SECOND CULTURE ACQUISITION AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: FAUX AMIS?

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1. Introduction and overview

One of the well-known characteristics of modern approaches to second language learning is the view that successful second language acquisition (SLA) is accompanied by second culture acquisition (SCA) (e.g., Hamers & Blanc,1989; Schumann 1978). It seems clear that a learner's acquisition of communicative competence must involve more than the command of the grammatical structures of the target language and a mastery of its phonology. The learner must also acquire new cultural knowledge and a set of culture-specific constraints on linguistic behaviour. The claims above make sense. There is little doubt that, in the best case, expansions of linguistic competence should be accompanied by expansions of cultural competence. But there is also a way in which the claims above make too much sense. They suggest a straightforward parallelism between SLA and SCA as well as a parallelism between the successful end-states of bilingualism and biculturalism. In this paper, we suggest that although the parallels between SLA and SCA are intuitively appealing, they often mask important underlying differences in the ways in which linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge are organized as well as important differences in the acquisition process.

The claim: "Expansion of linguistic competence should be accompanied by expansion of cultural competence." Is there a straight-line relationship?

We explore some of the fundamental differences that exist between SLA and SCA and concentrate on the situation of adults who begin the acquisition process with already well-developed systems of linguistic and cultural competence. We argue that the manner in which these systems change as a result of exposure to new linguistic and cultural environments is to a large extent determined by the nature of the systems themselves. In rare cases, adults are successful in becoming bilingual as well as bicultural. However, the differences between what it means to have a language and to have a culture are so great that the terms bilingualism and biculturalism (as well as the conditions to which they refer) may share little more than a prefix.

We conclude that the inherent modularity and boundedness of language make it possible for dual non-interfering systems to develop. Culture, on the other hand, appears to be less bounded and the possibility for the development of dual non-interfering cultural systems is therefore relatively low. Unlike SLA, therefore, SCA involves the expansion of an existing system rather than the development of a new one.

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2. Having a language and having a culture

We begin our discussion of SLA and SCA at the beginning — the initial stages of acquisition. This is the point at which the individual is first exposed to a new language or culture. Nothing has yet been acquired; however, it seems reasonable to assume that what the individual brings to this first stage determines to a large extent what will be acquired. We therefore concentrate on the nature of the acquirer's knowledge state before acquisition takes place and ask: What do the second language and second culture acquirers have in the initial state? First and foremost, the adult second language acquirer has competence in his or her native language. The individual possesses an internalized system of knowledge that both enables and constrains the use of language such that it has the character of human language in general and of (let us say) English in particular. Strictly speaking, this linguistic competence is not an internal representation of English, but rather of the principles and constraints that allow for the generation of English utterances — a grammar of the language (see Webelhuth 1995 for some recent presentations of this framework). It is important to note that linguistic competence, in this technical sense, refers to the unconscious knowledge that is in the mind of the native speaker. It is in this sense that we can say that the individual has a language.

Are there similarities between "having a language" and "having a culture"?

Now, can it be said that individuals have a culture in this same sense? There have been many claims in the anthropological literature that it is not fruitful to look for culture within the individual because culture is essentially between individuals (e. g., Geertz 1973). We concur that many aspects of what is commonly called culture can only be understood in interpersonal terms. Nevertheless, there is a way in which collectively held beliefs, values, and opinions are internalized by individuals as constraints that allow for the generation of what is thought to be "appropriate" behavior. This is particularly evident when individuals are confronted with novel situations.

Consider, as an illustration, a somewhat fanciful scenario in which a Swedish woman and a Tamil woman land on an uninhabited Pacific island as the sole survivors of a shipwreck. We expect in this scenario that each woman will initially react and interact with the other in a culturally-specified manner. Clearly, in this situation, the cultural differences in their behaviour could only come from their previous experience. We claim then that each of the women on the island is "having a language and having a culture."

