In this article, we begin by delineating the background to and motivations behind Firth and Wagner (1997), wherein we called for a reconceptualization of second language acquisition (SLA) research. We then outline and comment upon some of our critics’ reactions to the article. Next we review and discuss the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological impact the article has had on the SLA field. Thereafter, we reengage and develop some of the themes raised but left undeveloped in the 1997 article. These themes cluster around the notions of and interrelationships between language use, language learning, and language acquisition. Although we devote space to forwarding the position that the dichotomy of language use and acquisition cannot defensibly be maintained (and in this we take up a contrary position to that held in mainstream SLA), our treatment of the issues is essentially methodological. We focus on describing a variety of aspects of learning-in-action, captured in transcripts of recordings of naturally occurring foreign, second, or other language interactions. Through transcript analyses, we explore the possibilities of describing learning-in-action devoid of cognitivistic notions of language and learning. In so doing, we advance moves to formulate and establish a reconceptualized SLA.

WITH THE BENEFIT OF 10 YEARS OF HINDSIGHT, it is probably fair to say that our article (Firth & Wagner, 1997) touched a proverbial raw nerve within as well as around the periphery of the second language acquisition (SLA) community. Certainly the article’s evident impact on the profession has greatly exceeded our expectations. This is in no small measure thanks to The Modern Language Journal’s (MLJ) editor, Sally Sieloff Magnan, who so insightfully showcased the article and its thought-provoking responses, thereby providing a framework for an extraordinarily fruitful and lively debate. For some, the article has been a rallying cry for an alternative SLA; for others, it has presaged new lines of inquiry within a rapidly developing and multivaried research field; for many, it articulated misgivings and dissatisfaction with dominant SLA concepts, theories, and research practices. For others still, it was an unwarranted, misguided, perplexing, and naïve critique of a well-defined field of study. We begin by explaining the background to our 1997 article.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT OF FIRTH AND WAGNER (1997)

Firth and Wagner (1997) was conceived on the basis of a lingering sense of frustration with SLA as we saw it at that time—a sense that, in
large measure, prevailing, dominant SLA theory and concepts were myopic vis-à-vis language learning as social practice and language as a social phenomenon—and a strong sense that the field had to acknowledge more openly and more consequentially its limited vision, and, if possible, overcome its myopia. The frustrations with SLA emerged gradually, from a bottom-up process while working with our data materials—audiotape recordings of people at work in a variety of settings, engaging each other in a second/foreign/other language (L2). Our analyses revealed people who were artfully adept at overcoming apparent linguistic hurdles, exquisitely able to work together interactively, despite having what at first blush appeared to be an imperfect command of the languages they were using (Firth, 1990, 1991, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 1995d, 1996; Wagner 1995a, 1995b, 1996, 1998; Wagner & Firth, 1997). When we turned to apparently relevant areas of SLA for theoretical insight, applicable concepts, and methodologies, something was not right. Rather than depictions of interactional success in an L2, we found an overwhelming emphasis on and preoccupation with the individual’s linguistic and pragmatic failure. Rather than talk, we found input. Rather than achievement, we found an abundance of problem-sources. Rather than collaboration, invention, and an extraordinarily creative use of shared resources (which, to us, was learning-in-action), we found references to errors, input modifications, interference, and fossilizations. Try as we might at first, our observations of people using English as a lingua franca (i.e., a mediating language that is not a mother tongue [L1] for any of the interactants—see Firth, 1990, 1996, see also Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b; Seidlhofer, 2001, 2004) just would not fit the theory and concepts of SLA.

Yet such data materials were, surely, of critical relevance for the SLA program. Here, after all, were nonnative speakers who were clearly acquiring and using (new) forms of language on the fly—often language forms that were linguistically and pragmatically marked. Moreover, despite noncollocating noun phrases, verb-concordance, prosodic and morphosyntactic errors, and a host of other linguistic anomalies, they were buying and selling thousands of tons of Danish cheese (as well as fish, flowers, and steel) on a daily basis, and maintaining cordial relations with one another. This was real cheese, and they were talking (albeit in linguistically marked ways) real, and big, money.

With a background in both SLA and ethnomethodological conversation analysis (CA), and informed by poststructuralist notions of contingency, fluidity, hybridity, and marginality (see, e.g., Lyotard, 1979; Rampton, 1995), we were uneasy about how to approach our data materials. CA, with its emphasis on the socially achieved construction of irredeemably motile, participant-defined contextual relevancies, its commitment to the microanalytic explication of naturally occurring (rather than experimental) encounters, and an emic (participant-centered) sensitivity to “what’s going on,” led us to see that our participants were not defensibly—that is, to us, emically—identifiable as participants, learners, or even nonnative speakers—the standard identity categories of SLA. At the least, such categories were clearly not omni-relevant: These individuals were also, varyingly, sellers, buyers, friends, business acquaintances, customers, and clients. Identity, we had learned, was a motile, liminal, achieved feature of the interaction (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Gumperz, 1982; Rampton, 1995). And—as we will show—we noted that who they are locally and discursively has an impact on how they use and learn language.2

Certainly they were not learners in any formal (or traditional SLA) sense of the term. Yet they were clearly modifying, adapting, and creatively deploying what were to them new forms of language; that is, they were learning, and they would occasionally draw attention—often in jest—to their underdeveloped foreign language abilities when engaging each other. We were hesitant about calling their interlanguage interlanguage, for where and what was the target language here, in this seemingly linguistically lawless lingua franca landscape? Here, it appeared, the spectre of the native speaker, with his or her idealized norms and baseline standards, had evaporated (on this concept, see Jenkins, 2006a). SLA fitted, but then again, it did not. Something was quite clearly not right. The field was, we argued, in need of theoretical, methodological, and conceptual refurbishment and expansion. In particular, we (Firth & Wagner, 1997) called for a reconceptualization within SLA in three areas: “(a) a significantly enhanced awareness of the contextual and interactional dimensions of language use, (b) an increased emic (i.e., participant-relevant) sensitivity towards fundamental concepts, and (c) the broadening of the traditional SLA data base” (p. 286).

From our observations of SLA, it was the individual’s disembodied cognition—more specifically, his or her autonomous language processing—that was in the ascendency, to the detriment of what we might call social cognition, that is, what people do,
think, demonstrate, achieve, manipulate, modify, acquire, and learn, together, in concerted social interaction (e.g., Volosinov, 1930/1973; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). This is not to say, then, that learning was or is uninteresting or somehow incidental to our methodological pursuits. What we did not attempt to show in Firth and Wagner (1997)—but will attempt to do in this article—is that learning can be explicaded and tracked as it happens and, moreover, that the description of how it happens can be liberated from a cognitivist position predicated on telenmental notions of communication4 and individualistic, monolinguisitic, and formalistic perceptions of language.5 These perceptions, we argued, infuse SLA research, in its theorizing on language, learning, and discourse, in its terminologies and fundamental concepts (such as an ascendant native speaker and interlanguage), and in its methodological practices, including the practices of those who focalize interaction in SLA studies.

