



# Theory Construction in Second Language Acquisition

## *In Favor of the Rationalism*

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### Abstract

One of the most controversial issues in second language acquisition (SLA) seems to be the issue of theory construction. There are mainly two opposing views considering the SLA theory construction namely the *Rationalist* view and the *Relativist* view. The former tries to reasons that there should be a few theories of SLA at work while the latter favors as many theories as possible. However, the present paper tries to take a supportive stance with regard to the rationalism reasoning that the rationalist view seems to be more fruitful, practical, and above all beneficial considering theory construction in SLA.

**Keywords:** Rationalism, Relativism, SLA, Theory construction

### 1. The heart of the debate

Where did the story of the debate between SLA scholars considering theory building begin? The debate started with the publication of a special issue of *Applied Linguistics* in 1993 titled "Theory Construction in SLA," which contains papers from a 1991 conference at Michigan State University titled "Theory Construction and Methodology in Second Language Research".

It seems that some of the American scholars were either not interested or not ready for that very conference in 1991 due to the fact that after the publication of the articles in 1993 special issue of applied linguistics, rebellious voices of protest from different major universities in general and other scholars in particular were heard.

Thanks to the respect which all of these scholars found it hard to extend to each other, the participants of the debate of SLA theory construction can be easily recognized and divided into two main parts. One side of this debate, which is in line with *Rationalism* is supported by Berretta (1991, 1993); Berretta and Crookes (1993); Crookes (1992); Long (1993); Schumann (1993); Gregg (1993); (2000) and more recently Gregg (2002, 2003, and 2005), and also Long (2003). The other side of this debate, i.e. *Relativists*, although few in number, is supported by Lantolf (1996); Block (1996), and more recently Lantolf (2005).

It seems that currently the other members of each alliance either lost or change interest in that the debate is continued between Kevin Gregg from the *rationalist* perspective and James Lantolf from the *relativist* perspective.

To start, it has to be specified that the major focus of this article is an illustration of how scholars in the *rationalist perspective* view theory construction in SLA. But having a look on the criteria that a good theory of SLA should enjoy in general seems quite essential in helping us to decide which of the previously mentioned perspectives on theory construction in SLA make more sense. As a result, first a short recount of the general criteria of a good SLA theory is provided and then the significant elements of an SLA theory form a rationalist perspective are brought into consideration. Additionally, each of the scholars in rationalist perspective and their concerns are presented. And finally, I try to end up with a rationalist conclusion considering the issue of theory construction in SLA.

### 2. A good SLA theory: Elements and Concerns

According to Long (1990), "Theories of SLA are attempts to explain well-attested empirical findings about relationships between process and product in interlanguage development and universals, and variance in learners



and learning environment” (p.649). Additionally, Jordan (2004) lists 5 criteria for evaluating SLA theories:

1. Theories should be coherent, cohesive, expressed in the clearest possible terms and consistent that is there should be no internal contradiction
2. Theories should be capable of being challenged by empirical observations referring to the issue that the more a theory is open to tested, the stronger it is.
3. The wider the scope of a theory, the better
4. Theories with undemanding procedure and the fewer number of basic entities seem to be more preferable due to the issue of economy.

More importantly, McLaughlin (1987) sees one important task for theory builders in SLA as being to try to fit the different “bits” together. McLaughlin also suggests that an SLA theory should meet various types of requirements such as

- A theory should correspond to external reality. In effect this means that a theory must have empirical elements.
- The concepts employed in a theory must be described so that anyone will interpret it in the same way.
- Terms used in the theory may be drawn from everyday language or the theorist may invent his own terms. If the terms are drawn from everyday language, then all ambiguity must be removed. If the term is a neologism, it can be precisely defined but risks being misunderstood, an example is *intake*. Operational definitions are very helpful.
- A theory must have explanatory power; good theories go beyond the facts and can be generalized.

