

The ups and downs of the monolingual bias and the bilingual turn in second language acquisition

Getting down to some specifics

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Cognitive and linguistic approaches to second language acquisition (SLA) (Corder 1963, Dulay, Burt & Krashen 1982, Selinker 1972, White 2003) derive their meaning from the epistemology and methodology of the Chomskyan paradigm – the study of language as a cognitive system. Chiefly concerned with establishing whether, how, and why non-native speakers differ from (monolingual) native speakers in their linguistic knowledge and processing, and their ultimate attainment (Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam 2009, 2011, DeKeyser in press, Granena & Long 2013, White & Genesee 1996) cognitive/linguistic approaches have had a dominant role in the theoretical landscape in the last fifty years. Highlighting this theoretical emphasis in what became a seminal article, Firth and Wagner (1997) called for a “social turn” that would place more emphasis on social dimensions of SLA, qualitative methods, and focus on individuals and inherent variation in language acquisition. The social turn, as it turns out, produced some reconceptualization of critical concepts in the field, proliferating at the same time yet more theories and approaches (Atkinson 2011, Long 2007). Pleased with this state of affairs yet concerned with SLA’s lack of trans disciplinary relevance beyond itself, Ortega (2010, 2013) has made another call recently: the “bilingual turn.” Central to Ortega’s concern is the emphasis on the monolingual norm and the concomitant deficit view of second language acquisition at the heart of cognitive approaches which, in her view, cast SLA in a negative light and prevents the field from make further progress. Placing SLA in a closer dialogue with other fields within bilingualism will achieve, Ortega argues, trans disciplinary relevance, and impact on education. But what does a “bilingual turn” exactly mean for SLA and what are the epistemological and practical needs for such turn?

In this talk I first trace the epistemology of cognitive approaches to SLA and justify the monolingual bias. I will also show that cognitive/linguistic approaches to SLA have already been in close dialogue with other fields within bilingualism, psychology, language acquisition, speech and hearing sciences and cognitive science. I will then turn to the field of bilingualism itself to show that a monolingual bias exists in that field as well, especially because it is deemed appropriate by the research questions that have been guided the inquiry so far. Finally, I will spell out what adopting a bilingual approach to SLA and bilingualism would mean, and the types of questions that should guide that type of research. I conclude by suggesting that these “turns” can only be justified by the needs and willingness to solve complex multidimensional societal problems, and by pressing research questions of compelling theoretical and practical urgency.