

# L1 language acquisition theory

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Language is closely related to the human mind. The human mind, however, is very difficult to study, as it cannot be observed directly. But it leaves its traces everywhere, particularly in language. Language has been a window of the mind.

Many people have tried to discern the workings of the mind from the growth of children. Psycholinguists are concerned with the mental processes that are involved in learning to speak, and are also interested in the underlying knowledge and abilities which children must have in order to use language and to learn to use language in childhood. Is language innate or is it learned after birth? Is there any biological foundation for language? How do children acquire their first language? These and other issues have the focus of interests and research to applied linguists, psycholinguists and language teachers. L1 acquisition theories are the attempted explanations for these unanswered questions. 1. Major Modern First Language Acquisition Theories ?????????? How do children acquire language is at the center of the debate. Learning theorists such as Skinner maintained (1957) that language is acquired through reinforcement.

Chomsky (1959) argued that language was far too complex to be learned so completely in such a short space of time, by cognitively immature toddlers (baby, child), merely by reinforcement. He argued that the neonate?? arrives equipped with a LAD. This contains a set of rules common to all languages and allows children to learn any language which they are exposed to. Slobin (1985) suggested a similar innate device---the LMC (language making capacity). The interactionists perspective suggests that a combination of biological and cognitive factors plus linguistic environment are

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all necessary for the acquisition of language. Basically we shall discuss two schools of thoughts on the issue of language acquisition here. The question of how children acquire their first language is answered quite differently by the two schools of theories.

The school of behavioristic theory believes that the infant's mind at birth is a blank slate to be written on by experience. With regard to language, it claims that children acquire their L1 through a chain of stimulus-response-imitation-reinforcement. The other school of thoughts is based on the innateness hypothesis. People who hold the cognitive view believe that human babies are somewhat predisposed ??? to acquire a language. They say that there are aspects of linguistic organization that are basic to human brain and that make it possible for human children to learn a language with all its complexity with little or no instruction from family or friends. The nature of language acquisition is still an open question and people are still probing the nature of the innateness of infant's mind. 2.

Brief History of Modern L1 Acquisition Research ?????????? 1. Modern research on child language acquisition dates back to the late 18th when the German philosopher recorded his observation of the psychological and linguistic development of his young son. 2. Most of the studies carried out between the 1920s and 1950s were limited to diary like recordings of observed speech with some attempts to classify word types, and simply accounts of changes from babbling to the first word and descriptions of the growing vocabulary and sentence length. 3. Most observers regarded language development as a matter of imitation, practice, and habituation. 4.

It was not until the 1960s that the study of L1 acquisition received a new major 'impetus' largely because of the Chomsky's revolution and the creation of the generative grammar. Researchers began to analyze child language systematically and tried to discover the nature of the psycholinguistic process that enables every human being to gain a fluent control of the exceedingly complex system of communication. 5. In a matter of (about) a few decades of language some giant strides were taken, especially in the generative and cognitive model of language, in describing the nature of child language acquisition and the acquisition of particular languages, and in probing universal aspects of acquisition. 3. L1 Acquisition Theories: A Behavioristic Perspective ?????????? L1 acquisition theories can roughly be divided into two major groups: behavioristic and cognitive. Behaviorists contend that language is a fundamental part of total human behavior.

Behaviorists learning theories describe and explain behavior using a SR model. The basic tenet of behaviorism is that human beings can not know anything they have not experienced and children and adults learn language through a chain of 'stimulus-response reinforcement'. Since one can not look inside a living organism, one can not observe its internal states. Hence one can not know anything about them. Any statements one makes about internal states or process are meaningless. Each organism is regarded as a black box that can not be opened for observation. The only meaningful statements one can make about the organism concern what goes into it (stimulus) and what comes out of it (response).

