

Handouts for Language Acquisition by Jenny Kuo
Chapter 2: First Language Acquisition

I. Child language development

1. Infant speech perception

- Infants are born with the ability to discriminate the phonetic contrasts of any of the world languages.
- With exposure to their own language, they begin to focus on those contrasts that are relevant for that particular language and to lose the ability to perceive certain contrasts not found in their native language.

2. Accuracy of perception

- Children who fail to pronounce particular sounds correctly may have failed to perceive them correctly.
- But, usually children with normal hearing are able to discriminate sounds. Child A might be able to point correctly to a coat and a goat even while calling them both “goat.”

3. Syntactic development

- Children usually utter their first words at around 12 months of age.
- Young children use their words in a variety of contexts, but limit their messages by speaking one word at a time.
- At the latter half of the 2nd year, they begin putting words together.
- Syntactic development seems to take place unnoticed, with no explicit instruction.

Two-word utterances

- novel and unique
- dominated by content words
- telegraphic speech
- consistent word order
- semantic relations

Limited scope formula vs. semantic relation formula

<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Child 1•My dog•My shoe•My hat•My hand•My chair•My house•My book	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Child 2•Kendall chair•Bill house•Bill book•Mommy hand•Lady hat•My penny•Our car
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II. Theories of first language acquisition

1. Behavioristic Approaches

receptive vocabulary learning ---classical conditioning

- productive speech--operant conditioning

Children's speech that more closely approximates adult speech is rewarded, whereas meaningless or inappropriate speech is ignored or punished.

- Word combinations

---shaping and imitation training, rewarding

Contrary evidence

- Results with adults cannot be generalized to children.
- Shaping and reinforcement do not exist in children's natural home environment.
- Parents respond to the content rather than grammaticality of children's utterances.
- The failure of careful tutoring.

2. The Nativist Approach

- Language has a structure or grammar that is independent of language use.
- This independent rule system specifies the sentences that are grammatical or permissible in any particular language.

- Language is innate in humans.

- Universal Grammar

LAD and Development

- Language acquisition device bestows upon the child information about grammatical classes, d-structure, and possible transformations.

- The LAD is assumed to be a physiological part of the brain that is a specialized language processor.

- Early formulation: children are innately endowed with strong linguistic universals, which were necessary for the proper development of a grammar.

- Recent formulation: inherent constraints and biases to treat the language environment in special ways.

Supporting Evidence

- All children successfully learn their native language at a time in life when they would not be expected to learn anything else so complicated.

- Children master the basic structure of their native language in a variety of conditions.

- Poverty of input

- Species specific

- No negative evidence

3. Functional Approaches

General assumptions

- Social, linguistic, maturational / biological factors affect language acquisition, and these factors are mutually dependent upon, interact with, and modify one another.

Piaget's cognitive approach

- similarities with the linguistic approach
- Emphasize internal structures as the ultimate determinants of behavior
- Language as a symbolic system for expressing intention or meaning
- Distinctions between competence and performance and between underlying and surface structure.

Social interactionist approach

- Agree with nativists who stress that language has a structure and follows certain rules that make it somewhat unique from other behaviors.
- Shares with the behaviorists an emphasis on the role of the environment in producing such structure.
- The structure of human language may have arisen out of the social-communicative functions language plays in human relations.
- Vygotsky's Zone of proximal development
- Meaning negotiations between the child and the mother
- Some early language may be taught by the parents and learned through rote or imitations by the children.
- Process of mapping meaning onto language is assisted when the code provided closely parallels the child's attention.
- Children might notice the difference between their own immature sentences and more mature versions if the two closely co-occur.

III. Issues in first language acquisition

1. Competence and performance
2. Comprehension and production
3. Nature or nurture?
4. Universals--- language, language acquisition
5. Systematicity and variability
6. Language and thought
 - Behaviorism: cognition is too mentalistic to be studied
 - Piaget: cognitive development influences language development
 - Jerome Bruner: language influences cognitive development
 - Vygotsky: social interaction through language is a prerequisite to cognitive development.
7. Imitation—surface imitation, deep imitation
8. Practice (frequency effects)
9. Input
 - Adult speech is semigrammatical.
 - Speech addressed to children is carefully grammatical and lack of the usual hesitations and false starts common to adult-to-adult speech.
10. Discourse

IV .The Direct Method