

context
competence
critical period

Introducing **Second Language Acquisition**

Muriel Saville-Troike

bilingualism
learning strategies
target language

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Introducing Second Language Acquisition

Written for students encountering the topic for the first time, this is a clear and practical introduction to Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

It explains in nontechnical language how a second language is acquired; what the second language learner needs to know; and why some learners are more successful than others.

The textbook introduces in a step-by-step fashion a range of fundamental concepts – such as SLA in adults and children, in formal and informal learning contexts, and in diverse sociocultural settings – and takes an interdisciplinary approach, encouraging students to consider SLA from linguistic, psychological, and social perspectives. Each chapter contains a list of key terms, a summary, and a range of graded exercises suitable for self-testing or class discussion. Providing a solid foundation in SLA, this book is set to become the leading introduction to the field for students of linguistics, psychology, education, and trainee language teachers.

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Introducing Second Language Acquisition

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521790864

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First published in print format 2005

ISBN-13 978-0-511-13330-5 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN-10 0-511-13330-8 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-79086-4 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-79086-7 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-79407-7 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-79407-2 paperback

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Contents

<i>About the book</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	viii
1 Introducing Second Language Acquisition	1
What is SLA?	2
What is a second language?	3
What is a first language?	4
Diversity in learning and learners	5
Summary	5
Activities	6
2 Foundations of Second Language Acquisition	7
The world of second languages	8
The nature of language learning	12
L1 versus L2 learning	16
The logical problem of language learning	21
Frameworks for SLA	24
Summary	29
Activities	29
Further reading	30
3 The linguistics of Second Language Acquisition	31
The nature of language	32
Early approaches to SLA	33
Universal Grammar	46
Functional approaches	52
Summary	62
Activities	63
Further reading	64
4 The psychology of Second Language Acquisition	67
Languages and the brain	68
Learning processes	73
Differences in learners	81
The effects of multilingualism	93
Summary	94
Activities	95
Further reading	96
5 Social contexts of Second Language Acquisition	99
Communicative competence	100
Microsocial factors	101

Macrosocial factors	119
Summary	130
Activities	130
Further reading	132
6 Acquiring knowledge for L2 use	133
Competence and use	134
Academic vs. interpersonal competence	135
Components of language knowledge	137
Receptive activities	153
Productive activities	162
Summary	169
Activities	170
Further reading	171
7 L2 learning and teaching	173
Integrating perspectives	174
Approaching near-native competence	179
Implications for L2 learning and teaching	180
Summary	180
<i>Answer guide to questions for self-study</i>	181
<i>Glossary</i>	185
<i>References</i>	197
<i>Index</i>	205

About the book

This book is a brief but comprehensive introduction to the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The intended audience is primarily undergraduate students, but it is also suitable for graduate students who have little or no prior knowledge of linguistics.

My goals in writing this book are threefold: (1) to provide a basic level of knowledge about second language learning phenomena to students as part of their general education in humanities, the social sciences, and education; (2) to stimulate interest in second language learning and provide guidance for further reading and study; and (3) to offer practical help to second language learners and future teachers.

Scope and perspective

I have included a broader range of SLA phenomena in this book than is the usual case: those involved in both adult and child second language learning, in both formal (instructed) and informal (natural) contexts of learning, and in diverse sociocultural settings. Since my own professional identity and commitment are interdisciplinary, I emphasize the importance of integrating linguistic, psychological, and social perspectives on SLA even as I recognize the differential nature of their assumptions and contributions. An effort has been made to maintain balance among them in quantity and quality of representation.

The focus of this book is on the acquisition of second language “competence,” but this construct is broadly considered from different points of view: as “linguistic competence” (in the sense of underlying grammatical knowledge); as “communicative competence” (adding notions of requisite cultural knowledge and other knowledge which enables appropriate usage); and as knowledge required for participation in communicative activities involving reading, listening, writing, and speaking.

