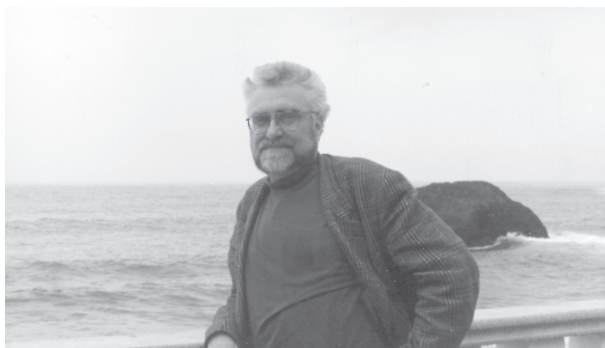# AN INTERVIEW WITH VIVIAN J. COOK

Mª Adelaida Jurado Spuch

Mª Adelaida Jurado Spuch: Well, in this interview I'd like to address a number of issues dealing with the field of SLA both from the research and the theory formation perspectives, and with your own contribution to them. The first question is about your views of the field of SLA at the moment. That is, taking into account (i) how quickly it has developed in the last two decades, and (ii) taking also into account the models of acquisition that have been put forward. For example, nativist theories, environmentalist theories, and interactionist theories.

VIVIAN J. COOK: Yes, I think it's nice that people are intending to research and develop ideas within this sort of area, and it's nice that there are conferences in America, EUROSLA (European Second Language Association) and in Australia where people are now meeting to compare notes essentially and discuss such various issues. I think what's sad in a sense is that people do see these things as rivals, that there are these alternatives to SLA, one of which is going to be right and the other is going to be wrong. But at the moment all are theories that are very partial. They only deal with some aspect of very complex ideas of SLA. And that we've really got no right to say that one of these works and the other one doesn't work, so to speak. A nativist theory may work for certain areas of core syntax, but it probably won't work outside that kind of area. That the ideas of variationists may work for certain social exchanges, for certain variation between

sexes and between other sorts of things in language learning, but won't work for other things. Far too much time is wasted, I think, between people saying "Oh!, this one is the real truth, the other one isn't true at all". Rather than saying that at the moment, they are all partial theories of particular elements within SLA, and that none of them are sufficiently well developed or all-embracing to be proper accounts of the whole of SLA.

M.A.J.S.: Which of the three models do you sympathize most with?

V.J.C.: In one sense I don't think one should sympathize with one or the other. I think they're alternatives. In the Feyerabend's theory of science he claims that what we should do is to develop all alternatives simultaneously. Yes, I happen to do research mostly within Chomskyan nativist kind of theory, because I suppose I'm most informed about that kind of area. Nevertheless, I think that there're other things which are just as important. In particular, I think that one model which hasn't been mentioned is the kind of psychological processing models that have been developed in Germany by people like Hans Dechert and people like that. Temporal variable models are very interesting and very complementary to the theories of knowledge, I suppose.

M.A.J.S.: Are there areas within this field of SLA that you feel have not been tackled, or tackled insufficiently, or not from the appropriate angle? If so, could you please state which one(s) and/or how you think they should be approached?

V.J.C.: Well, there are so many areas within each sort of a theory, I suppose. If you take a specific theory like UG, the types of syntax that have been studied within that are a small selection of UG theory. But nothing has been done about Case Theory, about the Proyection Principle, about many of the major elements in UG. People concentrate on one or two things like Subjacency rather than looking at a big range of syntax within that kind of area. In terms of SLA in general, I think that some areas are starting to be explored rather better than before but still haven't had enough attention done to. Areas like vocabulary, which in most of the surveys on SLA research you find very few remarks about vocabulary at all. And yet quite a lot is now known about vocabulary acquisition. There is certainly a very active set of researchers who are looking at vocabulary issues. The same with pronunciation. If you take Ellis, Larsen Freeman and Long, and people like that, and look for mentions of phonology, you find that nothing whatsoever is mentioned, and yet in the past ten years there have been masses of research on how people acquire the pronunciation of L2s.

M.A.J.S.: What do you think are the main contributions of this area of knowledge, SLA, both to linguistics and to language pedagogy?

