

Department of English

General Linguistics

Child Language Acquisition

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Language is God's special and unique gift to mankind, that without it human civilization would have been impossible. It's defined as a system of arbitrary symbols used for communication. One of the most significant moment in parent's life, that when they hear the first word comes out from their small child's lips. To many, language seems like a basic instinct, as simple as breathing. But language is not simple at all; in fact it is the most complex skill that a human being will ever master. For along time, numerous philosophers, psychologists and linguists tried to study this phenomenon. They raised questions such as how do children acquire their mother language? How do they grow up linguistically and learn to deal with the stylistic varieties of their mother language? How much of the linguistic system that they are born with?

Language acquisition can be defined as the process which humans acquire the capacity to perceive, produce and use words to understand and communicate. People often tend to take the process of language learning for granted. However, Bloomfield, an American linguist, avers that "The acquisition of language is doubtless the greatest intellectual feat any one of us is ever required to perform." (Leonard Bloomfield, Language1993).

This paper presents a brief overview about child language acquisition. There are theories that explain this subject. Each one has its good points and its bad points, and none as yet seems to be definitive in explaining that complex learning experience. During the past forty years, there have been two main theories known as *Behaviourism* and *Mentalism*.

Behaviorist school of thought is based on the idea that behavior can be learned without involvement of the mind:

The Behavior of Organisms would have been classified at the time as “learning theory,” but it was about many other behavioral processes as well. Nevertheless, my research was on the role of the consequences of behavior, and that was “learning.” (Skinner, 16)

Humans acquire spoken language as a result of behavioral conditioning and environment affects all humans in the same way. On the other hand, the Mentalists school of thought suggests that all humans have an innate language learning mechanism.

B.F Skinner is an American Psychologist, who was born in 1904 and died in 1990. He proposed The Behaviorist Theory as an explanation for Language acquisition in human. His entire system is based on a process which is called the operant conditioning. This means that language is an activity that a child acquires voluntarily without any external force. In this way child acquires his mother language in his own free without any sort of pressure. The whole process is based upon four elements: stimulus, response, reinforcement and repetition.

In other words, Children learn to speak by imitation the utterances that they heard around them, and by having their responses strengthened by the repetitions, corrections and other reactions that adults provide. Skinner wrote “A child acquires verbal behavior when relatively unpatterned vocalizations, selectively reinforced, gradually assume forms which produce appropriate consequences in a given verbal community” (Skinner 31)

For example, when a child listens a word 'sweets', he tries to store this word in this mind and when he tastes it and enjoys it, he tries to associate this word with actual theme 'Sweets'. Then, when parents or adults utter the word 'sweets', the child will give response by uttering the word 'sweet' or some sounds. So they reinforce him to utter this word again and again and the child makes repetition.

There are positive sides for this theory. Imitation is important in phonological development and children develop regional accents suggesting they imitate the sounds from people around them. But there are negative sides, Children don't pick up grammatical structures immediately as some children show an incorrect use of grammar. For example they may say 'wented' instead of went. Showing they have not imitated this of others. Yule wrote in his book *The Study of Language* " it is simply not possible that the child is acquiring the language through a process of consistently imitating (parrot-fashion) adult speech." (P181). Children normally use only the words that they understand. So if they imitate others, they would copy all words spoken by another person. If a child is deaf, he cannot imitate another person, therefore he uses sign language. According to these negatives the theory has been found incorrect.

Noam Chomsky, an American linguist who was born in 1928, considered Skinners theory to be an inappropriate one. He says about Behaviorism that "Whatever 'behaviorism' may have served in the past, it has become nothing more than a set of arbitrary restrictions on 'legitimate' theory construction." (Bjork, 1993, p.204). So he brought his own theory which named Mentalistic Theory or Innate

Theory. He suggests that language is an innate ability - that is to say that we are born with set of rules about language in our brains called the Universal Grammar or Generative Grammar.

In his theory he claims that a child learns his first language through cognitive learning. And any child is born with an inherited ability to learn any human language. He also acquires it by natural exposure. Both nature and nurture influence the acquisition of language in children. He believes that every child has a language acquisition device, which encodes the major principles of a language and its grammatical structures into the child's brain. In other words, that a child is born with some innate mental capacity which helps him to process all the language which he hears. Chomsky says "Language learning is not really something that the child does; it is something that happens to the child placed in an appropriate environment much as the child's body grows and matures in a predetermined way when provided with appropriate nutrition and environmental stimulation." (Chomsky 1988, 62-63)

Chomsky suggests that his theory applies to all languages as they all contain nouns, verbs, consonants and vowels. So, all children, regardless of their intellectual ability, become fluent in their native language within five or six years.

Innateness theory helps us to understand why children learn to speak so quickly. Because they born with an ability to learn. Chomsky suggested that everyone is born with a special brain mechanism which has the ability to tell us that all language has a structure. It is like a pre-programmed box which has information and can tell us if we are using a past tense and that it needs to be changed. However, no

one has ever know where the place of that mechanism which called language acquisition device (LAD).

At the end the differences between the two schools can be summarized in these points. Firstly, according to Mentalist language acquisition is an innate and children learn by application not like Behaviorism which discusses the stimulus-response process. Secondly, Mentalist is not agrees with Behaviorist which suggests that Language is a conditioned behavior. Thirdly, Language learning is based on practice not like Mentalist that Language learning is analytical, generative and creation. Finally, according to the Mentalist Language acquisition is the result of nurture. While Behaviorist considered Language acquisition is the result of nature. This comparison makes one thing clear: nature and nurture, analogy and application, practice and exposure are so important in language acquisition and learning.

References:

B.F Skinner (Teaching machines 16 ,31)

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