

Review

# A critical understanding of second language acquisition from two sociolinguistic strands: The Variationist Approach and the Investment Perspective

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## Abstract

This review explores how sociolinguistics expands our understanding of second language acquisition (SLA) by drawing upon two typical sociolinguistic strands: the variationist approach and the investment perspective. Accordingly, two empirical studies are used to illustrate the contributions of each strand, with Han's (2019) study adopting a variationist approach and Sung's (2020) study taking an investment perspective. Through a critical analysis, this paper argues that both theoretical strands contribute to the "social turn" of SLA by providing different insights into the social shaping of L2 knowledge and learning, as well as the interplay between identity construction and L2 learning. Implications, limitations, and suggestions for future studies are discussed at the end.

**Keywords** second language learning; sociolinguistic theory; variationist approach; investment perspective; identity

## 1. Introduction

Learning a second language (L2), or any language in addition to the learners' native language(s) (Block, 2003), is traditionally believed to be a context-neutral undertaking situated within learners' minds (Zuengler & Miller, 2006). Over the past three decades, however, the predominance of this cognitive paradigm in second language acquisition (SLA)<sup>1</sup> has been extensively challenged by socially positioned critiques (e.g., Block, 2003; Hall, 1995; Pavlenko, 2002). A prominent example driving this ongoing "social turn" (Block, 2003, p. 1) is Firth and Wagner's (1997) seminal paper, which critiques the hegemony of the cognitive-driven approach to SLA. Instead, they called for the field to become "more theoretically and methodologically balanced" (p. 286) and for a reconceptualisation of L2 learning as "emically" and "interactionally attuned" (p. 296) — a perspective embraced by many current socially-oriented theories.

Positioned within this social-cognitive debate, this paper aims to explore the theoretical insights into L2 learning contributed by sociolinguistics, a socially-

situated branch concerned with exploring the "relations between the use of language and the social structure in which the language users live" (Zhang & Wang, 2016, p. 830). As a diverse and changing field of applied linguistics, sociolinguistics has adopted multiple theoretical strands to theorise L2 learning. These include but are not limited to: the variationist approach (Labov, 1963), the language socialisation theory (Duff, 1995), the theory of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and the investment perspective (Norton Peirce, 1995). While the variationist approach traditionally investigates variability in learner language, the remaining strands focus on the dynamic social processes of L2 learning.

The current review draws on the variationist approach and the investment perspective to discuss how sociolinguistics expands our understanding of SLA. Pioneered by Labov (1963), the variationist approach primarily employs quantitative research means to investigate the causes of socially-patterned variations in language use, which is the fundamental concern of sociolinguistics (Holmes & Wilson, 2017). In contrast, the investment perspective, proposed by Norton Peirce (1995) and expanded by Darwin and

<sup>1</sup> This paper uses the terms L2 learning and SLA interchangeably to refer to both the scholarly field of inquiry in applied linguistics and the process

of learning an additional language after the successful acquisition of the L1(s), or first language(s) (Ortega, 2011).

Norton (2015), adopts qualitative paradigms to explore the social structures and power relations imbued in the L2 learning process, an angle unexamined by the variationist tradition. Therefore, given the fundamental differences between these two approaches in terms of origins, theoretical foci, and research methods, valuable insights about L2 learning through a sociolinguistic lens could be derived from a critical discussion of both.

Accordingly, two empirical studies will be used to illustrate the contributions of each strand. While Han's (2019) paper investigated L2 sociopragmatic performance from a variationist sociolinguistic perspective, Sung's (2020) study examined learners' investment in L2-mediated social interactions through an investment model. These two papers are selected as they tellingly reflect the core contributions of the chosen sociolinguistic strands, which transcend beyond the traditional cognitive awareness of SLA. Specifically, the reviews found that the variationist approach deepens our understanding of SLA by revealing its socially-conditioned nature, whereas the investment perspective contributes to this field by uncovering the value-laden and power-imbued SLA process. Moreover, both strands illustrate the interplay between L2 learning and identity constructions, with the investment perspective exploring the influence of social constraints and learner agencies on identity negotiations in greater depth.