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We have thus referred to a very broad point of similarity between language and culture. Both cases involve systems of internalized knowledge, and in both cases the nature of these internalizations must be abstract and general enough to be applicable to novel situations. As linguists are fond of pointing out, the vast majority of utterances that native speakers encounter are unique events. Thus linguistic competence cannot simply be an internalized "list" of utterances. This list, no matter how long, could never be long enough. It seems reasonable to suppose that the same principle holds for the nature of cultural competence. If we concur that the women in the scenario above would indeed interact in culturally-specified ways in the initial stages, the source of this cultural specificity must be in the form of general

principles, not specific behaviours. It seems exceedingly unlikely that each woman's culture would have supplied her with specific preparation for being stranded on a Pacific island with a foreign woman.

To summarize to this point, we have argued that the individual brings native linguistic and cultural competence in the form of abstract and largely unconscious knowledge to the initial stages of SLA and SCA. It is here, however, that the similarities between having a language and having a culture may end.

3. Where comparability of language and culture fails

A very important difference between cultural and linguistic knowledge lies in how the acquirer conceives of the knowledge that he or she brings to the situation. We argue below that in the case of language, native speakers believe themselves to possess a tightly interwoven language system; in the case of culture, a loose collection of behaviours, attitudes and values. This difference in belief has great consequences for the course of acquisition in the two domains.

A person who begins the task of SLA begins with two important assumptions:

1. that there is a system to be acquired (that can have a label such as English or Spanish);
2. that he or she is already in possession of such a labeled system.

In the case of SCA, the acquirer believes himself to be in possession of values, beliefs, and opinions that he shares in varying degrees with other members of his social group but he does not conceive of the second culture as comprising a separate labeled system.

We would not expect that the Tamil woman would begin speaking Tamil to the Swede and assume that she would understand. But what about "behaving Tamil"? Firstly, it seems unlikely that the Tamil woman would know what it might mean to "behave Tamil" in a general sense. Secondly, we would expect that the Tamil woman would make many more assumptions about the comprehensibility of her behaviours, attitudes and opinions than she would about her language.

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A language system "hangs together", but cultural characteristics are perceived to be independent and unrelated.

Now what about the subsequent stages of acquisition? Surely after a period of time, the women would begin to acquire some measure of language and culture from each other. But how would this acquisition take place? In the case of SLA we might expect that each woman would consciously teach certain vocabulary items to the other and at later stages employ a form of "foreigner talk." This is only one of many possible scenarios (another one being that they both end up speaking Tamil) but it points to the significance of characteristics 1. and 2. above — that each woman assumes herself to be in possession of an integrated system and therefore would not begin by speaking her language at the outset,

simply assuming that the other would understand. Each woman would begin by assuming that, untutored, she would understand nothing of the languages of her island-mate.

In contrast, the women would have a much less clear idea about what to expect on the cultural level. In general, the Tamil woman might expect the Swede to have different eating habits, but she might not think that her opinion would differ on important issues such as moral judgment. Each woman would assume at the outset that the other should be able to understand her on such important issues. Each would also find it exceedingly difficult to justify her own moral judgment as Swedish or Tamil or "teach" it to the other along these lines. More importantly, neither of the women involved would think that their eating or dressing habits would impinge in any way on their understanding of what their moral judgment was all about. Nor would either assume that ritual obligations were linked to matters of hygiene or humor. This perceived lack of internal coherency stands in stark contrast to the general idea about language which implies that language as an interrelated system is possessed by everyone.

This particular lack of consistency and coherent labeling makes culture acquisition all the more difficult to initiate since it is neither clear what one already has nor what one is supposed to acquire.

We have suggested so far that individuals perceive their language system as something that "hangs together." Although these same individuals may be very aware of specific aspects of their cultural system such as greeting rituals and eating customs, they typically do not perceive their culture as an integrated system of knowledge but rather perceive most cultural characteristics to be independent and unrelated.