The immediate reactions to the 1997 article were, for the most part, polarized, with rather stern criticism on one side and firm support on the other.6 Because the criticisms go to the heart of the debate, a debate that, as recent publications attest, has in no manner been concluded (see, e.g., the recent exchanges between Gass, 2004; Hall, 2004; Larsen-Freeman, 2004; and Wagner, 2004), and because these criticisms reveal the key counterarguments to ours, while demonstrating how entrenched positionings within SLA can become, let us briefly consider the criticisms of Firth and Wagner (1997).

CRITICISMS OF FIRTH AND WAGNER (1997)

In contradistinction to our argument, Long (1993) had actually argued for SLA theory culling, rather than an expansion or broadening of SLA. In his response to our 1997 article, Long (1997) ventured that the fundamental problem with our position, which among other things emphasized the need to focus on L2 acquisition through L2 use,7 was that SLA is “the study of L2 acquisition, [and] not . . . ‘most centrally the language use of second or foreign language speakers’” (p. 318). Long went on to state that “most SLA researchers view the object of inquiry as in large part an internal, mental process” (p. 319). However, he conceded that “Firth and Wagner are perfectly justified, and probably right, in arguing that a broader, context-sensitive, participant-sensitive, generally sociolinguistic orientation might prove beneficial for SLA research” (p. 322). Nevertheless, he ended his response with “the major problem I have with Firth and Wagner’s polemic remains my skepticism as to whether greater insights into SL use will necessarily have much to say about SL acquisition” (p. 322).

Kasper (1997) adopted a similar stance. “‘A’ stands for acquisition,” she reminded us, adding, tellingly, that “[a] noncognitivist discipline that has learning as its central research object is a contradiction in terms” (p. 310; note, however, that we did not, in Firth and Wagner, 1997, call for a noncognitivist SLA). In close agreement with Long (1997), Kasper held that “the most nagging problem with the Firth and Wagner paper is that it has in fact very little to say about L2 acquisition” (p. 310). She went on to state that “I am comfortable with an essentially cognitivist definition of SLA” (p. 310), though in her self-styled heretical final note she submitted that 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. (p. 311)8

Poulisse (1997) also offered a defense of the psycholinguistic approach in response to our arguments, maintaining that “the task of all researchers [is] to not only describe, but also explain and predict phenomena” (p. 325) and “it would definitely not do to just look at particular and local phenomena and find specific explanations for each of them” (p. 325). However, Poulisse conceded that “Firth and Wagner have a point when they plea for ‘an enhanced awareness of the contextual and interactional dimensions of language use’ and a more positive view of the NN’s [non-native speaker’s] attempts to interact in the L2” (p. 327).

Gass (1998), who found our perspective “perplexing” (p. 88), maintained that we had got it all very wrong and that our criticisms were naïve and misplaced because, among other things, in calling for greater attention to communication, we had not understood that the “proper” object of attention in SLA is language; thus her correction: “the emphasis in input and interaction studies [in SLA] is on the language used and not on the act of communication” (p. 84). “The goal of my work,” she wrote, “(and others within the input/interaction framework . . . ) has never been to understand language use per se . . . but rather to understand what types of interaction might bring about what types of changes in linguistic knowledge” (p. 84). Gass made the erroneous observation that “Firth and Wagner portray cognitive
approaches and communication/discourse emphases as mutually incompatible” (p. 84). In addition, she claimed that, because we called for an enlargement of the standard SLA database (which we see as being dominated by classroom and experimental settings) to include settings such as the workplace,9 and because we called for greater attention to L2 use from an emically informed viewpoint, the approach we espoused “is not actually part of SLA, but part of the broader field of L2 studies (of which SLA is a subset)” (p. 84). She continued, “many individuals in a workplace setting...are not learners in the sense that is of interest to researchers in SLA” (p. 84).

We shall return to some of these criticisms presently (see also Firth & Wagner, 1998). What is important to point out at this juncture are the rhetorical methods and arguments deployed both to dismiss our viewpoint and to impose a grand narrative (Lyotard, 1979) or dominant theory of SLA, a theory that is meant to trump ours precisely because it is framed and formulated as dominant—for example, in ex cathedra proclamations about how SLA is properly done, and through references to what most SLA researchers do (see Long, 1997; Gass, 1998). The criticisms also demonstrate rather vividly how readily hegemonic forces can come to the fore when metatheoretical contributions, such as Firth and Wagner’s (1997), attempt to critique prevailing, established, and thus mainstream, intellectual practices. Admittedly, this is a mainstream that we, in and through our critique, both aid in its construction as mainstream and contribute to its status as mainstream. Long (1997), Kasper (1997), Pouliotte (1997), and Gass (1998) drew inwards, and from their self-constructed SLA pantheon they laid down the law by defining SLA’s proper intellectual territory (e.g., learners, language, cognition), delineating its key concerns (e.g., acquisition, not use, language, not communication), and by pointing to its borders (e.g., by stipulating what is inside and outside SLA). In so doing, they defined the parameters of legitimate criticism and debate while essentially accusing us of intellectual trespass (see Firth & Wagner, 1998; Thorne, 2000).

For some SLA researchers, including some with tangential SLA interests, the Firth and Wagner (1997) article seems to have been viewed as a kind of watershed for SLA in general and for SLA studies of interaction in particular. This reaction to it occurred, at least in part, as the result of the prominence the article was given in the MLJ at the time—as the centerpiece of a focused and extended discussion by prominent scholars contributing to an esteemed journal. However, as we pointed out in our 1997 article, the arguments it contained did not emerge from an intellectual void. Although the article has since been characterized as seminal by a number of scholars, it would be a mistake to see it as some kind of sociocultural or sociointeractional big bang within or without SLA. Our theoretical position vis-à-vis what we had termed and perceived as mainstream SLA emerged from our own observations of and engagement in an ineluctable sociocultural turn in the study of language that had swept across linguistics in general and discourse studies in particular, as well as across anthropology, social psychology, education, and sociology in the 1970s and 1980s, beginning, we argued, with Gumperz and Hymes’s (1972), Halliday’s (1973), Hymes’s (1974), and others’ influential calls for a socially constituted linguistics. The Firth and Wagner article also developed and was influenced by a number of extant, socioculturally focused critiques of SLA by scholars such as Block (1996), Kramsch (1993), Lantolf (1996), Rampton (1987), and van Lier (1994).

Of course, SLA research of the 1980s and 1990s was itself influenced by this sociocultural turn—as witnessed by the steady increase in studies that acknowledged, thematized, and explored context and interaction. However, we argued in Firth and Wagner (1997) that in the mainstream, SLA work— including contextual and interaction-oriented studies—was tenaciously resistant to the full implications of this sociocultural turn (see also similar criticisms made by Breen, 1985; Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Larsen-Freeman, 1983; Rampton, 1987). That is, despite a significant increase in calls for more socially oriented approaches to L2 learning and acquisition throughout the 1980s and early to mid-1990s, SLA continued to be dominated by an essentially Chomskian mind-set that placed enormous stress on individual cognition—to such an extent that, to some, alternative conceptions of SLA were perplexing and just plain wrong. However, on the basis of subsequent publications that reengaged and developed our criticisms of SLA10 (e.g., Atkinson, 2002; Block, 2003; Hall, 2004; Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b; Markee, 2000; Pavlenko, 2002; Rampton, 1997b; Seeley & Carter, 2004; Thorne, 2000), it seems reasonable to conclude that our article articulated a widely held sense of dissatisfaction and unease that was building at the time both within and around the periphery of SLA, an unease that provided impetus for our own call for a reconceptualization of SLA theories, concepts, and methods.11 In 1997, we maintained the position that SLA is part of the nexus of approaches to the wider, interdisciplinary study of language—which centrally includes language...
learning—and has the potential to make significant contributions to a wide range of research issues conventionally seen to reside outside its boundaries—a potential that is, arguably, yet to be realized.

