largely obscure thus far.

NOTE

1 This text is based on the original oral draft, presented as an invited response to F&W's paper at the symposium on Discourse Analysis at the 1996 AILA Congress. I have tried to retain some of its original stylistic flavor in the written version.

REFERENCES


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**National Endowment for the Humanities Announces Availability of Annual Report**

THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES 31ST ANNUAL REPORT IS NOW AVAILABLE. This year’s report contains brief descriptions of Endowment programs as well as a complete listing of all Endowment grants, entered by the division and program in which they were funded, for fiscal year 1996 (October 1, 1995 through September 30, 1996).

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