

Theories of language acquisition

Unit 5

NAMS

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Theories of language acquisition

- The most prominent figure in language acquisition and development is Noam Chomsky.
- Others include: B.F Skinner, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky.
- Main theories of language acquisition and development:
 - behavioral
 - nativistic
 - semantic-cognitive
 - input/interactionist



- Skinner (1957) was the proponent.
- Considered language to be a “verbal behavior” dictated by the environment and the reinforcement children receive from communication.
 - A child acquires and learns language by imitating the language of their parents.
 - Their imitation is rewarded in the form of praise or by giving them what they ask for.
 - This reinforces their verbal behavior.



Limitations of behaviorism

- Language is a set of rules and structures that can't be learned by just imitation.
 - Children make systematic errors, overapplying the rules.
- Most children go through the same language development milestones.
 - The sequence of development of language is largely unaffected by the society the child lives and grows up in.
- Children can't repeat an adult's speech unless the structure of the utterance is in their repertoire.
 - E.g., if the child hasn't yet developed negation of verbs, they can't imitate the adult's use.
- Parents don't necessarily explicitly reward correct use of grammar.
- Behaviorism doesn't address the critical period of language development.



Innateness (Nativist theory)

- The process of language acquisition is biologically determined at birth in humans.
 - Language is innate, physiologically determined, and genetically transmitted.
 - Children develop language despite the poverty of stimulus.
 - The natural faculty for language acquisition is known as Language Acquisition Device (LAD).
- Proposed by Chomsky (1957) in critique of Skinner's behaviorism.
- All human languages share common principles that children are predisposed to learn.
 - Children aren't born to learn a particular language.
 - LAD has *process mechanism* which the children apply to the linguistic data they encounter, and learn the language they are exposed to.
 - On exposure to language, LAD is activated.
- Language learning is an unconscious process.



- Vocal tract and specialised brain areas
- No languages in other primates despite efforts to teach them
- Creole languages
- Sign languages and creole sign languages



- Chomsky was a theoretician
- No reasons for a child's motivation to speak
- Case of Jim (Brad & Sachs, 1977)
 - Hearing CODA (child of deaf adult)
 - Received spoken language input from TV and radio
 - Parents' motivation: wanted Jim to learn spoken language rather than sign language they used among themselves
 - Jim didn't make progress until an SLP's intervention
 - So, language exposure alone is not enough



- Proponent: Jean Piaget
- Language development is within the context of child's mental and cognitive development.
- Child first understands a concept, then expresses it.
 - Child can't use adjectives like 'smaller' and 'bigger' until they understand the concept of size.
 - They have to first be in the developmental stage such that they can arrange objects by their size into small and big objects.



Semantic-cognitive theory

- Object permanence: By 18 months, as children become aware of the existence of objects beyond their immediate perception, their vocabulary expands largely.
- Preoperaional stage: At around 2 years, children develop imagination and think in slightly abstract ways.
 - e.g., may say “pillow” for a “cloth” because they share some characteristics
 - May use words that aren’t generally acceptable.
 - Use egocentric communication, unable to understand others’ perspectives
 - Say what’s in their mind
- Concrete operational stage: State facts and observations
- Formal operational stage: Use language to express, discuss, and debate even abstract concepts



Limitations of cognitive theory

- Developmentally, no clear causal link between intelligence and language, except the link between object permanence and vocabulary
- Syntax doesn't seem to be dependent on general intellectual growth.
- Children speak fluently despite intellectual disability.



Input or interactionist theories

- Addresses one of the functions of language:
 - Communication with those who are ready to communicate with you
- Language can be learned in the context of communication with others, not in isolation.
- Children are exposed to language of parents.
 - Parents speak to children in special manner: Child-directed speech (CDS).
 - It supports acquisition of language in children through Language Acquisition Support System (LASS) as termed by Jerome Bruner.
 - Turn-taking structure in parent-child interaction is developed through games and non-verbal communication well before verbal communication and utterance of words.
 - It helps in word utterance and verbal communication.
- Useful corrections to Chomsky's theory.



Limitations of input theories

- Not all cultures use CDS.
- CDS is useful, but it is not essential.