Design

Each chapter of this book considers three basic questions: *What* exactly does the L2 learner come to know? *How* does the learner acquire this knowledge? *Why* are some learners more successful than others? Chapter 1 introduces the most basic terms and concepts, beginning with “What is SLA?” Chapter 2 provides a foundational background, ranging from the nature and distribution of multilingualism in the world to generally accepted notions of contrasts between first and second language acquisition. The chapter concludes with a preview of the different theoretical frameworks of SLA which will be surveyed. Chapters 3 to 5 focus in turn on different disciplinary perspectives: linguistic, psychological, and social. Chapter 6 focuses on the competence required for academic and interpersonal functions, and on the interdependence of content, context, and linguistic knowledge. The final chapter briefly summarizes and integrates answers to the basic *what*, *how*, and *why* questions that are posed throughout the book.

Each chapter includes a preview of its content and a summary. Chapters 1 to 6 conclude with suggested activities for self-checking of understanding and for class discussion or individual exploration. Chapters 2 to 6 include annotated suggestions for further reading on each major topic in that chapter. Important technical concepts are presented sequentially with key terms listed at the beginning of chapters and highlighted with explanations and examples in the text. A comprehensive glossary is provided for student reference, and the subject index allows for integration and reinforcement of concepts across topics and disciplinary perspectives. All terms which appear in the glossary are highlighted in the text, whether or not they are listed as key terms.

Acknowledgments

Any introductory survey of a field is indebted to many sources, and this is no exception (as the relatively long list of references suggests). I am particularly grateful to Karen Barto in the preparation of this work: she developed the suggestions for further reading and chapter activities, and she has contributed significantly to other aspects of conceptualization and development. I am also grateful to colleagues who provided input on earlier drafts (especially Rudy Troike, Peter Ecke, Renate Schulz, and Mary Wildner-Bassett), although they do not bear responsibility for my conclusions. My students

at the University of Arizona have been most helpful in providing relevant examples and in indicating where clarification in my presentation was necessary. I could not begin to make an enumeration, but I thank them all.

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1 Introducing Second Language Acquisition

CHAPTER PREVIEW

KEY TERMS

*Second
Language
Acquisition (SLA)*

*Second
language (L2)*

*Informal L2
learning*

*Formal L2
learning*

*Linguistic
competence*

*Linguistic
performance*

*First
language/native
language/mother
tongue (L1)*

*Simultaneous
multilingualism*

*Sequential
multilingualism*

When you were still a very young child, you began acquiring at least one language – what linguists call your **L1** – probably without thinking much about it, and with very little conscious effort or awareness. Since that time, you may have acquired an additional language – your **L2** – possibly also in the natural course of having the language used around you, but more likely with the same conscious effort needed to acquire other domains of knowledge in the process of becoming an “educated” individual. This book is about the phenomenon of adding languages. In this introductory chapter, I will define a few of the key terms that we will use and present the three basic questions that we will explore throughout the book.

What is SLA?

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers both to the study of individuals and groups who are learning a language subsequent to learning their first one as young children, and to the process of learning that language. The additional language is called a **second language (L2)**, even though it may actually be the third, fourth, or tenth to be acquired. It is also commonly called a **target language (TL)**, which refers to any language that is the aim or goal of learning. The scope of SLA includes **informal L2 learning** that takes place in naturalistic contexts, **formal L2 learning** that takes place in classrooms, and L2 learning that involves a mixture of these settings and circumstances. For example, “informal learning” happens when a child from Japan is brought to the US and “picks up” English in the course of playing and attending school with native English-speaking children without any specialized language instruction, or when an adult Guatemalan immigrant in Canada learns English as a result of interacting with native English speakers or with co-workers who speak English as a second language. “Formal learning” occurs when a high school student in England takes a class in French, when an undergraduate student in Russia takes a course in Arabic, or when an attorney in Colombia takes a night class in English. A combination of formal and informal learning takes place when a student from the USA takes Chinese language classes in Taipei or Beijing while also using Chinese outside of class for social interaction and daily living experiences, or when an adult immigrant from Ethiopia in Israel learns Hebrew both from attending special classes and from interacting with co-workers and other residents in Hebrew.

