

Faculty of Human and Social Sciences

Department of Psychology

Level: 2nd year LMD Psychology

Instructor: Ms. Saci Meriem

Module: English Language

Lesson n°2: Language Acquisition

Introduction

Language is a unique human ability that allows individuals to communicate, express ideas, and participate in society. Understanding how humans acquire language has been a major academic pursuit for decades. Scholars have developed theories to explain how children learn their first language so rapidly, how adults learn second languages more slowly, and why linguistic abilities differ among individuals.

Language acquisition is influenced by biological predispositions, cognitive development, environmental input, and social interactions. These factors make language learning a complex and multidimensional process.

I. Behaviorist Theory

B.F. Skinner argued that language is learned through imitation, reinforcement, and conditioning. Children acquire speech patterns by copying adults and receiving positive feedback. Although influential, this theory does not fully explain the creativity and complexity of child language.

II. Nativist Theory (Chomsky)

Noam Chomsky proposed the **Language Acquisition Device (LAD)**—an innate biological mechanism that enables children to acquire language naturally. According to this theory:

- Humans are born with a universal grammar
- Children learn language effortlessly due to innate predispositions
- Environmental input triggers internal linguistic knowledge

This approach strongly influenced generative linguistics.

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III. Cognitive Theory (Piaget)

Piaget emphasized the role of cognitive development. Children acquire language as their thinking abilities grow. Cognitive milestones such as object permanence, symbolic thought, and logical reasoning influence language learning.

IV. Social Interactionist Theory (Vygotsky)

This theory argues that language develops through interaction and communication. Key points include:

- Social environment is essential
- Caregiver-child interactions facilitate learning
- The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) supports language growth

This approach explains the importance of emotional bonding and social context.

V. Connectionist Theory

Connectionists argue that language emerges from exposure to linguistic input and the brain's ability to detect patterns. Through repeated experience, neural networks strengthen associations between words and meanings.

VI. Factors Influencing Language Acquisition

1. Biological Factors

- Genetic predispositions
- Brain development
- Sensitive period hypothesis (children learn language more easily than adults)
- Neurological structures such as Broca's and Wernicke's areas

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2. Cognitive Factors

- Memory
- Attention
- Problem-solving abilities
- Symbolic understanding

3. Environmental Factors

- Quality of linguistic input
- Caregiver responsiveness
- Socioeconomic status
- Exposure to books and storytelling

4. Social Factors

- Daily interactions with family and peers
- Cultural language norms
- Social motivation

VII. First vs. Second Language Acquisition

a) First Language (L1)

- Natural, unconscious process
- Occurs during early childhood
- Strong neurological support
- Fast and universal

b) Second Language (L2)

- Often conscious and effortful
- Influenced by age, motivation, and learning environment

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- More reliant on instruction
- Interference from L1 may occur

Research shows that adults have stronger cognitive abilities but weaker pronunciation learning due to reduced neural plasticity.

VIII. Neurolinguistic Insights

Modern brain imaging technologies reveal:

- Language processing involves distributed neural networks
- Critical periods correspond to high brain plasticity
- Bilingual individuals exhibit unique neural activation patterns

These findings support a combination of biological and experiential influences.

Conclusion

Language acquisition is a complex process shaped by biological, cognitive, social, and environmental factors. No single theory fully explains how humans acquire language; instead, a combination of perspectives provides a comprehensive understanding. Modern research continues to reveal the extraordinary mechanisms behind linguistic development and their implications for education, cognitive science, and neuroscience.