This article argues for a reconceptualization of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research that would enlarge the ontological and empirical parameters of the field. We claim that methodologies, theories, and foci within SLA reflect an imbalance between cognitive and mentalistic orientations, and social and contextual orientations to language, the former orientation being unquestionably in the ascendancy. This has resulted in a skewed perspective on discourse and communication, which conceives of the foreign language speaker as a deficient communicator struggling to overcome an underdeveloped L2 competence, striving to reach the "target" competence of an idealized native speaker (NS). We contend that SLA research requires a significantly enhanced awareness of the contextual and interactional dimensions of language use, an increased "emic" (i.e., participant-relevant) sensitivity towards fundamental concepts, and the broadening of the traditional SLA data base. With such changes in place, the field of SLA has the capacity to become a theoretically and methodologically richer, more robust enterprise, better able to explicate the processes of second or foreign language (SjFL) acquisition, and better situated to engage with and contribute to research commonly perceived to reside outside its boundaries.

Native speakers and nonnative speakers are multiply handicapped in conversations with one another.
Varonis & Gass (1985b, p. 340)

This article examines critically the predominant view of discourse and communication within second language acquisition (SLA) research. We argue that this view is individualistic and mechanistic, and that it fails to account in a satisfactory way for interactional and sociolinguistic dimensions of language. As such, it is flawed, and obviates insight into the nature of language, most centrally the language use of second or foreign language (SjFL) speakers. As part of this examination, we discuss the status of some fundamental concepts in SLA, principally nonnative speaker (NNS), learner, and interlanguage. These concepts prefigure as monolithic elements in SLA, their status venerated and seemingly assured within the field. We claim that, for the most part, they are applied and understood in an oversimplified manner, leading, among other things, to an analytic mindset that elevates an idealized "native" speaker above a stereotypicalized "nonnative," while viewing the latter as a defective communicator, limited by an underdeveloped communicative competence.

Our critical assessment of some of SLA's core concepts is, in part, a reaction to recent discussions on theoretical issues within the field. Long (1990), for example, inaugurated a discussion on the perceived proliferation of theories in SLA, and argued the need for "theory culling." Subsequent contributions from Beretta (1991), Crookes (1992), Beretta and Crookes (1993), Long (1993), Ellis (1994, p. 676ff.), and Gregg (1990, 1993) similarly engage problems of theory and para-
digm formulation. Such discussions reflect a desire to keep pace with an expanding and increasingly diversified field, and to introduce "quality control" on the basis of "established" and "normal" scientific standards.

In a recent paper, Block (1996) has challenged many of the assumptions upon which these discussions are predicated, not least the assumption that there is a "normal science," as well as the assumption that the existence of multiple theories in SLA is inherently problematic (in that a multitude of theories is said to prevent SLA from becoming a "normal science"), and the assumption that there exists an "ample body" of "accepted findings" within SLA research.

Long (1993) claims that a theoretically "slimmed down" SLA would allow for knowledge accumulation and the prevention of a "wildflowering" of disparate and "rivaling" theories (p. 235). Such a process, it is felt, will bolster the theoretical foundations of SLA. In Long's view, knowledge production in "normal" science becomes cumulative, details can be attended to, and applications of theory can be harvested" (p. 230). And yet, as introductory SLA texts such as Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991), Lighthown and Spada (1993), and Ellis (1990, 1994) demonstrate, there is a strong tendency within SLA to accumulate large quantities of heterogeneous research. The problem is that the accumulation is done largely without critical assessment of the presuppositions underpinning the research. As we argue below, although SLA research is imbalanced in favour of cognitive-oriented theories and methodologies, the fact remains that the branch of the discipline dealing with discourse and communication is, and always has been, of necessity multitheoretical in its adopted approaches and conceptual apparatus. Hence, SLA would appear to require not so much a "theory culling," but rather a more critical discussion of its own presuppositions, methods, and fundamental (and implicitly accepted) concepts. This article engages in such a discussion.

By challenging prevailing views, presuppositions, and concepts, and by examining critically theoretical assumptions and methodological practices, our ultimate goal is to argue for a reconceptualization of SLA as a more theoretically and methodologically balanced enterprise that endeavours to attend to, explicate, and explore, in more equal measures and, where possible, in integrated ways, both the social and cognitive dimensions of S/FL use and acquisition.

We are aware of the growing number of SLA studies, mainly of an ethnographic nature, that are socially and contextually oriented (e.g., Aston, 1993; Blyth, 1995; Kramsch, 1995; Hall, 1995). Although such studies are beginning to impact SLA in general, and have begun questioning and exploring the fundamental notions of learner, nonnative, native speaker, and interlanguage, most tend to take the form of learning environment (i.e., the S/FL classroom) as their point of departure. Thus, although S/FL interactions occurring in noninstructional settings are everyday occurrences (e.g., in the workplace), they have not, as yet, attracted the attention of SLA researchers (see, though, Rampton, 1995a; Bremer, Roberts, Vasseur, Simonot, & Broeder, 1996).

Although many findings and theories in SLA have been important and even groundbreaking, we submit that, on the whole, work that purports to examine nonnative/learner discourse and communication is impaired. This is a result of an imbalance of theoretical concerns and methodologies. It is an imbalance that hinders progression within the field. The reconceptualization we call for, which would redress this imbalance, requires three major changes in SLA: (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. If we begin to accomplish such goals, we believe that the field of SLA has the capacity to become a theoretically and methodologically richer, more robust enterprise, better able to explicate the processes of S/FL acquisition, and better placed to engage with and contribute to research commonly perceived to reside outside its boundaries.

In the sections that follow, we trace, first, the origins of the perceived imbalance in SLA research practices, arguing that it has led to the prioritizing of the individual-as-"nonnative speaker"/"learner" over the participant-as-language-"user" in social interaction. In order to consider the theoretical and methodological implications of this prioritization, we (re)analyse previously published data extracts, upon which we offer alternative insights and conclusions.