What we called for was an epistemological and methodological broadening of SLA. This broadening does not entail jettisoning the mainstream SLA position, as some have mistakenly interpreted our arguments (e.g., Gass, 1998; Long, 1998; Poulisse, 1997). Although we do not subscribe to SLA’s fundamental tenets (e.g., an assumption of the natural ascendancy of the native speaker), and we seriously question (a) the validity of such standard SLA dichotomies as acquisition versus use, and language versus communication; (b) problematize the apparently clear-cut separation of the cognitive and the social; and (c) reject SLA’s essentially static view of context and identity, in Firth and Wagner (1997), we nevertheless eschewed dogmatic positioning and pressed instead for the need for greater theoretical, conceptual, and methodological balance within SLA. For let us acknowledge that SLA research has, over the four decades or so of its existence as a discipline, uncovered a wide range of critically important findings relating to how languages are acquired or learned.

In Firth and Wagner (1997), we emphasized the need for a theoretical, methodological, and epistemological broadening of SLA, which included enlarging the standard SLA database to one that reflects more accurately the sociolinguistic reality of a vast number of L2 users/learners around the world. We sought an SLA that was more interactionally sensitive, that also made room for an emic stance towards fundamental concepts, and that took seriously the theoretical and methodological consequences of a social view of learning and language. We did so in the belief that “the existence of distinct and multiple theoretical traditions may help to explicate the processes of SLA, and subsequently, to develop more accurate heuristics which model these processes and conditions” (Thorne, 2000, p. 221). Without specifying in any detailed way what the reconceptualization would entail in methodological terms (this was not, after all, the purpose of our article in 1997), we stressed “the need to work towards the evolution of a holistic, bio-social SLA” (p. 296).

RECONCEPTUALIZATIONS: NEW DIRECTIONS IN SLA

How, then, do we assess the field of SLA, 10 years later? Has the reconceptualization we, and others, called for come about? The most accurate answer to this question is likely to be: It depends where you look. In many ways it appears that things are more or less as they were in 1997—the mainstream is in full flow (for recent critical expositions, see Block, 2003; Cook, 1999; Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b; Kramsch, 2006; Seeley & Carter, 2004) and the native speaker continues to predominate as the baseline or target that learners should seek to emulate; learning is conceived as a cognitive process that is in essence context-neutral; competence is defined largely in terms of the individual’s grammatical competence; etic prevails over emic; and learners in classrooms remain the standard data set. All the while, these learners are viewed as essentially engaged in a continuous, autonomous, cognitive, morphosyntactic struggle to traverse, in linear fashion, along the plane of their interlanguage in pursuit of the target (i.e., native speaker) competence (see e.g., Han, 2003).

Nevertheless, our (and others’) urgings clearly did not go unheeded. Much SLA research that has been produced over the last decade bears witness to a marked increase in the number of socio-cultural and contextual-interactional themes and concepts impacting upon SLA’s research agenda, revealing an apparent growing awareness of the need to take seriously the requirement for a more balanced approach to SLA research. It appears that SLA has, over the last decade in particular, undergone a bifurcation between a cognitive SLA (which is being termed mainstream in a number of recent publications)—represented perhaps most clearly in work undertaken by, for example, Doughty and Long (2003), who see SLA as “a branch of cognitive science” (p. 4)—and a sociocultural/sociointeractional SLA. An increasing number of researchers are thus displaying a willingness to adopt emic perspectives and explore and attempt to develop cognitive-social approaches to language learning.

New sets of metaphors are being deployed, such that allusions to dynamism, interaction, intricacy, and the liminal are nowadays competing with the established SLA metaphors of machinery and computation (e.g., input, output, processing). Kramsch (2002), for example, proposed the development of an ecological approach to SLA and language learning, one that centrally acknowledges the nonlinear, interactional, and contextual characteristics of language use and acquisition. Borrowing from the latest thinking in the natural sciences, Larsen-Freeman (1997, 2007) used the terms chaos and complexity in her attempt to capture more accurately the fact that L2 learning is “dynamic, complex, nonlinear, unpredictable, sensitive to initial conditions, sometimes chaotic, open, self-organizing, feedback sensitive, adaptive” (Larsen-Freeman, 1997, p. 35). Block (2007)
used the term *multimodal* to capture the multiplicity of resources (historical, cultural, spatial, temporal, linguistic, etc.) brought to bear upon the processes of language learning and as a framework for more socially oriented SLA analyses. Compared with mainstream cognitive SLA, such work centrally locates and thematizes the contingent, the contextual, the *ad hoc-ness*, the interrelatedness of linguistic and situational elements, and the unsystematicity inherent in processes underlying L2 learning—factors that have been at worst overlooked and at best downgraded in importance in more traditional SLA research.

Research of this chaotic, social, ecological kind is being recognized as representing new directions in the SLA field (see Cook, 2002; Kramsch, 2002; Larsen-Freeman, 2003; Ortega, 2005). Markee and Kasper (2004) thus talked of a recent “split between mainstream, cognitive SLA and emergent, sociocultural approaches to SLA” (p. 491). This latter type, Markee and Kasper claimed, “points the way to future developments in what may prove to be one of the most radical respecifications of SLA researchers’ theoretical priorities and methodological practices in the history of the field” (p. 492).

Three topics appear to play a key role in the development of work in this sociocultural, sociointeractional area: (a) whether the research incorporates educational (i.e., classroom) settings or other (e.g., workplace) settings; (b) whether the focus is on language learning or interaction; and (c) whether the research is theory driven or data-driven. Lantolf, with several collaborators (e.g., Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), has engaged in SLA theory-building in the Vygotskian tradition, producing what has become known as the sociocultural approach to SLA. At the core of Vygotskian learning theory, new developmental stages are first accomplished with the help of others in the social sphere and can then become intrapsychological accomplishments (see Hall’s, 1997, useful synopsis). The pathway to learning is thus through social practice. The social practice in which learning has been studied thus far has been in L2 classrooms. In sociocultural theory:

Communication, including the instructional conversation of the classroom…and the learning-development that emerges from it, arise in the coming-together of people with identities (which entail more than simply whether one is a native speaker), histories and linguistic resources constructed in those histories. (Dunn & Lantolf, 1998, p. 427)

With a greater emphasis on data-driven research but still working mainly from the basis of classroom interaction and Vygotskian ideas of learning are, inter alios, Hall (2002), Hall and Verplaatse (2000), and Ohta (2001).