The following sections discuss how each theoretical approach contributes to insights about SLA according to major themes (i.e., social shaping of L2 knowledge and learning; the interplay between identity construction and L2 learning) that emerged from the chosen empirical studies. Implications, limitations, and directions for future research will be offered at the end of this review.

## 2. Social Shaping of L2 Knowledge<sup>2</sup> and Learning

Stemming from the sociolinguistic tradition, the variationist approach argues for the systematicity of variability in patterns of language use (Geeslin, 2020), which means that the differences in linguistic features produced by L2 learners can be explained by a range of internal (i.e., linguistic and developmental factors) and external elements (i.e., social factors) (Romaine, 2003). The latter, which involve the social context, interlocutors, and L2 learners' social categories, constitute the primary focus of variationist sociolinguistics (Regan, 2013). Unlike the cognitive framework that perceives L2 learning as merely the development of grammatical competence (Firth & Wagner, 1997), variationist sociolinguistics concerns

with the acquisition of L2 forms in socially appropriate ways, i.e., sociopragmatic ability (Regan, 2013).

Drawing on a variationist perspective, Han (2019) focused on L2 Chinese learners' sociolinguistic pragmatic performance by exploring their use of sentence-final particles (SFPs)<sup>3</sup> in non-interrogative sentences. Methodologically, the data for this study came from the conversations of eight L2 users who appeared on the popular Chinese talk show *Informal Talks*. Apart from the speech data, Han also collected text data from the participants' Weibo, a Chinese social media platform. Having identified a range of linguistic and social variables informed by existing literature, Han used Rbrul to quantitatively determine the ones that influenced the varied presence of SFPs, followed by qualitative case analyses of how participants utilised SFPs in different situations and how these were perceived by others.

The findings of this study illustrated the socially-conditioned character of L2 knowledge and learning. For example, based on the Rbrul analysis, Han found that the differences in time spent in China and in gender-related personality were statistically significant factors that impacted the variations in SFPs. Regarding the former, it was revealed that more time spent in China corresponded to more frequent use of SFPs. This phenomenon, according to Han, can be explained by the fact that with increased opportunities for language socialisation with native speakers, L2 learners gained a better understanding of the social indications of SFPs, and thus expressed themselves more effectively using SFPs. These findings shed light on the influences of participants' social categories (e.g., gender-related personality) and socialisation (e.g., learner-native interactions) on L2 knowledge and learning.

Another valuable insight discussed in Han's study that illustrated the socially-shaped nature of SLA is the role of L1 transfer in the acquisition of sociopragmatic competence. Unlike the traditional contrastive analysis that perceives negative transfers of L1 as causes of potential L2 errors (Al-khresheh, 2016), this study showed that the role of L1 was a non-significant factor in influencing the acquisition of SFPs. While this result could have been affected by the relatively small corpus size, it was Han's explanation that cast new light on the nature of SLA. She attributed the minimal effect of L1 to the fact that the subjects' motivation to be "socialised into active agents outweighs linguistic difficulty of SFPs" (p. 58). This explanation implied that the positive social influence on L2 learning could potentially compensate for negative L1 transfers, thus confirming the role played by social factors in SLA.

Besides the impact of social variables on linguistic variations, L2 users' social intentions and possible reactions of the audience were also found to shape L2 knowledge and learning. In the case of Daddy Mu<sup>4</sup>,

<sup>2</sup> L2 knowledge is also known as interlanguage, which is defined as the type of language generated by the L2 learner that shares features of both the learner's L1 and the target language (Selinker, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> In Mandarin Chinese, most SFPs are grammatically optional morphemes typically attached to the end of a statement or question

(Wamsley, 2019) to imply the speaker's attitude, level of assertiveness, and evidentiality (Simpson, 2014). The L2 acquisition of Chinese SFPs is said to be particularly difficult due to the complexity of the rules and the insufficient instruction of such rules in formal teaching (Han, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> "Daddy Mu" is a nickname given by the audience to Mohammed, a

certain SFPs were used to enact an amiable personality to his audience, particularly on Weibo. For example, with the social intention of reminding his fans to watch his show, he added the SFP “o (哦)” at the end of the imperative sentence (“you must watch!” [p. 61]) to create a friendly and casual mood. Although Daddy Mu mostly projected a masculine image, he had learnt to manipulate SFPs to convey expressive feminine traits during interactions with his fan groups. As argued by Han, this meaningful speaker-listener relationship facilitated the learning aspects of SFPs, which in turn broadened the audience base of the L2 user. In this sense, the variationist approach demonstrates how L2 knowledge and learning can be shaped by learners’ social intentions and the possible perceptions of the audience, again exemplifying the social dimension of SLA.

