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Learners' Conceptions of Language: An Exploration of Potential Contributions from Folk Linguistics

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Abstract: Despite the abundance of studies on learners' beliefs in the field of second language acquisition, very few have addressed learners' conceptions of the language itself. In this article, we argue that examining these conceptions is crucial for understanding the beliefs and attitudes students hold towards other languages and their learning processes. Specifically, we observe how a prescriptive view of language can influence students' expectations regarding the nature of the content being learned. Additionally, we note that the notion of correctness is often imprecise and ambiguous within the educational context. Furthermore, we explore how learners' conceptions about language components are intricately linked to their expectations about language learning. In particular, we observe that an emphasis on words as the primary object of learning can be detrimental to sociopragmatic factors. Moreover, we note that the folk conception of meaning as a rigid and context-independent entity can lead to a *naïve universalist* perspective, privileging the L1 as a means to understand and evaluate the L2. To delve into learners' conceptions of language, we propose the use of qualitative methods grounded in folk linguistics. Folk linguistics is the study of non-linguists' beliefs and ideas about language and language learning, including how they perceive and describe language use. This approach involves the study of metalanguage through discoursal data, which can be gathered both through metacognitive and contextual approaches. Additionally, we suggest that understanding the folklinguistic notions held by educators and those embedded in teaching materials is significant in this line of research, as it can help in designing and implementing educational interventions that are more closely aligned with learners' pre-existing conceptions, potentially leading to improved learning outcomes.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition, Learners' Beliefs, Folk Linguistics, Applied Linguistics

1. Introduction

The study of learners' beliefs about language learning has emerged as a distinct field of inquiry within second language education (Bui & Huong, 2023). It is commonly assumed that such beliefs are key individual factors that influence students' attitudes and behaviors, and can ultimately impact their learning outcomes, either positively or negatively (Mohammadi et al., 2015; Abdi & Asadi, 2015). This is a comprehensive perspective, since students can hold beliefs about virtually any aspect related to their learning, including their own performance, the features of the target language, the methodologies and materials used, and the practices of their instructors. Illustrating this point, Horwitz's (1987) BALLI questionnaire, a commonly used tool for assessing students' beliefs, consists of 34 items grouped into five categories: (1) foreign language aptitude, (2) difficulty of language learning, (3) nature of language learning, (4) learning and communication strategies, and (5) motivations and expectations.

While extensive research has been conducted to address these categories and their relationship with various classroom variables, learners' beliefs about language itself have received relatively scant attention. This line of research was explored by Miller and Ginsberg (1995), who used the term *folklinguistic theories* to refer to both students' ideas about language and their beliefs about language learning. Furthermore, Benson and Lor (1999) advocated for establishing a distinction between conceptions, defined as "what the learner thinks the objects and processes of learning are," and beliefs, which "are concerned with what the learner holds to be true about these

objects and processes, given a certain conception of what they are" (p. 464). In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), "conceptions of learning can be understood as conceptions of what a foreign language *is* and of what the process of learning a foreign language *consists* of" (p. 465).

In this article, we explore learners' conceptions through the lens of folk linguistics, which studies how non-linguists perceive and think about language (Niedzielski & Preston, 2003). The benefits of utilizing this approach in applied linguistics and SLA research have been advocated by researchers such as Barcelos (2003), Kalaja (1995, 2003), Pasquale (2011), and Pasquale & Preston (2013). These authors suggest that folk linguistics can provide language teaching professionals with valuable insights into students' beliefs, thereby enabling them to develop more appropriate teaching materials and methodologies. Additionally, it provides teachers with the tools to identify these beliefs in their professional practice. This approach is also useful for examining teachers' own beliefs about language learning and teaching (Pasquale & Preston, 2013).