Since the major focus of this paper is on a rational view of theory construction in SLA, one can make use of the following proposed by Jordan (2004) as guidelines to construct a rational theory of SLA:

1. ***An external world exists independently of our perceptions of it.*** It is possible to study different phenomena in this world, to make meaningful statements about them, and to improve our knowledge of them.
2. ***Research is inseparable from theory.*** We cannot just observe the world: all observation involves theorizing. That is, there is no way we can talk about something sensed and not interpreted. This is a rejection of the behaviorists and logical positivist position, but does not exclude all empiricists.
3. ***Theories attempt to explain phenomena.*** Observational data are used to support and test those theories.
4. ***Research is fundamentally concerned with problem-solving.*** Research in SLA should be seen as attempted explanations. Data collection, taxonomies, “rich descriptions” of events, etc., must be in the service of an explanatory theory.
5. ***We cannot formalize “the scientific method”.*** Science is not only experimentation in a laboratory, it is not only physics, and, in any case, it is not necessary for a theory of SLA to be “scientific” in any narrow sense. There is no strict demarcation line between “science” and “non-science”.
6. ***There is no need for paradigmatic theories.*** As many theories as possible should be encouraged. It has to be highlighted that the opposition between the rationalist and the postmodernist perspective views on theory construction is conspicuously palpable in that the latter, i.e. the postmodernist view attempting to provide a cover-all theory.

### 3. The rationalist and SLA theory construction

Before discussing the rationalist’s scholars in particular, it seems useful to shed light on the general distinction between the rationalist and the relativist. Put simply, the rationalist view of SLA theory construction is against the notion of theory proliferation but at the same not after only a unified theory of SLA. The major claim of the rationalists is that the number of SLA theories should be decreased from many to a few in that the SLA theories have to be complementary rather than to be oppositional. The relativists, however, holds a contradictory stands in that they believe we can have as many as theories as possible.

Beretta (1991), who can be considered as the pioneering feature of the debate on SLA theory construction, framed a discussion of theory construction by addressing issues such as whether or not a diversity of theories and criteria in SLA represents a problem. In other words, he directly picked up the question that “should this diversity be reduced to one or a few theories?”

Considering different approaches to theory building, Beretta clearly concludes in favor of few, rather than many theories, highlighting the former as the result of “rationality” and the latter, the outcome of “relativism” (p. 495). Beretta provides an acceptable analogy and reasoning in that he believes comparing SLA to the already-successful sciences; i.e., the so-called hard sciences (p. 497), these fields do not, unlike SLA, have



“multiple rival theories” (p. 497). Therefore, it is not beneficial for SLA to have many theories, either. Moreover, Beretta (1991) adds that “most anarchic criterion of all” is that of “no criterion” which he calls “extreme relativism”.

Two years later, Beretta (1993), once again, negotiates his uneasiness and concern considering the proliferation of rival theories in SLA. Beretta (1993) argues *complementary* theories, that is, theories operating in different domains and each providing answers to different parts of the SLA puzzle are no problem since they are theoretically coherent; but *oppositional* theories are a problem, since they offer theoretically incompatible, mutually exclusive explanations of the same facts. Hereby, one can clearly conclude that Beretta supports theory building only from a rationalist paradigm, and certainly not from a relativist one.

It has to be mentioned that Alan Beretta, from Michigan State University, is not alone in this regard. He receives support from University of Hawaii by Graham Crookes. After the publication of Beretta’s (1991) article, his idea was supported by Crookes (1992) in an article titled “Theory format and SLA Theory” in which Crookes shows his agreement with Beretta implicitly in his adherence to a rationalist notion of science as the gold standard in considering theory construction.

Finally, Beretta and Crookes’ coalescence reaches its ultimate phase by their publication of an article in 1993 under the rubric of *Cognitive and social determinants of discovery in SLA*. Beretta and Crookes (1993) dismiss the argument that social conditions can cause the content of theories; they argue that “social conditions are not only not sufficient but are not necessary at all for scientific discovery” (p. 253). Moreover, they pointed out that assessment criteria by themselves assume ready-made theories; but the important issue to any active researchers is how to get to next step. Importantly, it has to be underlined that by important issue, they mean the greatest interest lies in the process of science.

In sum, Beretta and Crookes (1993) consider two approaches to SLA as a process: First, a mechanism based on personal motives which has much the same effects as if the enterprise were rational, and second, reasoning strategies to generate new hypothesis.

