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Language Acquisition as an Innate Ability

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Abstract

It was often thought that children learn by imitating those around them. But how is it that children with little cognitive capacity could succeed in first language development and acquire complex linguistic system with very little input? What are the possible reasons of children's success in developing their linguistic competence despite their lack of cognitive capacity? A major concern in understanding language acquisition is how these capacities is picked up by infants from what appears to be very little input? How do children learn language? Is language learnt or inborn? Is language competence universal or individual? What is it that enables a child not only to learn words, but to put them together in meaningful sentences? This logical problem refers to the fact that children come to know more about the structure of their language than they could reasonably be expected to learn on the basis of the samples of language they hear. Most linguists and psychologists assume that children's achievement in language development must be attributed to innate and spontaneous language learning constructs and/or processes.

Key Words

L1: First Language
L2: Second Language
LAD: Language Acquisition Device
UG: Universal Grammar
CPH: Critical Period Hypothesis
SLA: Second Language Acquisition

Introduction:

Language acquisition is the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive, produce and use words to understand and communicate. This capacity involves the picking up of diverse capacities including syntax, phonetics and an extensive vocabulary. This language might be vocal as with speech or manual as in sign. The capacity to acquire and use lan-

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guage is a key aspect that distinguishes humans from other organisms. While many forms of animal communication exist, they have a limited range of non-syntactically structured vocabulary tokens that lack cross cultural variation between groups.

Language Acquisition is a fascinating and impressive aspect of human development. Indeed, language learning is one of the most amazing acts that have attracted the attention of linguists and psychologists for a number of years. A major concern in understanding language acquisition is how these capacities is picked up by infants from what appears to be very little input? How do children learn language? Is language learnt or inborn? Is language competence universal or individual? What is it that enables a child not only to learn words, but to put them together in meaningful sentences? What pushes children to go on developing complex grammatical language even though their early simple communication is successful for most purposes? Therefore, over the past fifty years, a range of theories of language acquisition has been created in order to explain this apparent problem.

The proposition of language acquisition as an innate ability:

For a long time it was believed that children learn language through imitation. This theory was propounded by the Behavioural Approach which was very influential in the 40s and 50s, especially in the United States. Behaviourism, as an approach to language acquisition, found its theoretical background in psychology and linguistics. Traditional behaviourists believed that language is acquired according to the general laws of learning; language learning is the result of imitation, practice, feedback on success and habit formation. Children imitate the sounds and patterns which they hear about them and receive positive reinforcement which could take the form of praise or just successful communication (Lightbrown & Spada, 1999, pg. 15) Thus encouraged by their environment, they continue to imitate and practice these sounds and patterns until they form 'habits' of correct language use. All learning, whether verbal or non-verbal, takes place through the same underlying process. Learners receive linguistic inputs from speakers in their environment and they form 'associations' between words and objects or events. According to this view, the quality and quantity of the language which the child hears, as well as the consistency of the reinforcement offered by others in the environment, should have an effect on the child's success in language learning. The Behaviourist view imitation and practice as the primary processes in language development. Because language development is viewed as the formation of habits, it is assumed that a person learning a second language also starts off with the habits formed in the first language and these habits interfere with the new ones needed for the second language.

However, more recent views claim that children have an innate language ability of which Noam Chomsky was the forerunner. Chomsky claims that children are biologically programmed for language and that language develops in the child in just the way that other biological functions develop. For instance, a child will learn to walk as long as adequate nourishment and reasonable freedom of movement is provided. For Chomsky, language acquisition is very similar. The environment makes a basic contribution – in this case the availability of people who speak to the child. The child, or rather the child's biological endowment will do the rest. This is known as the innatist position. Chomsky proposed his theory in reaction to what he saw as the inadequacy of the behaviourist theory of learning based on imitation and habit formation.

The Innatist Approach argues that the behaviourist theory fails to recognize what has come to be called *'the logical problem of language acquisition'*. (Lightbrown & Spada, 1999 pg. 20) This logical problem refers to the fact that children come to know more about the structure of their language than they could reasonably be expected to learn on the basis of the samples of language they hear. According to Chomsky, the language the child is exposed to in the environment is full of confusing information (for example: false starts, incomplete examples, or slips of tongue) and does not provide all the information which the child needs. Furthermore, the evidence seems very strong that children are by no means systematically corrected or instructed on language. Parental corrections of language errors have been observed to be inconsistent or even non-existent for children of pre-school age. When parents do correct, they tend to focus on meaning and not on language form, often simply repeating the child's incorrect utterance in a more complete grammatical form. When parents do correct errors, children often ignore the correction, continuing to use it in their own way of saying things.

i) Children do not learn simply by imitation:

According to Chomsky, there is a mental reality behind actual linguistic behaviour and the mental reality is important for the interpretation of sentences. The teacher's job is to draw out the innate capacity of the students by creating proper conditions for learning. Language acquisition or learning is a cognitive process and not a mechanical process of imitation and memorization; it is not just learning the four basic skills. Even if children do imitate, their imitations are not random; they do not imitate everything they hear.