Moreover, SLA research can benefit from using discoursal frameworks as a primary method for data collection and analysis in folk linguistics. Traditional quantitative methods such as the BALLI questionnaire have faced scrutiny from some researchers. Kuntz (1996) argues that these tools are flawed because the belief statements and their organization are not derived from the learners but are instead predetermined by the questionnaire. This setup leads to varied and often contradictory responses from students, which complicates the process of quantifying results (Pasquale, 2011). In contrast, folk linguistics-based methods challenge the premise that speakers' beliefs are straightforwardly accessible, preferring instead to depend on qualitative analysis of discoursal data collected through minimally directed interviews (Kalaja, 1995; Niedzielski & Preston, 2003; Pasquale, 2011). Additionally, as Barcelos (2003) points out, beyond this *metacognitive approach*, researchers might also engage a *contextual approach* that involves observing learners' actions in educational settings.

Folk linguistics not only helps us better understand learners' beliefs but also emphasizes the importance of acknowledging these beliefs (Pasquale, 2011; Pasquale & Preston, 2013). There is a tendency to conceive the relationship between folk discourse and scientific knowledge as a dichotomy, where the role of the professional linguist would be to amend mistaken popular beliefs. However, researchers like Preston (1996), Paveau and Esteves (2018) and Baronas and Cox (2019) have shown that an integrationist approach between folk discourse and mainstream linguistics is desirable. This perspective also underscores that language and linguistic issues are of interest not only to linguists but to the wider community (Wilton & Stegu, 2011; Albury, 2014).

2. Metalanguage

An initial point to consider is that when individuals engage in discussions about language, they are necessarily employing a metalanguage (Niedzielski & Preston, 2003). *Metalanguage* refers to the language used to describe, analyze, or discuss language itself. Although folk metalanguage lacks the technical precision of the metalanguage used by professional linguists, it often addresses the same linguistic phenomena. Additionally, folk metalanguage may incorporate specialized terminology acquired through formal education, demonstrating once again that folk and scientific domains are not entirely isolated from each other. Furthermore, the variability of folk metalanguage among different individuals and human groups, influenced by factors such as educational level, highlights the complexity and diversity of folk discourses about language.

Preston (2004) deems it necessary to establish greater precision in the terminology used to define metalanguage within the field of folk linguistics. He identifies three types of metalanguage apparent in the discourse of informants:

- (M1) *Metalanguage 1* includes all explicit and conscious commentary on language, covering topics such as linguistic norms (such as *In English, you should never end a sentence with a preposition*), the characteristics of specific languages or dialects (*Spanish from Spain is more correct than Latin American Spanish*), language learning (*Learning French is difficult because of the verb conjugations*), etc.
- (M2) *Metalanguage 2* is employed in casual conversation to refer to language without making it the focus. This includes phrases like *in other words*, *he said something*, or *repeat that*, which lack the intentional cognitive engagement found in M1. Preston considers M2 to be of no relevance for folk linguistics.

- (M3) *Metalanguage 3* involves the unasserted presuppositions, or the *folk theory*, that underlie the use of M1. M3 is metalinguistic in the sense that it involves ideas and conceptions about language, though it doesn't itself constitute a specific instance of language use (Preston, 2004, p. 87).

Recognizing and considering folk metalanguage is crucial for the practice of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and is directly related to the analysis lines we will present in this work. First, it is necessary to note that foreign language students begin learning with a prior background of resources to refer to language. Additionally, the metalanguage of the learners may not align with that utilized by the instructor. Technical terms such as *word*, *phrase*, or *dialect* can carry very different connotations in colloquial contexts. Therefore, an examination of the disparity between folk and technical metalanguage is essential for ameliorating misunderstandings within the educational environment.

The vocabulary used in a language course will be normally aligned with colloquial usage. This practical approach proves frequently adequate. For example, the instruction *Complete the sentences with the words in the box* can be readily comprehended through the colloquial interpretation of *sentence* and *word*. However this may not be the case in every context. For instance, *word* is commonly employed to refer both to lexemes and their individual inflected forms. This presents a potential challenge for learners whose native language lacks inflectional features and who might have problems grasping the concept that forms like *am, is* and *was* are indeed instances of the same *word*.

Of course, besides conscious metalinguistic reflections, many casual references to language use also take place in the second language classroom.