While variationist sociolinguistics is concerned with socially-mediated language variations, the investment perspective extends this line by delving into the complex socialisation processes of L2 learning. The sociological construct of investment was proposed by Norton Peirce (1995) as a complement to the psychological concept of motivation in order to explain the non-linear L2 learning phenomenon, where deeply motivated learners may still refuse to participate in learning opportunities under socially hostile circumstances. Two decades later, Darwin and Norton (2015) developed the model of investment as a response to the new world system “characterized by mobility, fluidity, and diversity” (p. 51). This expanded model highlights three intersecting factors (i.e., ideology, capital, and identity) that dynamically constitute the complexities involved in L2 learning. Core to this model lies the belief that learners invest in an L2 with the understanding that they will be rewarded with myriad material and symbolic resources, which will in turn translate to their enhanced social status (Darvin & Norton, 2017).

Similar to variationist sociolinguistics, the investment perspective focuses on learners’ sociolinguistic ability rather than their grammatical competence. This is suggested by Darwin and Norton (2015), who construe individuals’ forms of linguistic capital as “styles and registers”, which are “measured against a value system that reflects the biases and assumptions of the larger sociocultural context” (p. 45). What makes the two theoretical strands differ is that the investment perspective tends to treat the linguistic and even nonlinguistic resources as part of the L2 learners’ capital. This coincides with Darwin and Norton’s (2018) argument that learners are able to “assemble and engage more complex linguistic and non-linguistic repertoires, where [L2] becomes just one of many resources” (p. 4). This means that the investment perspective views L2 knowledge as an integral part of one’s entire linguistic repertoire.

Grounded in the investment perspective, Sung (2020) investigated a group of mainland Chinese

university students’ investment in Cantonese learning during their cross-border studies in Hong Kong. Specifically, this study focused on participants’ negotiations of identities, forms of capital, as well as the impact of ideologies on their L2 investment. Based on a thematic analysis of interview data from a larger project involving 21 mainland Chinese university students, Sung identified the dynamic interactions of identity, capital, and ideology in participants’ Cantonese learning experiences, which reflected the multilayered L2 learning process conditioned by hierarchical power relations and preconceived values.

One example was participants’ struggles in converting existing resources, such as their L1, as affordances for L2-mediated interactions. The investment perspective conceives L1 as a form of linguistic capital, which can potentially create more L2 learning opportunities. In Sung’s study, however, participants experienced difficulties transforming their proficiency in Mandarin, a form of linguistic capital they already possessed, into opportunities for Cantonese learning. This was because while Mandarin was deemed as a highly valued type of capital in mainland China, it was regarded as “a peripheral language” (p. 11) in the Hong Kong university context. As the locals rarely sought opportunities to practise Mandarin with the participants, proficiency in Mandarin could not be usefully capitalised to access L2-mediated social opportunities. This finding suggested that, when entering a new social space, learners’ linguistic capital can be devalued by those in power with a predetermined value system.

The role of ideologies also illustrates how dominant views of the powerful could influence L2 learning. The incorporation of ideology in this model was enlightened by De Costa’s (2010) call for an explicit naming of ideology in SLA in order to render systemic patterns of control visible. Darwin and Norton (2015) conceptualise ideology in broader terms beyond the dimensions of governance or language, as normative beliefs that frame societies and decide ways of inclusion and exclusion. In Sung’s study, for example, anti-mainlandisation ideology due to the tense Hong Kong-Mainland political relationship and the deep-seated negative stereotypes towards mainlanders made it difficult for participants to gain meaningful Cantonese learning opportunities. This finding indicated that L2 learning experiences are mediated by ideologies that shape the assumptions, values, and beliefs held by the more powerful others towards L2 learners.