DISCOURSE AND COMMUNICATION

Researchers within SLA have a relatively long history of recording and analysing "learner" discourse; that is, language "above the sentence," produced in spoken encounters with others. In SLA, such recordings are commonly labelled "performance data." The aim is to explicate the
processes of S/FL acquisition, while (at least implicitly) acknowledging the social basis of language. In large measure, this practice of collecting data from interactive encounters is rooted in the "communicative" turn within anthropology and linguistics in the mid-1960s, represented most notably by Hymes's (1961; 1962; 1974, p. 90ff.) critique of Chomsky's (1957) formalistic, context-free, "grammatical competence" programme for linguistics. By stressing the centrality of communicative competence rather than grammatical competence, Hymes was instrumental in launching a more social and contextual view of language, which permeated, in greater or lesser degrees, a number of disciplines, SLA included. This view is predicated on the conviction that language—as a social and cultural phenomenon—is acquired and learned through social interaction (see, e.g., Halliday, 1978, p. 18; Gass & Varonis, 1985a, p. 150; Ellis, 1990, p. 99; Yano, Long, & Ross, 1994, pp. 192–193). As such, it can, and should, be profitably studied in interactive encounters. Long (1981), for example, takes the position that "... participation in conversation with N[ative]S[peaker]s, made possible through the modification of interaction, is the necessary and sufficient condition for SLA" (p. 275, emphasis added). Gass and Varonis (1985a) contend that "[a]ctive involvement is a necessary aspect of acquisition, since it is through involvement that the input becomes 'charged' and 'penetrates' deeply" (p. 150).

Hymes's influential critique notwithstanding, Chomsky's impact was too powerful to resist. His distinction between competence (the ideal speaker-listener's abstract knowledge of grammar of his own language) and performance (language as actual utterance) paralleled, reinforced, and extended Saussure's dichotomy of langue and parole, and maintained the priority of the former over the latter (see Sampson, 1980, p. 50). But it was Chomsky's theory of a language instinct (Pinker, 1994), an innate "mental structure" or "language acquisition device" within the brain, enabling language acquisition to take place, that had a catalytic effect on linguistics, an effect that reverberated in research in child development, speech perception, neurology, genetics, psycholinguistics—and SLA. Chomsky's legacy is clearly evident in groundbreaking SLA work, including Corder (1967) on learners' errors, Selinker (1971) on the notion of "interlanguage," and Duyal, Burt, and Krashen's (1982) model of SL speech processing.

The Chomskyan paradigm—its roots traceable to Plato and Descartes's rationalistic theories of the mind (see Chomsky, 1976, pp. 6–8)—was to manifest and subsequently establish itself within SLA as a central concern with language as an aspect of individual cognition. According to Chomsky (1968), linguists should "establish certain general properties of human intelligence," the reason being that "[l]inguistics is simply the sub-field of psychology that deals with these aspects of the mind" (1968, p. 24). For Corder (1973), a leading figure in SLA for a generation, the consequence was that SLA must subscribe to a view of language "as a phenomenon of the individual," while being "principally concerned with explaining how we acquire language ... its relation to general human cognitive systems, and ... the psychological mechanisms underlying the comprehension and production of speech" (p. 24). Moreover, such an approach would be "much less concerned] with the problem of what language is for, that is, its function as communication, since this necessarily involves more than a single individual" (ibid.). For many within SLA, the strength of this conviction has not diminished with passing years. In a recent paper, Gregg (1993) contends:

In SLA, for reasons that I (and others) have given elsewhere ... and which I for one find totally compelling, the overall explanandum is the acquisition (or non-acquisition) of L2 competence, in the Chomskyan sense of the term. (p. 278)

Gregg continues:

SLA theory is a theory of the acquisition of linguistic knowledge, and thus requires a property theory or functional analysis of that knowledge. But it is also a theory of the acquisition of linguistic knowledge ... Our property theory asks "How is L2 knowledge instantiated in the mind/brain?" (p. 279)

According to these views, acquisition is an individual phenomenon, its locus being the individual's "mind" or "brain." Thus social, discursive approaches to the nature of mind, as well as competence and knowledge (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981; Wertsch, 1991; Sampson, 1993; Harré & Gillett, 1994), are beyond the purview of SLA.

The consequences of the rapid development during the 1960s of these two strands of language research—let us call them the "social-anthropological" and the "cognitive"—were of great importance, because while in an embryonic state, SLA was subjected to a tension between, on the one hand, an acknowledgement of the social, contextual dimensions of language, language acquisition and learning, and on the other, the centrality of the individual's language cognition and mental processes. This tension is, to some extent,
still prevalent within SLA. And yet, as Gregg’s observations (above) intimate, the centripetal forces of the individual-cognitive orientation remain irresistible for SLA. The field was to become if not firmly embedded within, then at least an important adjunct of, psycholinguistics (Clark & Clark, 1977; Stern, 1983), which by the mid-1960s had largely adopted Chomsky’s programmatic statements on the cognitive, autonomic nature of the mind as its research agenda.

Benefits have accrued from the tension between these two perspectives. For example, researchers have attempted to investigate the influence of a range of contextual factors on language acquisition (e.g., the influence of task, conversational topic, prior acquaintance with one’s interlocutor), and have at times sought to embellish their research by invoking ethnographic information on data. The most lasting benefit is that SLA is an applied field of research, where learners’ competence (in both a Hymesian and a Chomskyan sense) has been studied through investigations of performance in verbal interaction (see the overviews in Ellis, 1990; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Ellis, 1994).

But this tension is by no means one of equipoise or counterbalance. It is a tension weighted against the social and the contextual, and heavily in favour of the individual’s cognition, particularly the development of grammatical competence. This has led to an imbalance of adopted theoretical interests, priorities, foci, methodologies, perspectives, and so on, resulting in distorted descriptions of and views on discourse, communication, and interpersonal meaning—the quintessential elements of language. Moreover, this has occurred even in SLA work that is concerned with discourse and interaction (e.g., communication strategies [CS] and input modification [IM] research), as we discuss below.