Of course, as is commonly discovered in the study of human cognition, the intuitions of individuals regarding mental representations and processes often provide poor and misleading information concerning the architecture of cognition. It seems that very little of our thought processes are open to conscious introspection. Thus, in the case of language and culture, there is considerable likelihood that individuals' perceptions are influenced by the fact that we have a rich vocabulary with which to organize our understanding of language as a system and a considerably less developed vocabulary with which to talk about characteristics of cultural knowledge and cultural competence. Notwithstanding these considerations, we claim that the intuitions of individuals regarding the organization of linguistic and cultural knowledge lead us in the right general direction — to the view that language is an integrated module whereas culture seems more a loose association of elements.

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There are a number of reasons to believe that language can be seen as a tightly interwoven cognitive system. There is evidence from psycholinguistic experimentation that language processing is obligatory, automatic and relatively insulated from other aspects of cognition (see Pinker 1994, Libben 1996). There is evidence from clinical neurology that language production and comprehension can be selectively impaired as a result of damage to discrete areas of the brain (Caplan 1994, Goodglass 1995). These resulting aphasias suggest that language, in addition to being a functional module of human cognition, may also have the status of a module in the neuronal underpinnings of mental representations and processes. It is

also important to note that whereas there exist perhaps a dozen well-defined categories of aphasia, no case of the loss of specifically cultural knowledge (i.e., "aculturia") has yet been associated with brain damage in the clinical literature.

One possible reason for the tightness of the language system is that it must be organized to meet the computational demands of everyday use. Sentence comprehension and production seem effortless. Yet, as has been shown by the difficulties encountered in the development of automated language processing systems, both comprehension and production involve huge amounts of computation and data representation. Moreover, the system is called upon to perform in a millisecond time fram e.

Another reason for the tight organization of the language system is probably related to the fact that all of it is typically active all the time. Although linguists often treat the language system in terms of the submodules of phonetics, phonology, syntax, and semantics, it is always understood that normal language use involves all these submodules. We are never called upon to use only syntax or phonology. The most extreme example of this "all switches on" phenomenon is at the level of phonetics. If one were to read the present sentence aloud, virtually all the phonemes of the English language would have to be used. This fact probably accounts for why we typically think about a foreign accent in terms of phonetics. Because all aspects of the phonetic system of the language would be required in virtually any conversation, it is not possible for a second language learner to avoid any aspect of the system. This seems different from some aspects of syntax which can be quite successfully avoided in English production, and seems very different from many aspects of lexical knowledge (e.g., the technical vocabulary of automobile repair) that would only be called upon under specific circumstances in particular environments.

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The characteristics of language that we have focused on so far are shown in Figure 1. This diagram represents the language system as a stratified triangle in which individual language elements can be represented. Each stratum in this space represents a language submodule or level, and the triangular shape allows us to represent the phenomenon discussed above — that some levels of language are more tightly packed than others.
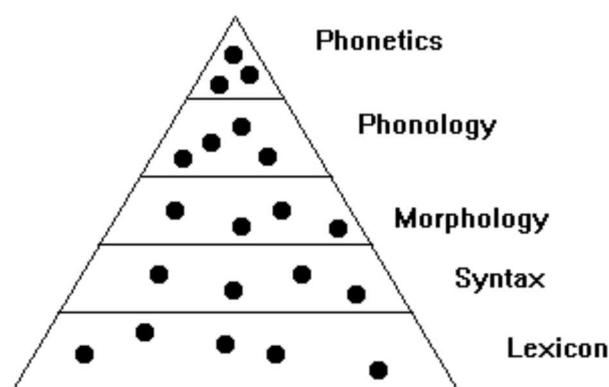

Figure 1. Levels of linguistic competence. Elements of linguistic knowledge are represented as circles. The triangular shape suggests that some levels are more tightly integrated than others.

