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The Minds Behind SLA: Insights from Leading Scholars—Scott Jarvis

Scott Jarvis is the Stoller-Grabe Endowed Distinguished Chair in Applied Linguistics at Northern Arizona University, and he currently serves as Editor-in-Chief of *Language Learning*. His main areas of research are crosslinguistic influence, lexical diversity, and forensic linguistics, and across these areas he has played a leading role in shaping several new strands of inquiry. He is one of the principal architects of the study of conceptual transfer—crosslinguistic influence arising from language-specific concepts and patterns of conceptualization—which he developed across a body of work beginning with his 1998 book *Conceptual Transfer in the Interlingual Lexicon* and his 2008 volume *Crosslinguistic Influence in Language and Cognition* (with Aneta Pavlenko), and continuing through subsequent work clarifying the construct's scope and theoretical foundations. He has likewise been instrumental in establishing text-analytic and detection-based approaches to the study of language transfer—including native language identification and text classification, as presented in his 2012 edited volume *Approaching Language Transfer through Text Classification*—and in advancing the modeling and measurement of lexical diversity as a multidimensional construct grounded in human judgments. His recent research has, inter alia, investigated conceptual transfer and the comprehension and comprehensibility of legal language, particularly non-native speakers' understanding of their Miranda rights. Professor Jarvis has authored or edited six books and edited volumes and published more than seventy journal articles, book chapters, and reviews. Alongside his current editorship of *Language Learning*, he has served the journal as Executive Director, and has held leadership roles in the field, including Treasurer of the American

Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL) and co-convenor of the AILA Research Network on Crosslinguistic Influence. Additionally, he has served on numerous editorial boards. His contributions have earned recognition including the 2021 AAAL Research Article Award—for his co-authored study of native and non-native speakers' understanding of their Miranda rights—and an honorary doctorate from the University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Your paper “Methodological Rigor in the Study of Transfer: Identifying L1 Influence in the Interlanguage Lexicon” has been influential in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. Could you define the specific area of SLA that it falls under and describe what initially led you to explore this topic?

This paper deals with crosslinguistic influence—specifically L1 influence in learners' productive use of the L2. Crosslinguistic influence is one of several variables that have been investigated in relation to their effects on L2 acquisition and use. Some of the other variables are internal variables, or characteristics of the learner—such as age, motivation, and aptitude—that affect a person's ability to acquire and use the L2. Other variables are external variables—or characteristics of the target language or learning environment—such as the complexity of (features of) the target language, and types and amounts of exposure to the target language. Crosslinguistic influence can be understood as both an internal and external variable. It is internal in the sense that it reflects the knowledge that the learner brings to the learning task, and it is external in the sense that its effects are both quantitatively and qualitatively shaped by the relationship between learners' knowledge of the L1 and the characteristics of the target language that they are exposed to. Crosslinguistic influence also stands out as being the earliest recognized and the longest investigated independent variable affecting L2 acquisition and use.

My intense interest in crosslinguistic influence began while I was learning L2 Finnish as an adult learner. I noticed in my own use of L2 Finnish as well as in that of other learners that crosslinguistic influence manifests in different ways and to different degrees in different learners, even when those learners have the same L1 backgrounds, the same levels of L2 proficiency, and the same types and amounts of exposure to the L2. I also observed that L1 influence sometimes appears in ways that are extremely subtle, and that its most subtle and perhaps most important effects are beneficial to L2 acquisition and use. My intense interest in crosslinguistic influence was also driven by the fact that I began studying linguistics during the 1980s, when claims about the negligible effects of crosslinguistic influence were still prominent in the field (e.g., Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982). These claims did not align with my own experience as a learner or language teacher, and I felt that they critically needed to be corrected. But my interest in conducting this particular study was also driven

by a somewhat opposite problem, which is that some published studies were claiming to have found crosslinguistic influence when their only evidence was differences between the language used by learners vs. native speakers of the target language. This problem and the lack of methodological standards for identifying and confirming instances of crosslinguistic influence are what ultimately led me to conduct this study.

Could you recommend key resources—such as textbooks, papers, or other materials—that would be particularly beneficial for graduate students and scholars looking to explore and deepen their understanding of this area of interest?

Jarvis, S. (2023). Conceptual transfer: Roots, assumptions, and current scope. *Language, Interaction and Acquisition*, 14(1), 14–40.

Jarvis, S., & Pavlenko, A. (2008). *Crosslinguistic influence in language and cognition*. Routledge.

McManus, K. (2021). *Crosslinguistic influence and second language learning*. Routledge.

Odlin, T. (1989). *Language transfer: Cross-linguistic influence in language learning*. Cambridge University Press.

What is one prevalent misconception about second language (L2) acquisition, teaching, or assessment that you've encountered in your work?