Students who start to learn a new language are motivated to acquire instrumental structures that facilitate communication negotiation, such as *Can you repeat that?* or *I don't understand*, which fall under what Preston categorizes as M2. Contrary to Preston's dismissal of M2 as irrelevant, we argue that these statements are indeed valuable for studying conceptions of language and language learning. For example, when a student, upon encountering a new vocabulary item, asks *How do you spell it?*, they reveal a specific attitude towards learning, indicating that they might believe visual representation aids in comprehension or memorization.

3. Folk prescriptivism

According to Niedzielski and Preston (2003), "non-linguists use prescription (at nearly every linguistic level) in description" and "for the folk, this notion of good language extends even to the boundaries of what language is or may contain" (p. 18). This notion underlies common beliefs in folk linguistics that may seem puzzling to professional linguists, such as the claims that a certain English structure or dialect is not "proper' English, or that a particular term is not a 'real' word. Niedzielski and Preston argue that the key insight from these observations is that laypeople view language as an idealized, abstract entity, existing independently of its practical use. Interestingly, linguistic science also relies on such abstractions to define its subject (as seen in Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*, or Chomsky's distinction between *competence* and *performance*). The main difference is that while linguists see this abstract language as an idealized object of study, laypeople believe it has a very real existence (Niedzielski & Preston, 2003, p. 19).

However, prescriptive notions are not necessarily uniform within the same speech community. In her study of folk linguistic beliefs among Costa Ricans, Jara Murillo (2008) identifies four models for how these speakers perceive their own variety of Spanish. Three of these models involve a subjective evaluation of Costa Rican Spanish: the majority of respondents (37%) viewed it negatively, while others (26%) held a positive opinion, and a few (9.5%) had an extremely positive regard for it. More interestingly, the fourth model outlined by Jara Murillo does not involve an evaluation at all: 27% of those surveyed express a primarily descriptive view of linguistic variation, seeing it as the result of as a transformation process inherent to language and emphasizing the functionality of their specific variety. Furthermore, the models described by Jara Murillo may not appear in a pure form; instead, each individual might express various combinations of them.

This study also highlights the close relationship between folk linguistic prescriptive conceptions and speakers' attitudes towards different varieties. To the extent that a speaker conceives of their language as an abstraction, they will also assign each variety a greater or lesser degree of similarity to this ideal. In the case

discussed, Spanish speakers most frequently refer to Castilian Spanish as the standard, reflecting the processes of standardization and supralocalization that this variety has undergone since the 15th century, both in Spain and the Americas (Fernández de Molina & Hernández-Campoy, 2018). Moreover, Castilian Spanish remains closely associated with the centers of economic and cultural power in the Spanish-speaking world. This connection helps explain why, despite contemporary institutional and policy recognition of Spanish as a polycentric and plurinormative language, prejudices persist (Mendoza Puertas, 2021).

In SLA, it is crucial to determine how these types of conceptions can affect learners and shape their learning experiences. This influence occurs in two main ways. First, learners may project their conception of their native language onto the target language, assuming the existence of one (or more) prestige variety that is essentially more correct than other dialects. Furthermore, learners are exposed to the folk linguistic beliefs prevalent within the speech community of their L2. Consequently, students of Spanish as a second language, across different learning environments, consistently show a preference for the European variant over the American variants of the language, and in some cases, specifically for Castilian Spanish (Svetozarovová, 2019; Badiola González, 2020; Mendoza Puertas, 2021).

A learner's preference for a specific linguistic variety may be influenced by practical considerations. For instance, the potential to secure employment or engage in business activities within a particular country can significantly shape their inclinations. Given that socioeconomics factors contribute greatly to the prestige attributed to certain linguistic varieties, a correlation between learners' preferences and favorable attitudes is expected. Nonetheless, Mendoza Puertas (2021) observes that even students who prefer Mexican Spanish for practical reasons demonstrate a stronger appreciation for Castilian Spanish, which they associate with notions of correctness, purity, and legitimacy. Badiola (2020) and Mendoza Puertas (2021) both suggest that these linguistic biases are primarily propagated by educators.