V.J.C.: Well, I mean my first point. I think SLA research should be a subject of its own. It is interested in how people learn L2s, and that's its aim. Only secondly it is interested in contributing to linguistics or interested in contributing to language teaching. But it has to get its own particular goals about understanding how L2 learning works before it can actually really say very much to people outside that. Some of the UG work has been much on linguistics rather than

trying to find out on SLA. And some of the applications to language teaching have been rather premature. I'm thinking of Krashen's implications, I suppose.

M.A.J.S.: Language learning and language teaching. What are the differences between them? How much language learning can be actually taught?

V.J.C.: I think that obviously teaching intends to create learning in people's minds, and that not always succeeds. But learning is an independent subject. Teaching is trying to make something happen in the student's mind. And it may be totally unsuccessful. Learning may not take place, I suppose. So, yes, there is a clear logical difference. However, the actual approach to learning, my own feeling is that things like teaching people language strategies and so forth are only going to teach a range of language rather than the main things about language because what they usually do is treat language very consciously. Something that is processed unconsciously and learnt unconsciously, but they're trying to make conscious.

M.A.J.S.: Learning vs acquisition. Is it a meaningful distinction to you? Why or why not?

V.J.C.: I've never seen how you can distinguish learning from acquisition in terms of empirical research. This doesn't mean that they don't have an attractive appeal particularly to teachers, I think. Somehow it seems to sum up quite a lot to say learning vs acquisition to teachers. And perhaps it's valuable as a way of making teachers think about language teaching. But I've never seen the research difference. And when you pursue it through Krashen's writings, it's completely circular.

M.A.J.S.: And what role have experimental approaches gained in the study of L2 learning? Are you satisfied with the way in which they have been carried out?

V.J.C.: The problem with L2 learning is that you haven't got the same evidence as you have in L1 acquisition, where you've got the adult mature native speaker. And you can say whatever that speaker says is right. So if you go to an adult English speaker and ask them whether such and such sentence is English, they can answer you straight away affirmatively stating, for example, the correctness of that sentence in English. But if you accept that the target in L2 learning isn't the native speaker, you've then to find other types of evidence. And you can never just use, if you like, the comparison with the native speaker as your main source of evidence. So what you've got to do is look at corpora, you've got to design experiments, you've got to find different ways of getting evidence for SLA. I'm not convinced that any of them is fully satisfactory, i.e. grammaticality judgements, observational evidence, eliciting imitation, comprehension experiments ... My feeling is that you've got to be as honest as you can about the approaches that you are using. And probably try to use more than one.

M.A.J.S.: What about the role of grammar in the process of learning an L2? Would you advocate it?

V.J.C.: It may mean different things to different people. If by grammar one means traditional grammar as used in conventional EFL grammar books, and as used in the grammar in the communicative syllabuses and things like that, then I think

it's got no role whatsoever. That type of traditional grammar may at best have some logical motivational thing for the students but I don't think it can actually help to learn at all. If you take grammar in a wide sense, obviously if you mean by grammar the mental grammar inside a person's mind, you simply can't avoid it in learning an L2. That's what learning an L2 is. It's building a mental representation of another language. And what's been wrong with language teaching, in my view, is that it's been so limited in the types of grammar that they've used over the years. Often in language teaching, recently, they've said you should go back to grammar, and what they mean is grammar basically of a medieval kind, I should think. That is, basically what the Latin grammarians tried to do to English. Any grammar book that isn't based on a scientifically acceptable theory of grammar isn't about grammar at all, in my view.

M.A.J.S.: How well trained do you think English language teachers should be in Applied Linguistics? Is linguistics relevant to language teachers? Why or why not?

V.J.C.: Well, it depends again on what you mean by Applied Linguistics. A large number of people doing Applied Linguistics don't use linguistics at all, and so Applied Linguistics for them is simply a synonym for language teaching methodology or, in particular, EFL methodology. In that sense obviously a language teacher should be as good as possible in the current ideas on language teaching. In that sense Applied Linguistics should certainly be well known to language teachers. The question of whether linguistics is relevant to language teachers, I suppose there are different levels once again. A certain level of descriptive linguistics seems to me has to be relevant to language teachers. If you are teaching language you do have to know some of the facts even if it is elementary phonetics, or elementary grammar.

