interactionism

Interactionism is a theory of language acquisition that argues that a child's language development is a result of the interaction between their innate, biological capacities and their social environment. It serves as a middle ground between the nativist theory (which focuses on innate abilities) and the behaviorist theory (which focuses on environmental factors).

The Core Idea

Interactionism, often associated with researchers like Jerome Bruner, posits that while humans may be born with a cognitive predisposition for language, this ability can only flourish through meaningful social interaction. A child's internal mechanism for language acquisition requires a specific kind of environmental support to process and learn.

Bruner introduced the concept of the **Language Acquisition Support System (LASS)**, which is the complementary, structured environment that caregivers provide to a child. This support system includes:

- **Child-Directed Speech (CDS):** Also known as "motherese," this is the simplified, high-pitched, and repetitive speech that adults use when talking to children. CDS provides a simplified linguistic input that is easier for a child to understand and process.
- **Scaffolding:** Parents and caregivers act as "scaffolds," structuring conversations and activities to help the child move to the next level of linguistic ability. For example, a parent might ask questions, expand on a child's short utterance, or use repetition to reinforce a new word.

Interactionism vs. Other Theories

- **Behaviorism:** Focuses solely on external factors like imitation and reinforcement, largely ignoring innate abilities.
- **Nativism:** Focuses on an innate, internal mechanism (Noam Chomsky's Language Acquisition Device or LAD), arguing that the environment's role is minimal.
- **Interactionism:** Combines both, proposing that the innate LAD needs the external LASS to successfully acquire language. The theory emphasizes that language learning is a social and collaborative process.