The role of the L2 speech community in the dissemination of prescriptivist conceptions cannot be underestimated, especially when students are learning in an immersion context. Language users are not passive recipients of a top-down imposed linguistic ideology but actively participate in its maintenance and propagation through bottom-up processes of grassroots prescriptivism (Heyd, 2014; Lukač, 2018). Speakers may actively question the decisions and policies enacted by institutions responsible for language standardization (González García, 2011). Moreover, as evidenced by Miller and Ginsberg (1995), even foreign language learners partake in normative judgments of native speakers' language use.

We can also consider prescriptivist conceptions from another angle: their relationship with the use of metalanguage in the classroom. Terms like *correct*, *good*, or *right*, which carry a prescriptive sense in everyday speech, take on different meanings in a learning environment. At the most basic level, the notion of correctness is associated with the results of the tasks that students undertake in the classroom. There is a *right* way to respond to the teacher's instructions and questions; exercises and exams include solutions that can be deemed *correct* or *incorrect*. It's natural for this type of correctness to align with linguistic norms, although this is not always the case.

Consider, for example, a fill-in-the-blank exercise consisting of a series of sentences that students must complete with a given set of words. In some cases, two different words (lets call them A and B) from that set might result in a grammatically correct construction when placed in a particular sentence. The only reason to choose word A over word B might be that the latter must be used to complete another sentence, where no other word from the set fits. This creates a situation where an answer considered *incorrect* in the context of the exercise, like using word B instead of word A, could still be considered *correct* from other perspectives, including a purely normative one.

Secondly, the terms *correct* and *incorrect* are often used to denote different (and sometimes conflicting) aspects of an utterance, including its grammaticality and acceptability, as well as its semantic or pragmatic appropriateness. While these dimensions sometimes align with correctness in strictly normative sense, this is not always the case. Structures considered incorrect from a normative standpoint may still be gramatically sound and acceptable. Consider, for instance, the use of the present continuous for stative verbs in English, such as *I'm loving this movie*. This sentence is well-formed grammatically, but traditionally, it might be considered incorrect in Standard English.

On the other hand, learners often produce grammatically and normatively correct sentences that nevertheless seem incongruous or awkward to native speakers. For instance, *Quel est votre nom?,* a word-by-word French rendition of the English sentence *What is your name?*, is typically eschewed by native French speakers in favor of the more idiomatic *Comment tu t'appelles?* or *Comment est-ce que vous vous appelez?* (Pellet & Myers, 2022).

Linguistic conventions, speech patterns, and idiomatic expressions emerge from social settling processes and cannot be deduced solely from the grammatical rules of the language (Seuren, 2013). This poses a challenge for non-native speakers, since they must memorize such conventions rather than rely on the explicit grammatical knowledge they acquire in class. It can also lead to frustration, as students often expect that grammatical correctness should be sufficient to ensure the acceptability of a statement. Additionally, they may not be aware of the difference between correctness and acceptability, leading to further confusion when their grammatically correct sentences are perceived as awkward or incorrect by native speakers

In sum, these observations suggest that understanding folk prescriptivist notions is crucial for comprehending certain attitudes and biases of language learners. Additionally, this highlights the need for a discursive analysis of the metalanguage used in the classroom, as a means to understand the clashes between beliefs and conceptions held by both learners and educators. Such analysis can be highly beneficial for educators and material developers, enabling them to adjust the metalanguage they use and refine their pedagogical strategies.

4. Components of Language Learning

As Miller and Ginsberg (1995) observe, learners' conception of what constitutes a language is much narrower than that of professional linguists. Specifically, "aspects of language outside of syntactic rules and dictionary-style definitions are thought of as 'culture' rather than 'language', and consequently dissociated from their descriptions and language learning" (p. 297). This insight is crucial in understanding students' expectations and exemplifies the importance of analyzing metalanguage through narrative inquiry in order to understand their folklinguistic conceptions.