In summary, both studies have provided ample evidence to the contributions of sociolinguistic theories to SLA by unveiling the social shaping of L2 learning and knowledge. Han’s study not only showed the systematic nature of linguistic variations and their correlations with social categories but also uncovered how these variations and the acquisition of sociopragmatic ability were conditioned by L2 learners’

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journalist from Egypt, due to many of his macho opinions. He possessed

the lowest frequency of the use of SFPs (17%).

social intentions and their audiences' potential responses. Meanwhile, Sung's study demonstrated the situated nature of L2 learners' linguistic resources and the value-laden, ideology-infused L2 learning experiences. However, the discussions so far have barely analysed learners' agency during L2 learning. This will be further explained in the next section on the interplay between identity construction and L2 learning to enrich the understanding of SLA from a sociolinguistic perspective.

### 3. The Interplay between Identity Construction and L2 Learning

The construct of identity has been a focus of research in variationist sociolinguistics ever since its inception in the early 1960s (Labov, 1963). While different variationist traditions disagree on the definition and the role of identity in language variation, this paper focuses on the third wave<sup>5</sup> of variationist sociolinguistics (TWVS). As a relatively recent approach to the examination of sociolinguistic variation (Eckert, 2016), TWVS is most relevant to Han's (2019) study of participants' identity construction through language variation. While the first two waves concern static groups of speakers and associate identity with category affiliation, TWVS focuses on social meaning and speaker agency (Eckert, 2012). It treats language variation as an expression of social identities by speakers through stylistic practices (Eckert, 2012). Identities, or senses of self (Duff, 2013), are regarded as socially constructed, dynamic, and changeable (Drummond & Schlee, 2016), challenging the essentialised view of identity as binary and stable from a conventional cognitivist strand (Davies, 1991).

Instead of examining the relationship between language variation and the biological category of sex, Han examined gender-associated variations in Chinese language use, as evidenced by the self-presentations of gender-related personality characteristics. Individuals exhibit varying levels of a combination of both masculine (e.g., independence and assertiveness) and feminine characteristics (e.g., sensitivity and compassion). Through the example of Madam Qian's<sup>6</sup> identity performance, Han illustrated L2 learners' strategic use of SFPs to construct their desired identities. The qualitative analysis showed that Madam Qian frequently manipulated SFPs to evoke a warm and sympathetic persona. For instance, during the debate on whether we should offer seats to the elderly on public transport, Madam Qian skillfully drew on a variety of SFPs, including *ya* (呀), *a* (啊), and *ma* (嘛), to emphasise his affective attitudes and construct his public self-image. This exemplifies that the acquisition of SFPs could empower L2 learners by granting them

social agency as users of this language to articulate gender-related social identities.

Another example that showed the transformative role of L2 learning in constructing identities is Madam Qian's choice of wearing a female hat when presented with traditional hats from different cultures in the TV show. While his choice was perceived by fellow participants as looking like a female, Madam Qian responded by manipulating a series of feminine SFPs, such as *ma* (嘛), to soften his responses. His language further strengthened the incoherence between his biological sex and sociological gender identity at that moment. Notwithstanding this incongruence, his gendered use of SFPs was appreciated and well-received by other participants and his fans on social media, which, in turn, broadened his audience base. This instance again demonstrated how successful L2 acquisition grants learners more agency to construct desired identities, potentially creating more favourable L2 social opportunities.

Similar to TWVS, the investment perspective is also grounded in the poststructuralist perspective, which views identity as multiple, shifting, contradictory, and socially constructed (Norton, 2000). Specifically, identity is conceptualised as "the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (Norton, 2013, p. 4). In Sung's (2020) study, while participants performed their agency to construct identities as Cantonese communicators so as to access more Cantonese-mediated interactions, the challenges they experienced hindered their L2 learning. Drawing on Miller's (2004) concept of *audibility*, or "the degree to which speakers sound like, and are legitimated by users of the dominant discourse" (p. 291), Sung revealed that participants struggled to gain audibility during class discussions due to their limited Cantonese proficiency, which subsequently discouraged them from continuing speaking. Based on the findings, this lack of recognition as legitimate Cantonese communicators by the locals also made it difficult for participants to claim in-group membership, thus limiting their L2 learning experiences.