Another distinct research direction is also emerging where the emphasis is on the social, contextual, and interactional. In this case, the work deploys CA methodology. Scholarship that draws together CA and SLA is taking both SLA and CA into new, and largely uncharted, territory, and providing “the impetus for a whole new generation of empirically grounded research into how cognitive SLA might be respecified in sociocultural terms” (Markee & Kasper, 2004, p. 491). This work can usefully be divided into two groups. The first group focuses on the classroom setting and other formal learning environments and is centrally concerned with the theme of L2 learning—though from an interactional perspective (see He, 2004; Hellermann, 2006; Kasper, 2004; Koshik, 2005; Lazaraton, 2002, 2004; Markee, 2000; Markee & Kasper, 2004; Mondada & Pekarek-Doehler, 2004; Mori, 2004a, 2004b; Seedhouse, 2004). A somewhat different emphasis can be found in the CA-based SLA work undertaken by Brouwer (2003, 2004) and Brouwer and Wagner (2004), who explored aspects of L2 learning occurring outside formal educational settings.

A second group to have emerged over the last decade also deploys CA methodology and theory. In this case, the focus is not so much on L2 learning, but more on trying to understand and explicate the character of L2 and lingua franca interactions, or L2 use. This work has been undertaken in settings outside the classroom—for example, in government offices, libraries, and various workplace settings (e.g., Firth, 1996; and contributions to Gardner & Wagner, 2004; Kurhila, 2006; Rasmussen & Wagner, 2002; Schegloff, 2000; Svennevig, 2003, 2004; Wong, 2000a, 2000b). As Wagner & Gardner (2004) explained in the introductory chapter to their *Second Language Conversations* collection, this research is an ongoing investigation of

whether a micro-analysis of second language conversations can enhance our understanding of what it means to talk in another language, by broadening the focus beyond the sounds, structures and meanings of language to encompass action sequences, timing and interactivity. (p. 14)

In most of these studies—with Wong (2000a, 2000b) as a notable exception—explicating the normality of L2 conversations, in the face of sometimes abnormal (from a native-speaker perspective, at least) linguistic behavior, has underpinned the research, revealing, for example, that due to participants’ linguistic and interactional alacrity
and resourcefulness, interactional success can be achieved (see also Carroll, 2000; Egbert, 2002; contributions to Richards & Seedhouse, 2004; and Seedhouse, 2005).

SOCIAL APPROACHES TO L2 LANGUAGE LEARNING

Challenging the distinction between language acquisition and language use was not a core issue in Firth and Wagner (1997), although we did address it, albeit briefly, in Firth and Wagner (1998). Although our critics pointed out in unison that SLA is about acquisition and not use, we question the utility and theoretical as well as methodological validity of the dichotomy, and see it as being yet another symptom of the cognitivist, reductionist mind-set that prevails in mainstream SLA. To us, acquisition cannot and will not occur without use. Language acquisition, we would argue, is built on language use. Moreover, in order to understand how language acquisition occurs, develops, and is operationalized, we are surely obliged to observe and explicate language in use. At best, making and maintaining a distinction between acquisition and use is highly problematic; at worst, both concepts are so tightly interwoven as to be rendered effectively inseparable. As we noted in Firth and Wagner (1998):

If, as we argue, language competence is a fundamentally transitional, situational, and dynamic entity, then any language users will always be “learners” [or “acquirers”] in some respects. New or partly known registers, styles, language-related tasks, lexical items, terminologies, and structures routinely confront language users, calling for the contingent adaptation and transformation of existing knowledge and competence, and the acquisition of new knowledge. (p. 91)

What this acquisition-use dispute reveals is arguably the most significant and consequential disagreement between Firth and Wagner (1997) and proponents of a mainstream SLA, namely, the conception of learning. In this regard, some of the implications of our 1997 article were surprising for us as well, for we failed to realize at the time just how fundamentally our views challenged SLA’s conception of learning. Indeed, the Chomskian heritage in SLA may be most conspicuous with regard to SLA’s concept of learning, for as long as language learning is envisioned as a specific type of learning relating solely to the individual’s head—the human language faculty—traditional SLA is conceptually safe. In fact, in the early 1970s, when the umbrella term learning was replaced by the technical term acquisition, SLA accomplished three things rather elegantly: (a) it defined itself as a discipline that produces knowledge about this special phenomenon called acquisition; (b) it cemented its identity as a distinct discipline and secured a foothold in the world of scientific research; and (c) it all but cut off possible links to learning theories residing outside its own (self-constructed) disciplinary boundaries (Rampton, 1997a).

This terminological transformation seems to have been critical for SLA. However, if L2 learning is understood differently—specifically as principally the same type of process as other types of human learning—then SLA is open to extant and potentially insightful learning theories and approaches, and thus placed under immense pressure to reconceptualize, expand, enlarge, or recalculate its epistemology—pressure we see exerted by, for example, Atkinson (2002), Block (2003), Firth and Wagner (1997), Hall (1997, 2004), Jenkins (2006a), (2006b), Lantolf (2000), Liddicoat (1997), Markee and Kasper (2004), Rampton (1997a, 1997b), and Thorne (2000).

Admitting different conceptions of learning allows, of course, for nonpsychological theories to become relevant for understanding and explicating L2 learning.16 By way of exemplification, we can identify three potentially relevant avenues of such research. One is sociocultural theory (e.g., Hall, Vitanova, & Marchenova, 2004; Lantolf, 2000), which we have outlined above. A second is constructivism, which is well established outside SLA. A third is a social-interactional approach to learning, which is only just beginning to take root. We will now elaborate briefly on these latter two.

Constructivism

Constructivism (which includes social constructivism, radical constructivism, and cognitive constructivism) is a theory of knowledge acquisition that sees learners constructing their own knowledge and meanings on the basis of personal experiences. Constructivist ideas are readily traced in the work of Dewey (1916, 1980, 1938) and Kant (1781/1946). Drawing on von Glasersfeld’s work (e.g., von Glasersfeld, 1984, 1995), Doolittle (1999) summarized constructivism as containing:

three essential epistemological tenets of constructivism to which a fourth has been added in light of recent writings:

1. Knowledge is not passively accumulated, but rather, is the result of active cognizing by the individual;
2. Cognition is an adaptive process that functions to make an individual’s behavior more viable given a particular environment;
3. Cognition organizes and makes sense of one’s experience, and is not a process to render an accurate representation of reality; and

Social-Interactional Approach to Learning

This approach is in the very earliest stages of development. It is an approach that focalizes learning-in-and-through-social-interaction, though devoid of cognitivist underpinnings. In its current manifestations, it combines insights from three areas: (a) the approach to learning promulgated by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), who stress a social view of learning, and see learning as occurring in multiplex communities of practice; (b) ethnomethodology, which emphasizes the centrality of dynamically and contingently deployed commonsense reasoning practices in everyday settings (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984); and (c) CA, which stresses the necessity to attend to and uncover the socially achieved, microstructuring of human activity (Goodwin & Heritage, 1990; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; ten Have, 1999).