While it might seem obvious to SLA professionals that pragmatic elements like speech acts are part of foreign language acquisition, assuming students share this perspective would be a mistake. Lack of awareness of students' conceptions could lead the instructor to oversight of their actual expectations or even inadvertently conflicting with them. Therefore, teachers must be prepared to address these conceptions when presenting new content that, from the learner's perspective, would not be part of the primary focus of their learning.

As also noted by Miller and Ginsberg (1995), students not only grasp grammatical rules and lexicon, but also assign the greatest weight to them in determining their communicative success. When interactions with native speakers fail, they tend to attribute it to a lexical or grammatical error rather than any sociopragmatic factor. However, it is often such overlooked sociopragmatics factors that determine the success or failure of communication. Among them, different authors have shown that speech acts (Yates, 2010), politeness (Wong & Esler, 2020), turn-taking (Ryan & Forrest, 2021) present serious challenges to foreign language learners.

In contrast, speakers are highly aware of the importance of the pragmatic element in their native language and can discuss it extensively (Niedzielski & Preston, 2003). This discrepancy may stem from factors inherent in the learning process itself, such as the traditional focus on lexical and grammatical aspects in language teaching. Undoubtedly, the fact that grammar and vocabulary are more tangible and quantifiable aspects of a language, along with the fact that they can be studied independently of the context of use, helps to structure teaching curricula and provides a more objective benchmark for academic success.

A further insightful observation made by Miller and Ginsberg (1995) is that students assume the target language is a fixed and coherent system. This expectation translates into "statements which express irritation when they encounter what they perceive as illogical, redundant, or ambiguous uses of language" (p. 301). The authors' examples reveal that students assess the "logical consistency" of L2 through the lens of their native language. For instance, one informant displayed confusion regarding the existence of two distinct Russian terms for the English *meeting*: "I didn't understand what the point was of having two words" (p. 301). Similarly, another

informant challenged the logic of a phrase when directly translated: "Literally translated this means 'Will you be tea?'... *I asked why people used that phrase when it was so odd*" (p. 301).

Two critical inferences can be derived from these observations. First, students inherently perceive their native language as logical, without realizing that their understanding or what is logical is determined by their mother language. This perception spans various linguistic levels, including syntax and vocabulary, and intersects with the prescriptivist notions discussed earlier. Second, the expectation among students that other languages should conform to the logical structures of their native language reveals a significant lack of awareness regarding interlinguistic variation. This phenomenon may be characterized as *naïve universalism*. One of its consequences is that learning a foreign language is perceived mainly as the acquisition of syntax and lexicon, rather than new meanings. Thus, for a form X in their L1, the student expects there to be a form Y in the L2, with X and Y having the same meaning.

In connection with this, Miller & Ginsberg (1995) also point out that speakers tend to view words as the primary carriers of meaning. Thus, in a communicative situation, a considerable part of the learner's cognitive effort consists of determining which words to use. Niedzielski & Preston (2003) also note that, from a folk perspective, the word holds primacy in the language system and is the quintessential object of folklinguistic analysis. Common people often engage in discussions about the meanings of specific words, which are crucial for understanding folk theories of meaning. An example presented by Niedzielski & Preston (2003) involves two English speakers trying to elucidate the difference between *present* and *gift*. Although they agree that "technically" there is no difference between these terms, one speaker notes that they are used in different ways. Again, this distinction between *technical meaning* and *usage* may seem perplexing to a professional linguist, but it aligns with the folk conception of language as an ideal object, as discussed earlier.

As evidenced in this example, the folk nevertheless recognize that the meaning of words is largely dependent on pragmatic factors. Niedzielski & Preston (2003) observe that a prevalent folk method involves elucidating the meaning of a term through the contexts in which it appears. For instance, in the aforementioned discussion, the informants noted that *gift* is more frequently used in the context of advertising, where the use of *present* is less likely. However, this distinction between two orders of meaning can foster a prescriptivist attitude. In her analysis of linguistic attitudes among Ecuadorian speakers, Flores Mejía (2014) outlines the criteria her informants use to define "correct" language across various levels of analysis. At the semantic level, correctness is determined by the knowledge and use of the "correct" meaning of words, which are typically identified as those documented in dictionaries or disseminated by educators or institutions.