While opportunities for L2 learning are constrained by identities imposed by others, Sung's study also showed how agents' self-positioning could create obstacles in constructing desired identities, which further affected their L2 learning. For example, standard language ideology, which in this study referred to the importance of speaking Cantonese with a standard accent, was internalised by participants. Although the participants aspired to speak Cantonese with the ideal accent, they still struggled to do so and suffered "a sense of linguistic inferiority" (p. 10). This "negative self-positioning" (p. 11) undermined their

<sup>5</sup> Variationist sociolinguistics has come in three waves of traditions. The first focuses on documenting relationships between linguistic variables and macrosocial categories spanning large populations. The second wave employs ethnographic methods to examine the relation between variation and local social categories (Eckert, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> "Madam Qian" is a nickname used by fans for James, a kindergarten teacher from Nigeria, as he is very emotional when expressing his opinions on the show. He possessed the highest frequency of use of SFPs (33%).

desired identities as authentic learners and users of Cantonese, which further dampened their confidence to engage in L2-mediated socialisations.

Another type of self-positioning relates to learners' pursuit of imagined identities, or their ideal sense of selves, affiliations, and social groups they aspire to be part of (Kanno & Norton, 2003). The crucial relationship between imagination and identity is highlighted by Wenger (1998), who conceptualises imagination as "a process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves" (p. 176). As identified from the data, participants faced dilemmas between investing in Cantonese and English as they were uncertain about their imagined communities, known as "groups of people not immediately tangible and accessible with whom we connect through the power of imagination" (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 241). Some participants placed more emphasis on investing in English as they imagined themselves being able to function in a global educational or workplace context. Thus, their devotion to learning Cantonese was not just associated with their desire to establish identities as legitimate speakers, but also related to how they position themselves in the future. On this matter, ambivalence about imagined identities could also affect L2 learners' agency to invest actively in their L2 practices.

To sum up, both studies illustrate the "language-identity nexus" (Joseph, 2004, p. 12) — the mutual shaping and reinforcement between identity construction and language learning. While the variationist approach highlights the empowering role of L2 acquisition in identity constructions, the investment perspective illustrates how L2 learners' identity performance can be circumscribed by power differentials, how L2 learners contest this power imbalance, as well as how learners' self-positioning affects L2 learning.

## 4. Conclusions

This review has discussed how sociolinguistic theory contributes to insights about L2 learning from the perspectives of two theoretical strands — the variationist approach and the investment perspective through the illustrations of two empirical studies. It argues that both theoretical approaches provide valuable insights into SLA by revealing the social shaping of L2 knowledge and learning, as well as the interplay between identity construction and L2 learning, albeit to different degrees and from different angles. The variationist approach confirms the relevance of social factors to L2 learning and highlights the transformative role of SLA in identity constructions, which may translate to greater L2 social interactions. The investment perspective takes a more radical approach by uncovering the power-laden nature of L2 learning and identity negotiations, along with L2 learners' agency, in confronting social constraints.

Therefore, these two strands could be visualised as occupying different positions on the spectrum of sociolinguistics, with the variationist approach situated at the initial part and the investment perspective at the extreme end.

The findings of this paper could be used to inform possible reasons for successful and unsuccessful SLA from the perspective of sociolinguistics, which will shed light on pedagogies and policies regarding L2 education. For example, in regards to the social constraints on L2 learners' identity performance, teachers and policymakers could encourage more supportive "audiences" and "interlocutors" (e.g., local students in the study abroad context and local people interacting with L2 learners) and empower learners by promoting the value of their L1. Moreover, lessons on hidden power relations and social structures could be provided not just to L2 learners but to all students living in culturally and linguistically diverse settings to raise their awareness of the social mechanisms underpinning L2 learning. Lastly, sociopragmatic competence should be given more emphasis in L2 education so as to increase learners' chances of exercising agency to access L2 learning opportunities.

Despite an in-depth analysis of the contributions made by two sociolinguistic approaches, this review is not free from limitations. For example, aside from the areas of contributions discussed, other aspects, such as the context of SLA and research methodologies, are beyond the scope of this review. Moreover, the arguments about the two theoretical strands are mostly based on the two empirical studies, which might be limited in offering insights into SLA. Therefore, future research could seek to address these limitations by exploring other areas of concern and drawing on a broader range of empirical studies.

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