For example:

Child : I putted the plates on the table
Mother : You mean I put the plates on the table
Child : No, I putted them on myself

Unlike a parrot that imitates the familiar and continues to repeat the same thing over and over again, children's imitation is selective and based on what they are currently learning. In other words,

even when the child imitates, the choice of what to imitate seems to be based on something that the child has already begun to understand, not simply on what is available in the environment. Learning the first or second language is a process of creative consumption. According to Chomsky, children's minds are not blank slates to be filled merely by imitating language they hear in the environment.

ii) Children master the basic structure of their L1:

Children successfully master the basic structure of their native language or dialect in a variety of conditions: some which would be expected to enhance language development (for example, caring, attentive parents who focus on the child's language), and some which might be expected to inhibit it (for example, abusive or rejecting parents). Children achieve different levels of vocabulary, creativity, social grace, and so on, but virtually all achieve mastery of the structure of the language spoken around them. This is seen as a support for the hypothesis that language is somehow separate from other aspects of cognitive development and may even be located in different part of the brain. This is the notion that the brain has different 'modules' which serve different kinds of knowledge and learning.

Virtually 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 who are profoundly deaf will learn sign language if they are exposed to it in infancy and their progress in language acquisition is similar to that of hearing children. Even children with very limited cognitive ability develop quite complex language system if they are brought up in environments in which people talk to them and engage them in communication.

iii) Children are exposed to limited linguistic rules and patterns:

The language children are exposed to do not contain examples of all the linguistic rules and patterns. Children often hear incomplete sentences or ungrammatical utterances, simplified inputs etc, full of confusing information along with grammatical input; and yet are, somehow, able to filter the language they hear so that the confusing environmental input is not integrated into their L1 system. Moreover, children's linguistic competence enables them to make out which sentences are possible and not possible in a language although input does not provide them with this information. Children do not repeat everything they hear, but on the other hand, may utter certain sentence structures which they have never heard before. Animals - even primates receiving intensive training from humans – cannot learn to manipulate a symbol system as complicated as the natural language of a three or four year old human child. Children develop an underlying system of the language which they are not taught.

iv) Universal Patterns in the development of language learning:

A remarkable thing about language acquisition is the high level of similarity which we see in the early language of chil-

dren of the world. Language input consists of sounds, words, phrases, sentences and other surface level units of a specific human language. However in spite of the surface difference in input, there are similar patterns in child acquisition of any language of the world. The earliest vocalizations are simply the involuntary crying, cooing and gurgling sounds of babies. Even in the early weeks and months of life, infants are able to hear very subtle differences between the sounds of human language, yet it will be months before their own vocalization begin to reflect the characteristics of the different languages they are learning. By the end of their first year, most babies understand quite a few frequently repeated words. At twelve months, most babies will have begun to produce a word or two that everyone recognizes. From this time on, the number of words they recognize and produce grows rapidly. By the age of two, most children reliably produce at least fifty different words and some produce many more. About this time, they begin to combine words into simple sentences as 'Baby fall down.' By the age of three and a half to four years, most children can ask questions, give commands, repeat real events and create imaginary stories complete with correct grammatical morphemes. In fact, it is generally accepted that by age four, children have mastered the basic structures of the language or languages which have been spoken to them in these early years.

The extent of this similarity suggests that language universals are not only constructs derived from sophisticated theories and analyses by linguists but also innate representation in every young child's mind.

Grounds for the innate ability of language acquisition:

Chomsky originally referred to this special ability of children to discover for themselves the underlying rules of a language system as a ***language acquisition device (LAD)*** (Chomsky, 1965, pg 25)This device was often described as the 'imaginary blackbox' which exists somewhere in the brain. This 'blackbox' thought to contain all and only the principles which are universal to all human languages, prevents the child from going off on lots of wrong trails in trying to discover the rules of the language. For LAD to work, the child needs access only to samples of a natural language. These language samples serve as a trigger to activate the device. Once it is activated, the child is able to discover the structure of the language to be learned by matching the innate knowledge of basic grammatical relationships to the structures of the particular language in the environment .Chomsky and his followers no longer use the term LAD but refer to the child 'endowment' as '***Universal Grammar"(UG).*** UG is considered to consist of a set of principles which are common to all languages. If Children are pre-equipped with UG, then what they have to learn is the ways in which their language makes use of these principles and the variations on those principles which may exist in a particular language which they hear spoken around them. (Cook & Newson, 2007, pg 205)