Niedzielski & Preston (2003) note many instances where speakers are aware that they are not using words in what they perceive as their "real" sense. Their respondents often resort to dictionaries to settle discussions about language, and they occasionally note discrepancies between these official definitions and their practical application of certain terms. If a term is not recognized in such repositories, the folk tend to dismisse it as a "non-word" even if they can explain its meaning. In other cases, respondents identify certain terms as meaningless, including obscenities, slang, and certain discourse markers. Ambiguity and double meaning are regarded by speakers as incorrect uses of language in Flores Mejía's 2014 study.

Here we encounter a critical concept in defining learners' attitudes towards foreign language acquisition, one that warrants a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis. As students' conceptions of meaning are transferred into their learning of a second language, those who more concerned about normative correctness will tend to prioritize learning what they believe to be the "real" meaning of words rather than understanding the nuanced ways in which different speakers or groups of speakers use these words in different contexts.

The verb *to mean* is another key component of metalanguage, the precise scope of which depends on a particular conception of *meaning*. In the initial stages of learning, the question *What does ... mean?* is typically answered through equivalences between the target language and the learner's native language or another vehicular language. As the student seeks solutions to their immediate linguistic needs (for example, understanding the overall meaning of a text), their inquiry into meaning is concerned with acquiring sufficient information to achieve that objective. Naturally, this is not always straightforward. For instance, the Spanish word *seguro* can mean *sure* in certain contexts, but in others, it may translate to *safe*, *secure*, *insurance*, or *lock*.

Students frequently compile vocabulary lists that often consist of pairing terms from the target language with words from their native or vehicular language. Such an approach is not exclusive to learners, as glossaries and vocabulary lists are common educational resources. Other didactic materials, such as flashcards or matching exercises, also operate on this binomial logic. While we do not suggest that these types of activities are ineffective as part of the learning process, it is important to consider the folklinguistic conceptions implicit in this approach, as they, again, underscore a decontextualized conception of meaning.

This assumption is based on the conception that different languages share the same system of meanings even though these meaning are lexicalized in different ways across languages, which can be identified as another form of naïve universalism. A learner with a low degree of metalinguistic awareness tends to think that other languages are identical to their L1 but with a different inventory of words. Their learning task then becomes one of identifying the corresponding term in L2 for each term in L1, a task in which the notion of "real" meaning we discussed previously plays a significant role. As mentioned, when L2 has words to express two concepts that in L1 are expressed with the same word (or vice versa), the learner may perceive this as a lack of logic in the other language

Once again, it would be a mistake to assume that these types of folklinguistic conceptions are exclusive to laypersons. As Wierzbicka (2013, 2014) points out, English-speaking researchers tend to approach the study of other languages (especially non-European ones) with the presupposition that certain concepts lexicalized in English are universal. In other words, they assumed such notions to be part of the conceptual repertoire of all cultures, even those in which they are not lexicalized. On the contrary, however, "it is not similarly assumed that words from other languages which have no counterpart in English also stand for shared concepts" (Wierzbicka, 2013, p. 316). That is to say, a universalist perspective is frequently biased in favor of the language in which the research is conducted.

The search for equivalences and similarities between L2 and other known languages is a natural and efficient strategy for acquiring vocabulary in the target language (Liu, 2008; Joyce, 2018). However, the use of L1 as a metalanguage introduces a certain blindness to its role as a metalanguage. For the scholars referenced by Wierzbicka, the bias lies in the assumption that academic language can serve as an objective tool of analysis. For foreign language students, the issue is similar: L1 serves as viewpoint from which the system of meanings in the target language is analyzed. Thus, for a native English speaker, Spanish has two words (the copulas *ser* and *estar*) to express a single concept, while for a native Spanish speaker, English has only one word (the copula *to be*) to convey two distinct meanings.