Indeed, the imposition of an orthodox social psychological hegemony on SLA has had the effect of reducing social identities to “subjects,” or at best to a binary distinction between natives and nonnatives/learners. It gives preeminence to the research practice of coding, quantifying data, and replicating results. It prioritizes explanations of phenomena in terms of underlying cognitive processes over descriptions of phenomena. It assigns preference to (researcher manipulation of) experimental settings rather than naturalistic ones. It endorses the search for the universal and underlying features of language processes rather than the particular and the local. It views communication as a process of information transfer from one individual’s head to another’s. It prioritizes etic (analyst-relevant) concerns and categories over emic (participant-relevant) ones. At best it marginalizes, and at worst ignores, the social and the contextual dimensions of language.

We do not argue that such theoretical predilections or methodological practices are in and of themselves erroneous or flawed, and that, as such, they should be eschewed. Rather, we point out their striking predominance within the field, leading to a general methodological bias and theoretical imbalance in SLA studies that investigate acquisition through interactive discourse.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

A case in point is much of the work conducted under the rubric of “communication strategies” (CS), as represented by Faerch and Kasper (1983) and, more recently, Poulisse (1993), and Kasper & Kellerman (1997). In a trenchant critique, Rampton (1997) argues that CS research constitutes the quintessential L2 moment. It bears many of the hallmarks of an orthodox psycholinguistic/social-psychological hegemony as outlined above, but an additional element, peculiar perhaps to SLA, is also prominent. This is SLA’s general preoccupation with the learner, at the expense of other potentially relevant social identities. For SLA, the learner identity is the researcher’s taken-for-granted resource, rather than, or as well as, a topic of investigation. (In most cases, “learner” is implicitly taken to be an adult receiving formal education in a S/FL.) The emic relevance of the learner identity is not an issue in SLA. More important, the learner is viewed as a defective communicator. So the focus and emphasis of research—a reflection of the quintessential SLA “mindset,” we venture—is on the foreign learner’s linguistic deficiencies and communicative problems. Indeed, CS are defined as “potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal” (Faerch & Kasper, 1985, p. 36).

In some senses this view is understandable: Feelings of incompetence and difficulty when learning a FL are surely commonplace, and often psychologically salient. The problem as we see it, however, is that studies of “difficulties” and “problems” predominate. Moreover, the study of problems in S/FL communication is implicitly taken to cast more light on SLA than does a focus on, say, communicative “successes.” Yet although largely neglected by SLA in general and CS studies in particular, the fact is that people often do succeed in communicating in a FL even with
quite limited communicative resources; successful communication, however, is perhaps less psychologically salient, and this may, in part, explain its disregard in SLA research. Nevertheless, we suggest that a study of communicative successes—in addition to studies of perceived failures and problems—may provide new and productive insights into SLA. We return, briefly, to this issue below.

Within CS research, we see social processes being interpreted from the perspective of cognition, which is prejudged to be hindered by the demands of a L2. For example, in Poullisse and Bongaert's (1990) CS work, the FL speaker's anomalous word formations (actually Dutch L1 lexical items) are viewed as erroneous features, explained solely in terms of the individual's lack of lexical competence (through the concept of "automatic transfer"). Explanations are not sought in terms of interactional or sociolinguistic factors. Yet as Rampton (1997) suggests, the identified lexical items may equally well have discourse organizing functions—as "contextualization cues" (in the sense of Gumperz, 1982)—or "the speakers might . . . be code-switching in order to explore a mixed Anglo-Dutch identity" (p. 22). In either case, it is problematic to view the L1 lexical items as exclusively erroneous artefacts of cognition.

The CS model of communication is characteristic of both psycholinguistic and transformational grammar approaches to language in that it implicitly draws upon the "mechanistic" (Shannon & Weaver, 1949) or "elementalntional" concept of message exchange. Here communication is viewed as a process of transferring thoughts from one person's mind to another's (see, e.g., Harris, 1981). According to the transformational grammarian Katz (1966), for example, "linguistic communication consists in the production of some external, publicly observable acoustic phenomenon whose phonetic and syntactic structure encodes a speaker's inner private thoughts or ideas" (p. 98). In CS research, then, speakers are viewed as having a preverbalised message or goal (the "information source" in Shannon and Weaver's model) equated with the speech act (Færch & Kasper, 1983, p. 24). This message or goal, known a priori by the putative speaker, is converted into a "plan," which is the locus of the selected communication strategy (op. cit., p. 30). The strategy is then executed through speech. In this way, meaning and social interaction are viewed as essentially separate and discrete entities.

Færch and Kasper (1983) present the following extract involving two 17-year-old females—a Danish learner (L) and a native speaker (NS) of English—as an example of a CS. The CS occurs at lines 4 and 6 (arrowed):

1 NS: ((pause)) what do you read at home ((pause)) what do you er read
2 L: mmmm
3 NS: what er subjects do you read about
4 L: --> er historie
5 NS: mhm
6 L: --> and((laugh)) I read 'historie' home and sometimes in my school - and - er
7 not more
8 NS: mm - do you like er history - in school - do you like learning history
9 ((pause))
10 NS: do you have history lessons in school -
11 L: er yes
12 NS: I mean when you learn about er I don't know
13 L: kings
14 NS: old kings yes
15 L: oh yes I have that
16 NS: do you like it
17 L: no ((laugh)) (extract continues)

Færch and Kasper (1983) observe that the conversation:

illustrates various aspects of interlanguage (IL) communication: the learner has difficulty in expressing in English what she could easily have expressed in Danish (namely that she likes reading stories); her attempt to communicate leads to a misunderstanding on the part of the native speaker which then gets clarified at a later time. (p. 21)

The CS in this extract is the word "historie," produced by L at lines 4 and 6. Presumably, Færch and Kasper would refer to this as an achievement strategy of "code switching" (p. 46), since "historie," reproduced by the authors inside quotation marks (at line 6, though not at line 4, the reason for this being unclear), is likely uttered (in standard Danish at least) as /his'doːˈrɪə/ , which the authors recognize as a Danish word, the English equivalent here being "stories." Færch and Kasper see the uttering of the word "historie" as marking a point of "difficulty" for the learner and of causing misunderstanding. They do so, it would appear, on the basis of what transpires several turns later (not reproduced above), where the learner declares that her interests are "not with this old things you know kings or all that," from which the native speaker responds "oh you mean a story, just a story about people, not necessarily in the past" (p. 20).

