Level: M1

Module: Second Language Acquisition

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Lecture Two: Language Acquisition

1. Acquisition

In linguistics, "acquisition" refers to the natural, often unconscious, way humans internalize language systems. This process fundamentally differs from conscious "learning," occurring through meaningful interaction and exposure rather than explicit instruction. Krashen (1985) popularized this distinction, through emphasizing the implicit nature of linguistic development. For instance, children acquire their first language without formal instruction. They develop complex grammatical competence simply by being exposed to and using the language.

Acquisition involves the integration of multiple cognitive systems. It encompasses processing sound patterns (phonological processing), constructing grammatical structures (morpho-syntactic development), establishing meaning networks (semantic networks), and developing contextual language use (pragmatic competence). This process demonstrates consistency across diverse cultures and languages, which supports theories of inherent biological predispositions (Chomsky, 1965). However, environmental factors, social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1983), and the quality of linguistic input (Krashen1985; Long, 1996) significantly influence both the pace and ultimate proficiency levels of acquisition.

2. Explaining Language Acquisition

Language acquisition is a complex process investigated across linguistics, psychology, neuroscience, and cognitive science. Explanatory frameworks for language acquisition vary, often complementing each other. Nativist approaches, primarily associated with Chomsky (1965), emphasize innate linguistic capacities that guide acquisition. Social-interactionist theories, such as those proposed by Jerome Bruner (1983) and Lev Vygotsky (1978), stress the significant role of communicative contexts and input in language development. Current

research indicates that acquisition likely involves a combination of these mechanisms: innate predispositions constrain possible grammars; statistical learning identifies patterns, and social motivation drives communicative development.

3. Theories of Language Acquisition

The field of language acquisition encompasses diverse theoretical frameworks, each offering distinct explanations for how linguistic competence develops. These theories fundamentally differ in their assumptions regarding innate capacities, the role of environmental input, underlying learning mechanisms, and language's relationship with general cognition.

-Behaviorist Theory

B.F. Skinner (1957) proposed that language acquisition is a process of habit formation, driven by operant conditioning, imitation, and reinforcement. Language develops through stimulus-response associations and environmental shaping. However, this theory has limitations in explaining children's capacity for creative language use beyond learned patterns.

-Nativist Theory

Noam Chomsky's (1965) theory of Universal Grammar posits that humans possess innate linguistic knowledge, termed a Language Acquisition Device (LAD), which contains universal principles and parameters. This framework accounts for the rapid acquisition of complex language structures by children despite limited linguistic input.

-Interactionist Theory

This perspective, advanced by scholars such as Jerome Bruner (1983) and Lev Vygotsky (1978), emphasizes the role of social context, scaffolding, and communicative functions in language development. Language is seen as emerging through the dynamic interplay of cognitive development and social engagement.

4. Stages of Language Acquisition

First language acquisition progresses through a sequence of identifiable developmental stages, although individual variation exists in the precise timing and rate of advancement. Delineating these universal patterns provides insight into the systematic properties of language development

and informs expectations for typical and atypical linguistic growth. Early theories, such as behaviorism (Skinner, 1957), proposed language acquisition through imitation and reinforcement, while later perspectives, particularly those of Noam Chomsky (1957, 1965), emphasized an innate capacity for language, known as Universal Grammar, guiding this developmental process.

-Pre-linguistic Stage (0-12 months)

Infants commence their linguistic development not with words, but with vocalizations. Initial crying gives way to cooing around two months, characterized by soft, vowel-like sounds. Canonical babbling emerges between 6-10 months, involving reduplicated syllables such as "bababa," as consonants and vowels combine. During this period, infants refine categorical perception, discerning phonetic contrasts, and progressively attune to the phonology of their native language through a process of perceptual narrowing.

-One-Word Stage (12-18 months)

The appearance of a child's first true words typically denotes this stage, with vocabulary often referencing familiar objects, individuals, or actions. This period is characterized by holophrastic speech, where a single word conveys a complete utterance or idea. For instance, "milk" may signify "I want milk" or "That is milk." Comprehension at this point substantially exceeds production, with vocabulary accumulation steadily progressing to an average of 50 words by 18 months.

-Two-Word Stage (18-24 months)

Children begin to combine two words to express fundamental semantic relationships. This "telegraphic speech" results in constructions such as "Daddy go," "eat cookie," or "Mommy shoe," illustrating an emergent understanding of syntax despite the absence of function words or inflectional morphology. This phase frequently coincides with a rapid vocabulary expansion.

-Multi-Word Stage (24-30 months)

Sentence structures expand beyond two words, incorporating function words, inflections, and increasingly complex grammatical patterns. A common phenomenon observed is the overgeneralization of grammatical rules, for example, producing "goed" instead of "went" or "mouses" instead of "mice." This indicates an active, rule-governed learning process rather than mere imitation.

-Later Stages of Language Acquisition

Language acquisition is a continuous process that extends beyond early childhood, with increasing complexity observed throughout later developmental periods. In these later stages, Individuals refine their morpho-syntax, enhance their semantic knowledge, acquire pragmatic nuances, and develop metalinguistic awareness. This ongoing development contrasts with earlier views, such as those that focused primarily on basic grammar acquisition in early childhood.

Preschool Period (3- 5 years)

During the preschool years, children begin to construct more complex sentences, incorporating structures such as embedded clauses, passive voice, and various question forms. They typically master most basic grammatical morphemes in predictable sequences (Brown, 1973), and their vocabulary expands considerably. Narrative abilities improve, showing clearer temporal sequencing, and pragmatic skills advance to include conversational turn-taking and the appropriate use of politeness markers, reflecting aspects of Bruner's social interactionist approach.

School-Age Period (6-12 years)

Upon entering school, children develop metalinguistic awareness, allowing them to reflect on and analyze language structure consciously. Literacy acquisition significantly influences their linguistic knowledge, facilitating explicit grammatical understanding. They also learn to use academic language registers, mastering decontextualized discourse and more complex syntax. Vocabulary growth remains substantial, with learners typically acquiring thousands of new words annually through reading and classroom instruction.

Adolescence (13+ years)

Adolescence involves the development of advanced pragmatic competence that enables individuals to effectively use and interpret indirect speech acts, irony, and sarcasm. Their comprehension of abstract and metaphorical language also deepens. Adolescents gain greater control over stylistic variation and register, adapting their language to different social contexts. Written language becomes noticeably more sophisticated.