Based on Darden (1991), Beretta and Crookes proposed seven strategies for producing a new idea or a theory:

1. Using analogy
2. Invoking a theory type
3. Using interrelations
4. Moving to another level of organization
5. Introduce and manipulate a symbolic representation
6. Introduce a simplifying assumption, and then investigating
7. Beginning with a vague idea and successively refining it.

The next person who shows interest in joining the rationalist party is Michael Long, who was both a participant of the Michigan’s 1991 conference and a publisher in the 1993’s volume of applied linguistics. Having expressed his uneasiness considering the theory proliferation in SLA, Long (1993) estimates that there are between 40 and 60 theories of SLA, and he goes on to give an outline of the diversity.

Moreover, Long (1993) suggests that theories can be assessed in absolute and relative terms. He believes that

In absolute terms, theories may be judged inadequate because they are too powerful, ad hoc, untestable, say nothing about relevant phenomena, and so on. In relative terms, they may be less adequate than rival theories of the same phenomena because they consistently make less accurate predictions, account for fewer data, require more mechanisms to handle the same data. (p. 231)

The already covered quotation by Long shows that if he does not agree with theories in absolute status, he would not feel to be in the same boat with the relativist theories whatsoever. Additionally, Long (1993) clarifies his position as a rationalist and further expresses his dissatisfaction with the relativists view so boldly and assertively. Long (1993) states that

Relativists argue that no field could ever be ready, and are against it in principle either as impossible or as undesirable on cognitive ground which is a self-defeating attitude. In fact, it is not clear to me why relativists would bother to do research at all. (p. 230)

Finally, it has to be mentioned that, Long like Beretta and Crookes favors the notion of complementary rather than opposing rival SLA theories. Such an attitude is quite overt in his 1990’ article titled *The least a second*



*language acquisition theory needs to explain.*

John Schumann, another participant of the Michigan's 1991 conference and also a publisher in applied linguistics 1993's volume, puts forward his support considering the rationalist view of SLA theory in a both sophisticated and interesting way. Schumann (1993) puts forward the notion of falsification as a significant element in SLA theory construction.

According to Schumann, the notion of falsification asserts that a hypothesis cannot be tested in isolation, because all hypotheses are embedded in networks of auxiliary assumptions, and when a particular hypothesis is tested and the predicted result fails to occur, one cannot know whether the hypothesis is wrong or whether there is an error somewhere in the network of associated assumptions. Such assumptions can be either conceptual notions or methodological issues and the researcher may not even be aware that he/she maintains them.

For instance, we can consider the critical or the sensitive period as a sort of hypothesis which is to a large extent depends on the auxiliary factors such as socio-psychological factors, input factors, and neurological factors thus leading to difference results. According to falsification premise and more specifically Schumann (1993), these differences in result do not mean that the critical or sensitive hypothesis is wrong; but rather the differences result from many other auxiliary factors.

In sum, Schumann clearly expresses that it is so hard, if not impossible, to achieve a state of falsification and at the same he warns us that scholars should not aim at producing rival and oppositional theories due to the fact that one specific theory fails to fulfill what it predicts; rather we should be aware that such a failure in prediction is as a result of our not being aware of other auxiliary factors. Thus, new findings should not be considered as opposition to the original proposal of an issue but rather should function as complementary.

The messages that Schumann tries to get across are rationally redolent enough to be associated with the rationalist view of SLA theory construction in that it explicitly recognizes the theory proliferation in SLA is due to the researchers' acceptance of failure in what a theory accounts for as a result of the erroneous theoretical basis.

Thus; an acceptance of the influence of the auxiliary factors as the reason that why in some cases a theory of SLA results in failure can be considered a legitimate and rightful rationale to consider the new achievement as complementary rather oppositional or contradictory since they are all result from one theory.

The last but not the least feature is Kevin Gregg. Among the coalition of the rationalists, Kevin Gregg's desire to heat up the controversy between the rationalist and the relativist seems to be unquenchable. In a series of article, Gregg (1993, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2005) has tried to reprimand the relativist position with a barrage of irate tirade. To do him a justice, one can reasons that he absolutely got some points and concerns to negotiate.