To begin with, it is at least debatable whether L does in fact experience difficulty at lines 4 and 6. The filled pause—"er"—at line 4 is hardly com-
pelling evidence of difficulty. (If this is the authors' reason for identifying difficulty, would they apply the same yardstick and declare that NS, in line 1, is experiencing difficulty in enunciating the word "read" in her "what do you er read"? We doubt this.) Færch and Kasper's assessment seems to be based on an etic view that sees language encoded in a "marked" (e.g., L1) form as an indicator of difficulty for the speaker. This learner-as-defective-communicator mindset has seemingly prevented the authors from considering the possibility that, in code switching, L has avoided difficulty and preempted a problem, not solved or experienced one.

A more emically based perspective would allow the authors to explicate the competencies through which the participants conjointly accomplish meaningful communication with the resources—however seemingly imperfect—at their disposal. For example, although L's pronunciation of "historie" is marked, the interlocutor, NS, is able to make sense of the utterance-as-pronounced (see Firth, 1996). This is so because, in this instance, both L and NS rely upon the nonnative status as a resource for sense-making: L in the way she can, knowingly, use a marked form in the knowledge that her interlocutor will take account of her NNS status in the interpretive work of making sense of the marked form; and NS in the way she focuses on the substrate of message content, rather than on the marked form of L's speech. In this extract, the identities of NNS and NS are not concomitant with linguistic "handicaps" or communicative deficiencies. On the contrary, they are resources that have aided communication.

Although L may have intended "story" and not "history"—as NS clearly interprets "historie"—the point is that the meaning or sense is that which is conjointly negotiated and implicitly agreed upon in the talk.7 Contrary to Lockean principles of communication, people cannot say what they mean in an absolute sense; meaning is ineluctably negotiated. Moreover, in order to make sense, people are obliged to do ceaseless interpretive work.8

The negotiated meaning in the above extract—the meaning conjointly established in an apparently unproblematic way—is "history." How does this come about? How have we moved from "historie" (lines 4 and 6) to "history" (lines 8 and 10)? Færch and Kasper propose that this is caused by a misunderstanding resulting from L's reduced competence in English. We offer an alternative analysis. NS has used the word "history" in line 8 because L's answer "historie" in line 4 is assumed to be topically relevant vis-à-vis the preceding question, namely "what er subjects do you read about" (line 3). The question, as a "first pair part" of an "adjacency pair" (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973), establishes a set of expectations as to what will occur in the following turn, one central expectation being that the next turn will be occupied with topically relevant materials vis-à-vis the preceding turn (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p. 162), another expectation being that it will answer the posed question; that is, it will have an actional relationship.9 NS has thus inferred that L's "historie," though enunciated in a marked way, is intended as the English "history," since "subject" (line 3) and "history" (line 4) are (in this specific sequential configuration) topically interrelated ("history" is a school "subject" that can be read about). By reacting in this way, by "searching for a normal form" (Cicourel, 1973), NS has made the abnormal, anomalous form "normal" (see Firth, 1996, pp. 245–247).

The misunderstanding that Færch and Kasper claim resulted from the use of the word "historie" is thus questionable. Note that after L's use of the word at line 4, NS does not intimate misunderstanding (line 5). Rather, the "mhm" is interpreted by L as a token of understanding and as a signal to continue on topic. This is borne out by L's on-topic turn at line 6, which not only elaborates the topic with a voluntary disclosure on where she (L) reads "historie" ("home and sometimes in my school," line 6), but also reuses the word "historie." Lacking a public display of non-understanding from NS, then, in line 6 L makes the common-sense, default assumption that she has been understood. NS's subsequent triple-deployment of the word "history" (lines 8 and 10), and L's affirmative answers (lines 11, 13, & 15) show that for these participants "historie" is not a problem.11 If there is a misunderstanding on NS's part, L is either unaware of it, or she lets it pass at lines 9 and 11—sequential "slots" that offer clear opportunities for L to carry out a "third-turn repair" (see Schegloff, 1992) of NS's erroneous interpretation.12 If L did see it as a misunderstanding on NS's part, at this moment in the conversation it was deemed to be nonfatal or irrelevant.

Meaning, from this perspective, is not an individual phenomenon consisting of private thoughts executed and then transferred from brain to brain, but a social and negotiable product of interaction, transcending individual intentions and behaviours (see Streek, 1980, pp. 147–149; Goodwin, 1979). This transcendence is possible because talk is organized on a turn-by-turn basis, thereby providing participants with a resource—
Alan Firth and Johannes Wagner

"procedural infrastructure of interaction" (Schegloff, 1992, p. 1338)—for accomplishing, demonstrating, and transforming meaning in an ongoing fashion. Each speaking turn, then, is a locus for the display of understanding of the prior turn (see, e.g., Schegloff, 1992, pp. 1300–1301). Participants orient to this feature, and in so doing are able to construct a transcendental "architecture of intersubjectivity" (Heritage, 1984, p. 254).

By extension, we would want to at least question Feerch and Kasper’s (1983) claim that “although problems in interaction are necessarily ‘shared’ problems and can be solved by joint efforts, they originate in either of the interactants” (p. 50; emphasis added). Because interaction and communication are per definition conjointly and publicly produced, structured, and made meaningful, communicative “problems,” we suggest, are likely to be recognized as problems in interaction. In this sense, it may be more useful to view problems in communication as contingent social phenomena, as intersubjective entities, and not invariably as “things” possessed by individuals.