The social-interactional approach can be characterized as follows: Learning is an inseparable part of ongoing activities and therefore situated in social practice and social interaction. In this sense, learning builds on joint actions and as part of a joint action it is publicly displayed and accomplished. Building on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), Brouwer and Wagner (2004), in their analyses of L2 conversations, proposed such an approach to learning—one that shifts the focus from the individual’s cognition and grammar, to social praxis in concrete social settings: “Instead of studying the acquisition of a grammatical system, we propose to study the texture of communities and the ways in which newcomers get access to them” (p. 45). Wagner and Pekarek-Doehler (2006) demonstrated how participants proceed through their activities by a process of what they call *bricolage*—that is, complex segments of social activities where interactants collaborate to make sense of their joint action through the situated, contingent deployment of communicative resources. As has been shown in the contributions to Gardner and Wagner (2004), L2 speakers are not interactional dopes. They show perseverance and ingenuity in interacting with others. They produce not so much “language forms”; rather they engage in complex, multimodal, finely tuned co-participation, integrating body posture, gaze, verbal and prosodic activities, rhythm, and pace in their choreography of action (Egbert, Niebecker, & Rezzara, 2004). Research adopting this approach may have the potential to reconceptualize notions of learning, with important consequences for SLA (c.f. Mondada, 2006).

SLA’s adoption of such theories and approaches would, we submit, have major implications for SLA as a field of inquiry, as well as for L2 pedagogy, and only hints at possible developments that might have occurred in SLA, modern language teaching, and learning, if behaviorism and, later, information-processing psychology had not been allowed to become established as having primary importance in SLA.

LANGUAGE LEARNING AS A SOCIAL ACCOMPLISHMENT

How, then, might the analysis and explication of L2 learning be approached from a social-interactional perspective, one that places contingency, contextuality, dialogue, and liminality at its core? We shall attempt to answer this question by offering cursory analyses of language learning-in-action. Our focus here is not learners in a formal sense of the word—that is, persons engaged in purposive activities principally in order to develop skills, knowledge, and competences. Nor will we deal with classroom interaction (recent studies of classroom interaction include Hall, 2006; Hall, 2007; Kasper, 2004; Mondada & Pekarek-Doehler, 2004; Mori, 2004a, 2004b; and Seedhouse, 2004). Rather we are concerned to uncover learning as a ubiquitous social activity, as an interactional phenomenon that transcends contexts while being context dependent; as an instance of social cognition in the wild (see Hutchins, 1995), specifically in relation to encounters where an L2 is in use. For although learning may or may not be a drawn-out process, it is certainly a process that takes place in the micromoments of social interaction in communities of practice. It is therefore critically important that we attempt to uncover and understand what goes on, interactionally, in such micromoments.

What we want to explicate, albeit extremely cursorily, are aspects of social learning as they are evident in L2 talk-based activities, in each case occurring outside the classroom. Throughout, we emphasize not the failings or deficiencies, not the errors or interlanguage of the interactants; rather, we approach the data with a view to explicating and uncovering what L2 users actually do,
in everyday, natural settings. And as we shall see, they deploy, make available, share, adapt, manipulate, and contingently and creatively apply communicative resources in an ongoing attempt to construct meaningful and consequential social interaction. The data excerpts we present and comment on here represent a small window on what might be possible if more in-depth, extensive studies of the same kind are undertaken.

An Evidential Argument

Consider first Excerpt 1, where Hansen (H), the Danish dairy-produce salesman, is talking on the telephone with Akkad (A), an Egyptian wholesaler (see the Appendix for transcript conventions):

EXCERPT 1
Blowing in the Customs
(Firth, 1996, p. 244)
1. A:. .. so I told him not to u: :h send the::
   cheese after the- (-) the blowing (-) in the ↑customs
2. (0.4)
3. A: we don’t want the order after the
   cheese is u: :h (↑) blowing.
4. H: see, yes.
5. A: so I don’t know what we can uh do with
   the order now. (-) What do you
6. think we should uh do with this is all ↑
   blowing Mister Hansen
7. (0.5)
8. H: I’m not uh (0.7) blowing uh what uh,
   what is this u: :h too big or what?
9. (0.2)
10. A: no the cheese is ↑had Mister Hansen
    (0.4)
11. A: it is like (-) fermenting in the customs’
    cool rooms
12. H: ah it’s gone off↑
13. A: yes it’s gone off↑
14. A: yes it’s gone off↑
15. H: we: :ll you know you don’t have to uh
   do uh anything because it’s not
   ((continues))

When this excerpt was initially analyzed (in Firth, 1996, p. 244), the focus of attention was the let it pass procedure and its interactional consequences.17 But we can also use the excerpt to witness an instance of learning-in-interaction. To see this, note, first, H’s “I see, yes” (line 4). This turn follows A’s revelation in lines 1–3 that the “cheese is blowing in the customs” (line 1). In line 6, A displays that he has heard H’s I see, yes as indicating uptake, as displaying that he (A) has been understood. Upon hearing H’s uptake at line 4, and now acting on the presumption of a shared common ground, A, in line 6, asks H “what do you think we should do with all this blowing?” (underlining indicates stress in enunciation). At this juncture, H is evidently compelled to display—to make public—his unfamiliarity with the word blowing; thus H’s “I’m not uh (0.7) blowing uh what uh, what is this u: :h too big or what?” A’s response is to explain the meaning of blowing; he does this by reformulating: “no the cheese is bad, Mr. Hansen” (line 10). With no receipt forthcoming (note the 0.4 second pause in line 11), A tries again, in line 12: “it is like fermenting in the customs’ cool rooms.” H now displays his updated knowledge by producing his own reformulation (with rising intonation) of blowing, in his “ah it’s gone off?” (line 13). A, in the next turn, confirms the appropriateness of the definition of blowing by reusing H’s formulation, hence “yes it’s gone off” (line 14).

What this excerpt reveals is that the interactants, conjointly, do interactional work to overcome potential or real communicative hurdles in order to establish intersubjectivity and meaning. In so doing, the interactants provide for the availability and utility of interactional and linguistic resources that allow for learning to occur. H has, in this excerpt, quite clearly displayed that he has learned the (for him) new lexical item blowing. What is important is that the excerpt also shows how learning is engaged contingently, as the learned item in question becomes interactionally relevant as the talk unfolds. Learning here, then, is an artifact of interactional exigency and a product of collaboration.