This is yet another example of the kind of *naïve universalism* we referred to earlier. Given the importance of this conception in various aspects of learning, we believe it is crucial to address it directly through metalinguistic reflection activities. As Jones et al. (2005) put it, an aim of language awareness should be to challenge the conception that "the English language represents absolute truth and the foreign language represents some kind of lesser confection of the teacher" (p. 65). This goal, of course, extends beyond English and is applicable to any native language possessed by learners.

From these observations, we can infer that a crucial task for educators is to identify the underlying language conceptions that shape students' attitudes, as well as their own and those reflected in the materials used. If certain materials reinforce a binary view of meaning, this issue could be addressed by incorporating alternative resources. For example, using materials that exclusively employ the target language would represent a significant improvement. Monolingual learners' dictionaries, for instance, encourage students to move beyond binary thinking and engage with the target language as an autonomous system. Research has demonstrated their effectiveness, especially in comparison to bilingual dictionaries (Ahangari & Dogolsara, 2015). Additionally, other vocabulary learning tools, such as semantic maps, can enhance understanding of L2 as a system governed by its own logic. These tools are also proven to be effective for vocabulary instruction (Dilek & Yuruk, 2013).

However, it is also important to recognize that even materials embodying "erroneous" conceptions of language can still be valuable for both students and educators. For example, flashcards and vocabulary lists can certainly aid in the memorization of new lexical items. Rather than eliminating these techniques, the goal should be to potentially complement them with metalinguistic reflection or to develop new materials that address these conceptions. We will revisit these points in the next section.

As we have seen in this section, students' beliefs about language learning can stem from their conceptions of what a language is. The primacy of the word as an object of folk linguistic analysis, for instance, translates into a particular emphasis on vocabulary as a central component of language, a focus which is also reflected in the structure of language materials and courses. Consequently, meaning is perceived as an inherent property of words rather than being determined by context. We argue that understanding such conceptions should be a primary concern for applied linguistics. Ultimately, adopting a comprehensive approach that integrates folk linguistic insights with pedagogical practices has the potential to significantly enhance learners' engagement and success in second language acquisition.

5. Future Directions

As we have noted, questionnaires are the preferred method of analysis when it comes to studying learners' beliefs. Folk linguistics proposes a different approach, relying mainly on discoursal data and the analysis of metalanguage to uncover speakers' attitudes toward language. In the preceding sections, we have seen some examples of how this approach can reveal implicit and explicit information that is difficult to reach through quantitative methods of analysis. Folk linguistic studies do not solely rely on interviews but also on other instances of folk discourse about language, such as collaborative online dictionaries (Dolar, 2018) and texts posted on social networks (González García, 2011).

As argued throughout this article, folk linguistic analysis can significantly contribute to the field of SLA. General studies refer to those that examine the language conceptions within specific speech communities, like some of the works discussed here (Niedzielski & Preston, 2003; Flores Mejía, 2014). One of the key tasks of applied folk linguistics is to determine the extent to which prevalent conceptions in a speech community impact second language learning. In this way, general studies can help identify key conceptions that warrant more in-depth investigation in specific teaching contexts.

Although we can assume that many folk linguistic conceptions are shared by various linguistic communities worldwide, many are culture or community specific. Thus, understanding a particular learning context also involves familiarizing ourselves with its specific conceptions. This involves not only the learners' speech community but also that of the instructors. As previously noted, the linguistic ideology prevalent among L2 speakers often reaches the foreign learner (Mendoza Puertas, 2021), who may, in turn, help promote such ideology (Miller & Ginsberg, 1995).