INPUT MODIFICATION STUDIES

The mindset that views learners/nonnatives as inherently defective communicators is not restricted to CS research, but encompasses a wide range of “interactional” studies in SLA, included in which are influential papers by Varonis and Gass (1985a, 1985b) and Gass and Varonis (1985a, 1985b). These authors investigated communication between native speakers and nonnative speakers, a major impetus of their work being Long’s (1981) claim that “participation in conversation with NSs [native speakers] . . . is the necessary and sufficient condition for SLA” (p. 275, emphasis added). Summarising work in the field, Varonis and Gass (1985b) write:

... native speakers (NSs) respond differently to nonnatives (NNSs) than they do to natives. Specifically, there are more clarification requests, repetitions, expansions and elaborations, and a greater incidence of transparency in conversation with nonnatives than with natives. (p. 328)

Research that investigates the way participants accomplish mutual understanding has been termed “input modification studies.” As alluded to in Varonis and Gass (1985b), this work focuses almost exclusively on interactions involving NSs and NNSs, the modifications being made by the NSs (resulting in “foreigner talk”). Modifications include slower speech rate, shorter and simpler sen-

tences, more questions and question tags, greater pronunciation articulation, and less use of contractions (Zuengler, 1992). Even when nonnatives interact together, that is, when natives are not involved, the language and forms of interaction are compared (by the researcher) to NS interactions, the supposition being that NS interactions are the norm. Indeed, the general notion of modification presupposes that there is a standard or normal way of talking and interacting; it is this standard or normal way that is modified.

Native and Nonnative Speakers

Prior to discussing input modification studies directly, we wish to comment briefly on the status of the concept of NS in input modification research, although our comments will be relevant to SLA in general.

(a) Consonant with Chomskyan linguistics, in input modification research, and in SLA as a whole, the NS is a seemingly omniscient figure. In SLA, as Mey (1981, p. 73) sardonically puts it, the NS’s status as “the uncrowned King of linguistics” is upheld. NS data are thus viewed as the warranted baseline from which NNS data can be compared, and the benchmark from which judgements of appropriateness, markedness, and so forth, can be made.

(b) As a logical extension, NNSs are unproblematically viewed as the NSs’ subordinates, with regard to communicative competence (the negative connotation of the “non-” prefix is hardly coincidental).

(c) The SLA researcher approaches NS and NNS interactions in an overwhelmingly a priori fashion, viewing them as inherently problematic encounters. Thus Varonis and Gass (1985b) say: “even with earnest nonnatives and cooperative native speakers, misunderstandings are inevitable,” (p. 328) and “NSs and NNSs are multiply handicapped in conversations with one another” (p. 340). At the very least, NS—NNS interactions are prejudged to be somehow unusual, anomalous or extraordinary. Richards and Sukwiwat (1983), for example, claim that “[f]or the speaker of a foreign language, any conversational exchange with a native speaker of the target language is a form of cross-cultural encounter” (p. 113, emphasis added).

(d) NS and NNS are blanket terms, implying homogeneity throughout each group, and clear-cut distinctions between them. So a NS is assumed unproblematically to be a person with a mother tongue, acquired from birth. How bilingualism, multilingualism, “semi-lingualism,” and
which they occur, varying widely. Given this state, it is to compare observed features of interactions with "comparable" NS interactions (i.e., so-called "baseline" data; see, e.g., Trosborg, 1994, pp. 177-186). In the majority of cases, the NNSs being studied are unacquainted (college) students engaged in a formal learning programme and interacting in a quasi-experimental setting.

Interlanguage

It appears that people who are demonstrably not engaged in the formal learning of a L2, but who nevertheless voluntarily use a L2 in their everyday affairs (e.g., at work or play), are essentially uninteresting from the perspective of SLA research—judging by the paucity of what we may term "everyday L2 use" studies. However, in the few studies where interest in noneducational settings is shown (e.g., Varonis & Gass, 1985a), NNSs tend to be cast in the same light as "learners." Thus, users of a L2 are deemed to be in a phase of transition, in terms of language. That is, their language skills and competencies are seen to be underdeveloped. Once again, the NS is brought into the picture as the definitive object of comparison. Moreover, this transitional phase is regarded as more or less systematic and predictable—as a "system" in its own right. The system is seen to be on the move, the goal being "target" (NS) competence. Implicit here is the (at least disputable) assumption that target or NS competence is constant, fully developed, and complete.

Therefore, apparently regular though anomalous linguistic (phonological, syntactic, morphological, etc.) features of NNS speech are termed "fossilizations;" these are areas where movement in the system is seen to have been suspended, thus inducing linguistic petrification. In a similar fashion, "anomalous" speech acts have been deemed to result in "pragmatic failure" (e.g., Thomas, 1983). Completion is achieved and failures are avoided (the argument goes) once the NNS has reached NS competence.

These views on a NNS/learner language system are representative of the extraordinarily influential concept of interlanguage (IL) (Selinker, 1971), described by Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) as "a continuum between the L1 and L2 along which all learners traverse" (p. 60). This concept, like the work undertaken under the rubric of CS, is predicated on a range of metatheoretical assumptions on what it means to be a FL speaker, the nature of a "native" language, the nature of cognition, and the desirability of achieving native competence (though not NS status). And once again, within studies of IL, what may be—and often are—social dimensions
of language use tend to be viewed through the optics of individual cognition. The tensional imbalance reemerges.

This imbalance is particularly discernible in IL research because, as Rampton (1987) points out, IL studies are placed at the intersection of SLA and sociolinguistics, in the sense that both fields are concerned with language variability. Rampton's (1987) concern is with SLA's myopia in IL research, which "runs the risk of remaining restrictively preoccupied with the space between the speaker and his grammar, rather than with the relationship between speakers and the world around them" (p. 49). The "world around" speakers (and, presumably, hearers) is a myriad of factors, for example social relations, identities, task, physical setting, and both global and turn-by-turn speaking-turn agenda, each instantiated through language yet potentially influential on the way language is used. Research on speech genres, ethnography of speaking, and sociolinguistics in its many guises has irrefutably established and documented this reflexive relationship between language use and social context. Nevertheless, IL studies remain locked into a pattern of explaining variability and anomalous usage by recourse to notions of underdeveloped grammatical competence.