Turning back to culture, we note that it, too, may be represented as a cognitive space. As we have mentioned above, the boundaries of that space are not as clear as they are in the case of language. There are functional reasons for why language would have to be at least partially insulated as a computational and representational system. Language processing is something that *you do*. Culture, on the other hand, is in many ways who *you are*. In the section below, we will argue that this basic difference between language and culture has consequences for the

A basic distinction: Language processing is something that you DO; culture is who you ARE.

ways in which SLA and SCA can develop. We might also consider, in our comparison of linguistic and cultural knowledge, whether the triangular shape of the space represented in Figure 1 is also appropriate for culture. It seems to us that it is, but not exactly for the same reasons that it is appropriate for the representation of language. In the case of culture, the triangular shape allows us to distinguish between those aspects of culture that are part of who you are (i.e., are central to a person's cognitive makeup) and those aspects of cultural knowledge that can be easily modified depending on the situation in which the individual finds him or herself. We will refer to this latter type of cultural knowledge as "peripheral"/"contextualized."

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In Figure 2, an outline of cultural knowledge is presented in a triangular space that is similar to the one we have used for language. Here cultural elements are represented as dots and the bottom portion of the triangle represents situational and less tightly packed elements. The top of the triangle, in which there is much less space, is used to represent more central elements which interact more closely and come into conflict more easily.
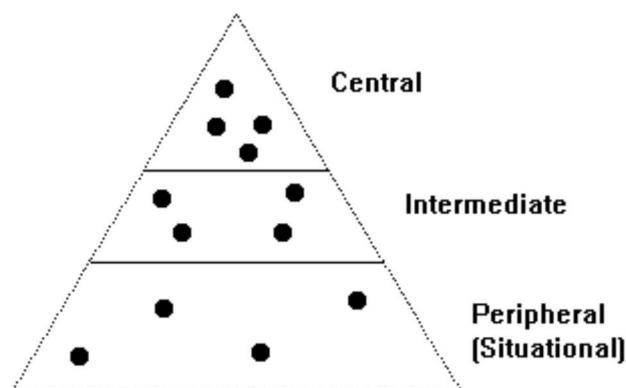
Figure 2. Cultural competence is represented as a triangular space with weaker borders represented by dotted lines. Central elements exist in a tighter space and are therefore more likely to come into conflict.

The distinction between these central and peripheral cultural elements is outlined in Libben & Lindner (1993) in which it is pointed out that it is part of the competence of North Americans to know that eating stew with your hands is negatively valued. It is probably also the case that a North American's cultural competence would indicate that cannibalism is negatively valued. There is, however, a clear and important difference between these two cases. We can conceive of situations in which a North American would, perhaps out of politeness in a foreign country, cheerfully dip his fingers into a gooey stew. It seems very unlikely, however, that the same North American would adopt a "when in Rome" view of eating fellow humans for dinner. The

Central and peripheral aspects of cultural competence.

somewhat extreme example above illustrates what we consider to be a fundamental property of cultural knowledge. Peripheral aspects of cultural competence can be easily modified and contextualized. In addition, peripheral cultural elements do not seem to get in the way of one another. We can eat chicken with our hands in one context, with a knife and fork in another, and with chopsticks in yet another environment. More central cultural elements, the ones that are really associated with who you are, seem much more closely packed. We are less able to contextualize our notions of honor, friendship and justice. When central cultural elements are not consonant with one another, they create stress and the need for an individual to reduce that stress. We will argue below, that this notion of stress and the need of the individual to reduce it, plays a large role in the character of SCA and the course of its development.

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4. Culture acquisition processes and outcomes

Ever since the seminal work of Ervin and Osgood (1954), it has been assumed that, in the best case, successful SLA results in the development of functionally distinct language systems. We see the successful second language learner as someone who seems to be in possession of independent and insulated language systems, has complete mastery of both, and can switch between them with ease. In fact, of course, very few second language learners ever reach such a stage of proficiency in their second language and are ever free of spillover from one system to the other. It seems likely that there is a great deal of individual variability in the extent to which a second language learner actually develops distinct non-interfering systems and that a great many environmental factors influence the relative independence of the systems (see

"Interfering" and "non-interfering systems."

