

## SOME BASICS OF BINARY RESEARCH INSTRUMENTALITY IN SLA THEORY

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**Abstract.** Second language acquisition (SLA) is referred to a wide-ranging field of knowledge concerned with learning and teaching an additional (non-primary) language alongside the disciplinary inquiry and research of the objects involved in the domain. Distinguished by an ample extent from boundary to boundary, the realm of SLA is not marked off by any circumambient lines revealing the construction of the field. In the absence of the overall underlying frames established and unanimously acknowledged by the associated community, the current state of the arts in SLA theorizing is characterized by multiple conceptions, methodologies and approaches. The significance of the very term *theory* is by no means straightforward as the word encompasses quite a few dissimilar notions like *contemplation vs. comprehension* or *hypothesizing vs. action*, *hypothesizing vs. comprehension*, *a set of ideal principles vs. a set of principles of action*, *ideal beliefs vs. basis of action*, *a field of intellectual inquiry vs. an intellectual discipline*, *abstract knowledge vs. plan of action*, etc. The concept *theory* seems to cover so much that its very usage now appears inconceivable without the term being specified first. Nevertheless, these opposed meanings are not bound to be treated in isolation or, taken separately, to be considered as an underlying research foundation. With regard to the current study the discreteness of the subject investigated is initially contrary to the ultimate aim of establishing the integrity of both theory concept and construct. Any deviation to a particular part of the meaningful array would inevitably lead to the onesidedness of the main subject's investigation. Put it another way, the multimodality of the concept *theory* should not prevent researchers from investigating the distinct types of its understanding in holistic terms thus making the idea of theory consistent and harmonious. Despite the noticeable multiplicity and variability of the conceptual meanings the idea of theory could be represented by constant units emphasizing its wholeness. The concept of theory might be interpreted and structured in the mode of correlative equivalence binary oppositions generate, i.e. in the form of a set of binary constituencies. An essential presupposition is advanced with the claim that the notion of binary opposition be capable of making a case for the substantiation of the idea of a universal structural element the common

theoretical framework is composed of. The justification of the theoretical model of the current research relies on the following premises.

(1) Binary opposition methodology allows the language, communication and individual universe to be integrated as an organized whole.

(2) It is a binary unit that reflects a common characteristic functioning at all levels of a system. A binary representation mode is an adjustable tool that gives the whole system the means of focusing on all aspects, from the most abstract to the most concrete.

(3) Each phenomenon is to be considered as part of the whole equally important to the entire system; it is irrelevant for any element to be treated separately.

(4) The entire domain of language acquisition can be described by a series of dichotomies, with the opposites not necessarily belonging to the extremities of each binary unit. It is midway between opposed extremities that makes it possible to pass from one to the other or from one binary pair to another.

Language learning theory is certain to have numerous properties other than just binarity, and its constructive principles make reference to more than just a few principal oppositions. Nevertheless, disregarding certain particulars, binary opposition outlines a good prospect for an explanatory general theory of language learning. Binary opposition might function as the central axial interior part of a theory structure.

**Keywords:** SLA, theory, binary opposition, theoretical framework

### **Introduction**

A great variety of trends encompassed by second language acquisition (SLA) implies the development of a new kind of systematism based on the invariant characteristics of different theoretical slants regardless of their being prepossessed by opposing ideas like *conscious* or *subconscious*, *language-oriented* or *communication-based*, *self-performed* or *taught learning*, etc. SLA theorizing is known to have been developing within a broad scope circumscribed by the extreme edges of language structure orientation and pure nativist position. This developmental idiosyncrasy has engendered the predominance of ‘cross-sectional’ rather than ‘longitudinal’ studies “with serious resulting limitations on the conclusions that can be drawn in some important issues” (Doughty C.J. & Long M.H., 2005: 1). The idea of binary opposition is assumed to be based on a continuous patterned and structured whole forming a unity within the complex and variegated SLA area, thereby helping to construct SLA theories longitudinally. The binary opposition research methodology proposed offers an efficient inventory for both the verification of theoretical assumptions and empirical

content testing. This approach to SLA theory construction would allow to order, classify and hierarchize numerous premises that hypothesize midway language acquisition conceptions. The elucidation of the theory concept in ways of thought belonging to the idea of the binary opposition seems to be most rational as it corresponds to the peculiarities of the language learning domain structure.