Let us now examine how H operationalizes his learning (of what blowing cheese means) in a separate encounter, that is, how his learning is carried over in time and space. Two working days later, H, in Denmark, calls A’s wholesale company in Cairo. The call is answered by A’s colleague, B. The call begins as follows:

EXCERPT 2
Bad Cheese
(Firth, 1991)
((ring))
1. B: allo
2. H: yes hello Michael Hansen melko
dairies Denmark ↑calling (-) can I
   please speak to mister Akkad
3. (-)
4. B: ↑hello mister Michael
5. H: is it Bårå?
6. B: ye: (h)s, how are you (·) si:rk
7. H: well I’m OK, but you had tu-have some uh problems with the: cheese
8. B: uuuuuuhhhhh ((one-second sound stretch))
9. H: the bad cheese (·) in the ↑ customs
10. (0.5)
11. B: ↑ one minute (0.4) mister Akkad will talk (·) w ith (·) you
12. H: ok ↑ yes
13. (1.5)
14. A: YES (·) mister Hansen↓
15. H: hello: mister Akkad (·) hh we ha-f some informations for you about the cheese (·)
16. with the ↑ blowing
17. A: ↑ yes mister Hansen

Note that in this excerpt it is H who uses the item blowing (line 16)—which seems to suggest that not only has H now learned this lexical item in a way that extends beyond the concrete local context where he first became acquainted with it, but also, critically, that he has learned how to deploy it appropriately in context, which in this case entails knowing whom to use the item with. Consider, first, how H characterizes the matter while talking to B. First, H uses “problems with the cheese” (line 7), next, he reformulates the matter as “the bad cheese in the customs” (line 9), this reformulation likely being a result of an apparent lack of uptake by B (line 8). When A enters the interaction (at line 14), H first uses the formulation “the cheese” (line 15), and then, without yet securing uptake from his interlocutor (note the micropause at the end of line 15), formulates the matter as “with the blowing” (line 16). This formulation succeeds, as we see from A’s “yes Mr. Hansen” (line 17).

What are the language learning implications of such behavior? They are, first and foremost, that if learning entails being contingently adaptable as the unfolding context requires, then here, surely, is learning-in-action. Second, here may be evidence of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) being constructed before our very eyes—namely, between H and A. The nature of this particular community of practice appears to be consequential for how learning is operationalized, for how learning is displayed, and for how communicative knowledge is refined and tested both within and across interactions.

It is arguable that H, in Excerpt 2, orients to A as a co-user, or as a co-member of this microcommunity of practice, of the term blowing. Co-usership, then, is, potentially at least, a relevant identity category for some of these interactants. In a related way, we may venture that the reason H deploys the item blowing with A, but uses instead cognate formulations with B, is because H is “recipient designing” (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jeffer son, 1974, p. 727) his displays of knowledge so as to achieve communicative (and likely interpersonal) success and to display interactional affinity. To paraphrase Baker, Emmison, and Firth (2005), we can say that H is calibrating his language behavior for his interlocutors’ competence. We cannot know why H did not use the term blowing with B. Perhaps, if A had not been available or had not been able to engage H, H may subsequently have deployed the item blowing. However, his apparent contingent and selective deployment of the item offers an intriguing angle from which to view language learning.

Our argument so far reminds us of the interaction hypothesis (Long, 1996), according to which learning is fueled by the problems that learners encounter. However there are several problems with this explanation for learning:

1. The approach describes a transparent problem-based way of learning, but we find only few instances of such problem-based learning in our data.
2. It prototypically describes lexical learning. Where does the rest of the language (and communicative behavior more generally) reside?
3. Uptakes are rare. Participants in interactions obviously pick up items and use them in recipient-designed ways, but such actions are only part of the whole language learning story. Although it might partly have to do with the lack of comprehensive corpora, problem-based learning of this kind seems not to be at the core of language learning.
4. The interactive hypothesis constructs some kind of evidential argument: a plain causal chain between use of elements and learning. When we look at the developmental data we have access to, plain causal explanations do not cover many of the complexities we see unfolding in our data. We see learners developing their skills in using resources in more advanced ways for more advanced interactions, but we rarely see a “smoking gun,” as in Excerpts 1 and 2.

There are few, if any, studies showing learning in action (Huth, 2006; Nguyen, 2003). The main obstacle for this type of research has been the lack of longitudinal corpora available for L2 interactions.
Another way of describing learning does not focus on the evidence but on the process. Our position in this regard is inspired by sociocultural theory, particularly Hall’s 2006 work. Consider the next excerpt in which Rasmus, a Danish student, coaches Joseph, an American guest student, to learn how to order pizza in Danish. In his own words: Joseph is developing his survival skills.

**EXCERPT 3**

Danish Pizza  
(Wagner, unpublished raw data)

1. Jo: so how do I say it one time for me.
2. Ra: [.pt]  
3. (0.2)  
4. Ra: jeg vil gerne bestille en pizza. I would like order a pizza  
5. (0.3)  
7. (0.2)  
8. Ra: [.jep].  
9. (0.5)  
10. Ra: that’s I’d like to order pizza.  

In line 1, Joseph opens a new sequence with “so” and gives two consecutive prompts for next action: “how do I say” and “say it one time for me.” Rasmus provides the appropriate Danish expression (line 4), which Joseph repeats (line 6). Rasmus acknowledges the repeat in line 8 with “yep” and provides an English translation (line 10). In line 11, Joseph closes the sequence.

The sequence runs off at a slow pace without glitches, delays, overlaps, or repairs. Both participants demonstrate, through their actions, that they understand who will produce the next element and which element has been projected. It seems to be clear for both participants what kinds of actions they are engaged in and how the subactivities are distributed. To elaborate—the Danish expression is decontextualized. The I does not refer to the current speaker (Rasmus) but is a generic I for any speaker in a pizza-ordering situation. In this way, Rasmus provides a model as a standard solution for a well-defined activity in a well-defined environment (ordering a pizza by phone). Both Joseph and Rasmus show their knowledge of the script for this activity and treat it as a standard situation where preformulated expressions can be deployed. They refer only to the core of this standard situation—the Danish sentence would work as the reason for the call, but the opening and closing activities in a phone call are not thematized by Joseph and Rasmus.

The sequence is initiated and closed by the L2 speaker, which makes it different from classical teaching activities described, in non-CA research, as variations of an *Initiative-Response-Evaluation* sequence (Mehan, 1979). The L1 speaker Rasmus appears therefore interactionally not as a teacher but as a language expert who is transferring know-how to a nonexpert.

The participants themselves call the activity *learning*. Joseph’s (the learner’s) main activity is the repeat of the target utterance. We observed that the translation follows the repeat of the Danish expression that shows both participants orienting primarily to the form of the expression. Joseph learns the Danish expression before the translation has made crystal clear what he has learned (see below).

What we observe in Excerpt 3 holds for the whole interaction. Joseph provides a prompt, Rasmus delivers a Danish expression that Joseph repeats. However, not all sequences run as smoothly as the one shown in Excerpt 3. In later talk, which we cannot show here due to constraints of space, we observe Rasmus slowing down his speech, isolating troublesome elements in the utterance by prosodic means, and even using the written mode to display a model. The resources for learning used in this interaction are not very different from those of traditional classroom teaching, which include (a) utterance model and repetition, (b) form before content/translation, (c) prosodic formation (speed, rhythm), and (d) written models. In Excerpt 3, the participants show us that they recognize and characterize their activity as learning. They construct conversational routines and patterns of interaction that are typical of language classrooms (Kasper, 2004; Mondada & Pekarek-Doehler, 2004).

Although Rasmus and Joseph draw heavily on a classroom format, other studies show how participants in interactions orient in more subtle ways to language learning as one goal in the ongoing activity. Lilja (2006) described instances in interactions between a Finnish host family and guest students where the native speakers in repair sequences do not just repeat trouble sources but strip them of morphological inflection and present them in an unmarked form. Theodórsdóttir (2007) showed how learners may insist on producing full turns although their co-participants have indicated their understanding of the ongoing turn before its end. Brouwer
and Rasmussen-Hougaard (2007) described how participants in L2 interactions carve out opportunities for doing learning in the ongoing flow of interaction.