The goal of behaviorists, therefore, is to discover and create predictable relationships between stimulus and response. Since they regard language as a basic part of total human behavior, they try to explain L1 acquisition process strictly in accordance with their basic tenet, focusing on the observable aspects of language behavior and their relationships or associations with the objects, events or states of affairs in the world. Some Basic Features of Behavioral Model Pavlov/ Skinner ---focus on outwardly observable behavior like structural linguists. ---language is a function of reinforcement. ---learning is formed through stimuli-response-reinforcer. --- language is learned through environmental conditioning and imitation of adult models. ---language acquisition is a process of habit-formation.

--- focuses on the immediately perceptible aspects of linguistic behavior---the publicly observable responses and relationships or associations between those responses and events in the world around. --Children are conditioned to??? learn language. Their parents reinforce and model good grammar and vocabulary use. ---A behaviorist might consider effective language behavior to be the production of correct responses to stimuli. If a particular response is reinforced, it then becomes habitual, or conditioned. Two Main Representatives of Behaviorism Classic Behaviorism (Ivan Pavlov) Classic conditioning: the learning process consisted of the formation of associations between stimuli and reflexive responses. Neo-behaviorism (Skinner's Operant Conditioning) Operant conditioning refers to conditioning in which the organism( a human being) emits a response, or operant( a sentence or utterance), without necessarily observable stimuli; that operant is maintained( learned) by reinforcement.

It is learning from the consequences. Operant behavior is behavior in which one operates on environment "Operant" is used because the subject operates or causes some changes in the environment, producing a result that influences whether it will operate in the same way in the future. So verbal behavior is controlled by its consequences. Reinforcement can be defined as a stimulus or event that affects the likelihood that a behavior will be repeated. The nature of the reinforcement depends on the effect it has on the learner. Criticisms of Behavioristic Theory of Language

Acquisition ?????????????? No one denies the fact that behaviorism has made its due and early contributions to the development of child language acquisition theory. It emphasized the important and necessary roles of imitation, reinforcement, repetition, and practice in the process of language acquisition.

But abstract nature of language shows that it not only contains verbal behaviors but an underlying and rule-governed system. First, in language acquisition, child often creates his own linguistic rules. The best example is that child over generalizes the grammatical rule of forming past regular verbs with ed and extends it to all irregular verbs and creates verbs like goed, comed, breaked, which, of course, are not the result of imitation of the adult's language. Child's generation of rules indicates that he creates his own rules and has his hypotheses tested in his LAD. Secondly, what child acquires is abstract language system, i. e. competence rather concrete performances to which he is exposed.

There is no doubt that any sentence contains both surface and a deep structure. Although sometimes, surface structures of two sentences are the  
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same, the meaning of the deep structures is completely different. The same surface structure and different meanings prove that a child can never understand the difference in meaning by imitating the two surface structures unless he goes deep into the underlying structures. Thirdly, since language is difficult and complicated, a child has to learn its structures and build his communicative competence. Adults can never teach the communicative functions of the language to the child. The drawbacks of the behavioristic acquisition theory are obvious; linguists are still in search of a theory that provides an overall and effective explanation to the child language acquisition. 1.

L1 Acquisition Theories: A Cognitive Perspective ?????????? Behaviorism, with its emphasis on empirical ??? ? observation and the scientific experimentation, can not account for a vast domain of language acquisition that can only be explored by a deeply probing approach---the cognitive approach. Cognitive theory of L1 acquisition emphasizes the mental and psychological process and importance of cognition, thus opening a new horizon for L1 acquisition study. (1) Innateness Theory ??? "?? " This theory, also known as the nativist approach "?? " , is represented by Chomsky, McNeill and Lenneberg. Chomsky attacked behavioristic theory of language learning and reasserted the mentalist views of L1 acquisition. Chomsky stressed the active contribution of the child and minimized the importance of imitation and reinforcement. Nativists strongly held that language acquisition is innately determined, that human beings are born with a build-in device of some kind that predisposes us to language

acquisition, resulting in the construction of an internalized system of language. The child is born with the innate knowledge of language.