### **Purpose of the study**

The goal of the study is the evaluation of the binary opposition research methodology which is worth considering in the SLA theory construction development. The basic idea behind a binary opposition framework in language learning is greatly similar to the general duality line of approaching the subject, namely the everlasting opposition a language organization system and learning procedure. The starting point of the problem contemplation is the multi-faceted nature of SLA theory which makes the analysis of any of its extremities inexpedient, if considered separately. What we need to obtain is an integral projection in the form of a coherent conceptual framework explicated through additive functional dimensions. An adequate conceptualization of the binary opposition requires that the notional structure of theory be modeled in holistic terms. Hence there should be found an adequate conceptual tool that might pave way to developing a methodology for a balanced comprehension of the concept *SLA theory* applicable to at least some, or preferably most of its presumed variations. Their identification and description in terms of binaries can constitute a solid theoretical base for the specification of both regular and sporadic language acquisition patterns.

### **Methodology**

The implementation of a holistic theory model appears to be achievable with the binary underpinning preliminarily outlined above. An essential presupposition is advanced with the claim that the notion of binary opposition be capable of making a case for the substantiation of the idea of a universal structural element the common theoretical framework is composed of. The binary opposition theory in language is known to be originally put forward by F. de Saussure in his theory of language. According to Saussure, inner duality is inherent in all sciences concerned with values, though to a various extent. The idea of binary opposition is supposed to be an intellectual product of the Sausurian theory further developed and extrapolated over other coterminous fields. Each binary opposition is a pair of defined opposites, or diametrically opposed characteristics, set off against one another in a reciprocal determination and taken as a basis for the conceptualization of a particular area with its coherent issues.

A key common feature of a flexible conceptual framework composed by opposite but correlated constituents is conjugate transformation. The idea of conjugate transformation involves fluctuation and interchange between the opposed binary components of a theory in accordance with an established invariant pattern “closer to vs. farther from one of the opposed element”. The property is defined by the two elements of an opposition bearing to each other a relation characterized by having certain features in common but being opposite or inverse in some particulars. Thus, conjugate transformation emerges since the opposite elements share common characteristics (say, due to their belonging to the same learning environment), but preserve certain distinctive attributes. The balance of the dichotomous relation between the opposites alternate as the dominance of one element over the other takes turns thus forming another kind of acquisition sequence. Conjugate transformation is thereby the mechanism establishing the supremacy of one opposite over the other. Certain phenomena in the field appear to be able to be explained through arranging a series or order of conjugate transformations driving a learning type closer to its opposite and thus forming a concession-making model with a dominating though not all-embracing element set against the other. Thus, within the mechanism of a conjugate transformation in a binary unit, either of the opposites might change yielding part of their impact but maintaining the dominant role nonetheless. The proportions of the mutual interdependence of the opposed binary elements vary, due to which a new approach option can be created. Transformations like this are quite common in learning and teaching practice. For example, a teacher practicing the task-based approach might try to apply some error-correction techniques borrowed from the old grammar-translation methodology, which definitely contradicts the major idea of the TBA. Moreover, in the currently developing post-method era combining principles, models, techniques and other inventory from various approaches and methods of language learning is provided with the theoretical substantiation and reinforcement on the part of Principled Eclecticism. The trend is supposed to combine principles, models or techniques borrowed from various approaches and methods developed before. The proponents of Principled Eclecticism are most positive of the broad parallel usage of different methodologies available now in language learning practice. Thus free uncontrolled rearrangement of language learning methodology is encouraged which is subordinated to the preferences of the learner or teacher and is performed within the entire range of language acquisition, language- or communication-based, “naturalistic, instructed, or both” (C. Doughty & H. Long, 2005: 1). The simultaneous arbitrary use of various methodical constituents produces countless

transformation patterns which function in a non-specified haphazard ways often aimed at performing particular communicative tasks whose role in achieving the mainstream goal is not always convincingly determined. A theory base formed by binaries includes, among other things, control mechanisms checking spontaneous combinations of various learning elements in accordance with a number of criteria and thereby preventing from heedless methodological decisions.

There have been specified two types of transformations with a similar functional structure.