In trying to understand the process of second language acquisition, we are seeking to answer three basic questions:

- (1) *What* exactly does the L2 learner come to know?
- (2) *How* does the learner acquire this knowledge?
- (3) *Why* are some learners more successful than others?

There are no simple answers to these questions – in fact, there are probably no answers that all second language researchers would agree on completely. In part this is because SLA is highly complex in nature, and in part because scholars studying SLA come from academic disciplines which differ greatly in theory and research methods. The multidisciplinary approach to studying SLA phenomena which has developed within the last half-century has yielded important insights, but many tantalizing mysteries remain. New findings are appearing every day, making this an exciting period to be studying the subject. The continuing search for answers is not only shedding light on SLA in its own right, but is illuminating related fields. Furthermore, exploring answers to these questions is of potentially great practical value to anyone who learns or teaches additional languages.

SLA has emerged as a field of study primarily from within linguistics and psychology (and their subfields of applied linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and social psychology), as a result of efforts to answer the

what, *how*, and *why* questions posed above. There are corresponding differences in what is emphasized by researchers who come from each of these fields:

- Linguists emphasize the characteristics of the differences and similarities in the languages that are being learned, and the **linguistic competence** (underlying knowledge) and **linguistic performance** (actual production) of learners at various stages of acquisition.
- Psychologists and psycholinguists emphasize the mental or cognitive processes involved in acquisition, and the representation of language(s) in the brain.
- Sociolinguists emphasize variability in learner linguistic performance, and extend the scope of study to **communicative competence** (underlying knowledge that additionally accounts for language use, or **pragmatic competence**).
- Social psychologists emphasize group-related phenomena, such as identity and social motivation, and the interactional and larger social contexts of learning.

Applied linguists who specialize in SLA may take any one or more of these perspectives, but they are also often concerned with the implications of theory and research for teaching second languages. Each discipline and subdiscipline uses different methods for gathering and analyzing data in research on SLA, employs different theoretical frameworks, and reaches its interpretation of research findings and conclusions in different ways.

It is no surprise, then, that the understandings coming from these different disciplinary perspectives sometimes seem to conflict in ways that resemble the well-known Asian fable of the three blind men describing an elephant: one, feeling the tail, says it is like a rope; another, feeling the side, says it is flat and rubbery; the third, feeling the trunk, describes it as being like a long rubber hose. While each perception is correct individually, they fail to provide an accurate picture of the total animal because there is no holistic or integrated perspective. Ultimately, a satisfactory account of SLA must integrate these multiple perspectives; this book is a step in that direction. As in the fable of the elephant, three different perspectives are presented here: linguistic, psychological, and social. I make no presumption that any one perspective among these is ‘right’ or more privileged, but believe that all are needed to provide a fuller understanding of the complex phenomena of SLA.

What is a second language?

I have broadly defined the scope of SLA as concerned with any phenomena involved in learning an L2. Sometimes it is necessary for us to make further distinctions according to the function the L2 will serve in our lives, since this may significantly affect *what* we learn. These differences may determine the specific areas of vocabulary knowledge we need, the level of grammatical complexity we have to attain, and whether speaking or reading

skills are more important. The following are distinctions commonly made in the literature:

- A **second language** is typically an official or societally dominant language needed for education, employment, and other basic purposes. It is often acquired by minority group members or immigrants who speak another language natively. In this more restricted sense, the term is contrasted with other terms in this list.
- A **foreign language** is one not widely used in the learners' immediate social context which might be used for future travel or other cross-cultural communication situations, or studied as a curricular requirement or elective in school, but with no immediate or necessary practical application.
- A **library language** is one which functions primarily as a tool for further learning through reading, especially when books or journals in a desired field of study are not commonly published in the learners' native tongue.
- An **auxiliary language** is one which learners need to know for some official functions in their immediate political setting, or will need for purposes of wider communication, although their first language serves most other needs in their lives.

