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SLA Theory: Key terms

SLA theory attempts to explain the phenomena involved when a person acquires a second language. We observe that people whose native language is X acquire a second language Y: How do they do it? The point of this over-simplified description is to emphasize that any theory is an attempt to explain phenomena, and to highlight three key terms: phenomena, language, and explanation.

Phenomenon

The term phenomena refers to things that we isolate, define, and then attempt to explain. Examples of phenomena are volcanoes, tides, genes, hallucinations, warts, steam, the second world war, car rage, the beginning of the universe. We should note immediately that phenomena are not always directly observable: genes and hallucinations are two examples from the foregoing list, the fundamental particles of physics and the force of gravity in Newtonian physics are two more.

Language

In SLA the phenomenon which interests us is people being able to speak languages other than their own native language/s. How one describes that phenomenon is crucial to the subsequent investigation. Those taking a Universal Grammar (UG) approach to SLA, for example, say that the phenomenon to be explained is a certain type of knowledge, namely linguistic competence, and their research consequently involves describing this knowledge and explaining how it is acquired. There are others in the field of SLA, however, who wish to take a much broader view of SLA, who wish to investigate "communicative competence", and language use. As a result, a wider range of phenomena need to be explained by appeal to individual differences among learners, social and cultural factors, and so on. Let us look very briefly at three different approaches to language.

Chomsky's Linguistic Competence

The distinction between performance and competence is most closely associated with Chomsky's work on the universal features of language that Chomsky claims are shared by all languages. Chomsky argues that we need to distinguish between people's language performance, what they say at any given moment (which may be influenced and explained by an enormous number of factors), and their competence,

what they know about language. Chomsky's approach to language assumes that language is a restricted psychological phenomenon. Chomsky takes language to be a complex, abstract system of rules, and Chomsky supposes that the job of a The question of language use, of what Chomsky has referred to as "the creative aspect of language… the ability of normal persons to produce speech that is appropriate to situations, though perhaps quite novel, and to understand when others do so" (Chomsky, 1980), lies completely outside the domain of Chomskian linguistics. Theory of language acquisition is to describe that system of knowledge and to explain how it is acquired.

To Chomsky, this question, and many others included in the Bachman model, are "mysteries" which

> simply lie beyond the reach of our minds, structured and organized as they are, either absolutely beyond those limits, or at so far a remove from anything we can comprehend with requisite facility that they will never be incorporated within explanatory theories intelligible to humans. (Chomsky, 1980:136)

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Halliday: "Language as social semiotic"

While Chomsky's UG approach sees language as a purely cognitive phenomenon, Halliday (1973, 1985) proposed a "systemic, functional" view of language which sees it in terms of the social functions it serves. According to Halliday, language is a systematic resource for expressing meaning in context, not the set of all possible grammatical sentences. Consequently, language should be analyzed in terms of the ways language users go about the task of "the realization of meaning in context". As Widdowson says, "the emphasis here is on language not as genetic endowment, but as generic accomplishment" (Widdowson, 1996:14). As a consequence of his approach, Halliday explains language as developing according to the changing needs of human communities. The two main functions that language performs are what Halliday calls the "ideational function", which allows people to deal with the external world (Language is used to organize, understand and express our perceptions of the world and of our own consciousness), and "the interpersonal function", which allows people to deal with each other. Halliday makes it clear that language can be seen as both abstract knowledge and as human behavior.

Bachman's Communicative Language Ability Framework

The framework includes three components:

Language competence: "a set of specific knowledge components that are utilized in communication via language" (Bachman, 1990:66).

– Strategic competence: "the mental capacity for implementing the components of language competence in contextualized communicative language use" (Bachman, 1990:67).