Chomsky drew attention to the fact that children seem to develop language in similar ways and on similar schedule, in a way not very different from the way all children learn to walk. Environmental differences may be associated with some variation in the rate of acquisition (how quickly children learn), but adult linguistics competence (the knowledge of how their language work) is very similar for all speakers of one dialect or language. In acquiring the complex and intricate systems that make up a language, young children, whose cognitive abilities are fairly limited in many ways, accomplish something which adult second learners may envy.

Implication of Universal Grammar on Second Language Acquisition (SLA):

Extending the problem of language learning to SLA, it is imperative to explain how it is possible for individuals to achieve multilingual competence when that also involves knowledge which transcends what could be learned from the input they receive. In other words L2 learners also develop an underlying system of knowledge about the language they are not taught, and which they could not yet infer directly from anything they hear. L2 learners already have L1 knowledge when L2 acquisition begins; they already have made all the parametric choices that are appropriate for L1, guided by UG. Some L1 knowledge is clearly transferred to L2, although exactly which features may transfer and at what degree appears to be dependent on the relationship of L1 and L2.

Chomsky's theory of language acquisition is based on the hypothesis that innate knowledge of the principles of UG permits all children to acquire language of their environment, during a critical period (i.e. the specific and limited time period for language acquisition) in their development. Chomsky has not made specific claims about the implications of his theory for second language learning. Nevertheless, some linguists working within this theory have argued that UG or Universal bilingualism offers the best perspective from which to understand SLA (Cook & Newson 2007, pg 222). Others argue that, although it is a good framework for understanding L1 acquisition, UG is no longer available to guide the acquisition of L2 in learners who have passed the critical period of language acquisition. In their view, this means that SLA has to be explained by some other theory.

Even those who believe that UG has an important explanatory role in SLA do not all agree on how UG works in L2 development. Some argue that, even if L2 learners begin learning L2 after the end of the critical period and even if many fail to achieve complete mastery of the target language, *there is a logical problem of second language acquisition*; learners eventually know more about the language than they could reasonably have learned if they had to depend entirely on the input they are exposed to. They infer from this that UG must be available to L2 learners as well as to L1 learners. Some of the theorists who hold this view claim that the nature and availability of UG in SLA is

no different from that which is hypothesized to guide L1 learners. Others argue that UG may be present and available to L2 learners, but that its exact nature has been altered by the acquisition of other languages.

Researchers working within the UG framework also differ in their hypotheses about how formal instruction or error correction will affect the learner's knowledge of the L2. Some argue that, like young children, adult L2 learners neither need nor benefit from error correction and metalinguistic information. They conclude that these things change only the superficial appearance of language performance and do not really affect the underlying systematic knowledge of the new language. Other UG linguists, especially those who think that UG has been affected by the prior acquisition of L1, suggests that L2 learners may need not be given some explicit information about what is not grammatical in the L2. Otherwise, they may assume that some structures of the L1 have equivalents in the L2 when, in fact, they do not. (Lightbrown & Spada 1995, pg. 105)

Researchers who study SLA from the UG perspective are usually interested in the language *competence* (knowledge) of the advanced learners rather than in the simple language of early stage learners. They argue that, while a variety of different theories might be sufficient to explain some early language *performance* (use), a theory such as UG is necessary to explain learner's knowledge of complex syntax. They are interested in whether the competence which underlies the language performance of L2 learners resembles the competence which underlies the language performance of native speakers. Thus their investigations often involve comparing the judgements of grammaticality made by the two groups, rather than observations of actual speaking. In doing this, they hope to gain insight into what learners actually know about the language, using a task which avoids at least some of the many things which affect the way we ordinarily use language.

The innatists draw much of their evidence from studies of the complexities of the proficient speaker's language knowledge and performance and from analysis of their own intuitions about language. Critics of this view argue that it is not enough to know what the final state of knowledge is and that more attention should be paid to the developmental steps leading up to this level of mastery.

Conclusion: Researchers and educators who are hoping for language acquisition theories which gave them insight into language teaching practice are often frustrated by the lack of agreement among the 'experts'. But the complexities of SLA, like those of L1 acquisition, represent a puzzle for linguistics, psychological, and neurological scientists which will not be resolved soon. Research which has theory development as its goal has very important long-term significance for language teaching and learning, but agreement on a 'complete' theory of language acquisition is probably, at best, a long way off.

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