Other restricted or highly specialized functions for 'second' languages are designated **language for specific purposes** (such as *French for Hotel Management*, *English for Aviation Technology*, *Spanish for Agriculture*, and a host of others), and the learning of these typically focuses only on a narrow set of occupation-specific uses and functions. One such prominent area is *English for Academic Purposes* (EAP).

What is a first language?

There is also sometimes a need to distinguish among the concepts **first language**, **native language**, **primary language**, and **mother tongue**, although these are usually treated as a roughly synonymous set of terms (generalized as **L1** to oppose the set generalized as **L2**). The distinctions are not always clear-cut. For purposes of SLA concerns, the important features that all shades of L1s share are that they are assumed to be languages which are acquired during early childhood – normally beginning before the age of about three years – and that they are learned as part of growing up among people who speak them. Acquisition of more than one language during early childhood is called **simultaneous multilingualism**, to be distinguished from **sequential multilingualism**, or learning additional languages after L1 has already been established. ('Multilingualism' as used here includes bilingualism.) Simultaneous multilingualism results in more than one "native" language for an individual, though it is undoubtedly much less common than sequential multilingualism. It appears that there are significant differences between the processes and/or results of

language acquisition by young children and by older learners, although this is an issue which is still open to debate, and is one of those which we will explore in chapters to follow.

Diversity in learning and learners

As already noted, the circumstances under which SLA takes place sometimes need to be taken into account, although they are perhaps too often taken for granted and ignored. *What* is learned in acquiring a second language, as well as *how* it is learned, is often influenced by whether the situation involves informal exposure to speakers of other languages, immersion in a setting where one needs a new language to meet basic needs, or formal instruction in school, and these learning conditions are often profoundly influenced by powerful social, cultural, and economic factors affecting the status of both languages and learners.

The intriguing question of *why* some L2 learners are more successful than others requires us to unpack the broad label “learners” for some dimensions of discussion. Linguists may distinguish categories of learners defined by the identity and relationship of their L1 and L2; psycholinguists may make distinctions based on individual aptitude for L2 learning, personality factors, types and strength of motivation, and different learning strategies; sociolinguists may distinguish among learners with regard to social, economic, and political differences and learner experiences in negotiated interaction; and social psychologists may categorize learners according to aspects of their group identity and attitudes toward target language speakers or toward L2 learning itself. All of these factors and more will be addressed in turn in the following chapters.

Chapter summary

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) involves a wide range of language learning settings and learner characteristics and circumstances. This book will consider a broad scope of these, examining them from three different disciplinary perspectives: *linguistic*, *psychological*, and *social*. Different approaches to the study of SLA have developed from each of these perspectives in attempts to answer the three basic questions: *What* exactly does the L2 learner come to know? *How* does the learner acquire this knowledge? *Why* are some learners more (or less) successful than others?

Activities

Questions for self-study

1. Match the following terms to their definitions:

- | | | |
|----|------------------|--|
| 1. | target language | a. has no immediate or necessary practical application, might be used later for travel or be required for school |
| 2. | second language | b. the aim or goal of language learning |
| 3. | first language | c. an officially or societally dominant language (not speakers' L1) needed for education, employment or other basic purposes |
| 4. | foreign language | d. acquired during childhood |

2. The underlying knowledge of language is called _____.

3. Actual production of language is called _____.

Active learning

1. List all of the languages that you can use. First classify them as L1(s) and L2(s), and then further classify the L2(s) as "second," "foreign," "library," "auxiliary," or "for special purposes." Finally, distinguish between the ways you learned each of the languages: through informal exposure, formal instruction, or some combination of these.
2. Do you think that you are (or would be) a "good" or a "poor" L2 learner? Why do you think so? Consider whether you believe that your own relative level of success as a language learner is due primarily to linguistic, psychological, or social factors (social may include type of instruction, contexts of learning, or attitudes toward the L1 and L2).