– Psychophysiological mechanisms: "the neurological and psychological processes involved in the actual execution of language as a physical phenomenon" (Bachman, 1990:67)

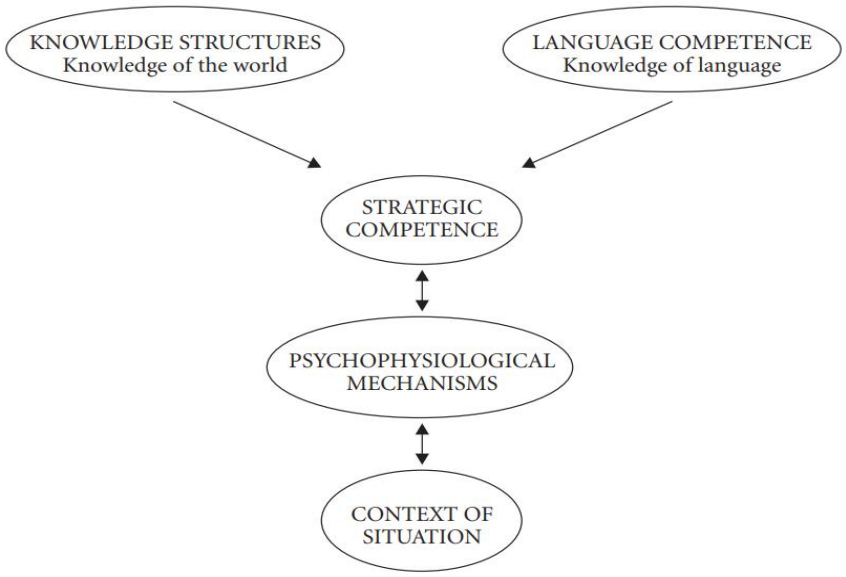


Figure 1. Components of communicative language ability in communicative language use. From Bachman 1990: 41.

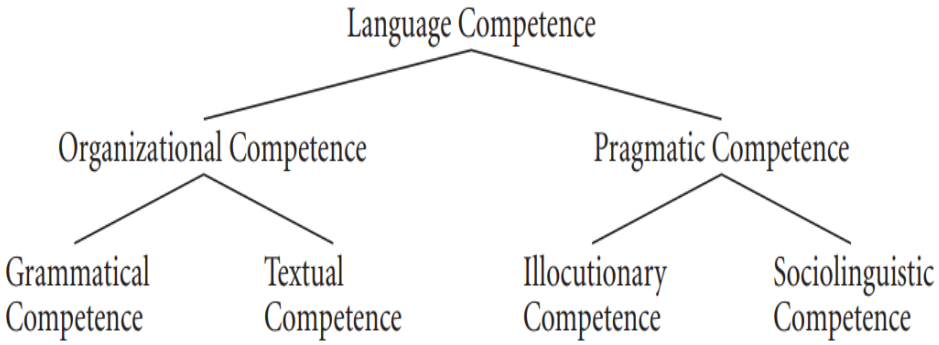


Figure 2. Components of language competence. Adapted from Bachman 1990:67.

Language Competence is composed of two components: Organizational Competence, divided into

a. Grammatical competence: knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and phonology/graphology

b. Textual competence: "includes the knowledge of the conventions for joining utterances together to form a text, which is essentially a unit of language — spoken or written — consisting of two or more utterances or sentences that are structured according to rules of cohesion and rhetorical organisation" (Bachman, 1990:88).

Pragmatic competence, which deals with the speaker's or writer's ability to achieve his purpose through his utterances. It consists of

a. Illocutionary competence: the ability to express and interpret the function performed in saying something. For example, the statement "It's cold in here" may function as an assertion, a warning, or a request to turn the heater on. The theory of speech acts makes a distinction between an utterance act (just

saying something), a propositional act (referring to something), and an illocutionary act. The meaning of an utterance can thus be described in terms of its propositional content and its illocutionary force.

b. Sociolinguistic competence: sensitivity to, or control of, the conventions of language use that are determined by the features of the specific language use context; it enables us to perform language functions in ways that are appropriate to that context.

Strategic competence consists of three components:

a. Assessment component: enables us to identify the information needed for a communicative goal, decide what resources to use, evaluate our interlocutor, and evaluate the outcome.

b. Planning component: enables us to marshal the necessary items from language competence.

c. Execution component: draws on the relevant psychophysiological mechanisms to implement the plan.