Yet as both Rampton (1987) and Firth (1996) show, NNSs' marked or deviant forms are not of necessity fossilizations of IL, nor can they on each and every occasion be accounted for by interference or a reduced L2 competence. Such forms may be deployed resourcefully and strategically, to accomplish social and interactional ends—for example, to display empathy, or to accomplish mutual understanding. IL studies in large measure do not appear to recognize that FL speakers are not simply at the mercy of their L2 (in)competence. The incompetence—if we wish to call it that—may in some instances also be a resource. Anomalous forms of talk may be accounted for not by incompetence but by the notion of recipient design, that is, speakers purposively designing their talk in anomalous ways in response to their specific, local circumstances, for this coparticipant, at this particular sequential moment (Sacks, 1970/1992, p. 230ff.; Firth, 1996). And not only utterances are recipient designed; interpretations of others' utterances also may be said to be recipient designed. Features of talk that are initially perceived and categorized as interference or fossilizations may be more appropriately viewed as adroit, local responses to practical and discursive exigencies that have arisen in the unfolding talk, resulting, on occasions, in purposive "codeswitching." There are interesting connections between IL and "input modification" research. One of these is that, in order to effect meaningful interaction, the NS appears to adopt IL-like behaviour—in the way language is simplified and adjusted to the perceived (lower) level of the NNS. The following extract was reproduced in Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) to illustrate input modification. Here the NS "is female, Caucasian American, in her late twenties, and a speaker of 'educated West Coast (Los Angeles) English.' The NNS "is a male Japanese office worker in his mid-twenties [. . . ] He is a 'beginner.' This is their first meeting, which has been arranged by the researcher":

1 NS: are you a student in Japan?
2 NNS: no I am not (. . . ) I am worker
3 NS: you're a worker what kind of work do you do?
4 NNS: uh I'm a /oSs'/ (. ) /oSs'/
5 NS: official! [official
6 NNS: [Official of (. ) (pu-) public
7 NS: ah you work for the government
8 NNS: uhm (pref?) (. ) no?
9 NS: (I don't understand) no. [pre?
10 NNS: /[prifek prif ker/
11 NNS: s-Japan has uh (. . . ) many /prifker/
12 NS: factory (. ) [factory?
13 NNS: [no
14 NS: what is it? can you tell me? what is that? (extract continues: pp. 146-147)

Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) observe that the participants talk about "here-and-now" topics, use interactional modification, produce repetitions, paraphrase, and check for confirmation. We ask: If this is "modified" interaction, what would be the "baseline" conversation? We do not take issue with the analysts' observations on what the participants are seen to be doing—paraphrasing, repeating, and so forth; more pressing is that data of this kind are taken to be a representation of FL interaction per se and "foreigner talk" (i.e., NSs' actions) in general. Thus Yano, Long, and Ross (1994) offer the following overview:

Conversational adjustments affect both the content and interactional structure of foreigner talk discourse. Where content is concerned, conversation with NNSs tends to have more of a here-and-now orientation and to treat a more predictable, narrower range of topics more briefly, for example by dealing with fewer information bits and by maintaining a lower ratio of topic initiating to topic-continuing moves. The interactional structure of NS-NNS conversation is marked by abrupt topic-shifts, more use
of questions . . . more repetition of various kinds. (pp. 193–194)

Our concerns are with the validity of such claims, and with the built-in assumption that a baseline form of interaction would be different from foreigner talk solely as a result of it involving NS. We question the implication that, in initial encounters between NSs and NNSs, interaction is overriding patterned as depicted above—for example, that natives and nonnatives, when interacting for the first time, routinely restrict themselves to “here-and-now topics,” and that natives invariably adopt the role of “information gatherer”—as is the case in the extract above.

It appears that, as a result of an urge to generalize across interactions between groups of NS and NNS, and as a result of a focus on experimental settings to the detriment of naturalistic, real-life encounters, researchers neglect the constraints and effects of setting and setting-related tasks on the structure of discourse. This raises the possibility that participants may not behave at the behest of their native or nonnative competencies and identities, but as a result of the (quasi-experimental) setting, their unfamiliarity with each other, and the setting-imposed task they have agreed to undertake.

It may be illuminating to consider why certain activities in the talk above appear to be differentially assigned, such that NS adopts the role of information gatherer, while NNS orient to and instantiates the role of information provider. Input modification researchers would most likely explain this as a result of NS’s superior language competence; that is, NS is simply “taking the initiative” (by, e.g., controlling topic). What we might allow for, however, is the possibility—borne out, we believe, in this extract—that NS is not taking the initiative; NS is being given the initiative by NNS, and is taking it on this basis. That is, both NS and NNS are collaborating in constructing meaningful discourse, and a mainstay of this collaboration is an effective “division of labour,” based on the resources that the two parties bring to and make relevant in the interaction. This is shown in the way NSS, in line 4, produces a marked form, and repeats it in rapid succession. The repetition of a marked utterance, we suspect, may be a methodic way in which speakers can implicitly seek assistance from their interlocutor (further research is clearly requisite on this matter). This appears to be the effect here, as NS in line 5 offers a “candidate hearing” of NNS’s marked pronunciation in line 4. This is followed by NNS’s acceptance of the candidate hearing and his incorporation of NS’s pronunciation (official) into his own turn (line 6). The phenomenon is repeated at lines 10, 11, and 12. Rather than dominance, incompetence, and underdeveloped FL ability (i.e., IL), we are witness to collaboration, sharing, resourcefulness, the skillful and artful application of a mechanism to effect collaboration in talk, and thus an efficient division of labour between the participants.

The materials considered in Zuengler (1993), Zuengler and Bent (1991), and Wagner (1996) also appear to challenge the “modification” researcher’s reliance on an assumption of inequalities in competence to explain features of NS—NNS interactions. Zuengler and Bent refer to the importance of content knowledge for the level of participation in conversations. Wagner’s data hints at the importance of factors such as social and institutional roles, and setting. In Wagner’s study, the NNS is a customer, conversing with a (NS) salesman in her (the NNS’s) own home. In this case it is the “customer” and “salesman” identities that appear to come to the fore, with NNS doing the information gathering and the NS salesman doing the providing—this despite NNS’s demonstrably limited syntactic and phonologic competence in the L2. Here, then, the NNS/NS identities are overridden (they appear, if anything, to be exchanged), while alternative identities—instantiated in the talk—are made relevant.

