ABSTRACT
         Theories of language acquisition which emphasize the
role of imitation, reinforcement, inheritance, and the active
involvement of the child himself in the language acquisition process
are discussed in this paper. The three major theories are: (1) the
behavioristic theory which asserts that children learn their language
through imitation of individuals around them; (2) the nativistic
theory which argues that language development is determined from
within the child rather than by external factors (i.e., language is
innate); and (3) the cognitive theory which, like the nativistic
theory, suggests that children are born with certain abilities to
acquire language but which disagrees as to the nature of these
abilities. Sequences of language acquisition are also discussed.
(LL)

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION OF YOUNG CHILDREN:

MAJOR THEORIES AND SEQUENCES

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This paper (1) discusses briefly three major theories of language

acquisition and (2) identifies some "milestones" and "sequences" in the

acquisition process. Language acquisition refers to how language is ac-

quired, particularly with reference to the grammar or syntax. The term

"language" although defined variously in the literature is used here to

refer to what Hymes (1971) calls "communicative competence." In this

definition a distinction is made between what a person knows (his

competence) and what he actually does (his performance). This defini-

tion includes a distinction between language and speech. In Cazden's

words, "Language is knowledge in our heads; speech is the realization of

that knowledge in behavior. Language consists of all the words in a

person's mental dictionary and all the rules at his (usually unconscious)

command for combining those words into an infinite number of novel
sentences and for interpreting the equally novel sentences that he
hears. Speech, by contrast, consists of his actual utterances spoken
to particular people in particular situations (1972 p.3)." "Young
children" refers to children between the ages of about one to eight or
nine years of age.

Regarding language acquisition of young children, parents, teachers
and researchers alike have noted with varying degrees of interest the
rapidity by which children acquire their language. By the time most
children are four or five years of age they have mastered their native
language so well that they can generate and understand an amazingly com-
plex array of unique sentences, sentences they have never heard or said
before. During this brief period most children master the essential
components of their language, in general without the benefit of school
or teacher. No one teaches it to them, a feat unparalleled by any other
aspect of children's learning.

The question, although studied for years, still remains, "How do
they do it?"

Currently there is no complete, satisfactory explanation of how
children acquire their language. Nobody really knows for sure. However,
partial explanations do exist in the form of theories. These theories
may be grouped into three major groups, (1) Behavioristic, (2) Nativistic,
and (3) Cognitive Theories (Wanat, 1969). These theories are similar
in that each is a serious attempt to describe how children acquire language.
However they differ in respect to the role of inheritance, imitation, rein-

forcement, experience and the child himself in the acquisition process.

Behavioristic Theory. It has long been held that children learn their language through imitation. Evidence cited in support of this view has included the fact that children learn the language of those around them. For example, Japanese children learn Japanese and American children learn American English and so forth right down to the dialectical variations peculiar to the child's speech community. Moreover, the fact that children often repeat or "parrot" words and expressions used by those around them has been taken as additional evidence supporting this theory. A third source of evidence includes the generalized stimulus response and reinforcement theories of learning in general. Researchers in the behavioral school of psychology finding substantial evidence in support of the idea that reinforcement and stimuli do change behavior (defined as learning), have used this model to explain how children learn their language. Proponents of this theory argue that those around the child provide a model for him, along with "rewards" which motivate him to learn.

To a certain extent imitation and reinforcement probably do play an important role in language learning, however, in recent years the behavioristic theories have been challenged as being inadequate. Advocates of nativistic and cognitive theories of language acquisition argue that:

(1) The task of memorizing all of the possible language structures and associating with each structure a particular conceptualization is virtually an impossible task. Gough (1967) has argued that for a 15-word sentence there are 10^{45} possible different ways to construct it, a formidible task if one were to memorize each structure.