Ellis, 1994 for a review). It also seems to be the case that the submodules of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax etc. can be independently organized as interfering or non-interfering systems (see Schreuder and Weltens, 1993) for a recent discussion of the bilingual lexicon). We have all encountered individuals who seem to have almost perfect command of the lexical and syntactic components of a second language, but show great interference at the phonetic and phonological level. This phenomenon is given a very natural account in the context of the triangular model. In Figure 3, first language elements are represented as circles and second language elements are represented as squares. The relative number of circles and squares can be taken to represent language dominance, and the separateness of circle and square clusters may represent the functional independence of the two language systems.

(a)   (b)

Figure 3. Bilingual language systems. In (a) the situation of interdependent or compounded knowledge is represented. In (b), there is a functional separation of first language knowledge (represented by circles) and second language knowledge (squares).

Now, can SCA also be treated in terms of a simplified triangular model? Some caution is certainly in order here because, compared to SLA, SCA is almost completely unstudied. We therefore cannot rely on a reservoir of experimentation and description with which to anchor our speculation. Nevertheless, it seems to us that some general points of contrast between SLA and SCA can be made explicit through the use of the triangular model.

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The first point of difference is that the cultural system does not seem to have well-defined elements that we can identify. In the case of language, we can speak of the representation of phonetic features, phonological rules, and syntactic constraints. In the case of culture, we can only talk loosely about culture-specific concepts, attitudes, scripts and schemata. This may of course say nothing about the knowledge systems themselves but rather reflect only the relative degree to which SLA and SCA have been investigated.

The second point of difference we consider to be fundamental. And fortunately it does not depend on the degree to which individual elements are elaborated within a system. The point is this: In the case of successful language acquisition, two separate systems are developed. In the case of culture, more elements are introduced into an undifferentiated cognitive system. Because these elements are not insulated within a competence subsystem, the individual cannot switch between, say, German and French cultural systems in the way that he or she can switch between the German of French languages in the midst of a conversation. Again, language is fundamentally what you do, whereas culture is who you are.

So what happens in the case of biculturalism? Firstly, we claim that biculturalism is essentially a misnomer. An individual cannot really maintain two cultural systems. Rather, what happens is that biculturalism creates and integrates elements of two cultures in the same cognitive space. At the periphery, these elements are typically situationalized, so there is little difficulty. However, at the more central levels of the cultural system, there is more potential for conflict, more stress, and a greater need to reduce that stress. So, whereas successful SLA is the result of the development of

Successful second culture acquisition is the result of

successful stress reduction.

insulated systems, successful SCA is the result of successful stress reduction. In the section below, we discuss some of the most important of the stress reduction processes.

5. Conceptual conflict reduction in second culture acquisition

The framework that we present in this section, is based on a longitudinal study of German-Canadians carried out by the second author. This study focused specifically on the development of bicultural knowledge and on the manner in which new cultural knowl edge is acquired and integrated in the initially existing cultural system. As we claimed at the outset of this paper, we are beginning from the assumption that the process of SCA involves integration of new knowledge into an existing system. Thus whether or not the learner is going to have difficulty acquiring a second culture element will depend to a large extent on that element's

Four different types of results of successful stress reduction.

relation to the relevant first culture concepts. In the study of German-Canadians, a number of patterns emerged that offer a framework within which to understand how the stress that accompanies SCA can be reduced by acquirers and biculturals. In general when new cultural elements are acquired, four results were observed: a. there was no problem; b. the acquirer

abandoned one element in favour of another; c. two incongruous cultural elements were amalgamated into a new "third culture' element, and d. potentially incongruous cultural elements were situationalized.

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a. Unproblematic new cultural elements.

In the early stages of SCA, new cultural elements are often acquired without any difficulty or conflict. The reason for this is probably that in the early stages of SCA, acquirers are typically exposed to the more superficial aspects of the second cultu re (e.g., greeting habits, eating habits etc.) which can easily be learned.

People are also likely to encounter new, exotic aspects of the second culture which, by definition, do not have any first culture counterparts. When they learn such exotic new knowledge individuals tend to integrate these aspects into the cultural space in the same manner in which they would integrate new cultural knowledge acquired within the first culture as a result of switching professions or acquiring a new hobby.

b. Selection of one element over another.