This innate knowledge, according to Chomsky, is embodied in a “ little black box” of sorts which Chomsky called language acquisition device or LAD. He assumes that the LAD probably consists of three elements---linguistic universals, a hypothesis making device, and an evaluation procedure. The so-called LAD has a number of linguistic universals, or universal grammar (UG) in store. It also has a hypothesis-making device, which is an unconscious process and enables the child to make hypotheses about the structure of language in general, and about the structure of language learning in particular. The hypotheses that the child subconsciously sets up are tested in its use of language, and continuously matched with the new linguistic input that the child obtains by listening to what is said in his immediate environment. This causes the child’s hypotheses about the structure of language to be changed and adapted regularly, through the evaluation procedure, and through a process of systematic changes towards the adult rule system. This view of the language learning process stresses the mental activities of the language learner himself and strongly questions the relevance?? f such external factors as imitation, frequency of stimulus and reinforcement.

A child learns not through imitation but by creative hypothesis testing. For example, he hears a lot of hypotheses but only chooses what he needs and creatively produces the language of his own. Contrasting Child Language Input and Output Utterances a child hears Utterances a child produces 1. Pass me the milk. 2. Give me the milk. 3.

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Get me the milk. 4. Want some milk. 5. Drink some milk. 1. Mommy, milk.

6. Take the milk. 7. Taste the milk. 2. Milk. 8.

There is no milk. 9. Milk, over there. 10. Milk, please. Some Basic Features of Innateness Theory / Nativist Approach Chomsky, McNeill and Lenneberg --- Language acquisition is innately determined, that we are born with a unique, biologically based ability of some kind that predisposes us to language acquisition---to a systematic perception of language around us, resulting in the construction of an internalized system of language. ---Children are born with a special language learning mechanism in their brain called LAD.

---Children can acquire grammatical rules subconsciously, with which they can generate an infinite number of sentences with new meanings. A Summary of Innateness Theory / Nativist Approach In summary, mentalist views of L1 acquisition posited the following points: 1. language is a human-specific faculty. (ability) 2. language exists as an independent faculty in the human mind. Although it is part of the learner's total cognitive apparatus ?? , it is separated from the general cognitive mechanisms responsible for intellectual development. 3.

the primary determinant of L1 acquisition is the child's acquisition device, which is genetically endowed and provides the child with a set of principles about grammar. . the acquisition device ' atrophies?? with age. 5. the process of acquisition consists of hypothesis-testing, by which means the grammar of the learner's mother tongue is related to the principles of the universal grammar. But there are still some problems of Innateness Theory / Nativist Approach to L1 acquisition. The problem is that we could not prove <https://assignbuster.com/l1-language-acquisition-theory/>

the existence of LAD and the generative rules only deal with the forms of language and fail to account for the functions of language.

Three Contributions of Nativistic Theories of L1 Acquisition Nativistic theories of child language acquisition have made at least three important contributions to the understanding of the L1 acquisition process. First, they accounted for the aspects of meaning, the abstractness of language, and the creativity in the child's use of language. Secondly, they have freed L1 acquisition study from the restrictions of the so-called "scientific method" of behaviorism and begun to explore the unseen, unobservable, underlying, invisible, abstract linguistic structures being developed in the child in the L1 acquisition process. Thirdly, it has begun to describe the child's language as a legitimate, ?? rule-governed, consistent system. Psychological and linguistic experiments have found that one-week old babies can distinguish sounds in French from those in Russian. The reason that linguistic competence is based on human genes is asserted, and this finding seemed to support Chomsky's hypothesis of LAD existence. (2).

Cognitive Theory. ????? "?? "? The cognitive theory, represented by Slobin, Piaget and Bloom, attempted to account for the linguistic knowledge of the child by a more general theory of cognitive development. Slobin provides a more detailed account of the language acquisition process with the broad outlines of cognitive theory of language development. He suggests that language acquisition is in the same order with the conceptual development of the child. Language development is paced by the growth of conceptual and communicative capacities, operating in connection with innate schema of cognition. Cognitive development has great impact on the linguistic

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development, which, in turn, will affect conceptual formation. Jean Piaget is another cognitive psychologist who made a thorough renovation to the concept of children's development of language and thought.