M.A.J.S.: A number of studies have been carried out to find out learner differences and proposals have been made to train learners to become more successful in their learning careers. What do you think about all this: its relevance, applicability ... ?

V.J.C.: Well, a lot of that research is not terribly convincing. The kinds of learner differences people come up with, one piece of research will show one thing, another piece of research will show the opposite. If you take personality variables like introversion/extroversion, or motivational things like instrumental/integrative, that kind of thing, it isn't that conclusive. One ideal end I suppose would be to have individual teaching, where the learner is doing a unique course through language as, for instance, people in the CRAPEL in France would advocate. When you've got a class, when you've got differing learners, how do you manage a class where each person is different from each other person in principle, I suppose? One thing that I've thought about to implement is an idea that I call ambiguous teaching. That the teacher provides something which the different learners can exploit in different ways. This seems to me one way of dealing with variation: it's to have ambiguous teaching which is exploitable in different types of ways.

M.A.J.S.: Metalanguage and language awareness. Could you please express your views on these issues?

V.J.C.: I don't have a strong view on them in one sense. I'm not convinced that conscious awareness of language is that much use to ability to learn the language for communicative purposes. That may be useful for academic purposes or for other educational purposes, but I'm not convinced that it actually helps you to speak, so to speak. I think that what it is chiefly doing is treating language as something that has to be made conscious, that the more conscious we are of things the better we will learn. That seems to me to be false with language, since with it we are not necessarily doing things consciously.

M.A.J.S.: In relation to the theoretical foundations that a comprehensive theory of SLA should have, what are they?

V.J.C.: Goodness, I don't know. That's a question demanding let's say a twenty-page answer ... Well, what we've done in terms of EUROSLA is to produce guidelines for application of L2 research to different areas because we were worried about how premature much of the application may be. And it seems to me that what you've got to do is to make certain that the research is appropriate to the kind of conclusion that you're advancing. If you're making a minor piece of research like grammatical morphemes, then you shouldn't go on to make major conclusions about language acquisition theories or about language teaching, simply because there is not a connection between the tiny little bit of research you've done and the major thing you're proposing. In something I've just been reading, the person looks at CP or IP in SLA and then makes a conclusion about functional categories. Well, there are 7 or 8 functional categories that we have to test before you make a general conclusion about functional categories. I think to carry out adequate research you need to have the appropriate number or type of students or subjects to test. Very often the types of persons that you are testing come from a very small group. If you take the research that is based upon age in SLA research, virtually all the age research is based on immigrant speakers of Romance languages in the USA. Hence, you could see it about age factor or about immigrants who are going to the USA when they are younger or when they are older. I think that what SLA research has to be clear about is relating the kind of statements that it's going to make to the foundation on which it's building, making certain there are appropriate methods, appropriate students or subjects and so forth. And be very cautious or explicit about when these things are broken.

M.A.J.S.: How do you think languages are learnt?

V.J.C.: Well, I mean the straight forward answer is to delete the word *learn*. Languages aren't learnt. Important aspects of language, I think, are not learnt but they're already there. The innatist hypothesis is, I suppose, the thing. I think the criteria one has to have is that language, whatever is happening, is response to input data from parents, caretakers, teachers, and so on. That's the language acquisition device problem, I suppose. What we've got to explain is how people from a small number of sentences with certain characteristics can get the large amount of knowledge that they get from the input in fact.

M.A.J.S.: Would you equate human learning with learning in other species?

V.J.C.: Human learning of language is not the same as learning in other species. That seems to be quite a distinct thing of its own. I don't think that any of the experiments have really come up with any evidence that other species do learn language in anything remotely like the human fashion.

M.A.J.S.: What's the main difference between the UG model of SLA and cognitive approaches to SLA?

V.J.C.: I suppose that when Gregg reviewed my book and says that I use the word *cognitive* wrongly, that UG is a cognitive model of SLA, yes I suppose in one sense that's true. It's not however the way in which the majority of people use the word cognitive. Certainly, if you take Wittgenstein's view you cannot say that UG is cognitive. What Gregg claims is that there is a distinction between the language faculty and other faculties. Usually when you say UG vs cognitive you are saying the UG faculty vs the other parts of cognition in the mind. UG is also a cognitive approach. In terms of cognitive approaches the problem is that they mostly do treat language as being the same as any of the other faculties. And so they don't see they have to do anything as distinctive so far as language is concerned. If you take the Anderson kind of approach, I suppose, as a typical approach, he would deny that there is any difference between language and the rest. And linguists say that Anderson and psychologists haven't understood what language is about.