Compared to the case of Hansen and Akkad, instances of doing learning do not afford an evidential argument for learning. Instances of doing learning show that learning a language and learning to learn are mutually constitutive, as Hall (2006) formulated it for the language classroom:

What our students take away from our classrooms in terms of their target language knowledge and understandings of what it means to learn another language is intimately tied to the kinds of interactional practices that we as teachers create in our talk with students. Through their interactions with us, learners become experienced at figuring out the actions that are being implemented in our utterances including how the utterances are constructed and eventually learn to use them to take actions of their own. Our interactional practices are, then, to use Vygotsky’s term, the meditational means by which we and our students together constitute, represent, and remember what it means to know and do language learning. (p. 27)

Learning is about the object and the ways of learning. Joseph and Rasmus illustrate that they know how to set up a learning situation. They enact the classical activities of language teaching. However, the other studies mentioned here trace ways of learning not only on the genre level but also as practices in ongoing interaction where participants show each other that they are, among other things in the real world, engaged in more than intersubjectivity. They are not content to make themselves understood but clearly demonstrate a desire to do so in ways that are viewed as appropriate and normal in their L2. Other settings, with other kinds of interactional and institutional goals and relationships, will doubtless produce different kinds of talk- and learning-based activities.

Doing learning illustrates how participants foreground learning in an interactionally consequential way. This type of learning is different from that of Hansen and Akkad where learning a new item was entirely embedded in the business interaction. But doing learning does not provide evidence that learning is actually happening in these activities.

Out of Chaos Comes Order

Consider now Excerpt 4, again from a business interaction. Jørgen Gade (JG) in Denmark has been called by a Swiss business acquaintance (BR). At the end of the call, BR enquires about the success of the company where JG works. This is the second call between BR and JG.

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**EXCERPT 4**
Lot of Work 1
(Wagner, unpublished raw data)

1. BR: okay have you a lot of work to do.
2. JG: yes,
3. JG: [we ha’ a lot a do.]
4. BR: [xx
5. BR: a lot of orders.
6. JG: and we e::hm: work also in the week-
ends
7. BR: ah [(xx the weekend)]
8. JG: [for the next ] e:h fh three four
monthth (-) [I think,
9. BR: [yes
10. (0.8)
11. JG: [so ]
12. BR: [that’s] that’s good to ↓hear.
13. (0.3)
14. JG: yes,
15. BR: ↑okay.
16. JG: and your company has also. (-) lot to
do,
17. (0.3)
18. BR: oh yes.
19. BR: things are going very well. =
20. JG: yes;

BR’s question in line 1, “have you a lot of work to do” is in line 16 mirrored by JG’s answer “we ha
lot a to do” (line 3) as well as in his formulation in line 16 “and your company has also a lot to
do.” Regular telephone engagement with known others frequently gives rise to the production of How are you sequences (compare Excerpts 2, 6). As in Excerpt 2, we notice that these how are you sequences are not taken personally but relate instead to the companies in which the protagonists work. Consider now Excerpt 5.

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**EXCERPT 5**
Lot of Work 2

1. JG: have you: lot of work to do.
2. TT: yes¿ they’re not too bad¿
3. JG: [yes
4. TT: [we-] e-e- picked up another order¿
=eight hundred thousand pound[s
5. JG: ↓ouw¿
6. (0.6)
7. JG: excellent ehhe hhe hhe hhe hhe hhe he
In Excerpt 5, JG is on the phone with a British colleague with whom he has had regular contact over many years. JG’s question in line 1 “have you: lot of work to do” sounds like an echo of BR’s question from Excerpt 4. However, in this case, 2 years have passed between the call in Excerpt 4 and Excerpt 5. It would be a bold move to construe (line 1) as evidence that learning had occurred in the call 2 years earlier. Nevertheless, the resemblance of both formulations over the span of those 2 years is striking. JG has not become more linguistically sophisticated in his inquiry into his interlocutor’s work commitments. He simply redeploy the utterance formula that he had deployed 2 years previously. We notice comparable development standstill in other recurrent call segments or activities, for example, in call openings, closings, the introduction of new topics, how-are-you’s and salutations. In these cases, it appears that comparatively little linguistic development occurs over time. If there is any developmental change at all, we find it in general interactional fluency, such that these activities are produced with fewer delays, smoother turn transitions, and a general increased orderliness; in addition, the content of the calls becomes more personalized over time as the interactants become better acquainted (cf. Brouwer & Wagner, 2004).

These observations beg the question: In which environments might we notice language learning as a social accomplishment? If it is not observable in routinized activities and talk episodes, where can it be located? What are the environments where linguistic structures expand and linguistic creativity and development can be observed?

They appear to occur in what we might call the body of the calls, that is, in phases following openings and preceding closing routines. Here the talk is more free flowing, less planned and less routinized. New expressions and new structures are afforded by new topics and activities. The contingencies of the locally unfolding situation seem to motivate the use of new resources; that is, language development in the calls appears to be nonlinear, and the growing complexities in the participants’ actions are not traceable to simpler preceding forms.

This observation is in line with Eskildsen’s study (Eskildsen, in press; Eskildsen & Cadierno, 2007), which drew on data from a Mexican learner of English over a period of 4 years (2001–2005). Eskildsen (in press) looked at the development of modal verbs over time and the conclusions he was able to draw on the basis of the data materials do not show a development from a core structure into more complex structures, but rather a patchwork of different uses that appear and disappear over time. In terms of linguistic structure, this study does not show much structure building.

We can tentatively conclude that we have been able to point to three aspects of language learning as a social accomplishment. These three aspects, and possibly others, demonstrate in a variety of ways how participants engage in meaningful activities by using an L2. In situated social practices, use and learning are inseparable parts of the interaction. They appear to be afforded by topics and tasks, and they seem to be related to specific people, with particularized identities, with whom new ways of behaving occur as the unfolding talk demands.

Studying learning as a social accomplishment shifts our understanding of learning from the construct of a linguistic system or a competence that serves all the speaker’s purposes. Instead, the development of social relations, the mutual constituency of linguistic resources and tasks, and the specific biography of the language learners come to the foreground. This strand of research has gained momentum over the last 10 years, and quite clearly, much more research into the specifics of social interactions in L2 environments is clearly necessary in the years to come.