When, one the other hand, learners acquire second culture notions that conflict with their first culture elements, different solutions have to be found. In this case, one very common solution is to adhere to old first culture knowledge even though new s econd culture notions are readily available. A closer look at these situations reveals that learners consistently select this strategy when the first culture notions (such as love, family relations, marriage) are particularly dear to them . These issues are in many cases very carefully insulated against change of any kind.

This leads to the fact that such notions are preserved in a "fossilized" state because they are rigorously kept at a level at which they have first been acquired. Among the older Ge rman-Canadians that were studied, many cherished, for example, understandings related to family life and marriage. Since many of these individuals had emigrated to Canada in the 1950's, they froze their concepts of family life at a level that was "en vog ue" in post-war Germany. Despite the fact that today such concepts are out of style both in Germany and Canada, the migrants continue to preserve them in their original state.

The opposite way to resolve cultural conflict occurs when the learner foresakes his or her first culture elements in favour of the second. This is a pattern that is often observed among younger second culture acquirers who for example find that gender r oles in the second culture are more attractive and acceptable than those in the first culture. If a person adopts this approach and applies it consistently in favour of the second culture, it is likely that the process will lead to acculturation rather t han to any form of biculturalism.

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c. Amalgamation of first and second culture knowledge.

Amalgamation, in practical terms, suggests that people take first culture concepts and apply them to the relevant new second culture understandings. For example, many immigrant families encounter conflicts because parents desire to retain parenting prac tices but are urged by their children and the surrounding society to acknowledge the new second culture notions. When they are confronted with having to make a decision, the parents find it difficult to satisfy both sides. Since most people believe tha t concepts related to marriage and education cannot be handled differently in different contexts, migrants tend to interweave parts of the older ideas with aspects of the new. The integration seems to satisfy both sides because people can keep parts of t heir old attachments and yet make concessions to the new cultural knowledge.

Similar mergers are possible in other less central areas such as ecological responsibility (recycling etc.). Cultural concepts can be extended to include more restrictive levels or, if the first culture standards are already highly restrictive, the cons traints can be relaxed. In either case, such extensions or contractions can accommodate a variety of changes and allow individuals to acquire new concepts simply by adjusting certain features of their older understandings.

d. Situationalization of cultural knowledge.

A final manner in which to deal with the problems of SCA can be found when acquirers maintain their first culture concepts and acquire new second culture concepts, but contextualize each set to different situations This contextualization can be found in simple behavioral areas such as table manners or greeting behaviours, but it can also be seen in those cultural areas where first and second culture notions contradict each other and are therefore difficult to amalgamate. In her study of Germans in Canad a the second author found, for example, that young Germans were able to make a separation between interacting with Canadian friends and interacting with German friends because they felt that the two belonged to different worlds that could not be integrate d. In their years of life in Canada these young

Germans had found that the forms of friendship among younger Canadians stressed popularity and large numbers of friends while the German notion of friendship emphasized long-term relationships and committed feelings among a small circle of friends. Rather than merging the two, they eventually became quite good at using both. They would behave "native-like" among their Canadian friends but would exhibit all the characteristics of a German friendship when t hey were among their German friends.

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It is interesting to note here that language plays an important role in the contextualization of the different notions, for in speaking a second language individuals can often switch to cultural understandings which would otherwise contradict their firs t culture concepts. An extreme example of this kind can be found in Ervin-Tripp's (1964) study of bilingualism among Japanese women. In this study, bilinguals were given an unfinished sentence in each of their languages and were then asked to complete t hat sentence first in Japanese and then in English. The sentence began "When my wishes conflict with those of my family ...". In Japanese, a subject completed it as "it is a time of great unhappiness" and in English as "I do what I want". The contradic ting answers were clearly tied to each language environment. Since the language environments served to contextualize and insulate each notion, it is quite probable that the conflict was not even apparent to the bilinguals involved.