M.A.J.S.: Would psychological research be an alternative to the linguistic approach to SLA?

V.J.C.: Well, I don't see why it would be an alternative. It might be complementary. It might be a different thing. But from the linguist's point of view, which is the one I usually take, most of psychological research in L2 in recent years has been very thin in terms of the areas of language it has looked at. If psychologists were using theories that were looking at a much greater range of language than they have done so far, then there might be more interesting things coming out of it for linguists, I think.

M.A.J.S.: You address the issue of knowledge of language of a person who knows more than one language. Could you tell us more about this?

V.J.C.: Well, the idea of multicompetence, a person who knows more than one language, is a kind of idea that I have been developing recently. It does seem to me to be an important sort of issue for language teaching, linguistics and SLA research. We've pretended for large number of years both in linguistics and language teaching, I suppose, that the L2 learner was an imitation L1 learner, that they didn't have the L2 in the system, that they were simply learning a language from scratch. So we gave them the functions of language, which they already had in the other language, we asked them to do the things which they could already do in the other language because they already spoke in that language, but we assumed they had to relearn it in the L2. In some sense we've been insulting L2 learners by saying "We can totally disregard all your previous language experience because that's totally irrelevant to learn the new language". I certainly feel

quite strongly that multicompetence view should be considered in SLA research. In it we should start from the assumption that there is a complex system in the mind involving two languages. And that partly this is going to involve things like tranfer and soforth, partly it's going to involve language teaching techniques which involve more than one language in the class and using things like code-switching and so on.

M.A.J.S.: Competence and development. What are they?

V.J.C.: Well, as I use the terms I certainly contrast development with acquisition. What you've got is the historical process through which a person develops language over time: step 1, step 2, step 3. This is how a person develops a language. Acquisition is the Chomskyan notion of the logical problem where you look at the final position that som one has, you look at the initial data and you say what must have happened in between. So acquisition is the logical problem, development is the historical, practical problem. Competence is then the end point of both, I suppose. What you are looking at is slightly different things. If you take a strict UG point of view, then information about development is irrelevant. SLA research has gone on and on about stages of development. That's quite irrelevant to acquisition. A lot of SLA research has been about development and has been making limited conclusion because of that, I think.

M.A.J.S.: What about development of performance?

V.J.C.: Well, I suppose that relates the points. Development is constrained by performance limitations. Whereas in terms of acquisition you never look at the actual memory limitations, breathing limitations, rather cognitive limitations of the students, in terms of development yes, you may very well do that and say that the two-year old can't produce a particular sentence because their short term memory won't let them do it. So development and performance seem to me related. The reason why people develop may be partly due to changes in their performance processes, and this isn't something you look at in terms of acquisition.

M.A.J.S.: Would you equate mind and brain?

V.J.C.: I don't think that as a linguist so to speak I have any right to say anything really about brain. At second and third hand one gets statements by people about brain, mostly the ones made by linguists seem to me to be based on very shallow sort of reading of research in these areas, making rather prematurely such an equation. I don't want to find myself saying things about physical structures in the brain which are really outside my skill and competence, since I have not been trained in brain architecture.

M.A.J.S.: Is there anything else you'd like to say about the issues we have addressed or do you find in them something missing that you'd like to raise?

V.J.C.: Let me think. To go back to the beginning, the important thing for me is bringing people together to this area with sets of disparate ideas, and not try to get yes or no answers, saying this one is a good idea and this one is a bad idea. I think that's certainly one important thing. The second thing that is a danger, par-

ticularly in the UG approach, is taking linguistics too seriously. People tend to change every year the kind of syntax that they're using. Not because it's irrelevant to SLA that linguistics has changed. Sometimes research is already out of date by the time it's published. I feel very strongly that SLA research has to try and be independent. It mustn't simply try to be always one step behind linguistics. Because that way we'll never get anywhere.