CONCLUSIONS

What this entire debate has brought home most vividly is that SLA as a field of inquiry is today a fertile arena of multifarious approaches, theories, methods, concepts, and, not least, debate. Whether SLA has a mainstream or a dominant approach is a moot point. Cognitivistic SLA—the mainstream that we focused our critique upon in Firth and Wagner (1997)—is certainly well established and continues to occupy a prominent place in SLA-related journals, textbooks, doctoral and graduate programs, and publications generally. In
most of its guises, cognitivistic SLA is strikingly different from the SLA of sociocultural theory, the ecological approach to SLA, and the CA-for-SLA movement that we have adumbrated in this article. Thus, although some researchers are exploring the possibilities of developing a holistic, encompassing SLA—one that seeks to draw together the social and the cognitive—other researchers position themselves apart from the social, cultural, situational, chaotic, sociolinguistic, ecological, interactional drives, and motives underpinning the work of a growing number of SLA scholars. These differences raise the inevitable question of where SLA is headed, and whether the field itself is able to withstand the current bifurcations, competing methods, critiques, and internal tensions, and remain generally cohesive—in the way that the field of sociolinguistics, for example, has remained more or less cohesive, despite the discipline being populated with an almost dizzying array of sometimes incommensurable methods, concepts, and theories—or whether SLA will fracture into cognitive SLA, holistic SLA, sociocultural SLA, conversation-analytic SLA, postmodern SLA, and so on.

It is arguable, of course, that such a fracturing either has already taken place or is currently underway. If this is indeed what is happening, or what has occurred, a major issue then becomes one of how the field or the discipline defines itself. SLA is a relative newcomer to scientific inquiry, and there are inherent risks in allowing such a new field of research to shift, morph, and fracture, particularly from the viewpoint of those who, through a lengthy professional devotion to the field or paradigm, conceive of themselves as the intellectual guardians of (in this case) SLA, and see it as their right and obligation to determine, ex cathedra, what is and is not proper SLA. The debates, the arguments, the progress, or the decay is surely an inevitable component of SLA’s evolution. We are, then, witness to a natural progression, an intellectual evolution, if one will, where successful paradigms evolve (and sometimes fracture) through both support and critique. If this process is based on sound, creative scholarship, one that leads to advances in knowledge of the many and varied ways in which L2s are learned, acquired, and used (in mutually reinforcing and enlightening ways), then surely SLA will become a more theoretically and methodologically robust and encompassing enterprise. Despite objections from some quarters, the boundaries of SLA are ineluctably being redrawn, and from this particular viewpoint, the future of SLA looks distinctly promising.

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NOTES

1 Conversation analysis (widely known as CA) is a methodology devised by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson in the 1960s (see Sacks, 1992). Building on its ethnomethodological foundations, CA endeavors to explicate the microdetails of talk-in-interaction and to uncover the communicative and social competences that structure and render meaningful talk-in-interaction. The materials of CA are video- and audiotape recordings of naturally occurring settings where talk is a prime facet of behavior. For descriptions of CA’s working methods and theoretical foundations, see ten Have (1999) and Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998).

2 Although such observations on our data informed our call for a reconceptualized SLA in Firth and Wagner (1997), they did not feature empirically in that publication.

3 We do not have the space to elaborate the point here, but in essence the argument is that, in the case of English, which is undoubtedly the global lingua franca in an array of domains (e.g., the Internet, diplomacy, science, pop music, tourism), equating target language competence with native speaker competence is inherently problematic, in that such a practice ignores the sociolinguistic reality of the global status and lingua franca uses and functions of English. The implications for SLA are potentially far-reaching, not least in terms of our understanding of interlanguage. This point is well made by Jenkins (2006a, 2006b).

4 The telementational view of communication is the view promulgated by, among others, Saussure (1922), adopted by Chomsky (1957) and, later, by mainstream SLA practitioners. It underpins SLA work in communication strategies (see Firth & Wagner, 1997). According to Harris (1981), the telementational view is a fallacy; it is a thesis about the function of language, namely, that “linguistic knowledge is essentially a matter of knowing which words stand for which ideas. For words, according to this view, are symbols devised by man for transferring thoughts from one mind to another. Speech is a form of telementation” (p. 9).

5 This monolingualistic notion, we argued (Firth & Wagner, 1997), underpins the prevailing SLA view that sees language users as non-native speakers who are (or ought
language acquisition as it is directly on the physical world but rely, instead, on tools and labor activity, which allows us to change the world, and with it, the circumstances under which we live in the world, we also use symbolic tools [e.g., language], or signs, to mediate and regulate our relationships with others and with ourselves and thus change the nature of these relationships. The task of psychology, in Vygotsky’s view, is to understand how human social and mental activity is organized through culturally constructed affairs” (p. 1).

14 We question the appropriateness of Markee and Kasper’s (2004) characterization of this CA-centered SLA work as sociocultural. The sociocultural approach has already established itself within SLA and is associated with the work of Lantolf (e.g., Lantolf, 2000) and others. According to Hall (1997) and Lantolf (2000), sociocultural SLA research is principally underpinned by Vygotskian theories of mind and learning (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978). CA, however, has its roots quite firmly in Garfinkelian sociological theory (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984).

15 Deploying CA’s microanalytic methodology for the analysis of L2 talk-in-interaction poses a number of challenges (which are too numerous and complex for us to reveal and discuss in this article; see Brouwer & Wagner, 2004). It certainly entails much more than familiarizing oneself with CA’s terminologies and applying them to L2 data materials. Arguably the greatest challenge for SLA researchers entails coming to terms with CA’s ethnomethodological research agenda (Firth, 1995c; Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984), which is radically different from mainstream SLA’s cognitivist agenda (see Larsen-Freeman, 2004). The incorporation of L2 data materials into a CA framework also poses challenges for CA. To mention one of several examples: CA has until relatively recently been restricted to the analysis of monolingual, first language (L1), interactions, where, overwhelmingly, the analyst has relied upon his or her co-membership in the interactants’ speech community as a resource in the explication of the talk-data. When faced with the analysis of L2 talk, the analyst cannot unproblematically assume linguistic or cultural co-membership; the applicability of an important analytic resource is thereby brought into question. For further information on this topic, see Firth (1990).

16 Let us be clear, however, that the opening up of SLA to noncognitivist theories and approaches to (language) learning is not going to be a trouble-free process; see, for example, Kasper’s (1997) view that “[a] noncognitivist discipline that has learning as its central research object is a contradiction in terms” (p. 310).
17 We refer the reader to Firth (1996) for a detailed explication, but in brief, H’s I see (line 5) is quite clearly a let it pass procedure. Such procedures are utilized in interaction when the recipient of a turn lets the unknown or unclear action, word or utterance pass on the (commonsense) assumption that it will either become clear or redundant as talk progresses.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX
Transcript Conventions

[ ]  Left and right brackets indicate beginning and end of overlap.
(0.0) Numbers in parentheses indicate silence by tenths of seconds.
(.)  Micropause.
::  Colons indicate prolongation of the immediately prior sound. The longer the colon row, the longer the prolongation.
↑↓  Arrows indicate shifts into especially high or low pitch.
,.¿¿ Punctuation markers are used to indicate intonation:
 , level intonation
; slightly falling intonation
. falling intonation to low
¿ slightly rising intonation
? rising intonation to high

WORD  Upper case indicates especially loud sounds relative to the surrounding talk.
°word°  Degree signs bracketing a sound, word, phrase, and so on, indicate especially soft sounds relative to the surrounding talk.
·hhh  A raised dot-prefixed row of h’s indicates an inbreath. Without the dot, the h’s indicate an outbreath.
wgrd  Underlining indicates stressed syllables
xxx  unintelligible speech
=  latching between turns or parts of turns
*  creaky voice