The type and incidence of modifications in NS—NNS interactions, indeed all types of interactions, are intricately related to the interactants’ local agenda, the social and institutional identities that are made relevant and instantiated in the actual encounter and, not least, the demands and contingencies that become relevant in the minutiae of the talk itself. In short, it is at least debatable whether there is such a thing as “interlanguage per se,” and it is problematic to hold that there exists a general, universal set of rules for how NS and NNS—as NS and NNS—converse. Equally questionable is the notion of there being a comparable baseline of NS—NS interactions. This simplification is once again predicated on a tendentious assumption that NSs represent a homogeneous entity, responding on each and every occasion in a patterned and predictable fashion.

The Notion of “Faultless” Discourse

This final section examines briefly another manifestation of the mindset of the “learner” or “nonnative” as per definition a deficient com-
municator, while casting critical light on the prevailing SLA view of discourse processes. Gass and Varonis (1985a) present the following two extracts involving two NNSs:

(extract 1)
1 NNS1: My father now is retire
2 NNS2: retire?
3 NNS1: yes
4 NNS2: oh yeah

(extract 2)
1 NNS1: This is your two term?
2 NNS2: Pardon me?
3 NNS1: Two term, this is this term is t term your two term? (p. 151)

Gass and Varonis (1985a) view these extracts as exemplifications of "exchanges in which there is some overt indication that understanding between participants has not been complete." According to the authors, lines 1 from each extract contain "unaccepted input" that act as "triggers." These serve to "stimulate or invoke incomplete understanding on the part of the hearer" (p. 151). However, in the case of extract 1, it is at least debatable whether the interlocutor (NNS2) demonstrates any kind of "incomplete understanding," or that the preceding turn is somehow "unaccepted." A more convincing case can surely be made for the interpretation that NNS2's reuse of the word "retire" (line 2) is seen—by NNS1—as a request for confirmation, rather than as indicating "misunderstanding" or "unacceptance." NNS1 provides confirmation in the subsequent turn (line 3). Further along, NNS2 displays the acceptability of this interpretation in line 4 ("oh yeah"). Similar to the Féerch and Kasper (1983) extract above, Gass and Varonis appear to be basing their judgement of acceptability and understandability of line 1 on an implicit assumption that marked usage (i.e., the marked word order of "my father now is retire") is problematic. This view distorts the analyst's interpretations of what is going on in the talk, such that NNS2's repetition of the word—here, "retire" (line 2)—is taken to indicate a problem in understanding. The same applies to extract 2. Here NNS2's "pardon me" (line 2) is adjudged to be indicative of a problem in understanding on NNS2's part, or that NNS1's turn 1 is unacceptable. Other interpretations are not considered. For example, NNS2's "pardon me" is not considered indicative of NNS2's preoccupation with other things during the uttering of NNS1's line 1, or indicative of an acoustics-related problem. Reduced competence is seemingly the metric upon which discourse is interpreted by the analysts—regardless of interactants' interpretations, which suggest that other factors may be at play.

Related to this is Gass and Varonis's (1985a) discourse model, predicated on an assumption of the existence of a "normal" form of discourse that is free of misunderstandings and such unaccepted input routines as above. Gass and Varonis (1985a) present the following extract:

1 NNS1: I'm living in Osaka
2 NNS2: Osaka?
3 NNS1: yeah
4 NNS2: yeah Osaka, Osaka
5 NNS1: What do you mean?
6 NNS2: Osaka (Japanese word)
7 NNS1: oh
8 NNS2: I'm not really mean Osaka city. It's near city.
9 NNS1: near city? (p. 152)

According to Gass and Varonis, the "trigger" is NNS1's turn at line 1. This "initiates a 'push-down' in the conversation, which continues until interlocutors have resolved the difficulty and 'pop' back up to the main discourse" (p. 152). What we question here is the implication there is a main discourse devoid of "triggers," "repairs," and "misunderstandings," one where progression is concomitant with problem-free interaction. This notion represents an erroneous conception of discourse processes—produced by NS or NNS. Misunderstandings and repair sequences like the one above are not aberrations. Rather, they are integral parts of the progression of normal, conversational discourse, regardless of the social identities of the actors involved.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

By critiquing what we take to be prevailing SLA views on discourse and communication, this article has sought to argue for a reconceptualization of SLA that would significantly—though, we feel, justifiably and necessarily—enlarge the ontological and empirical parameters of the field. The reconceptualization we call for is based on a belief that methodologies, theories, and foci within SLA reflect an imbalance between cognitive and mentalistic orientations, and social and contextual orientations to language, the former orientation being unquestionably in the ascendancy. This has resulted in a skewed perspective on discourse and communication, one that is accompanied by an analytic mindset that conceives of the FL speaker as a deficient communicator struggling to overcome an underdeveloped L2 competence, striving to reach the "target" com-
Researchers working with a reconceptualized SLA will be better able to understand and explicate how language is used as it is being acquired through interaction, and used resourcefully, contingently, and contextually. Language is not only a cognitive phenomenon, the product of the individual's brain; it is also fundamentally a social phenomenon, acquired and used interactively, in a variety of contexts for myriad practical purposes. The time has come for SLA to recognize fully the theoretical and methodological implications of these facts, a crucial implication being a need to redress the imbalance of perspectives and approaches within the field, and the need to work towards the evolution of a holistic, bio-social SLA.

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NOTES

1 At the risk of overgeneralizing, we conceive SLA to be a discrete and institutionalized field of study; we do not deny that research within the field is varied in terms of theoretical approaches and methodologies, as is the case in all collective endeavours within developing fields. Nevertheless, our critique of SLA is based on the view that the field has core interests, theoretical predilections, methodologies, and basic assumptions. It is this SLA "core" that has the focus of our attention here.