Throughout this article, we aimed to show how some of the folklinguistic conceptions may be relevant to specific SLA research. Regarding these potential studies, it is pertinent to recall Barcelos' (2003) distinction between the metacognitive approach and the contextual approach. The metacognitive approach seeks to collect data through interviews and self-reports, while the contextual approach involves the observation of students' actions, including classroom observations (Barcelos, 2000), diaries (Miller & Ginsberg, 1995), and discourse analysis (Kalaja, 1995). For instance, an investigation into learners' prescriptive conceptions might involve direct inquiry into their understanding of correctness or a classroom observation of how students use key terms like *correctness*. In this context, and others, analyzing educators' folklinguistic conceptions can also be of interest, as these may influence learners' beliefs and attitudes (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017).

Moreover, we have underscored the significance of examining educational resources, textbooks, courses and programs, as they inherently embody certain language conceptions. We suggested that activities or learning materials can either reinforce or conflict with learners' conceptions. A paradigmatic example is activities based on a binary conception of the relationship between words and meanings. This relatively unexplored field can lead us in two directions. Firstly, as suggested by Santipolo (2016) and Preston (2017), data from folklinguistic research can inform the design of pedagogical interventions that better align with students' pre-existing conceptions.

Conversely, an open question remains as to what extent data obtained folklinguistic research can be used to redefine students' conceptions. It is known that some student beliefs are susceptible to change over time (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Zhong, 2015) and can be modified through pedagogical intervention (O'Keefe et al., 2021). This can be a desirable goal since specific beliefs are associated with varying degrees of learning success. However, this perspective may conflict with the principles of folk linguistics: Barcelos (2003) warns of the risk of

adopting a normative approach to learners' beliefs by assuming that learners' beliefs are inherently incorrect and must be changed.

There is ongoing debate regarding the relationship between folk linguistics and Language Awareness, a related and often overlapping field. As discussed in Stegu et al. (2018), while folk linguistics is primarily descriptive, Language Awareness arises from concerns related to applied linguistics. Although it focuses on students' beliefs, Language Awareness also examines how speakers' language knowledge can be enhanced, promoting beliefs that are more beneficial for learning or more socially responsible. Despite the consensus among scholars in Stegu et al. (2018) about the proximity of these fields, Preston (2017) notes that Language Awareness "is wedded to a theory of learning that suggests that conscious knowledge of language facts will improve or enhance learners and users" (p. 385), a notion not reflected in folk linguistics.

Our tentative approach to learners' conceptions of language suggests that the two intervention modes we have detailed may be useful in different contexts. First, the use of metalanguage in the classroom can be adjusted to align more precisely with students' expectations. Conversely, rigid folk conceptions of meaning can be enriched by raising awareness of alternative understandings that are more pedagogically beneficial. The same applies to conceptions anchored in ideology that lead to valuing certain linguistic varieties over others. Both intervention modes—the adaptation of pedagogical strategies to students' conceptions versus the attempt to change these conceptions—require empirical studies to evaluate their efficacy.

In conclusion, several avenues for future research emerge from this study. One direction involves investigating how folk linguistic conceptions impact learning outcomes. Additionally, there is a need for research into pedagogical strategies that can effectively address and potentially reshape students' conceptions. Such studies could lead to the development of teaching materials and methods that are culturally sensitive and holistic in their approach to language. Furthermore, the implications of these findings could extend to educational policy, particularly in the training of language teachers and the design of curricula that better reflect the complexity of language as understood through a folk linguistic lens.

6. Summary

In this article, we have argued that students' conceptions of language significantly influence their beliefs and attitudes towards second language learning. Through concrete examples, we have demonstrated the impact of prescriptive notions, ideas about language structure, and conceptions of meaning on students' approaches to learning a second language. We advocate for an analysis based on folk linguistics to understand these conceptions, addressing the limitations of quantitative methods by viewing beliefs as dynamic processes. Discourse analysis and the study of metalanguage are highlighted as fundamental tools for elucidating these conceptions. Our findings suggest that students' beliefs should be considered as dynamic components of the teaching context, influenced by both external linguistic ideologies and internal educational beliefs. This perspective emphasizes the importance of aligning pedagogical strategies with learners' conceptions or raising awareness of alternative, beneficial ways to understand language concepts. Future empirical studies are needed to evaluate the effectiveness of these approaches.

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