His relativist opponent, James Lantolf who has always sent Gregg messages from the flower garden i.e. Lantolf (1996, 2005) seems to be the other side of this debate.

In his original proposal, Gregg (1993) argues that research in SLA considering the theory building should be committed to explanation rather than to the kind of aimless empiricist data –gathering collection. He further argues that theory proliferation is as a result of not being committed to explanation. Drawing on Long (1993), who has put forward that there are 40 to 60 SLA theories, Gregg argues that

Most of the 40 or 60 theories that putatively are SLA theories are not in fact really theories, but rather either descriptive, non-explanatory frameworks for L2 research on the one hand, or else metaphors for organizing one's thought on the other. (p. 289)

Additionally, Gregg (2000) finds the relativist stance wide open to be criticized and their characters to be assassinated. Gregg criticizes Lantolf for not having a clear understanding of relativism and mistaking pluralism instead. The second issue for which Gregg finds it a matter of scrutiny is Lantolf's notion of absolutism. Gregg argues that for one thing, no SLA researcher anywhere argues in favor of the domination of SLA by only one single theory. He also adds that even Eubank and Gregg's notorious comment that UG theory is the only rich and well-developed theory of linguistic competence around is not a claim that this is a welcome state of affairs. But Lantolf, like many other postmodernists, mistakenly believes that absolutism and foundationalism enjoy hegemony in science generally, and sees relativism as a bulwark against such hegemony.

In a comparison of Long and Lantolf, Gregg (2000) vividly expresses that

What does Lantolf offer us in preference to Long's picture of productive scientists doing useful work? In effect, a *kaffeeklatsch* of solipsists who do nothing but chat, without actually *doing*



anything. Where a rationalist like Long envisions SLA research as goal-oriented, empirical work, a postmodernist like Lantolf is satisfied with an endless conversation. (p. 396)

He also adds that

It is easy enough to see how this image of SLA research might appeal to those who are not really concerned with finding out the facts about SLA, or who might find themselves embarrassed by actual empirical findings. And it is hard to imagine what a research programme of Lantolfian postmodernist SLA researchers would look like. (p. 396)

Finally, Gregg (2003) gives the postmodernism and the relativist a curt in that he says he does **not** propose to spend much time on relativist views of theory, SLA or otherwise, as there seems to be very little reason to take them seriously since there are no scientists who take a relativist position and more importantly, it is inherently self-contradictory to conduct empirical research in order to reach conclusions which could not persuade, or even be comprehensible to, anyone outside the researcher's culture/paradigm/mindset.

#### **4. A Rationalist Conclusion**

Having a closer look on the entire previously mentioned rationalists like Beretta, Crookes, Long, Schumann and Gregg, we see that all of them are after the issue that coming to a consensus is quite beneficial to the field of SLA. And indeed it is beneficial.

As Long (1993) puts it the existence of a dominant theory or paradigm is necessary if the field is ever to attain the state of grace known as, using Kuhn's term, normal science. In this case, research becomes cumulative, details can be attended to, and application of theory can be harvested. More importantly, the theory tells the researchers the relevant data to collect and the process is theory-governed, organized, and cooperative effort.

Additionally, as Gregg (2005) highlights it

'The more, the merrier' is an irresponsible and self-defeating attitude for an empirical discipline to take towards theory construction. Life is too short, SLA researchers too few, and the claims of rationality too strong, for us to welcome every half-baked self-styled 'theory' simply because it 'challenges the paradigm'. The study of second language acquisition is an empirical scientific discipline, and one of the characteristics of science is that, in the long run at least, it progresses. An attitude of 'the more, the merrier' is one good way of stalling the progress. (p. 124)

Finally, the present paper underlines that the argument put forward by the relativist view of objectifying knowledge in general and the postmodernist view of SLA theory construction in particular is somehow much ado about nothing due to the fact that their claim is self-defeating and contradictory. If knowledge is out there and impossible to be objectified and SLA is one sort of that knowledge, as long (1993) puts it, why the relativists and the post modernists bother to do research whatsoever.

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