2 Other important and related influences at that time were John L. Austin's (1962) "ordinary language" theories of speaking as a form of action, and
H. P. Grice’s “William James Lectures” (1960, subsequently published in part as Grice, 1975). Both Austin’s and Grice’s work, like Hymes’s, extended the scope of linguistics into language use, that is, language beyond grammar (see Hanks, 1996, p. 92).

8 The debate about the “individual” and the “social” aspects of language predated Hymes and Chomsky, of course. See, for example, Saussure’s (1916/1959) contention that speech was individual, that it “depended on the free will of the speaker” (p. 19), and Volosinov’s (1930/1973) outright rejection of this, including his claim that “[t]he immediate social situation and the broader social milieu wholly determine—and determine from within, so to speak—the structure of an utterance” (p. 86, emphasis added). Hymes’s predecessors who promulgated a more “contextual” view of language included Malinowski (1923) and Firth (1937), and more immediately, Jakobson (1960) and Goodenough (1957). See also Brown, Malmkjær, and Williams (1996).

9 Our observations on CS research are a condensed form of Wagner and Firth (1997).

10 On the distinction between researcher’s resources and topics, see Zimmerman and Pollner (1971).

11 The transcription format has been altered from Faerch and Kasper’s original, though no detail has been omitted. In passing, we may point out the lack of detail in the transcript (e.g., on features such as pause length, word and/or syllable stress, intonation, and precise onset of overlaps—features that are reproducible, see, e.g., Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974, pp. 791–793) hinders others’ reanalysis of the transcript, inasmuch as such features may have important consequences for the way discourse is interpreted.

12 A caveat on the notion of “negotiation”: The term “conjoint negotiation” of meaning is not meant to imply that in order to talk openly and explicitly parties attempt to reach some kind of definitive agreement on the meaning of a word or utterance (although such “negotiations” may take place [e.g., between lawyers drafting a contract], in everyday circumstances they are rare). Normally, such negotiations are done implicitly, in the way an interlocutor will display acceptance or understanding of the meaningfulness of the other’s turn or utterance by producing an appropriate response. There are strong sceptical arguments—put forward by Schutz (1932/1967), for example—that agents cannot, in any theoretical sense, be said to fully understand one another, since no two people share identical interpretational schemes. However, in practice people do make common sense assumptions that they understand one another (see Pollner, 1987).

13 On notions of understanding in discourse, see Taylor’s (1992) outstanding exposition.

14 This is the basic proposition of the notion of “adjacency pair” relationships in discourse, also encapsulated in what Schegloff (1968) termed “conditional relevance”; see also Levinson (1983, p. 306).

15 Jefferson (1987) has referred to this as “embedded repair”. This is the activity of covertly repairing others’ perceivedly anomalous or marked usage in one’s own subsequent talk. Thus L’s “histoire” is subsequently repaired in an embedded way by NS as “history.”

16 Also, the very fact that NS continued to use the word “histoire” in the three questions at lines 7 and 9, in spite of L’s lack of responses to the first two questions, strongly suggests that NS assumes that L knows the word and, moreover, intended to use it in its sense of a school subject. If NS did see “histoire” as being a problem for L, presumably she would not have used the word repeatedly in her three questions.

17 Firth (1996) analysed how parties to (foreign language) talk are skillfully and differentially able to assess the gravity of misinterpretations, miscommunications, anomalous usage, and so forth, in their endeavours to construct coherent, meaningful discourse.

18 Although these papers were published over a decade ago (as was also the case with Faerch and Kasper, 1983), we feel that their influence on the field in general, and the contemporary currency of the views expressed within them, warrant their inclusion and examination here.


20 The extension of this is not that the SLA researcher must, on all occasions, refrain from using the categorization NS or NNS. Categorizations such as these (and a multitude of others, e.g., speaker, hearer, male, female, caller, doctor, patient) are necessary shorthands for the analyst-observer. What we point out, once again, is the predominance of the binary NS/NNS distinction, as well as the possibility that greater emotive sensitivity towards identity categorizations may, at specific analytical moments, or in general, prove to be profitable for the SLA researcher.

21 That monolingualism is viewed as the norm, and multi- or bi-lingualism the exception (even aberration), is borne out in the premise of the one language only policy underpinning the so-called “Natural Method” of (foreign) language teaching; see Kachru (1996, p. 16).

22 On the whole, SLA researchers implicitly view NNS as being synonymous with “learner” (see, e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1995, p. 125).

23 McCrum, Cran, and MacNeil (1986, p. 19) note that “English is used by at least 750 million people, and barely half of those speak it as a mother tongue.” A 1988 survey (Hesselbeg-Moller, 1988) of over 500 Danish businesses operating internationally revealed that English was the chosen foreign language in over 80% of all contacts. Contacts with Anglophone countries made up no more than 20% of all business interactions. English is the official language of international air and sea travel; it has been described as the lingua franca sine qua non in the European Union headquarters in Brussels (Dinyon & Greaves, 1989); members of the Free Trade Association conduct their business in English, even though no English-speaking countries are represented (Bryson, 1990, p. 2).

24 “Naturally occurring” in the sense that the interactions take place, or would have taken place, regardless
of the researcher's interest, involvement, or presence.

20 The "anomalies" are invariably characterized as such due to a comparison with a (often idealized) NS.

21 "Metatheoretical" in the sense that such assumptions are rarely, if ever, openly discussed, presented or debated within SLA; they remain tacit. On metatheoretical assumptions in sociolinguistics in general, see Figueroa (1994).

22 Davey (1993), for example, describes how L1 (Dutch) lexical items were creatively deployed as "nonce" forms in interactions involving Dutch and Danish business personnel, speaking English as a lingua franca.

23 Rampton (1987) compared the approaches to linguistic variability in sociolinguistics and SLA, and noted how the two approaches perceived identical linguistic phenomena in different ways, such that "[c]ode-switching in sociolinguistics winds up as interference in SLA" (p. 55).

REFERENCES


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