(2) Children utter some expressions which it is doubtful that
they would hear anyone say, especially an adult. For ex-
ample, one child said "Grandpa, <u>higher</u> the swing, my feet
are dragging;" another asked her father to "<u>fall</u> the cup in
the waste basket." Children are not likely to hear adults
use "higher," or "fall" in that particular way nor to say
as some children do "I <u>comed</u>" or "He <u>breaked</u> the glass."
Since children will likely have never heard such expressions
before, it is doubtful that they are "imitating" anyone. Na-
tivistic and cognitive theorists argue that such unique struc-
tures suggest that there exists some system or mechanism with-
in the child which he uses to generate sentences, and these
mechanisms cause him to produce on occasion such unusual unique
structures. A fuller discussion of these expalantions follows.

(3) A third argument against a simple imitation theory is based
on evidence that children's language is highly resistant to
alteration by adult intervention. For example, Jean Berko
Gleason reports a conversation between her and a four year
old child (Gleason, 1967, p. 1441).

Child:	"My teacher holded the baby rabbits and we patted them."
Gleason:	"Did you say your teacher held the baby rabbits?"
Child:	"Yes."
Gleason:	"What did you say she did?"
Child:	"She holded the baby rabbits and we pat- ted them."
Gleason:	"Did you say she held them tightly?"
Child:	"No, she holded them loosely."

As it may be noted, the child continued to use her own form
although she heard and comprehended the adult form.

McNeill (1966) reports a similar lack of success on the part of
a mother when she tried to teach her daughter an alternate form.

Child:	"Nobody don't like me."
Mother:	"No, say 'nobody likes me.'"

> Child: "Nobody don't like me."
>   (eight repetitions of this dialogue)
> Mother: "No. Now listen carefully; say 'Nobody likes me."
> Child: "Oh! Nobody don't likes me."

Even with the intense efforts on the part of the adult, the child's language was modified but only slightly.

Nativistic Theroy. Proponents of this theory, such as Lenneberg (1967) and McNeill (1966) argue that language development is determined from within the child rather than by external factors such as imitation or training. Language is innate. In effect, the child is born with a propensity for language much the same as a bird is to migrate. Evidence cited in support of this theory includes:

(1) Only man among all species on earth has the necessary anatomic and physiological features to engage in sustained speech activities.

(2) Language cannot be taught to non-human forms of life. Noting that although bees, dolphins and some birds do have communication systems, it is pointed out that they cannot grasp human language. Apes although they have high intelligence cannot learn human language, even with a tutor, while a young child can learn it without formal training.

(3) It is almost impossible to suppress language acquisition among humans, even the blind, deaf, retarded, neglected, even dwarfs with sub-normal brains learn language. There is hardly anyone who doesn't learn to use language to some degree.

(4) Although the pace may vary, the sequence of language development appears to be the same for all people. Moreover, the onset and accomplishment of minimul language development seem to be unaffected by cultural or linguistic variations.

(5) Finally, there are certain characteristics of language which appear to be "universal," exist in all languages throughout

the world. "All languages," Lenneberg (1967) argues, "are based on the same universal principles of semantics, syntax, and phonology. Each language has words for relations, objects, feelings, and qualities, and any human can learn any language in the world."

Cognitive Theory. Like the nativitists proponents of the cognitive theories of language acquisition hold that children are born with certain abilities to learn language but disagree as to what these abilities are. Slobin (1966) states:

"It seems to me that the child is born not with a set of linguistic categories but with some sort of process mechansim-- a set of procedures and inference rules, if you will--that he uses to process linguistic data (pp. 87-88)."

Language acquisition is seen as a process in which certain abilities develop, closely related to thinking or mental abilities. These include cognitive ability to deal with the world, short-term and long-term memory as well as the ability to process information.

More specifically, it is hypothesized that young children learn their language through a series of hypotheses and tests in which the children develop their own "theory" of how the language works. As children observe the ongoing language of others they look for regularities in it such that they can formulate a tentative "rule" or generalization about how it works, then they produce language using these "rules." As new evidence is obtained the "rules" are modified to more nearly fit their observations.

