

PSYCHOLOGY AND LANGUAGE LEARNING



CHAPTER 1 EXPLAINING FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION



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1. Explaining first language acquisition



- **Language acquisition** is the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive and comprehend language, as well as to produce and use [words](#) to communicate. The capacity to successfully use language requires one to acquire a range of tools including [syntax](#), [phonetics](#), and an extensive [vocabulary](#). This language might be vocalized as with speech or manual as in [sign](#). Language acquisition usually refers to **first language acquisition**, which studies infants' acquisition of their native language.
- This is distinguished from [second language acquisition](#), which deals with the acquisition (in both children and adults) of additional languages.



Theories of Language Acquisition



- Four main schools of thought, which provide theoretical paradigms in guiding the course of language acquisition are:
- **Imitation, Nativism or Behaviorism:** based on the empiricist or behavioral approach
- **Innateness or Mentalism:** based on the rationalistic or mentalist approach
- **Cognition:** based on the cognitive-psychological approach
- A recent view of language acquisition comes from **Connectionism:** differs sharply from the Chomskyan innatist theory, they hypothesize that language acquisition does not require a separate “module of the mind”



Explaining first language acquisition



The Immitation, Nativism, or Behaviourist Perspective:

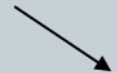
- Theory of learning that was very influential in the 1940s and 1950s
- Language has long been thought of a process of imitation, and reinforcement
- Imitation theory is based on an empirical or behavioral approach
- Main Figure: B. F. Skinner
- Children start out as clean slates and language learning is process of getting linguistic habits printed on these slates
- Language Acquisition is a process of experience
- Language is a 'conditioned behavior': the stimulus response process
- Stimulus → Response → Feedback → Reinforcement

Explaining first language acquisition

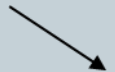


- Thus, Children learn language step by step

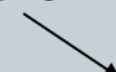
Imitation



Repetition



Memorization



Controlled drilling



Reinforcement



Reinforcement can either be positive or negative

Explaining first language acquisition



- Popular View: Children learn to speak by imitating the utterances heard around them and analogy
- Children strengthen their responses by the repetitions, corrections, and other reactions that adults provide, thus language is practice based
- General perception is that there is no difference between the way one learns a language and the way one learns to do anything else
- Main focus is on inducing the child to behave with the help of mechanical drills and exercises
- Learning is controlled by the conditions under which it take place and that, as long as individual are subjected on the same condition, they will learn in the same condition

Two Kinds Of Evidence Used To Criticize Behaviorist Theory



First Evidence: Based on the kind of language children produce

- first piece of evidence taken from the way children handle irregular grammatical patterns
- While encountering irregular items, there is a stage when they replace forms based on the regular patterns of language
- Gradually they switch over to the process of ‘analogy’ – a reasoning process as they start working out for themselves

Second Evidence: Based on what children do not produce

- The other evidence is based on the way children seem unable to imitate adult grammatical constructions exactly
- Best known demonstration of this principle is provided by American Psycholinguist David McNeill (1933)
- Child: Nobody don't like me
- Mother: No, say 'no body likes me'
- Child: Nobody don't like me (eight repetitions of this dialogue)
- Mother: No, now listen carefully: say 'no body likes me'
- Child: Oh! No body don't likes me
- Thus, language acquisition is more a matter of maturation than of imitation

Explaining first language acquisition



Nativist or Innateness Theory

- Limitations of Behaviorist view of language acquisition led in 1960's to the alternative 'generative' account of language
- Main Argument: Children must be born with an innate capacity for language development
- Main Figure: Bloomfield & Noam Chomsky
- children are born with an innate propensity for language acquisition, and that this ability makes the task of learning a first language easier than it would otherwise be.
- The human brain is ready naturally for language in the sense when children are exposed to speech, certain general principles for discovering or structuring language automatically begin to operate

Explaining first language acquisition



- Chomsky originally theorized that children were born with a hard-wired **language acquisition device** (LAD) in their brains. He later expanded this idea into that of **Universal Grammar**, a set of innate principles and adjustable parameters that are common to all human languages. The child exploits its LAD to make sense of the utterances heard around it, deriving from this 'primary linguistic data' – the grammar of the language
- According to Chomsky, the presence of Universal Grammar in the brains of children allow them to deduce the structure of their native languages from "mere exposure".
- Primary data is then used to make sentences or structures after a process of trial and error, correspond to those in adult speech