In fact, he developed the experimental methodology for exploring children's thought and studied systematically thought and logic of children. His study proved that the differences in thought between children and adults are of quality rather than of quantity. According to Piaget, language ability never develops earlier than cognitive ability. Human beings has two organizations ?? one is functional invariants, ??? , in Piaget's terminology, which determine how man and his environment react mutually and how man learns from environment. Another is cognitive structure, which is the outcome of the mutual reaction between functional invariants and environment. It is the functional invariants that are the central part of language acquisition. Many research findings proved that two facts are evident in the child language acquisition.

Some Basic Features of Cognitive Theory --Child language growth is paced with the cognitive development of the concept and communicative ability --- Linguistic and cognitive development keeps up the same pace and has interdependence. ---emphasize the interaction of the child's perceptual and cognitive development with linguistic and nonlinguistic events in his environment. We can never study the L1 acquisition thoroughly without considering the mental development of children in the first place. The formation of concept reflects the degrees of mental maturity. L1 acquisition depends on mental development. With the acquisition of concept, language acquisition enters from single-word phase to double-word phase, and later on <https://assignbuster.com/l1-language-acquisition-theory/>

to discourse. Intellectual development enables children to discard consciously what is unacceptable in a language community and assimilate what is acceptable.

Finally children establish an internalized acceptable grammar system. Tips from child first language acquisition: 1. A man is bound to acquire a new language only if he is physically normal and grown up in a proper speech community. 2. Adults learn a second language in much the same way as a child acquires his mother tongue. . In language teaching, practice must be emphasized, sometimes reinforced practice needed.

( pattern drills , rehearsal , substitution exercises etc. are necessary. ) 4. Language learning appears a matter of imitation, but imitation alone is inadequate for acquiring a language. 5. There is a natural order in acquiring a language. Stages of Child's Acquisition of First Language During the process of L1 acquisition, child develops his native language in a more or less stage-like pattern.

Different children of different nations usually undergo 4 similar and general phases of language development. Babbling, single-word utterance, double-word utterance and discourse. The numbering of these stages is quite arbitrary and varies from author to author. Based on the newest internet research data, child L1 development can be divided into 6 stages. 1. Pre-linguistic Period --- the Babbling Stage (???? ---?????? ) Crying is the child's earliest vocalization. ??? a.

cooing, crying (heard by 3 months ) ---a velar?? consonants such as /k/ and /g/ ---high vowels ?? such as /i/ and /u/ b. babbling (heard by 6 months )  
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---long sequences of consonants and vowels ---syllables ?? an be identified ---  
intonation ???? pattern can be heard ---not linked to immediate needs ---  
often uttered in isolation for pleasure ---provides practice for later speech 2.  
Acquisition of Concept of the World ---a child sees the world as the link  
between sound and meaning ---words vary in the pronunciation: sounds  
which differ most are learnt first; consonants which are similar are learned  
last. 3. Holophrastic Stage ---the Single Word Stage (???? ---????? ) ---single  
words become more than just labels ---intonation may be of question,  
command, request... 4. Telegraphic Stage--- the Double Utterance Stage and  
the Stage of Developing Grammar (18 months ) ---words have been  
multiplied considerably and are beginning to appear in combination with  
each other to form two-word and three-word “ sentences”. 5.

Linguistic Behavior and Speech Capacity ( about age 3 ) ---comprehend an  
incredible quantity of linguistic behavior ---speech capacity expands ---use of  
logical connections ---become a “ fluent” speaker ---form good  
communicative skills 6. Social Functions of Language ( school age) ---learn  
how to use language appropriately ---learn to use language in social contexts