One of the biggest misconceptions I have seen is the idea that any empirical study on L2 acquisition will necessarily have implications for language teaching. Some journals that publish empirical studies on L2 acquisition require authors to include pedagogical implications at the end of their article. I think that this is a misguided practice that encourages researchers to speculate beyond what their data can actually support and to make up pedagogical recommendations that may in fact be detrimental or at least less than optimal. I believe that pedagogical implications should come only from those studies that are specifically designed to test the effectiveness of pedagogical principles, methods, materials, and techniques.

How do you see the field of SLA and L2 teaching evolving in the coming years, particularly with the emergence of AI and other technological advancements?

It is difficult to foresee all the ways that AI will affect SLA research and L2 teaching in the future, but some of its effects are already clear. Language learning applications like Duolingo already make use of AI technology, which, among other things, allows language learners to engage in regular conversations with virtual partners and to get the type of rich interactive practice that has not previously been possible without a human interlocutor. Researchers whose methods involve interactive tasks can make use of this technology, and they can also use AI to generate audio and video materials that can be used,

for example, to investigate the effects of different types of carefully controlled input/exposure on language learning.

How do you typically develop a research idea?

For me, research ideas initially arise simply as questions that I privately wonder about. Sometimes these ideas are sparked by reading other researchers' work, sometimes when thinking about something unrelated to linguistics (e.g., the ecosystem) and looking for connections to the type of research that I do, and sometimes while engaging in deep thought and critiquing my own assumptions, methods, and findings. A private question that arises in one of these ways sometimes nags at me to the extent that I become obsessed with finding an answer to that question. I then turn to the relevant literature in our field and any other relevant field to see whether—or to what extent—past studies have already answered the question. When I do not feel satisfied with what I find in the literature, I try to identify the types of evidence that would be needed to answer the question satisfactorily. I then design a study that revolves around these types of evidence.

Could you share a transformative moment in your academic journey?

The transformative moment that stands out most to me occurred after I had been struggling for several years trying to find a solution to a problem in the measurement of lexical diversity—that is, how to calculate the mean type–token ratio of all possible combinations of 42 words drawn randomly from a text. After discovering that the solution involved the use of the hypergeometric distribution, I was faced with two additional obstacles: how to write an algorithm that would account for the probability of each word type occurring once, twice, three times, etc. in any random sample drawn from the text, and how to deal with the fact that some of the numbers I was dealing with were larger than what a personal computer could handle. After years of frustration at not being able to find solutions to these problems, I decided to find a quiet spot in the university library and devote an entire afternoon to thinking about them with the help of a pad of paper. After about two and a half hours of concentrated thought and writing notes, solutions to both problems suddenly became clear to me. This was a real eureka moment that gave rise to the now widely used HD-D measure of lexical diversity (McCarthy & Jarvis, 2007; 2010), which was recently demonstrated by Bestgen (2024) to be the preferred, optimal measure of lexical diversity.

What is the most important key trait you have noticed in successful scholars, and why?

The key trait that I have noticed in successful scholars is something that might have a name in German but does not have one in English. It is a combination of genuine curiosity regarding the work that other researchers are doing (even outside of your own area of specialization), a tendency to look for

ways in which other researchers' methods and findings might be relevant to your own research, an obsession with learning new skills and discovering new knowledge, and a commitment to following the evidence regardless of where it might take you.

What advice would you give to early-career researchers looking to make a meaningful impact in the field of SLA?

Choose the two or three international academic conferences that are most central to your current research interests, attend those conferences from beginning to end each year for several years in a row, attend as many presentations as possible, ask questions, make comments, introduce yourself and network with the people you meet during those presentations, find ways to collaborate with those new colleagues, and be as good a collaborator and co-author as you possibly can be. As you do these things, you will find yourself asking and answering important questions that will have a real impact on the field and will take your own expertise and skillset to the next level.

Is there anything important you would like to add that our previous questions did not address?

During your career, you will often experience obstacles, setbacks, unkindness, harsh criticism, and even rejection. This happens to all researchers in our field who are doing the work necessary to make a difference. Stay strong and recognize your talents, skills, past progress, and future potential. Believe that you will succeed, and use the adversity you experience as a catalyst for new learning and growth.

Quick-fire preferences:

Teaching or research? Research, whose dissemination ultimately involves teaching.

Long-term projects or short-term studies? Short-term studies that are embedded in clearly articulated long-term goals and objectives.

Methodology-driven research or theory-driven research? A lot of my research focuses on methodological issues, but these methods are grounded in theoretical foundations and frameworks.

Writing or data analysis? The process of data analysis is often more enjoyable, but the final product of writing is usually more fulfilling.

Writing in silence or with background voices? Silence.

Reading digital or printed books? Printed books for pure reading, but digital books for searching and synthesizing.

Small or big conference? Big conferences with lots of time for one-on-one networking.

Early bird or night owl? Early bird. I usually get to work at 6:30 am.

Summer or winter? Summer in Flagstaff, winter in Phoenix.

City or countryside? Countryside.
Coffee or tea? Neither.

May 12, 2026

Note: This interview was conducted via email. The responses are presented in Scott Jarvis's natural manner of expression, with minor stylistic edits for clarity and flow.

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