2 Foundations of Second Language Acquisition

CHAPTER PREVIEW

KEY TERMS

*Multilingualism/
bilingualism*

Monolingualism

*Multilingual
competence*

*Monolingual
competence*

*Learner
language*

Positive transfer

Negative transfer

Fossilization

*Poverty-of-the-
stimulus*

Most of us, especially in countries where English is the majority language, are not aware of the prevalence of multilingualism in the world today, nor the pervasiveness of second language learning. We begin this chapter with an overview of these points, then go on to explore the nature of language learning, some basic similarities and differences between L1 and L2 learning, and “the logical problem of language acquisition.” An understanding of these issues is a necessary foundation for our discussion of linguistic, psychological, and social perspectives on SLA in the next chapters. We follow this with a survey of the theoretical frameworks and foci of interest which have been most important for the study of SLA within each of the three perspectives.

The world of second languages

Multilingualism refers to the ability to use two or more languages. (Some linguists and psychologists use **bilingualism** for the ability to use two languages and **multilingualism** for more than two, but we will not make that distinction here.) **Monolingualism** refers to the ability to use only one. No one can say for sure how many people are multilingual, but a reasonable estimate is that at least half of the world's population is in this category. Multilingualism is thus by no means a rare phenomenon, but a normal and common occurrence in most parts of the world. According to François Grosjean, this has been the case as far back as we have any record of language use:

[B]ilingualism is present in practically every country of the world, in all classes of society, and in all age groups. In fact it is difficult to find a society that is genuinely monolingual. Not only is bilingualism worldwide, it is a phenomenon that has existed since the beginning of language in human history. It is probably true that no language group has ever existed in isolation from other language groups, and the history of languages is replete with examples of language contact leading to some form of bilingualism. (1982:1)

Reporting on the current situation, G. Richard Tucker concludes that there are many more bilingual or multilingual individuals in the world than there are monolingual. In addition, there are many more children throughout the world who have been and continue to be educated through a second or a later-acquired language, at least for some portion of their formal education, than there are children educated exclusively via the first language. (1999:1)

Given the size and widespread distribution of multilingual populations, it is somewhat surprising that an overwhelming proportion of the scientific attention which has been paid to language acquisition relates only to monolingual conditions and to first language acquisition. While there are interesting similarities between L1 and L2 acquisition, the processes cannot be equated, nor can multilingualism be assumed to involve simply the same knowledge and skills as monolingualism except in more than one language. This point is made most cogently by Vivian Cook, who introduced the concept of **multilingual competence** (his term is “multicompetence”) to refer to “the compound state of a mind with two [or more] grammars” (1991:112). This is distinguished from **monolingual competence** (or “monocompetence” in Cook’s terminology), which refers to knowledge of only one language.

L2 users differ from monolinguals in L1 knowledge; advanced L2 users differ from monolinguals in L2 knowledge; L2 users have a different metalinguistic awareness from monolinguals; L2 users have different cognitive processes. These subtle differences consistently suggest that people with multicompetence are not simply equivalent to two monolinguals but are a unique combination. (Cook 1992:557)

One message from world demographics is that SLA phenomena are immensely important for social and practical reasons, as well as for academic ones. Approximately 6,000 languages are spoken in the world, with widely varying distribution, and almost all of them have been learned as second languages by some portion of their speakers. The four most commonly used languages are Chinese, English, Spanish, and Hindi, which are acquired by over 2 billion as L1s and almost 1.7 billion as L2s, as shown in 2.1 (based on Zhu 2001 and Crystal 1997b):

2.1 Estimated L1/L2 distribution of numerically dominant languages		
	L1 speakers (in millions)	L2 speakers (in millions)
Chinese	1,200	15
English	427	950
Spanish	266	350
Hindi	182	350