Innate Theory is criticized for



- The role of adult speech can not be ruled out in providing a means of enabling children to work out the regularities of language for themselves
- It has proved difficult to formulate the detailed properties of LAD in an uncontroversial manner, in the light of the changes in generative linguistic theory that have taken place in later years, and meanwhile, alternative accounts of the acquisition process have evolved
- that there are principles of grammar that cannot be learned on the basis of positive input alone
- The concept of LAD is unsupported by evolutionary anthropology which shows a gradual adaptation of the human body to the use of language, rather than a sudden appearance of a complete set of binary parameters (which are common to digital computers but not to neurological systems such as a human brain) delineating the whole spectrum of possible grammars ever to have existed and ever to exist.
- The theory has several hypothetical constructs, such as movement, empty categories, complex underlying structures, and strict binary branching, that cannot possibly be acquired from any amount of input.
- Mentalists' emphasis on the rule-learning is over-enthusiastic

The Universal Grammar Approach



- According to Noam Chomsky, UG focuses to answer three basic questions about human language:
 - 1) What constitutes knowledge of language?
 - 2) How knowledge of language is acquired?
 - 3) How is knowledge of language put to use?
- ‘Knowledge of language’ stands in UG for the subconscious mental representation of language which underlies all language use

What Constitutes Knowledge of Language and how it is acquired

?



- UG claims that all human beings inherit a universal set of principles and parameters which control the shape human language can take
- Chomsky's proposed principles are unvarying and apply to all human languages similar to one another; in contrast, parameters possess a limited number of open values which characterize differences between languages
- The biologically endowed UG equip the children naturally with a clear set of expectations about the shape of the language according to a predetermined timetable and atrophies with age

Criticism of UG Theory



- Linguistically, this approach's primary concern is only syntax
- Semantics, Pragmatics and discourse are completely excluded
- UG is concerned exclusively with the developmental linguistic route. Social and psychological variables are ignored
- UG approach is methodological. The theory is preoccupied with modeling of competence. The study of naturalistic performance is not seen as a suitable source to analyze mental representations of language

Cognitive Theory



- **Main Argument:** Language Acquisition must be viewed within the context of a child's intellectual development
- Linguistic structures will emerge only if there is an already established cognitive foundation
- Before children can use linguistic structures, they need first to have developed the conceptual ability to make relative judgments
- **Most influential figure:** Genevan Psychologist Jean Piaget (1896-1980) who proposed the model of cognitive development
- Focuses on exploring the links between the stages of cognitive development and language skills
- The links have been clearly shown for the earliest period of language learning (up to 18 months), relating to the development of what Piaget called 'sensory motor' intelligence, in which children construct a mental picture of a world of objects that have independent existence
- During the later part of this period, children develop a sense of object permanence and will begin to search for the objects that they have seen hidden

Cognitive theory is criticized for:



It is highly difficult to show precise correlations between specific cognitive behaviors and linguistic features at the very early stage of language acquisition as the children become linguistically and cognitively more advanced in the course of time

Input Theory



- The studies of Motherese in the 1970's focused upon the maternal input
- Main Argument: Parents do not talk to their children in the same way as they talk to other adults and seem to be capable of adapting their language to give the child maximum opportunity to interact and learn
- Main Figure: C. A. Ferguson (1977)
- The utterances of the parents are considerably and subconsciously simplified especially with respect to grammar and meaning and sentences are shorter
- The meanings conveyed by mothers are predominantly concrete and there is a more restricted range of sentences

CONNETIONISM



- It differs sharply from the Chomskyan innatist theory, they hypothesize that language acquisition does not require a separate “module of the mind”
- Language acquisition in terms of how children acquire links or connections between words and phrases and the situation in which they occur.
- When children hear a word or phrase in the context of a specific object, event or person, an association is created in the child’s mind between the word or phrase and what it represents.
- Children are exposed to many thousands of opportunities to learn words and phrases.



THANK YOU