One reason that researchers feel that children use rules is because

of the kinds of "errors" that children make. Consider some examples.

It is not unusual to hear a child say "I <u>digged</u> a hole," "Santa has eight <u>reindeers</u>," or "The bell <u>ringed</u>." As adults we know that "<u>digged</u>" and "<u>ringed</u>" are not "correct" in that dig and ring form the past tense not by adding "ed" but by changing the word itself, and "reindeer" has no separate plural form. These errors while exemplifying the fact that the child does not yet have these understandings, do suggest however that the child is using some "rules" to generate these forms. It would appear that the child has formulated a rule that when one wants to indicate that something was done in the past one adds "ed" to the verb and to indicate plurality one adds "s," although he may not be able to verbalize this "rule," he nevertheless appears to use it. However, he does not yet understand that exceptions apply to these "irregular" words. As he continues to acquire greater mastery of his language he will employ the "correct" irregular forms.

Concerned that such usage might possibly be due to imitation Gleason (1969) conducted an experiment with first, second and third graders. She reports:

> "We showed them pictures of mice and geese and such
> things and told them what they were. We would say, 'This
> is a mouse, and now there are two mice. What's this?' ·
> (Pointing to the mouse) and the children would say 'a mouse.'
> 'And what's this?' (Pointing to two mice), and the first
> graders in particular answered 'two mouses,' having just one
> second before heard the correct form (p. 21)."

The example cited earlier in which the child asked her grandfather to "<u>Higher</u> the swing," doesn't seem quite so strange, when thought about

in the reverse. It is perfectly acceptable to say "lower" the swing.

Cazden cites many examples of similar overgeneralizations found in children's speech. Included were "firemens," "mines," "schoolses," "drinked," "winned," "gots," and "goed," all of which appear to be very reasonable considering the "rule" governed theory.

These overgeneralizations have been taken as evidence that the child develops and uses rules for producing his language.

Sequences and Milestones

Although children vary greatly in the pace at which they acquire their language, considerable evidence exists which suggests that all children follow a similar pattern of development (Lenneberg, 1967; Cazden, 1972). For example in the acquisition of specific aspects of syntax children tend to proceed from (1) no usage of a particular syntactic form to (2) occasional production with no errors or overgeneralizations to (3) increased production with errors and overgeneralizations, to finally (4) correct usage. Children tend, for example, to use the past tense of come, go and take correctly at first but later say "comed," "goed" and "taked" which appear to be caused by overgeneralization of a "rule." Mastery of the exceptions comes later. If this is true, as it appears to be, implications for educators might be that the child's use of such expressions as "comed," "goed" and "taked" should be viewed, not so much as "errors" or signs of weakness, as evidence that the child is progressing and that he has gained some important understandings related to how his language works, (Cazden 1972).

Children use content words such as nouns, verbs and adjectives before

function words (e.g. determiners, prepositions, and conjunctions; Wardhaugh, 1971). The focus appears to be on meaning more than syntax. Moreover the need to more clearly communicate increasingly more complex ideas appears to be related to the development of more complex sentence structures. Semantics, in general, appears to precede syntax (Cazden, 1972).

But understanding doesn't always precede syntax. Vygotsky (1972) notes that "grammar precedes logic." He cites as evidence Piaget's findings that "the child uses subordinate clauses with because, although, etc. long before he grasps the structures of meaning corresponding to these syntactic forms (p. 126-127)."

Additional information related to sequences in the acquisition of specific aspects of language may be found in Child Language and Education by Cazden (1972).

In the preceding discussion of sequences and major theories of language acquisition an attempt has been made to draw attention to the role of imitation, reinforcement, inheritance and the active involvement of the child himself in the language acquisition process. It is the author's opinion that as the role of each of these factors is better understood educators will be better able to facilitate the language development of young children.

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