Even just among these four numerically dominant languages, there is great variance. Chinese is an L1 for many more people than any other language, and English is by far the most common L2. In China alone, a recent estimate of numbers of people studying English exceeds 155 million: 10 million in elementary school, 80 million in high school, at least 5 million in universities, and 60 million adults in other instructional contexts. Many more millions will soon be added to these estimates as China implements mandatory English instruction at the primary level. Demographic change is also illustrated by the fact that there are now perhaps 15 million speakers of Chinese L2 (this number is far from certain), but the increasing involvement and influence of China in international economic and political spheres is being accompanied by an increase in the election or need for people elsewhere to learn Mandarin Chinese, the official national language (different varieties, such as Cantonese and Taiwanese, are as different as German and Swedish). An indicator of this trend in the USA is that by 1998, the Modern Language Association reported that Chinese had become the sixth most commonly taught foreign language in US colleges and universities, and numbers are steadily growing.

While multilingualism occurs in every country, for a variety of social reasons the distribution of multiple language use is quite unequal. In some countries, e.g. Iceland, very few people speak other than the national language on a regular basis, while in other countries, such as parts of west Africa, close to 100 percent of the speakers of the national language also speak another language. English L1 speakers often expect to be able to “get along” in English anywhere in the world they may travel for tourism, business, or diplomatic purposes, and may be less likely to become fluent in other languages in part for this reason.

Those who grow up in a multilingual environment acquire multilingual competence in the natural course of using two or more languages from childhood with the people around them, and tend to regard it as perfectly normal to do so. Adding second languages at an older age often takes considerable effort, however, and thus requires motivation. This motivation may arise from a variety of conditions, including the following:

- Invasion or conquest of one's country by speakers of another language;
- A need or desire to contact speakers of other languages in economic or other specific domains;
- Immigration to a country where use of a language other than one's L1 is required;
- Adoption of religious beliefs and practices which involve use of another language;
- A need or desire to pursue educational experiences where access requires proficiency in another language;
- A desire for occupational or social advancement which is furthered by knowledge of another language;
- An interest in knowing more about peoples of other cultures and having access to their technologies or literatures. (Crystal 1997b)

The numbers of L1 and L2 speakers of different languages can only be estimated. Reasons for uncertainty in reporting language data include some which have social and political significance, and some which merely reflect imprecise or ambiguous terminology. For example:

1. Linguistic information is often not officially collected

Census forms in many countries do not include questions on language background, presumably because there is no particular interest in this information, because it is impractical to gather, or because it is considered to be of a sensitive nature. In cases where responses concerning language would essentially identify minority group members, sensitivities can be either personal or political: personal sensitivities can arise if identification might lead to undesired consequences; political sensitivities can be at issue if the government does not wish to recognize how many speakers of minority languages there are in order to downplay the political importance of a group, or in order to emphasize cultural/linguistic homogeneity and cohesion by not according recognition to cultural/linguistic diversity.

2. Answers to questions seeking linguistic information may not be reliable

Respondents may not want to be identified as speakers of a minority language. For instance, this was the case for a survey which was conducted several years ago for a rural school district in California. The survey was of parents with preschool children, asking them about the language(s) used at home in order to anticipate future English L2 instructional program needs. Many Hispanic parents insisted that they spoke primarily English at home even when they could only understand and respond to the interviewers

when questions were asked in Spanish. Their linguistic “misrepresentation” was likely motivated by fear that lack of English would trigger further questions about their US citizenship (a reasonable concern on their part, although not the school’s intent). In other cases, respondents may say that they use the dominant language more than they actually do because they reject or are ashamed of their ethnic heritage and wish to assimilate, or because they are afraid of government oppression or social stigmatization. Others may similarly over-report dominant language use because they feel this is the appropriate answer to give official representatives, or in order to qualify for civil privileges, such as being allowed to vote.