The first type of transformation can be stated and formally described as a specified mode of language acquisition that combines elements normally belonging to different approaches and methods. A conjugate transformation is assumed to involve two-pole changes taking the edges off the extremes of each. The second type replicates the procedure mentioned staying within a particular methodical slant. In this case the two-pole convergence occurs between opposed constituents inherent in the methodology, and is potentially helpful for explicating hidden oppositions unidentified before. The necessary condition is for the process to be subordinated to one invariant concatenator, which is the binary opposition formula.

Actually, the binary opposition conception can give clues to the development of a mega-approach universal language acquisition, with the conjugate transformation technology used as its basic instrument. The binary unit concept is also important in theorizing as it epitomizes the idealized object of speculation.

### **Results**

The main premises for the productive application of the binary opposition conception to the current study are their functional peculiarities that make binaries an efficient tool in language learning investigation. They are the following.

- (1) Binary opposition enhances and expands the principles any theory relies on.
- (2) A sign acquires meaning if and only if it is related to another sign opposed to it. Hence any area involves differences between its constituents which could be replicated by multiple pairs of opposites.
- (3) One of the two opposites alternately dominates over the other. Conjugate transformations within a binary unit might shift the balance pivot to either of the extremities and thus make one of the opposites dominate over the other. Certain hierarchical rules are imposed between the two opposite terms of an opposition controlling their interdependence. Newly emerging meaningful interrelations are powerful means for discovering conceptual relationships yet unknown.

(4) The application of binary opposition conception is facilitative for making hidden aspects evident, invisible visible and implicit explicit.

(5) The binary opposition is a systematically organized functional formation with a large constructive and explanatory potential that allows to use it for a complete description of the structure of a theory including its idealized object.

The binary model of SLA theory construction is justified by the following arguments:

(1) Binary opposition methodology allows the language, communication and individual universe to be integrated as an organized whole.

(2) It is a binary unit that reflects a common characteristic functioning at all levels of a system. A binary representation mode is an adjustable tool that gives the whole system the means of focusing on all aspects, from the most abstract to the most concrete.

(3) Each phenomenon is to be considered as part of the whole equally important to the entire system; it is irrelevant for any element to be treated separately.

(4) The entire domain of language acquisition can be described by a series of dichotomies, with the opposites not necessarily belonging to the extremities of each binary unit. It is midway between opposed extremities that makes it possible to pass from one to the other or from one binary pair to another.

### **Discussion**

As is mentioned earlier in the paper, it was F. de Saussure who first put forward the idea of binary opposition theory in language. The author foregrounds the fact that “all sciences would profit by indicating more precisely the coordinates along which their subject matter is aligned” (Saussure F. de, 1959: 79), thus allowing for further extrapolating the idea over to various language aspects as well as other fields of knowledge. R. Jakobson elucidates an almost inconceivable idea of binary opposition wholeness as he states: “The inalienable property of opposition which separates it from all other contingent differences is when we are dealing with one opposite, the obligatory co-presence of the other one is in our minds” (Jakobson R. & Waugh L.R., 2002: 24). C. Levi-Strauss extrapolates the idea over other areas in the realm of the humanities. The philosopher notes that “all the levels of classification in fact have a common characteristic” which implies “possible recourse to other levels, formally analogous to the favoured one and differing from it only in their relative position within a whole system of reference which operates by means of a pair of contrasts”, e.g. between general and particular. (Levi-Strauss, 1966: 135). J. Culler notes that “the prominence F. de Saussure gives to binary

oppositions has borne fruit". The author emphasizes the importance of a reduction of language continuum to a particular elements "which can be defined as the point of intersection of several distinctive features" and concludes that "the use of binary oppositions to describe structure is not simply a methodological device but a reflection of language itself. Binary oppositions are most natural and economical code ... , more generally, they are the common denominator of thought" (Culler., J. 1986:102). T. King emphasizes the sense of symmetry evoked by binary oppositions like *reasoning vs. experimentation*. By "sense of symmetry" the author means "the correlative equivalence binary oppositions like these generate, a sense of mutual dependency in which each of the term simultaneously excludes yet invoke its companion". Referring to W. Blake's saying that "opposition is true friendship" T. King concludes that the difference between two opposed terms depends on the underlying sameness and the equivalence formed by binary oppositions is the result of one of two basic language operations of the brain (King T., 1991: 66).

The studies, both cited and those not mentioned but many times outnumbering, testify that binary opposition theory plays a significant role in the analysis of various complex areas of knowledge and associated phenomena.

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