Examples like these are, however, extreme. The reason we consider them to be extreme is precisely that issues such as family relations and friendship are normally thought of as being closely tied to one's identity. To put it differently, while contextu alization seems an appropriate strategy for dealing with behavioral elements, located at the bottom of our triangle, it strikes us as unusual when it is used in the middle or upper areas where most notions are closely related to central issues.

6. Conclusions: How is Second Culture Acquisition most profitably seen

We have illustrated above how basic cultural processes may manifest themselves as patterns of intercultural stress reduction. In Figure 4, a hypothetical bicultural system is represented. Here, first culture elements are represented as circles and seco nd culture elements are represented as squares. The most fundamental characteristic of cultural knowledge represented in Figure 4 is that first and second culture concepts are not clustered. Rather they occupy the same space in an undifferentiated manne r. In the figure, the three types of cultural stress reduction strategies are given graphic representation. The square with a white circle in the middle represents a case of one cultural element winning out over another, the square with the rounded corne rs represents a case of amalgamation, and finally, the two arrows represent a case of situationalization in which conflicting first and second cultural elements are moved from the mid ranges to the bottom of the triangle. It should also be noted that, in this hypothetical case, the individual is shown to have a dominance of second culture elements at the periphery, but first culture dominance in the central regions.
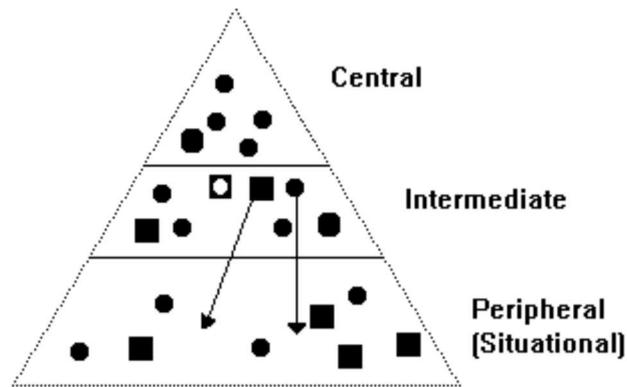
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Figure 4. A bicultural system. First culture elements are represented as circles and second culture elements are represented as squares.

To summarize, in this paper we have presented speculations and arguments concerning the nature of cultural competence, second culture acquisition, and its relation to language. We have argued that both language and culture are most profitably seen as kno wledge systems that generate behaviour under particular internal and external conditions. We have also argued that there is a danger of being seduced by the ease with which we can speak second language acquisition and second culture acquisition as going hand in hand. Language, we claim, is an integrated cognitive module that can be functionally separated into individually insulated subsystems such as English or French. In other words there is some psychological reality to the notions of individual languages. We are not sure, however, that individual cultures can be ascribed the same psychological reality. In effect, you can only have one cultural system. Within this system, individuals manage to avoid dealing with inconsistencies and conflict whether they occur f or cross-cultural reasons or for other (e.g., secular-religious) reasons. We view the cultural system as undergoing continual change in the manner that a language system does not. New cultural elements are often introduced and cultural conflict is resol ved through both the blending and the elimination of cultural elements.

SCA in our view is the situation in which tremendous stress is placed on the cultural system. This stress and the need to reduce it is typically manifested in the more advanced stages of SCA. In both SLA and SCA the learner typically begins with the ea siest and most obvious material. The language learner begins by acquiring new words — tripling his or her knowledge every day. There comes a point however where progress slows or even backslides. This is usually when syntax and connotation are encounte red. Similarly, in the case of SCA, the most superficial aspects of culture are encountered first — banking, shopping, eating in restaurants. Things look easy because they are not really that important. It is only after the learner lives in the culture for a while that the more central issues — involving perhaps moral decisions — become relevant. These are typically very difficult to situationalize and create considerable difficulty. However our continuing research into the phenomenon of SCA suggest s that, from this difficulty, the individual develops perhaps for the first time a sense of how his or her culture has the property of being an integrated network. Therefore, to return one last time to our shipwrecked women, we expect that before they ar e rescued they are each likely to learn just as much about their own cultures as about the other's.

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