On the other hand, respondents may over-report use of minority and ancestral languages because of pride in their heritage. There may also be over-reporting of minority language use in order to obtain more recognition, resources, or services for the groups with which they identify.

How questions are worded also commonly contributes to the unreliability and non-comparability of language data. For example, the following questions might all be intended to elicit the identity of speakers’ L1, but the same speakers might respond differentially depending on which question is asked:

- What is your native language?
- What is your mother tongue?
- What language did you learn first as a child?
- What language was usually spoken in your home when you were a child?
- What language are you most likely to use with family and friends?
- What is your strongest language?

3. There is lack of agreement on definition of terms and on criteria for identification

It may be difficult for someone to answer the common census question, “What is your native language?” for example, if they acquired multilingual competence simultaneously in two languages. In this case, both are L1s, and either or both might be considered a “native language.” Such a question is also problematic for individuals whose **language dominance** (or relative fluency) has shifted from their L1 to a language learned later.

Another issue is the degree of multilingualism. What level of proficiency is needed before one claims to have multilingual competence, or to “know” a second language? Does reading knowledge alone count, or must one also be able to carry on a conversation? What about languages that have been learned only in relation to limited domains or for special purposes? Do claims of multilingualism require near-balance in ability to function in multiple languages, or does multilingual competence include even early stages of L2 learning (the view in much SLA research)?

Perhaps the most basic definitional basis for unreliability in statistics lies in the meaning of “language” itself, for what counts as a separate language involves social and political (as well as linguistic) criteria. For instance, religious differences and the use of different writing systems

result in Hindi and Urdu being counted as distinct languages in India, although most varieties are mutually intelligible; on the other hand, mutually unintelligible “dialects” of Chinese (such as Mandarin and Cantonese) are counted as the same language when emphasis on national cohesion is desired. Similar examples arise when languages are reclassified, a process which may accompany political change. For instance, the demise of Yugoslavia as a political entity led to the official distinction as separate languages of Bosnian and Montenegrin, which had been categorized within former Serbo-Croatian (itself a single language divided into national varieties distinguished by different alphabets because of religious differences). Social status or prestige may also play a role, as in whether Haitian Creole is to be considered a separate language or a variety of French. The creole originated as a contact language between slaves who spoke African languages and French-speaking slave traders and colonists, evolving its own systematic grammar while incorporating vocabulary from French. Linguists classify the creole as a separate language because its grammar and usage are quite distinct from French. In contrast, some people disparage the creole as not a “real” language, but merely an inferior variety of French. Recognition of this and other creoles as full-fledged languages goes beyond linguistic consideration because such recognition strengthens the social identity and status of the people who speak them. There are also potentially important educational implications. For instance, when teachers recognize that native speakers of Haitian Creole are really learning a second language in acquiring French, they are likely to use different instructional methods. Thus teachers no longer view their task as “correcting” or “cleaning up” their students’ “bad French,” and are more likely to feel that the second language can simply be added to the first rather than having to replace it. Regrettably, there is a common attitude among educators, sometimes pursued with almost religious fervor, that socially “inferior” or “uneducated” varieties of a language are a moral threat and should be completely eradicated.

The nature of language learning

Much of your own L1 acquisition was completed before you ever came to school, and this development normally takes place without any conscious effort. By the age of six months an infant has produced all of the vowel sounds and most of the consonant sounds of any language in the world, including some that do not occur in the language(s) their parents speak. If children hear English spoken around them, they will learn to discriminate among those sounds that make a difference in the meaning of English words (the **phonemes**), and they will learn to disregard those that do not. If the children hear Spanish spoken around them, they will learn to discriminate among some sounds the English speaker learns to ignore, as between the flapped *r* in *pero* ‘but’ and the trilled *rr* in *perro* ‘dog,’ and to disregard some differences that are not distinctive in Spanish, but vital to English word-meaning, as the *sh* and *ch* of *share* and *chair*.