First language acquisition is the rapid, and largely unconscious, process by which children acquire their native language. It's distinct from learning a second language because it happens without formal instruction and relies on a mix of innate human abilities and environmental factors.

Stages of Acquisition

Children follow a predictable series of developmental stages, regardless of the language they are acquiring.

- **Babbling (6-12 months):** Infants begin to make a wide range of sounds, including cooing and babbling, which involves repeating consonant-vowel combinations like "bababa" or "dadada." The sounds produced at this stage are not always from the native language, but gradually become more selective.
- **Holophrastic Stage (12-18 months):** The child begins to use **single words** to convey a complete thought or idea. For example, "milk" might mean "I want milk" or "that's milk." The child relies heavily on context and tone to communicate.
- **Two-Word Stage (18-24 months):** Children start to combine words into simple phrases, often following a basic syntax like "Daddy go" or "kick ball." These utterances resemble a "telegram" because they omit function words (like "the" or "is") but retain the most important content words.
- **Telegraphic Stage (24-30 months):** Sentences become longer and more complex, typically consisting of three or more words. The child begins to incorporate more grammatical elements but still leaves out some function words. For example, "I want more juice" is a common utterance.
- **Multi-word and Beyond (30+ months):** Language develops rapidly, and children begin to form more grammatically correct and complex sentences, including questions, negatives, and subordinate clauses. By the age of five, most children have a solid grasp of the core grammar of their native language, though vocabulary and more complex structures continue to develop.

Key Theories

Several major theories attempt to explain how this process occurs, often debating the relative importance of nature versus nurture.

Innatist Theory (Nativism)

Proposed by Noam Chomsky, this theory argues that humans are born with a **Universal Grammar (UG)**, an innate blueprint for language. Chomsky suggests that the language a child hears (the "input") is often insufficient to fully explain how they acquire such complex

grammatical rules. He proposed the existence of a **Language Acquisition Device (LAD)**, a hypothetical module in the brain that allows children to quickly and effortlessly process linguistic data and deduce the rules of their language. A key piece of evidence for this theory is that children often make "overgeneralization" errors, such as saying "goed" instead of "went," which shows they are actively applying a rule they've deduced, not just imitating.

Behaviorist Theory

Championed by B.F. Skinner, this theory, now largely discredited for explaining language acquisition, proposed that language is learned through **imitation, reinforcement, and conditioning**. The child imitates the language they hear from caregivers, and correct productions are rewarded with positive reinforcement (e.g., praise), while incorrect ones are not. However, this theory fails to explain how children produce novel sentences they've never heard before or why they make overgeneralization errors.

Interactionist Theory

This theory, a middle ground between the nativist and behaviorist views, emphasizes the importance of both **innate abilities** and **social interaction**. Proponents like Jerome Bruner argue that a child's innate capacity for language (the LAD) is supported by a **Language Acquisition Support System (LASS)**, which is provided by caregivers. This includes things like **"motherese"** or **Child-Directed Speech (CDS)**—the simplified, high-pitched, and repetitive way adults speak to young children. This provides a simplified and more accessible input that helps a child make sense of the language. This perspective highlights that language acquisition is a dynamic process involving interaction between a child's internal cognitive mechanisms and their social environment